There’s Nothing Here: Tenure, Attachment, and Changing Perceptions in Gentrifying Williamsburg, Brooklyn

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THERE’S NOTHING HERE:
TENURE, ATTACHMENT, AND CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF
GENTRIFYING WILLIAMSBURG, BROOKLYN

by

SARA MARTUCCI

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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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
Abstract

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Depending on the audience, the term “gentrification” conjures images of pristine condos, fancy restaurants, dive bars full of hipsters, or eviction notices. This qualitative study examines the divergent perspectives of existing and former residents in a gentrifying neighborhood. For most of the twentieth century Williamsburg, Brooklyn was a working class neighborhood and it served as an ethnic enclave to several waves of (im)migrants. The neighborhood struggled through a period of deindustrialization, divestment, and high crime through the 1980s, when it began to gentrify. Initially networks of artists and students started moving into the area, but it soon became a destination for nightlife. In 2005 the neighborhood was rezoned among protests from residents. Since then, the gentrification has intensified with high-rise luxury condos on the waterfront and upscale, corporate retail outlets.

This research is based on fifty interviews with residents, supplemented with an additional ten interviews with local business owners, census records, and archival retail data. The residents in this sample are divided into tenure cohorts based on how long they have lived in the neighborhood: Long Term, Medium Term, New and Former. A theory of neighborhood attachment styles is proposed, suggesting that members of each cohort (excluding Former) have a specific attachment to Williamsburg depending on their motivations for moving to the neighborhood and the conditions of the neighborhood at
that time. Throughout the dissertation we hear from members of each cohort about crime, community activism, and shifting retail as gentrification has progressed.

Both Long Term and Medium Term residents have experienced cultural displacement as a result of advanced gentrification. Members of both tenure cohorts feel out of place at times, and that their own cultures or identities are being erased. Most New residents were initially unenthusiastic about moving to Williamsburg, thinking of it as a good investment rather than an attraction on its own. In the process of “upgrading” the neighborhood, New residents employ various strategies to gain symbolic ownership over the neighborhood. These efforts often end up excluding existing residents and increasing their feelings of cultural displacement. This work illustrates that length of tenure and neighborhood attachment style are important predictors for experiences of cultural displacement and strategies for ownership in the neighborhood. In order to mediate the negative effects of gentrification for existing residents, we must first deeply understand the lived experiences of cultural displacement and the methods through which existing residents are excluded.
Dedicated to my Grandmother and friend, Theresa Martucci
(December 24, 1930-August 19, 2017)
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This work began as a Masters Thesis at Brooklyn College many years ago. At that point I was convinced I would someday write a dissertation comparing participation in Feminist movements between Italian and Italian-American women. That Fall I took two courses, one with Jerry Krase and another with Timothy Shortell. Both professors encouraged me to immerse myself in my surroundings and, after nearly a decade, I cannot imagine a life without urban sociology.

During my second year at the Graduate Center I joined the “Local Shops Project” led by Phil Kasinitz and Sharon Zukin. While on the team I learned invaluable lessons about urban ethnography and it intensified my growing interest in studying gentrification. I know that the methods and discussions from that project will continue to influence my work beyond this dissertation. I was also lucky to acquire two committee members in the process. Being a first-generation college student in a PhD program can be intimidating, as many of my CUNY colleagues will attest. I am grateful to have had Phil Kasinitz as my chair, his ability to dole out humor and patience along with insightful critique made this whole process more fun. Sharon Zukin has shown enthusiasm for my project as it has evolved over the years and I have appreciated the encouragement and the very useful comments on this dissertation. One of the first urban sociology articles I ever read was written by Jason Patch—I couldn’t believe someone had written about the strange neighborhood I had just moved into! His work continues to be an inspiration and I am thankful for his presence on this committee. John Mollenkopf has supported this research from its inception, but beyond that he has been encouraging of my professional development as a scholar, for which I am especially appreciative.

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Chapter One
Welcome to Williamsburg

Once a working-class neighborhood with multiple ethnic enclaves, Williamsburg, Brooklyn has been transformed into a destination for restaurants, nightlife, and boutique shopping—attracting tourists and New York City residents alike. Some Long Term residents in the neighborhood have avoided physical displacement through rent control or ownership, but I argue that residents in a gentrifying neighborhood experience “cultural displacement”—experiences of being out of place—even if they do not move away. Long Termers daily navigations through the neighborhood are altered as nightclubs and luxury hotels replace grocery stores and ethnic social clubs. Existing residents find that not only do their own sites for recreation disappear, but so do their local histories. The disappearance of institutions of necessity, decreasing ethnic language on signage, increased surveillance, and the updating of parks complete with long lists of rules—all contribute to an environment that is unwelcoming or at least foreign to the long time residents of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Even early gentrifiers now feel culturally displaced by increasingly wealthy residents and the entrée of corporate retail into the neighborhood. This dissertation examines instances of cultural displacement and experiences of gentrification among residents—divided into tenure groups of Long Term, Medium Term, New and Former residents.

Introduction

Brooklyn is a globally recognized name. References to the borough can be seen on t-shirts and business names not just in other hip neighborhoods of Berlin or Melbourne,
but in rebuilt Eastern European cities, small towns in Southern France, national parks in Central America, airports of Caribbean Islands, and villages at the edge of the Sahara desert. Brooklyn is an international city in terms of global migration flows; it is represented in literature and movies, and was home to some of the most important American industry in the 19th and early 20th centuries. But now the idea of Brooklyn is cool enough to be silk screened onto clothing and used to market businesses that are thousands of miles away.

Williamsburg is one of Brooklyn’s most recognizable neighborhoods. Young people from Marrakech to Santiago recognize the name; it’s been the subject of glossy spreads in international magazines like Cosmopolitan and GQ; and a phone app called “Where is Williamsburg?” helps users locate the most Williamsburg-like neighborhoods of cities around the globe based on high concentrations of bars, restaurants, cafés, and boutiques. Formerly zoned for industry, Williamsburg was a working-class community with factories and warehouses lining the East River waterfront. After deindustrialization in New York, a sharp drop in crime, and early waves of gentrification, Williamsburg was rezoned in 2005—allowing for high-rise luxury housing on the waterfront and interior blocks. Today the neighborhood is home to luxury hotels, Michelin star restaurants, and waterfront condos that remind some visitors of Miami. Williamsburg is globally synonymous with foodie culture, alternative music venues, hipsters, and gentrification—a contested topic that is on the lips of residents, reporters, politicians and real estate developers.

This dissertation tracks Williamsburg’s transition from a hub of factory production, to a global capital of cool, with a focus on how neighborhood residents have
experienced the changes. Many established residents have managed to weather the tides of gentrification without losing their homes—either through ownership, rent control, or public housing. Still, existing residents may feel *culturally* displaced from the neighborhood. The focal point of this research is how residents perceive of and experience gentrification and cultural displacement based on their tenure in the neighborhood. Respondents in this study have been grouped into tenure cohorts based on when they moved to Williamsburg. Long Term residents are generally working class white ethnics and Latinos who began living in the neighborhood by 1980 at the latest, although some of the older residents were born or moved there as early as the 1940s. Two young men who were born in the early 1990s are also included as Long Term residents as they have lived their entire lives in Williamsburg. Medium Term residents—often white artists and students from a middle-class background—moved to Williamsburg in the 1980s and ‘90s up until the rezoning in 2005. New residents came to Williamsburg after 2005; they are predominantly wealthy professionals often living in couples or family units. Former residents who have moved out of the neighborhood are also included in this research, although their experiences most often match those of their original tenure cohorts (the grouping they would be part of had they remained in Williamsburg). A longer discussion of the characteristics and demographics of the tenure cohorts can be found below and in Chapter 2. As we’ll also see in Chapter 2, style of neighborhood attachment—based on the initial reason for moving to Williamsburg and the neighborhood conditions at the time—can also influence perceptions, experiences, and feelings of cultural displacement.
What follows is an in depth study of a single location, but gentrification in working class neighborhoods is common in American cities and abroad, making it applicable far beyond the few square miles that comprise Williamsburg (Munt 1987; Lorens 2006; Jean-Paul 2008; Bader and Bialluch 2009). However, this is not only a case of gentrification. On a fundamental level Williamsburg is a neighborhood that has witnessed a large-scale intervention. The 2005 rezoning, discussed in depth below, precipitated dramatic changes in the neighborhood’s economic, demographic, retail, and physical landscapes. Like the construction of a stadium, a public housing complex, or a convention center, the 2005 rezoning can be seen as an intervention that accelerates the normal pace of neighborhood change.

Cultural Displacement in Gentrifying Neighborhoods

The ‘G’ Word

Gentrification has been a much-discussed topic in urban sociology for the past five decades. When Ruth Glass first coined the term in the 1960s, scholars of cities were more concerned with disinvestment, suburbanization, white flight and urban renewal—even today gentrification is just one possible trajectory for a neighborhood or city. In the second-half of the twentieth century when divestment was more common, pockets of reinvestment didn’t seem to be a problem. Preservationists like Jane Jacobs (1961) praised neighborhoods made up of small blocks that were both residential and commercial, lined with houses only a few stories tall and with neighbors and business owners keeping their “eyes on the street”. She did not think that the entrance of wealthy individuals posed a conflict for the urban villages she celebrated. At the same time Herbert Gans (1962) was studying urban renewal in Boston’s West End Italian American
community. Gans’ urban villagers were less cosmopolitan than Jacobs’, an insular, ethnic community who retained many of the same social norms and structures as they, or their parents, experienced in Italy. Both “villages” were threatened by urban renewal, which bore a strong resemblance to later instances of private and state-led gentrification, respectively. Similar to Gans and in contrast to Jacobs, Glass was concerned that middle class occupants were “invading” and taking over working class neighborhoods, ultimately displacing inhabitants and altering the “social character of the district” (1964: xvii). She noticed a pattern that would continue in fits and starts in cities around the world for decades to come.

The process of gentrification has many variations, but at its core it is characterized by a shift of investment into declining city neighborhoods. Analyses of gentrification in the 1970s identified it as primarily a piecemeal trend, a private reinvestment of capital based on the choices of individuals. However by the late 1970s and early ‘80s urban scholars began to link the process to structural causes like deindustrialization and the restructuring of urban economies (Zukin 1987).

Discussed in the section below, Marcuse (1985) warned of the effects of direct and indirect forms of displacement that plague individuals in a gentrifying neighborhood—a debate that continues in gentrification scholarship today. In a 1987 book Harvey Molotch and John Logan look at the roles that elite, local actors play in urban redevelopment. They argued that political, financial, and media elites, among others, see the city as a “growth machine” through which they and their industries may profit. Despite possibly conflicting visions of the city’s future, growth becomes the
primary goal, deals are cut and cultural or educational institutions are sometimes
harnessed to promote growth (Logan and Molotch 1987).

Along with ubiquitous discussions around gentrification, there is constant debate
in the literature around the causes, effects and nature of the process (Brown-Saracino
2010). Urbanists argue about whether gentrification is a demand or supply-driven process.
Gentrification often starts piecemeal with individual newcomers, but regeneration efforts
can also be spearheaded by state-led policies. Eventually a neighborhood can become
“super-gentrified” (Lees 2003) One location can experience all of these forms as
gentrification develops, and all along the concept of displacement of existing residents is
contested.

On the demand-side, urbanists assert that gentrification is caused by the economic
and lifestyle changes that attract individuals to urban centers. From this position the
actors include ‘urban pioneers’—usually students or artists in search of cheap rent—
gentrifying with cultural capital, and professionals gentrifying with economic capital
(Blasius et al 2016). During demand-side gentrification, people move into cities or
neighborhoods because of the jobs, amenities, and lifestyle opportunities they provide
(Ley 1996). In contrast, supply-side gives more weight to actors like landlords, local and
national policy, and real estate developers. Supply-side proponents posit that a rent-gap
between the current and potential property values is one factor that can attract individual
gentrifiers as well as speculation by real estate developers (Smith 1979). The creation of
luxury housing, tax benefits, and decreases in crime may be other factors beckoning
residents back to the city (Hwang and Lin 2016).
Piecemeal gentrification can be demand or supply-driven, or a combination of both—the desire to live in the city coupled with a good opportunity for investment. Piecemeal gentrification is a process of private reinvestment and rehabilitation of real estate, sometimes via the “sweat equity” of professionals (Zukin 1987). Yet the individual efforts of gentrifiers can have an aggregate effect on a neighborhood’s identity. This scenario has played out in multiple Brooklyn neighborhoods, including in Kasinitz’s (1988) study of Boerum Hill. In the 1960s the neighborhood of Gowanus, Brooklyn, then 43% Puerto Rican and 15% Black (Kasinitz 1988: 166), was experiencing piecemeal gentrification. The new residents nicknamed themselves “The Brownstoners” and formed the “Boerum Hill Association”—a neighborhood name created by the gentrifiers. They succeeded in distinguishing Boerum Hill from Gowanus by drawing neighborhood boundaries that excluded concentrations of minorities, publishing histories of the neighborhood, and holding house tours for visitors. Still, while piecemeal gentrification can change neighborhood identity or even create new neighborhoods the process seems relatively benign when compared to state-led gentrification.

State-led (or city-led) gentrification is a top-down process that can include politicians working with corporate entities, real estate, and other elites to incentivize development, as in Molotch and Logan’s (1987) “growth machine” referenced above. Local governments use a variety of strategies to attract visitors, residents, and capital, including: rezoning for developers, tax abatements for luxury residential and commercial projects (Stabrowski 2014), and boosterism in the form of “grand projects” like museums or eye-catching architectural achievements (Gomez 1998; Evans 2003). All forms of gentrification threaten existing residents with displacement, but state-led gentrification is
especially criticized because elected and appointed political figures chronically fail to advocate, or provide solutions, for their displaced, poor constituents (Porter and Barber 2006; Davidson 2008).

In her 1984 dissertation, Fran Justa exposed how state-led policies supported beautification investment or “grand projects” while neglecting the city’s poor and working class. Justa studied community organizations in Park Slope between 1975 and 1983, a neighborhood which, like Boerum Hill, was experiencing piecemeal gentrification at the time. She categorized organizations by type depending on their work on neighborhood improvements and/or redistributive efforts towards the existing poor and working class populations. Justa found that community groups that focused on both improvements (investments in parks, schools and other institutions) and redistribution (creating or maintaining affordable housing) were largely unsuccessful. “When roads are repaved, trees planted, or parks refurbished, [community] groups interpret these actions as positive…however, when it comes to housing these populations so that they may remain and benefit from the efforts, there are no funds” (Justa 1984: 382). Justa drives home this point with an example of conflicts around redevelopment: “The Fifth Avenue Committee is told that local government cannot afford to give away houses for low-income families where the private market is strong, yet it can provide financial support for a $14 million renovation to house animals in the Prospect Park Zoo” (1984: 383). In such a way the state maintains a growth agenda while ignoring displacement concerns.

In a 2003 article, Loretta Lees added onto Glass’ original term, proposing “super gentrification” to describe an even more dramatic transformation in gentrified neighborhoods. Super gentrification is characterized by “intense investments and
conspicuous consumption,” that have the potential to drive out middle-class and avant-garde residents and businesses. When this level of gentrification occurs, Long Term and Medium Term residents and businesses are priced out by new in-movers: wealthy individuals and corporate establishments.

Favorable accounts of gentrification are often based on comparing it to an alternative of urban blight and abandonment (Byrne 2003). However some authors argue that this narrative trivializes residents of “abandoned” neighborhoods and the efforts of residents and community organizations to renovate housing, advocate for services, and improve neighborhood conditions. Increased housing prices also mean that lower-income families and individuals can be displaced or are unable to move into a gentrified neighborhood—as a result they have less access to the often cited benefits of gentrification like improvements in city services, public spaces, and retail options (Marcuse 1985; Slater 2009). The level of physical displacement caused by gentrification is contested (Freeman and Braconi 2004), but some researchers argue that not only displacement, but also exclusionary high rents for incoming residents, negative health outcomes for minorities, and loss of social networks trouble gentrified neighborhoods (Smith 1996; Lees 2003; Newman and Wyly 2006; Pattillo 2007; Gibbons and Barton 2016).

**Effects and Paths of Gentrification**

Throughout this text my findings are informed by rich studies on the consequences of gentrification for existing residents (Freeman 2006; Pattillo 2007); the trajectory of retail gentrification (Schlichtman and Patch 2008; Zukin 2009); how gentrification changes neighborhood norms and ownership (Deener 2012; Tissot 2015);
and the relationships between culture, grit, and gentrification (Mele 2000; Lloyd 2006; Ocejo 2014). Drawing from these works and my own findings, I divide the effects of gentrification into three main categories: material, social, and symbolic. **Material effects** of gentrification include economic or physical changes including: increased property values and rent, as well as prices of goods and services; (re)investment in infrastructure; physical displacement may occur; and physical changes are made to the built environment—like the construction of new housing, bike lanes, or parks. **Social effects** are changes to the interactions residents have with each other and local institutions. This includes the dissolution of old and the creation of new social networks as some residents are displaced and others move in; social institutions like ethnic clubs, places of worship, or organized sports may shift or disappear; retail spaces may no longer serve secondary functions like a place to interact with other locals or exchange neighborhood gossip. **Symbolic effects** refer to changes to a neighborhood’s reputation, norms, and culture. Symbolic effects can include a shifting reputation towards art, luxury, or tourism; new events or beautification projects in public space; tensions that arise when norms for long term and new residents conflict, or when ownership over a neighborhood shifts and existing residents feel unwelcome or out of place.

For the purposes of this research, the term ‘gentrification’ refers to an influx of capital into an area, reflected in the physical spaces of a neighborhood and the demographic characteristics of its residents. As the neighborhood gentrifies, residents experiences these material, social, and symbolic effects. The built environment changes to include new amenities and luxury housing, residents’ interactions and movements throughout the neighborhood change, and for many physical displacement looms as a
threat. In the section below, we’ll see how these effects relate to experiences of cultural displacement and ownership over a neighborhood for existing and new residents, but first a brief history of the trajectory of gentrification in New York.

The development and extent of gentrification differs depending on the social, political, economic and cultural conditions of a given location. Occasionally the arrival of wealthy residents signals the beginning of gentrification, though the process often occurs in waves where the first newcomers are young artists, musicians and trendsetters (here referred to as “avant-gardes”) in search of cheap rent followed by professionals like lawyers, doctors, and professors; occasionally super-gentrification (Lees 2003) occurs and the area becomes populated by well heeled individuals from finance, tech, and corporate executives.

On the surface gentrification can appear to be about individual, lifestyle choices: an aesthetic preference for brownstone houses; an artist’s wish for large studios with good lighting; a population’s collective desire for good coffee and cool bars. But as argued above, most research in the field has shown that there are larger political, economic, and social forces behind these obvious signs (Logan and Molotch 1987; Smith 1979; Zukin 1982; Hackworth and Smith 2002). The onset of deindustrialization and the popularity of suburbs in the 1950s and ‘60s left many American cities with a budget crisis in the 1970s. In New York this was characterized by limited public services, declining schools, and rising crime rates as well as decreased investment in the housing stock and a shift of tenure to low-income, minority households (Judd and Fainstein 1999). Some urban areas were already experiencing the beginnings of gentrification at that time, but as the urban economy shifted away from production, officials began actively trying to
attract the middle class, as well as tourists, back to cities (Greenberg 2008). New York’s tight housing market has been especially sensitive to shifts in demand of housing. Since the need for affordable housing far exceeds the supply, units once occupied by the poor and working class “filter up,” displacing residents (Mollenkopf 1981). Gentrification in New York has also been assisted by city policy as zoning regulations were altered to favor residential and commercial spaces over manufacturing, reflecting a trend toward services and consumption in global cities (Sassen 1991; Smith 1996). This process has been especially evident in Williamsburg where rents have increased, luxury buildings have been built, and restaurants and bars have replaced establishments that once catered to necessities. Long Term ethnic communities of Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Polish and Italians and been successively diluted first by a wave of artists, musicians, bohemians, and hipsters, and later by wealthy professionals and upper class families.

The actual rate of physical displacement, or residential turnover due to increased rents, is contested. Freeman (2006) argues that displacement isn’t as drastic as we assume, and Whyte (2010) found that “only 4% of moves are caused by displacement.” This dissertation examines experiences of cultural displacement, or whether or not a person feels at home in a changing neighborhood, in the absence of physical displacement. The question of cultural displacement is examined here with sixty interviews (fifty with current or former Williamsburg residents, and ten with local business owners or employees). The qualitative data is supplemented with censuses demographics, archival retail data, and property ownership data from the City of New York, Department of Finance that help us to better understand the experiences of cultural displacement and change in a gentrified neighborhood.
Cultural Displacement

Neighborhoods are not stagnant entities. People move in and out, businesses open and close, and over time trends develop: whites move out, artists move in, or a neighborhood becomes known as a Chinatown or a “little Haiti” because of its demographics and ethnic businesses. These changes start off with individual residents or businesses that attract others, eventually shifting the reputation of a neighborhood, as well as who feels at home in a given place (Krase 1982; Freeman 2006; Hyra 2015).

Since the 1970s middle class, educated, white Americans have been moving into previously declining neighborhoods (Marcuse 1985) and various forms of gentrification have intensified in most global cities, distinguishing it from the usual turnover of commercial and residential properties. In the process of gentrification, retail and recreational options catering to newcomers open, sometimes displacing the establishments that made up the day-to-day cultural experiences for existing residents (Patch 2008). Initially Long Term residents experience cultural displacement as institutions shift in favor of early gentrifiers. These early in-movers are in turn culturally displaced by wealthier newcomers if super-gentrification occurs (Lees 2003).

The concept of displacement has been a theme in urban research since at least the 1960s. Sociologist Herbert Gans (1962) and psychologist Marc Fried (1963) both studied the effects of urban renewal in Boston’s West End in the 1960s. Labeled as a slum, the West End was cleared to make room for high-rise luxury housing, uprooting a working-class Italian American community in the process. Gans lived in the neighborhood and immersed himself in the daily life of Italian Americans. As mentioned above, he found that many of the social norms and structures of Italian society were recreated among the
“urban villagers” of the West End. Second generation Italian Americans maintained a rather insular social life, distrustful of government and state workers, while enjoying aspects of mainstream American culture like movies and cars. Gans critiqued the urban renewal program in Boston for not considering the social cost of displacement for this population. Marc Fried’s (1963) work picks up after the displacement. He identified effects of relocation among the ‘villagers’ who lost not only their social networks, but also the physical spaces of their neighborhood. Fried found that even though “urban dislocation” can yield some benefits such as new opportunities for work or social mobility, the loss of networks and spatial identity stimulate a psychological grieving process in displaced individuals.

The displacement of a large-scale urban renewal project is perhaps more extreme than the (at first) gradual process of gentrification. Peter Marcuse linked the concept of displacement with the opposing processes of gentrification and abandonment in his 1985 study of New York. Marcuse used census demographic data to identify a scale of gentrifying to semi-abandoned New York neighborhoods, making policy recommendations for how to deal with the different types. He posited that both processes had negatives outcomes for low-income households—that they are displaced in both cases either by inadequate conditions or by increasingly unaffordable housing. Marcuse identified different types of displacement, drawing on the work of Grier and Grier (1978) who defined two types of direct displacement—economic (rent) and physical (more subtle tactics of tenant removal like landlords refusing to make repairs). In this work Marcuse adds his own concept “pressure of displacement.” Pressures of displacement include changes in the neighborhood’s social and built environment that signal
impending displacement to existing residents, occurring when: “a family sees the neighborhood around it changing dramatically, when their friends are leaving…when the stores they patronize are liquidating and new stores for other clientele are taking their places…” (1985: 207).

For Marcuse these signals matter because they herald the “direct displacement” to come, a theme that organizer and anthropologist Filip Stabrowski picked up three decades later while studying Williamsburg’s northern neighbor, Greenpoint. Stabrowski (2014) examines housing tensions between Polish immigrant tenants and their (often co-ethnic) landlords. He argues that increasing rents, landlord harassment, and dilapidated housing create a pervasive “everyday displacement.” While Stabrowski briefly references broader changes in the neighborhood, his concept of displacement centers on tenants’ loss of control and diminished security in their housing situations— conditions that he argues affect their ability to “place make” and otherwise maintain ownership over their neighborhood.

Stawbrowski’s definition of displacement is centered on housing, but in a recent book Derek Hyra (2017) focuses on the “social consequences” that low-income or long-time residents experience as their neighborhood gentrifies. He notes that cultural displacement: “occurs when the norms, behaviors, and values of the new resident cohort dominate and prevail over the tastes and preferences of the original residents” (2015: 128). Hyra looks at “political displacement” or diminishing political power and willingness to participate in politics among existing residents. Political displacement can be viewed as both a cause and effect of cultural displacement— as a resident begins to feel less connected to a neighborhood she may feel less ownership over the space and
thus have less interest in attempting to shape it. At the same time, efforts by newcomers and real estate actors may also increase her cultural displacement.

In all of these definitions of displacement the norms and preferences of incoming groups come to dominate over those of existing residents, playing a role in the elimination of previous cultures. Cultural displacement may include developments or conditions that alienate or even erase existing residents from a neighborhood’s public spaces. Examples from respondents in this work include feeling like strangers in their own neighborhoods, a loss of control over public space, and less reasons to participate in the neighborhood— not just politically, but socially.

The investments that do come with gentrification are often viewed with resentment or skepticism; existing residents know that these changes are not “for them” (Freeman 2006; Hyra 2015). The influx of capital causes a change in neighborhood institutions; overall there is a shift from necessity to luxury— hardware stores and bodegas are replaced with cocktail lounges and expensive clothing boutiques (Levy and Cybriwsky 2010; Krase 2016). In Harlem, Monique Taylor (1992) found that “lifestyle differences” based on class and race led to tensions between existing residents and newcomers, which manifested in public and private spaces. Studying Chicago at the turn of the century, Mary Pattillo (2007) identifies tensions that arose as a poor Black neighborhood was gentrified by Black professionals—culminating in a request by gentrifiers to expand the nearby University of Chicago police rounds into the area. As neighborhoods are transformed to fit the lifestyles and demands of newcomers, the public spaces used by Long Term residents are altered. Public spaces like parks may see renewed investment but exclusionary practices on the part of new residents signal who is
and isn’t welcome. In Boston’s South End, neighborhood associations led by white professionals exert control over local parks and community gardens, creating and enforcing strict rules about how plots must be maintained or what activities are allowed in the spaces (Tissot 2015). Writing about these processes, sociologist Sylvie Tissot recalls one incident where a young man was sitting on the grass, playing guitar in a park but was promptly told that, as an outsider, he did not have access to the space. The rules and norms instated by these new residents help them claim ownership over neighborhood spaces (Tissot 2015).

Aside from their overt functions local public spaces and establishments also communicate an area’s atmosphere. An abundance of expensive boutiques, upscale restaurants and manicured parks label a neighborhood as wealthy, while the presence of galleries and cafes might make a street seem trendy. Local actors—like residents, business owners, and community organizers—may have competing ideas of what the neighborhood is and should be (Kasinitz 1988; Deener 2012). When actors with competing ideas attempt to define neighborhoods, a struggle for symbolic ownership may occur. Andrew Deener identifies the practice of “symbolic ownership” in L.A.’s Venice Beach through which incoming groups achieve a heightened presence as the neighborhood shifted from a nineteenth century sea-side resort town, to neglected urban neighborhood, to gentrified enclave. Wealthy newcomers exert their ownership of the neighborhood by planning high-profile events and fostering an upscale retail cluster, effectively erasing the neighborhood’s Black, Latino and homeless populations (Deener 2007; Deener 2012). This ownership creates an image of the neighborhood that focuses
on its new attributes and attractions, culturally displacing existing inhabitants (Jayne 2006).

The concept of cultural displacement in this dissertation draws upon these existing theories of displacement, ownership, and place-making. However in this research many of the existing residents are not at immediate risk of physical displacement. While many Long and Medium Term residents have already been physically displaced from the neighborhood, the bulk of respondents in this sample have avoided displacement by living in public housing or rent controlled units, or by home ownership. Although physical displacement still looms as an issue they might eventually face, the lack of immediate pressure allowed our interviews to focus on experiences of cultural displacement—or the daily material, social, and symbolic effects of living in a gentrifying locale. In this study cultural displacement is defined as changes in the demographics, retail, services, and built environment that cause existing residents to feel increasingly out of place or lacking representation in their neighborhood. It entails detachment or erasure, a movement “of certain people and uses from urban space” (Curran 2004). While Williamsburg is similar to many other gentrified American neighborhoods, New York has a unique housing market. With strong rent control laws and extensive public housing (5,769 units in Williamsburg) many residents are insulated from the private housing market, allowing them to avoid or delay physical displacement. This provides a unique case to study cultural displacement, or how gentrification is experienced by residents who remain in place.
Cultural Displacement in Williamsburg

In Williamsburg, waves of ownership and cultural displacement have overlapped as gentrification has progressed. Avant-garde newcomers like artists or students may not necessarily have more income than Long Term residents, but they do have different tastes (Bourdieu 1984). Cafes, art galleries, underground parties and cheap, quirky bars come to define neighborhoods that are in a transition from working class to artistic enclave (Zukin 2010). When large numbers of these avant-gardes move into a neighborhood they bring with them a certain set of tastes and ideas of culture, this is when the first incidence of cultural displacement occurs. As neighborhoods like Williamsburg gain a reputation for art and cultural consumption, the avant-gardes are followed by real estate and corporate entities that cause an increase and intensification of development.

Institutions like cafes, bars, and galleries that help to form an artistic community can also assist in marketing the neighborhood to outsiders (Lloyd 2006). First by word of mouth, hip neighborhoods eventually get recognized by local and international media outlets including newspapers, magazines, travel guides, alternative media like zines, and now online style or travel blogs (Zukin 2010: 16). The artistic element that avant-gardes brought to these neighborhoods attracted people with more money, who desired to consume the culture that was created (Zukin et al. 2009). The tastes of the wealthier in-movers culturally displace the avant-gardes (Lees 2003; Ocejo 2011; Papen 2012). As Richard Lloyd documents in Chicago, “artists in Wicker Park help ‘make the scene’…with gentrification these artist groups had to move out” (2006: 106). Richard Ocejo (2014) writes about “early gentrifiers” in his analysis of nightlife and gentrification in New York’s Lower East Side. These early gentrifiers often see themselves as “pioneers”
because they moved into a neighborhood that was otherwise forgotten or undesirable for middle class whites. As gentrification progresses, these “pioneers” lament the loss of “cultural character” something they felt lent authenticity to their experiences in the neighborhood (Ocejo 2014: 99). At this stage of gentrification, both Long Term and Medium Term residents have experienced cultural displacement, even if they have physically been able to stay in the neighborhood.

As we’ll see in Chapter 5, retail spaces along Bedford Avenue, Williamsburg’s main commercial strip, shifted from necessity to luxury as gentrification progressed. As late as 2007, a one-block strip of Bedford was home to two Polish butcher shops, an Italian bakery and a Laundromat—the section of the street served necessities of the people who lived on the surrounding residential blocks. By 2010 all of these businesses had changed, catering more to luxuries like eating out and personal care. In the Spring of 2017, the bakery was a café, the Laundromat had become a restaurant with $25+ entrees, and the other shops were an expensive takeout restaurant and an upscale nail salon.

The shift from necessity to luxury isn’t the only commercial change that Williamsburg has gone through. With the entrance of upscale restaurants and designer boutiques, Medium Term residents have also experienced a loss of cultural institutions. In the ‘90s shops like Earwax records and the L café incubated networks of artists and musicians (Anasi 2012). Today the storefronts are home to an expensive clothing boutique and an artisanal pizza restaurant with specialty pies costing up to $50. These examples don’t just show how Williamsburg’s commercial corridor has changed over the years; they also speak to how the uses of Williamsburg for various groups have shifted. What was once a shopping street for people going about their daily chores of cooking and
laundry, shifted towards a more hip, yet cheap, café and music scene, and eventually transformed into a consumption site for boutique shopping and dining, luxury hotels, and upmarket chains like G-Star Raw and J. Crew.

Cultural displacement does not just affect residents’ experiences of retail and public spaces. Williamsburg has a strong history of community activism, but what residents fight for has changed over time. As newcomers take control over the neighborhood, community organizing begins to shift around their desires. In Chapter 3 we’ll see how local events and organizations came to focus on the desires and interests of wealthy in-movers at the exclusion of Long Term residents. For example, New residents petitioned against barbecue pits in 2012 in an attempt to limit the activities of Long Termers in a public park.

In Chapter 6, we hear from residents of different tenure groups reminiscing about the neighborhood’s past, and evaluating the benefits and disadvantages of gentrification. While Long Term residents remember a convenient, family-friendly environment, Medium Term and New residents maintain a narrative that there was “nothing” in Williamsburg before. The actions of incoming groups not only culturally displace existing residents from the neighborhood’s every day spaces, but also work to erase the history of Williamsburg’s long time ethnic communities. When cultural displacement occurs, some residents have fewer opportunities to participate in the public sphere of the neighborhood.

**Site Selection: Williamsburg, Brooklyn**

In the following sections the history and ethnographic description of Williamsburg will provide a more in depth context of the neighborhood and its
inhabitants. Williamsburg’s high concentration of public housing projects (over 6,000 units, and many more are rent controlled or stabilized) means that many Long Term residents do not pay market rent and thus can avoid physical displacement, making Williamsburg an excellent cite to study cultural displacement. Independent of its individual characteristics, Williamsburg is a good candidate site for this type of research because it has experienced similar artist-driven phases of gentrification as Deener’s Venice Beach, Lloyd’s Wicker Park, and Zukin’s SoHo. Still, with the amount of rezoning and real estate led gentrification it stands out as a unique case. Additionally, Williamsburg itself had already been the subject of multiple sociological studies (Susser 1982; Curran 2004; Patch 2004; Marwell 2007; Zukin 2010; Krase and DeSena 2016). With such rich history and context to draw upon, this study is able to focus on the lived effects of gentrification, while informing past research by updating the trajectories of Marwell’s (2007) community based organizations in the face of super-gentrification, or an expansion on Patch’s (2004) analysis of retail gentrification.

Finally, early on in the project I noticed Williamsburg being referenced when I traveled to other European and American cities, suddenly I wasn’t telling people that I was from New York or even Brooklyn, but Williamsburg. The neighborhood was receiving international attention—positive and negative—because of it’s hipster culture, nightlife, and its relationship to other gentrifying locales. The pervasiveness of conversations and concerns about gentrification reinforced the necessity of an in-depth, qualitative study about how people really experience the process, with Williamsburg as a high profile case study.
The geographic boundaries of Williamsburg have shifted over time, and the current popularity of the neighborhood has encouraged real estate agents to stretch the name further and further East along the local subway line. As Sampson (2012) notes in his review of neighborhood effects literature, social indicators of investment benefits are generally “clustered geographically,” and this is certainly true in Williamsburg. The purpose of this study is to understand how people experience gentrified neighborhoods and thus, some aspects of this research are focused on the Northside section of Williamsburg that has witnessed the most intense gentrification, although participants in the study lived in a variety of areas throughout the neighborhood. Williamsburg is outlined on the map below, but the super-gentrified area has a natural boundary of the East River to the West, McCarren Park to the North, the Brooklyn Queens Expressway to the East, and the Williamsburg Bridge to the South. This part of Williamsburg is also bisected by Grand Street. Before gentrification the “Northside” was more traditionally Polish and Italian and has seen the most dramatic rates of gentrification. The “Southside” was primarily Puerto Rican and Dominican, this area has also changed significantly, if less rapidly. Figure 1 below shows the “super-gentrified” part of Williamsburg, and Figure 2 shows the borders of the entire neighborhood.
Figure 1. Super-gentrified Williamsburg
Nearly 60,000 Satmar-Hasidic Jewish residents live in a residential and commercial district just south of the Williamsburg Bridge. Although they play a role in the real estate and sociopolitical fabric of Williamsburg, the community is insular and local businesses cater to most daily needs. Kosher supermarkets, bakeries, wig stores for women, clothing shops, and bookstores line the streets, and medical services, religious institutions, restaurants and pharmacies all cater to the Hasidic population. While some
change has occurred in the Hasidic part of Williamsburg, the area has been more resistant
to the effects of gentrification, partially a result of political negotiations (Marwell 2007).
While I acknowledge that the Hasidic neighborhood would be an interesting counterpoint
to the effects of gentrification, they have not necessarily experienced cultural
displacement. A study of this community, though it would be rich and worthwhile, would
necessitate different research questions and an entirely different focus of study, for this
reason the Hasidic population are generally absent from this dissertation.

Sampling and Methodology

The core of this research is based on 50 interviews with neighborhood residents
which lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to 3 hours. The focus on resident tenure provided
insight into how gentrification and cultural displacement are experienced differently by
these groups. Respondents have been divided temporally into four categories: (1) Long
Term residents who moved to the neighborhood by 1980 or were born in the
neighborhood and grew up there; (2) Medium Term residents who moved to
Williamsburg between 1980s and 2005; (3) New residents to Williamsburg who moved
in after the neighborhood was rezoned in 2005; and (4) Former residents who have
moved out of the neighborhood by choice or after being priced out.

The sample for this research is not intended to be random; instead it is quota
sampled by tenure cohort. I aimed to get a diverse group of individuals from each tenure
cohort, which at times necessitated sampling from networks of community groups or
websites used by residents. Fourteen residents were sampled through their current or
previous involvement in local organizations, eleven from online message boards for the
area, and eight from existing connections with people who lived in Williamsburg
currently or in the past. Another eight participants were also recruited via snowball sampling from original respondents, which was especially important in accessing Former residents and artists. Since this work draws on years of ethnography in the neighborhood, nine respondents participated in the study after encounters at neighborhood events or in local establishments. The sample broke down as follows with a minimum of ten respondents in each tenure category. While not a completely representative sample of race or ethnicity (at this point, that would have included more white American respondents), the sample does reflect trends of racial identification and tenure—with Hispanics and white ethnics being more common among Long Term residents, and white Americans being more commonly Medium Term and New. The sample also included one New resident who identified as Indian, and one Former resident who identified as mixed race.

I sampled most of my interviewees from the “super-gentrified” section of Williamsburg because of the dissertation’s focus on neighborhood change. In the 31 census tracks that comprise Williamsburg, only 6 tracts have more than 10% Black residents. Five of these tracts are concentrated in the least gentrified, South East corner of Williamsburg, bordering Bushwick and Bed Stuy. The bulk of my sample consists of Latino, white American, and white ethnics who represent the residential populations of Williamsburg’s “super-gentrified” tracts.
Table 1. Breakdown of Sample by Tenure and Race/Ethnicity

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>Polish</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Italian</th>
<th>White American</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium Term</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
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In each interview respondents were asked the same set of questions, with a slightly different script for Former residents. I also allowed participants to discuss what was important to them, asking follow up questions when appropriate. The interview questions measured whether or not residents were experiencing cultural displacement by asking about how they came to live in Williamsburg, their consumption and recreational patterns in the neighborhood, their descriptions and feelings about how the neighborhood has changed, experiences of crime in the neighborhood, and if they participate in community events and meetings.

The resident tenure groups were by no means homogenous. The Long Term group was the most diverse by race, but overwhelmingly working class with a high school education. Medium Term residents were perhaps the most similar to each other, mainly young, college educated, white people who did not grow up in New York City but were usually from suburban towns in the North East. New residents are mostly homogenous along class and education, but tend to be more racially diverse and coming to Williamsburg from around the country and the world after living in some other section of
Brooklyn or Manhattan. Former residents are the most diverse group because they are comprised of a mix of people who have lived in the neighborhood over time including Dominican and Polish immigrants, artists and musicians, and even relatively New residents— young professionals or students who were pushed out by swiftly rising rents.

In the chapters that follow I show that tenure is an important predictor for perceptions of cultural displacement and attitudes towards gentrification. Much of the existing research on neighborhood change has focused on racial or class differences among existing residents and gentrifiers. In this dissertation I show that tenure can have an affect on neighborhood attachment style, which also influences individuals’ experiences of their neighborhood. The demographics and characteristics of each tenure group are further explained in Chapter Two, along with a discussion of how their tenure in the neighborhood and attachment style to Williamsburg influenced their experiences and perceptions of gentrification.

A Brief History of Williamsburg

Prior to New York’s colonization, the area that is now North Brooklyn was Lenape land. The land was purchased in 1638 by the Dutch West India Company, and was originally part of the chartered town of Boswijck, later Bushwick. At that time the interior of Brooklyn was used for farming, and the area that is now Williamsburg was a launching point for ferries to move crops and other goods to Manhattan as well as a suburban retreat for wealthy city residents. In 1827 “Williamsburgh” became its own incorporated village within Bushwick, and by the 1850s the “City of Williamsburg” was an industrial center, attracting manufacturing because of its location on the East River.
Williamsburg became part of Brooklyn in 1855, and into the twentieth century the area continued to attract industry including the Domino Sugar factory, Pfizer Pharmaceuticals, oil processing, and breweries, as well as banks (Lederer 2005; DeSena 2009). Wealthy New York families built estates in Williamsburg, but in 1898 Brooklyn was incorporated into New York City and in 1903 the Williamsburg Bridge opened. These two factors encouraged a migration of poor and working class people from Manhattan, particularly the Lower East Side, who were attracted by manufacturing jobs.

For the next several decades Williamsburg’s demographics shifted from wealthy, New York entrepreneurs to working class migrants and immigrants, accompanied by the construction of tenement housing stock. Williamsburg’s population grew through chain migration (MacDonald and MacDonald 1964) as individuals and families from Europe and the Caribbean followed networks of relatives and acquaintances to Brooklyn. Polish immigrants have populated Williamsburg, and its northern neighbor Greenpoint, since the late 19th century. Subsequent waves immigrated after both World Wars, and again in the 1980s and early ‘90s after the end of communism in Poland. Immigration from Southern Italy followed a similar pattern, with waves in the late 19th century and in the decades after World War II. Jews migrated from the Lower East Side after the completion of the Williamsburg Bridge in 1903 and the opening of the L subway line in 1924. Jewish people of Satmar-Hasidic origin began moving into Williamsburg before World War 2, but the community grew with Holocaust survivors in the late 1940s and early ‘50s. After World War Two the advent of commercial air travel increased the migration of Puerto Ricans to New York, but especially to Williamsburg.
In 1938 The Williamsburg Houses were completed as part of the Public Works Administration. The Houses were the first New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) project in Brooklyn, and they were followed by 8 more projects in Williamsburg- totaling 74 buildings and 6,468 apartments. The large concentration of public housing means that, despite extensive gentrification, many Long Term residents have been able to remain in the neighborhood.

Williamsburg has never had the high population of African American or Black Caribbeans of other Brooklyn neighborhoods, but the two census tracts that contain the Williamsburg Houses grew from an average of 3.7% Black in 1950 to 15.8% in 1960 during the Second Great Migration. Today the same two tracts are 19.6% Black, while every tract in “super-gentrified” Williamsburg reports less than 5% Black residents.

Dominicans began settling in Williamsburg as well after the Immigration Act of 1965 repealed quotas that favored Europeans. Most of these groups were attracted to Williamsburg because of the availability of factory jobs and cheap housing in the neighborhood, in addition to established immigrant communities. However by the 1960s New York’s tenure as a manufacturing center was coming to an end.

public unrest as social justice movements like Civil Rights, anti-Vietnam war, and Women’s Liberation gained traction. In response conservative politicians at the federal level began cutting urban funding under Nixon and Ford that culminated with the famous Daily News headline: “Ford to City: Drop Dead” (Greenberg 2008).

With the combination of deindustrialization and a reduction in federal funds, New York had a budget problem. Additionally, high crime rates caused a drop off in the numbers of tourists visiting New York. In an attempt to increase tourism to the city, politicians considered a policy of planned-shrinkage. While many decried the concept put forth by then Housing and Development Administrator Roger Starr (Fowler 1976), the outer boroughs did experience a cut in services with some of the funds being redirected towards central Manhattan tourist attractions (Wallace and Wallace 2001; Greenberg 2008). As a result Williamsburg and similar neighborhoods experienced cuts to education, hospitals, and police departments (Wallace and Wallace 1990). Subway and bus service was limited, firehouses faced closure, and sanitation trucks visited with varying regularity. At the same time housing values plummeted and landlords refused to repair buildings, leaving some tenants without heat or water; others participated in a trend of arson fires hoping they could recoup some of their houses’ value through insurance claims. Banks redlined Williamsburg making it impossible for many people of color to get loans to buy or improve apartments (DeSena 1999).

The lack of jobs and citywide divestment led to increased poverty and crime, throughout the city (Greenberg 2008). By the 1970s Williamsburg was characterized by abandoned buildings, drug and alcohol abuse, and crimes perpetrated by gang members (Susser 1982, Williams and Kornblum 1985). Despite this, Long Term residents in the
neighborhood insist that they could not only get groceries, clothing and other necessities in the area, but that they also had rich religious and ethnic-based social lives and generally felt insulated from crime. Most actively resisted the term ‘slum’ and showed pride in their neighborhood by creating many successful Community Based Organizations and neighborhood groups that advocated for, or provided, services that the city neglected (Mollenkopf 1983). This period of disinvestment persisted, but it didn’t keep away another wave of migration from Lower Manhattan, this time artists and students who moved into Williamsburg for the cheap rents, studio spaces, and easy access to the city.

By the early 1980s Williamsburg’s demographics began to shift again with this migration of young, middle-class whites, along with some European and Korean artists and students. As we’ll learn in Chapter 2, these members of the avant-garde came to Williamsburg seeking inexpensive rent but also to be part of a growing artist network. Describing Williamsburg at the time as both desolate and magical, the newcomers’ creativity flourished in the abandoned factories and overgrown waterfront of Williamsburg’s decaying industrial landscape. Gradually over the next two decades the area gained a reputation for experimental performance art, elaborate parties, outdoor concerts, and a nascent foodie scene. During the same period crime rates began to drop throughout New York City. The precinct that patrols the Northside reports a 70.2% drop in crime from 1990-2015, and in the Southside a 69.4% decrease (Police Department of the City of New York 2017). Repairs to the L train line also made transit to the East Village even easier—a place where many of the early gentrifiers worked, showed their art, and may have even lived in before coming to Williamsburg. Eventually, entrepreneurs
opened new restaurants and bars in the area and the neighborhood became a nightlife mecca. Soon the L train did not just transport people into Manhattan for work and play, but also shuttled Manhattanites across the river to check out the burgeoning scene.

Although gentrification was underway in Williamsburg, city officials viewed the area as degraded after decades of their own policies of divestment and planned shrinkage. In 1994 the city proposed a waste transfer station for the neighborhood, but a coalition of residents successfully protested against it. In 2001 the neighborhood was again threatened with the proposal of a power plant on the nearby Greenpoint waterfront. Local organizations predicted that if the power plant was defeated the area might instead be rezoned for denser residential use. Anticipating development of the waterfront, neighborhood organizations and the Community Board devised a 197-a plan, a community-based advisory document that detailed the requests of neighborhood residents in light of rezoning (Department of City Planning 2002). In the plan, residents demanded public access to the waterfront, open space and affordable housing, while raising environmental concerns about the neighborhood’s waterfront. After much conflict between the city and Northside residents, the City Planning Commission and the City Council eventually approved a modified version of the advisory 197a plan in 2002 that would include affordable housing, light industry, and waterfront access. However then mayor Michael Bloomberg left affordable housing out of his original plan to rezone the North Brooklyn waterfront in 2003. In 2005, despite opposition from residents and community-based organizations, the New York City Council finally approved Bloomberg’s plan that rezoned almost 200 blocks of Greenpoint and Williamsburg including the entire waterfront. The “Inclusionary Housing Program,” which also began
in 2005, provided tax breaks to developers and let them build higher as long as 20% of the units they built would be affordable. This program has now been adopted in other parts of New York, as nearly 40% of the city was rezoned during Bloomberg’s twelve-year tenure, part of his plan to create a “luxury city” (Krase and DeSena 2016). Unfortunately little of the affordable housing has been built and what does exist has been criticized as not being affordable for Long Term residents (Stabrowski 2015).

Bloomberg’s enticement of real estate developers kicked off a decade of development in Williamsburg, escalating gentrification in the neighborhood. However for a while, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, development stalled and market-rate units became difficult to sell. In order to drum up business, developers of luxury real estate passed the tax abatements and other bonuses on to potential buyers. The owners of one condo building, “Rialto,” became so desperate during this period that in April 2009 they offered a trip to Italy to anyone who would purchase a unit (Amsden 2009).

Williamsburg had a surplus of luxury housing (even as the existing housing stock was becoming too expensive for many Long and Medium Term residents) so these units became brilliant “investments” for people who were already looking to buy real estate in New York. In fact, of the eleven New residents in this study, six moved to the neighborhood because they considered it a smart investment.

Today two bedroom apartments near current super fund toxic sites now sell for as much as $2.4 million. Luxury condos and remodeled homes have attracted wealthy newcomers who would have previously been likely to settle in Manhattan or the already gentrified neighborhoods of Brooklyn like Park Slope or Brooklyn Heights. The rezoning and development in the Eastern portion of Williamsburg have created even starker
contrasts between the neighborhood’s super-gentrified Northside and the still-neglected public housing projects in the southern and western sections. Millionaires and former factory workers now share the same subway stop and neighborhood park; and more upscale shops and restaurants have replaced many of Williamsburg’s older establishments. Since the condos were built, three chain pharmacies have opened as well as Starbucks, Apple, and Whole Foods. The condos and the corporations that comprise super gentrification have sanitized the public spaces of the “avant-garde” culture, and lead to drastic rent increases that neither Long Term nor most Medium Term residents can afford.

A Walk Through Williamsburg: Fall 2016

The waves ripple out underneath a ferry departing from Williamsburg’s Northside heading towards the city, it will return with commuters who work in Midtown Manhattan and live in the glittering condos on this shore’s waterfront. It’s a weekday afternoon in early Fall and the East River State Park is well manicured, sanitized, as evidenced by a list of things that are not allowed in the park including dogs and alcohol. It is markedly different from its past incarnations. This park was once the site of bustling factories and warehouses, later the abandoned structures provided shelter for a small population of homeless individuals and families. In the 1980s and ‘90s this stretch of the waterfront was occupied with skateboarders, musicians holding band practice, fire spinners, performance artists, people under the influence of various drugs, and old men fishing off the piers into the murky waters of the East River (Campo 2013). The park officially opened in 2007 around the same time as the first luxury condo buildings started moving in residents. Every Saturday part of the park is now taken over by “Smorgasburg,” an
expensive food market that has opened another branch in Brooklyn, as well as upstate New York, SoHo, and Los Angeles. Occasionally the entire park is closed for ticketed music concerts. On a pleasant weekday afternoon like this one it’s populated with tourists photographing the perfect view of the Manhattan skyline, there are a few Hasidic Jewish mothers with their small children, and Black Caribbean nannies with wealthy white children. The adjacent space to the north, Bushwick Inlet Park, is even newer with pristine soccer fields, a dog run, and a small playground. In a few years the park will be expanded, outlining the curve of the river with green space.

Turning towards the south the strong autumn sunlight catches on one of a dozen buildings that range from six to thirty stories. The Edge Towers, The Northside Piers, and The Austin Nichols House- all luxury housing, each has opened within the past ten years. Before the 2005 rezoning, the highest building on the waterfront was the old Domino Sugar factory, which is currently under construction and will be another luxury housing development, reportedly with some affordable units. Ten years ago this waterfront was completely different, no high-rises, no ferry service, no shiny new parks- these are all evidence of the real estate investment and residential wealth that has flowed into Williamsburg in the past decade.

As I turn to exit the park my field of vision is peppered with even more high-rises jutting up into the sky, rising above the three and four story homes that are more typical in this area. I look both ways before walking into the street, not for cars, but for bikes. Kent Avenue was once an important delivery route for the factories along the waterfront and further south in Brooklyn, the infamous street also had a nighttime economy of drug sales and sex work sustained by truck drivers. After Williamsburg’s rezoning the street
was altered to have just one lane of traffic, and a two-lane, protected bike path. The painted, green path is part of Brooklyn’s “Silk Road” that runs from Greenpoint south to Red Hook, about eight miles away. If I walked south down Kent Avenue I’d pass by many of these waterfront condos, anchored on the ground level by retail ranging from upscale grocery stores and chain pharmacies to gourmet ice cream shops, boutique gyms, and indoor play spaces for children. Past that the neighborhood would change dramatically to the self-sufficient Hasidic Jewish community mentioned above. Many of the businesses in this area have served the community for decades, with Hebrew signage and even their own local school bus company run by “Central Satmar Transportation.” If I continued even further south I’d arrive at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, an old shipyard that opened over two centuries ago. It is now home to movie studios, digital technology, textile design and light manufacturing. But today I’m heading inland towards Williamsburg’s main strip: Bedford Avenue.

Walking east I cross the block I used to live on. Less than a decade ago the street could be eerily quiet, it had several vacant buildings, manufacturing that had already left but hadn’t yet been replaced. After several years of constant construction there are now two extravagant hotels, cafes, bars, nightclubs, and music venues. Cabs line up at all hours of the evening to shuttle people to and from these destinations, and the pulsing music and excited crowds can be heard for blocks. For eight years I lived in an old, three-story building on Wythe Avenue. It didn’t have heat and my neighbor’s bathtub was in her kitchen, but it had a rickety ladder to the roof, views of Manhattan, and amazingly cheap rent right through my exit in May 2016. Our landlady, Helena, had lived there since coming from Poland in the 1970s. When she passed away her children converted
her first floor apartment into a storefront, and in 2015 “Heatonist,” a store selling only hot sauce, moved in.

Shaking off memories of very cold winters, I keep walking east on North 8th Street. I pass by “Teddy’s Bar and Grill” a neighborhood institution for decades that has transferred hands many times and now has tables on the sidewalk, a popular trend for Williamsburg restaurants. Aside from a few condos on this block all of the houses have between 3-8 apartments. Some of the buildings are covered in vinyl siding or shingles, but more savvy building owners have renovated their houses and stripped down to the original brick that the new in-movers seem to prefer. I dodge strollers exiting the new Montessori pre-school and smile to Piotr who is sitting outside as always in a lawn chair perched atop his stoop. I walk past “Northside” the Polish bakery and I successfully avoid the temptation of a trip inside. Recently they’ve added baguettes and cupcakes to their normal offerings of dark breads, makowiec (poppy seed cake), and borscht. But the new menu items and clientele don’t deter the Polish grandparents who congregate outside and are often served before English-speakers when waiting to order.
I finally come to Bedford Avenue, ground zero for retail gentrification in the early 2000s and the main transportation hub on the Northside. I step into my old bodega to visit Ayman, a Palestinian immigrant who has been working on Bedford since 1994. He
always has the best gossip about retail turnover on Bedford. Ayman tells me that the bank that burned down a few years ago will probably become a new bakery and there’s still no progress on the old thrift shop that was demolished. The former store is curiously still a construction pit despite being across from the Bedford Avenue subway station—surely some of the most valuable retail property in the borough. There are dozens of boutiques, specialty coffee shops, restaurants and bars on Bedford, and the side streets are starting to attract commercial activity as well.

A train just arrived at the subway station on the corner, judging by the seemingly endless flow of people trudging up the stairs. Latino and Black teenagers tease each other as they walk down to the train after a long school day, a Polish mother gets help carrying her baby stroller up the stairs by a man in tight jeans with full sleeves of tattoos on each arm, a group of young Japanese women huddle around a phone trying to figure out which direction to walk in, as a few white men in suits hustle by on their way home to the waterfront. Tourists and locals merge without interacting and within a few minutes I hear English, French, Japanese, German, Polish, and Spanish.

Snaking around the crowds I finally escape a section that feels more like a theme park than a neighborhood. The condos and retail peter out for a few blocks as I pass by more residential homes and “Our Lady of Mount Carmel,” an Italian Catholic church. If I headed north from here I’d hit McCarren Park, the barrier between Williamsburg and Greenpoint, its neighbor to the north. The thirty-five acre park has lots of open space, a track, dog runs, and baseball fields. A farmer’s market sets up in one corner on Saturdays and older Polish men can be found in the park no matter the season, socializing and hiding their beer cans in brown paper bags. But the park’s main attraction is its Olympic
size swimming pool. The Works Progress Administration completed the pool in 1936. At first it was a neighborhood treasure but the divestment and racial tensions of the 1970s culminated in white residents petitioning the city to close the pool for good in 1984. As we’ll see in Chapter 3, that would not be the last time neighborhood conflicts played out at the pool.

Instead of heading to the park I continue east towards my least favorite part of this walk- Robert Moses’s massive Brooklyn-Queens Expressway (BQE). Completed in 1964, the structure casts a shadow where hundreds of homes used to stand. The highway cuts through a large swath of Williamsburg, and during its construction in the 1940’s and ‘50s several blocks were demolished to make room for the highway. The BQE runs north to south, bifurcating the neighborhood into eastern and western sections- which is why the Italian Church is disconnected from much of today’s Italian American community on the eastern side of the highway (Skogan 1990). The expressway is elevated in this section of the neighborhood, and at ground level that means making my way under the hulking structure as the whir of cars speed over head. Passing through to the next portion of Williamsburg isn’t just a physical barrier, but also a psychological one. This side has restaurants, bars, and condos too, but it doesn’t feel as ritzy as the Northside.

As I continue south down Union Avenue I can’t help but notice the stark differences between the historically Italian neighborhood to my left and the predominantly Puerto Rican and Dominican neighborhood ahead of me. In the Italian neighborhood, bound roughly by Union Avenue and Grand Street, the housing stock is much the same as the Northside. Three and four story homes on tree-lined streets with the occasional high-rise climbing up above the rest. The Italian population has dwindled but
a few long-time Italian business are still around- a butcher, a fish market, a pastry shop and a bread bakery- some of which are patronized by Long Term residents and Newcomers alike. I’m Italian American myself but I don’t feel like anymore of an insider here than on the Polish Northside or my current home on the Latino Southside. In Williamsburg my black jeans, combat boots, and black-framed glasses give me away as a New resident, despite the fact that I usually can’t afford brunch and I occasionally pop into an Italian import store to buy the brand of tea my grandmother used to make.

The intersection of Union and Grand heralds the beginning of a more concentrated Latino community. Grand Street itself is in transition. Long-time dollar stores and Mexican taco shops sit next to punk rock dive bars and newer restaurants that look more like the ones on Bedford Avenue. This area has been slower to gentrify, at least partially because of the high percentage of public housing and rent stabilized units in the neighborhood. The southern portion of Williamsburg also suffered the most from divestment, as racist-redlining practices compounded on top of limited city services. I turn down Hooper Street where there are still some vacant lots, a reminder of the arson fires and landlord neglect of the 1970s and ‘80s.

I’ve only been walking for twenty minutes but the Southside feels worlds away from the luxury housing and boutique bars of the Northside. There are more shuttered businesses, less corporate advertising, the sidewalks are cracked and there are fewer trees, but there’s also a lot more public, neighborhood life. On Sundays residents congregate at the church across from my house, but today my neighbors are grilling on the sidewalk and playing music. Children shriek and chase each other nearby and a few older kids on bikes are stopped at a corner debating their next move- this informal, unstructured play is
rarely seen on the Northside. But there are signs of gentrification here too, in addition to my own presence as a white graduate student. Across the street from my house there is a large bodega where older men stand outside and observe the street, but next to that is “Rough Draft,” a sleek co-working space. “Rough Draft” opened in response to the growing population of creatives who frequently work from home but sometimes prefer the atmosphere of a communal workspace. Individuals can pay $28 to work there for the day, or $300 to work there “full time” each month. Down the street “City Copilot” has just opened. The business is essentially a concierge service for the new economy that has developed around the hundreds of Airbnb rentals available in Williamsburg. Tenants pay to leave keys for their visitors and the business can also arrange to have someone clean the apartment for the next Airbnb guests. Visitors can leave luggage at the storefront and arrange airport transportation. The idea that there would be enough visitors on the Southside to warrant this sort of business was unthinkable even a few years ago.

I turn left and cross Union Avenue again to head up Scholes Street, ending my walk at The Williamsburg Houses, the oldest public housing project in the borough and the largest in Williamsburg with 1,620 units. These are a stark contrast to where this walk began on the Northside waterfront. The twenty towers that make up the complex are the sites of dense urban living just like the new condos, but there are no rooftop patios or heated pools here. The anchor institutions on the first floor of the Northside condos include both necessities and luxuries, but at The Williamsburg Houses most of the first floor retail is shuttered aside from a few convenience stores and a daycare. One thing that is present here and lacking in most of Williamsburg are police, a sign of control and securitization over the poorest population in the neighborhood. This is not the
“Williamsburg” that has international renown, and most tourists do not end up in this section of the neighborhood. But the Southside, and these projects especially, are home to Long Term residents who aren’t facing immediate physical displacement. Still, their local environments have changed dramatically over the past two decades. In the following chapters, the reader will come to understand how existing residents experience change and cultural displacement as their neighborhood continues to gentrify.

Chapter Summaries

The residents of Williamsburg are at the center of this research, and in Chapter Two the reader is introduced to the tenure cohorts that these residents belong to and what style of attachment they hold to the neighborhood. The sample breaks down into four groups: Long Term, Medium Term, New and Former. Long Term residents are mostly Latino or white ethnics who (im)migrated to the neighborhood or were born to parents who did so. Most have lived in concentrated ethnic communities, near family, and have been employed in blue-collar work. These individuals have a necessity attachment to the neighborhood as they moved there for work or ethnic networks and the neighborhood itself does not hold any symbolic value for them. Medium Term residents, early gentrifiers of the neighborhood, include artists, students, and other middle class people, mainly white suburbanites who moved to the neighborhood in the 1980s through early 2000s. These residents are identity-attached to the neighborhood as their own urbanite, artistic identities are partially tied to Williamsburg. The cultural movement they brought to Williamsburg garnered international attention for the neighborhood, which led to an intensification of change and redevelopment. New residents moved to Williamsburg after the rezoning, many of them purchasing units in luxury condo buildings built along the
waterfront and the interior blocks of the Northside. These incoming residents are wealthier and more likely to live in family units than Medium Termers, they have an investment attachment to the neighborhood as they own property and are mostly concerned with “upgrading” Williamsburg. Ten Former residents, often overlooked in gentrification research, are included in this study. They often hold the same views as their original tenure cohort when it comes to aspects of cultural displacement or their experiences of Williamsburg. However all Former residents, no matter their cohort, feel that the current, corporatized incarnation of Williamsburg is problematic. They are less optimistic about the changes than Long Term residents who managed to stay. The tenure group that people were part of represents their reasons for moving to Williamsburg and the state of the neighborhood at the time. Tenure and attachment influenced how people experienced Williamsburg, specifically their perceptions of crime, retail changes, community activism, and gentrification itself.

Community activism, crime, and retail may seem like disparate topics, but they are all relevant for how residents made sense of their neighborhood and how they experienced it on a daily basis. Few interviewees directly mentioned their involvement in community activism, but previous research and media reports indicate several waves of passionate activism among Williamsburg residents over time. I argue below that participation in community organizing and activism is a way that successive residential cohorts have claimed ownership over the neighborhood. I did not initially anticipate crime as a topic in this research, but it came up in nearly every interview with Medium Term residents. When I asked Long Termers explicitly about the neighborhood’s history, they did not deny the existence of crime, but the cohorts in this research had very
different perceptions of the crime, again serving and reflecting their attachment style to
the neighborhood. Retail is part of residents’ everyday movements through the
neighborhood and an important component of their daily interactions with their locality
and the people in it. The turnover and changes in the neighborhood’s commercial
landscape have become a significant touchstone for experiences of gentrification in
Williamsburg.

The third chapter, “Activism and Ownership in Williamsburg” considers Andrew
Deener’s concept of symbolic ownership as it applies to Williamsburg and I expand on
my definition of cultural displacement. Community organizing is examined as a way that
various resident groups have shaped the neighborhood and claimed ownership over
Williamsburg. Long Term residents are presented as individuals going about their
everyday life in a neighborhood that has suffered from city divestment and
deindustrialization. They took actions to make their neighborhoods safer, or to advocate
for services that the city fails to provide. Medium Term residents were active in
protesting against the rezoning of the neighborhood that would result in luxury housing.
Their goals for Williamsburg are focused around environmentalism, and later
maintaining the neighborhood as a quirky, artist enclave instead of a bedroom community
for wealthy professionals. New residents who have moved to Williamsburg are mostly
focused on activism involving their children’s schools and the addition of parks and
public space activities in the neighborhood. The chapter concludes with a case study of a
New and Medium Term project: Williamsburg Walks. Community activism is presented
as a mechanism for claiming ownership over space, and can also result in cultural
displacement of established groups.
Chapter 4 details experiences of crime and perceptions of safety for Williamsburg residents over time. Crime peaked in Williamsburg and New York in the early 1990s, and has steadily decreased since. Most Long and Medium Term residents lived in Williamsburg during its highest crime rates, but members of each group have different interpretations of crime and indicators of social disorder in the neighborhood. All Long Termers acknowledged that there was a period of high crime in the neighborhood, but they did not feel personally threatened by it, but in-moving Medium Term residents observed crime differently. They sometimes talk about Williamsburg as a scary or dangerous place, and many have a “brush with danger” to recall. They don’t report personally experiencing crime more often than Long Termers residents, but they perceived the crime and aesthetic disorder of Williamsburg to be more threatening, while also “exciting” and “real.” Before moving there, most New residents thought of Williamsburg as dirty, and the grit didn’t lend authenticity as it did for Medium Termers. New residents hadn’t imagined living in Williamsburg until the condos were built, but by 2014-15 they reported feeling comfortable- citing increased retail that made it feel “more like a neighborhood” and safer. The fourth chapter ends with a discussion of the significance of crime for Medium Term residents. Their nostalgia, pride, and even glee at recounting their experiences suggest that they had a fetishizing relationship to crime and danger. Additional statements from Medium Term residents are evaluated in the final section of the chapter, revealing that these brushes with danger became central to their narrative as “urban pioneers” in Williamsburg.

As these various groups have gone through cycles of ownership and displacement in Williamsburg, the neighborhood has also changed beyond the scope of residents’
actions. Chapter 5 begins with a discussion of changes in Williamsburg’s most public sphere- the neighborhood’s businesses. The case is made for why the nature of local shops matters so significantly for a neighborhood’s evolution, alongside quantitative data about the shifts in Williamsburg retail over time. This argument is supplemented with commentary from storeowners about why they chose Williamsburg for their location, or how they adapted their business over time to meet Williamsburg’s changing demographics and clientele. The evolution is traced as the neighborhood shifts from local to global, necessity to luxury, and from economies of production to consumption. This chapter shows how Williamsburg’s identity evolved over time from negative representation in the press (see discussion of New York Times articles in Chapter 4), to a locally based scene, to an international travel destination and a place for upper-middle class professionals to invest in property.

Chapter 6 is focused on the experiences of residents when it comes to the process and effects of gentrification itself and their shifting perceptions of Williamsburg. It opens with accounts of residents comparing the neighborhood before and after gentrification. Medium Term residents show the most bitterness about gentrification, while Long Termers appreciate many of the changes, though they also experience cultural displacement. This chapter challenges some stereotypes about gentrification and divested neighborhoods that are being “revitalized”. Three themes that emerge from these accounts are then focused on: family friendly, void to convenience, and from local to global and back again. Despite the fact that Williamsburg was always home to families with children, it now has a reputation among New residents as being a “Family Friendly” neighborhood. In fact, the percentage of children in the neighborhood has steadily
decreased over time in almost every census tract. This section explores what makes Williamsburg seem like a family neighborhood if it’s not the mere presence of children and families. The next section follows the narrative of gentrifiers referring to ‘80s, ‘90s and even early 2000s Williamsburg in terms of a void- there was nothing/no one there. Today New residents find the neighborhood “convenient” while Long Termers feel it is less so for them and Medium Termers and Former residents deem the area “dead” and now void of culture. In the final section I trace how Williamsburg started out as a “local” community that catered to residents’ necessities but later shifted into a “global” presence-internationally known and catering to tourists, visitors, and cosmopolitans. Most recently, New residents have begun to push back on Williamsburg’s reputation as a destination by protesting for the closing of food and craft markets that draw large crowds on the weekends. Instead aiming for the quieter, “village life” that some claimed they left Manhattan for.

The conclusion reiterates the main differences between tenure groups and attachment styles as well as some of the notions about gentrification that this work has challenged. The importance of tenure and attachment is argued, and the chapter closes with ideas for further research in the field. This qualitative work lays the groundwork for a more quantitative, comparative study. Interviewing residents enabled me to identify the most common issues that each tenure cohort brings up about gentrification, these qualitative concepts could now be operationalized into variables to be measured in a survey. A more quantitative approach to these questions of tenure and attachment could yield rich data about how cultural displacement and gentrification affect existing communities and neighborhoods. This proposal leads into policy implications for the
work, especially the importance of protecting the cultural and consumption needs of established residents as a neighborhood gentrifies, creating a more blended neighborhood along race, class, and tenure lines.
Chapter Two
The Residents of Williamsburg

This study captures a specific point in Williamsburg’s history, from the impacts of divestment and deindustrialization in the 1970s, through its popularity in the 1990s, and state-led gentrification into the 2010s. In order to trace and understand the changes of this gentrifying neighborhood, it is necessary to focus on the people who experienced it. The fifty residents included in this study have lived through different versions of Williamsburg. The sample is divided into four tenure cohorts dependent on when the respondents moved to Williamsburg. This chapter begins by outlining the significance of tenure and neighborhood attachment style in gentrification research, followed by demographic evidence of Williamsburg’s changing population. A description of the four resident groups in this study and finally a discussion of each group’s motivations for moving to the neighborhood follows.

Tenure and Attachment

The purpose of this research is to understand the daily lives of individuals in a gentrified neighborhood. In the following chapters I identify concerns for Long Term, Medium Term, and Former residents who are being culturally, if not physically displaced. My goal has been to identify lived effects of gentrification and to verify or challenge existing stereotypes about culturally displaced residents. Detecting themes that are central to experiences of gentrification can assist city governments and neighborhood leaders looking to create policy solutions that respect the needs and rights of residents.

In order to understand how residents perceive of a gentrifying neighborhood, I focus on resident tenure. As places change and new groups move in and out, individuals experience their surroundings differently. What tenure cohort someone is in shapes their
neighborhood networks, their attachments to the neighborhood, and their perceptions and experiences of gentrification.

The romanticization of pre-gentrified neighborhoods often groups co-ethnics together without considering how the experiences of ethnic or racial others might be similar based on tenure. Ethnic tensions certainly existed in pre-gentrified Williamsburg-between white, Latino and Black residents, as well as between Dominican and Puerto Rican (im)migrants. While some residents mentioned instance of inter-ethnic tensions, these stories were not central to any of my respondents’ accounts of life in Williamsburg. In most cases Latino and white ethnic respondents emphasized sticking to their own territories to avoid trouble, although as we will see in Chapter 3, local ethnic organizations sometimes worked together in the 1970s and ‘80s for mutual goals. In this research, community refers more to an experience than a tangible, physical entity. Being part of the Dominican or Polish Long Term communities entailed different physical surroundings and different employment or educational opportunities, but with some overlap like religious commitment and factory work.

Gentrification research often fails to make distinctions between waves of gentrifiers. As we’ll see below there are many significant differences in perceptions and experiences of Medium Term and New gentrifiers, and important differences within those groups as well. Race and ethnicity were not a place of common ground between Long Term residents and Medium Term and New gentrifiers. A Medium Term immigrant from Poland in 1990 who hung out with artists saw the waterfront as beautiful and magical, while a Former/Long-Term Polish immigrant described the waterfront at the same time as decrepit and dangerous. There are Medium Term and New Latina residents who have
completely different experiences of the neighborhood than their Long Term peers, despite one of them having lived in the neighborhood for 16 years.

Later in the chapter I present motivations among different tenure groups for moving to Williamsburg. I argue that motivation for moving to the area is a predictor of the style of “neighborhood attachment” that residents felt. Long Termers were generally attached to the neighborhood out of necessity—most came for blue-collar work and because of existing immigrant enclaves. Medium Termers had an identity attachment to the neighborhood, moving to Williamsburg because of the burgeoning art scene and networks of students and artists. For many Medium Termers, Williamsburg represented an avant-garde identity and a rejection of traditional 9-5 work, cheap rent meant that they could work a few hours a week in a restaurant and spend more time focusing on creative pursuits. New residents have an investment attachment to the neighborhood. These newcomers are wealthy, highly educated professionals who have moved to Williamsburg because of its proximity to Manhattan along with relatively cheaper housing that they speculated would increase in value.

These attachment styles are not totally exclusive, for example: some Medium Term and Long Term residents own homes in the neighborhood and thus also have a stake in increasing housing values. Still, along with tenure, these attachments influence how participants experience Williamsburg over time, how they choose which local issues to organize around, and their perceptions of crime and safety.

Studies of neighborhood attachment have predominantly focused on assessing levels of sentiment that residents feel towards their locale (Fiery 1945). Other researchers have established that neighborhood attachment could be dependent on the extensiveness
of social networks, physical aspects of the area, the individual’s evaluation of their own home and mobility, and length of residence in the neighborhood (Kasarda and Jonowitz 1974; Ladewig and McCann 1980; Ringel and Finkelstein 1991). Still others identified that life stage might affect attachment, for example parents of small children may feel more attached as they’re likely to interact with local institutions like schools as well as other families, while single people may feel less attached since their social lives may play out in other locales (Mesch and Manor 1998). Most of these studies concluded that longer-term residents exhibited stronger neighborhood attachment than new comers, and that being more attached would lead to more involvement with local organizations, yielding benefits for the neighborhood (Shumacker and Taylor 1983).

These articles centered on level of attachment, but Albert Hunter (1978) introduced a model for types of attachment based on how residents interact or build community. In his essay in the Handbook of Contemporary Urban Life Hunter (1978) builds upon previous work (Suttles 1972) and argues that communities develop along sequential stages of attachment. These stages were dependent on neighborhood characteristics, the context of mass society and how the local community related to it (Hunter 1978: 151). In the first stage, residual communities, there is little shared attachment or sentiments among resident and community is based solely on proximity. Emergent communities are based in conflict—banding together only to combat a perceived threat, while conscious communities are chosen and arise around an “articulated set of central values.” In the final stage, vicarious or symbolic, individuals still choose to be part of the community, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that they participate or even share central values.
In this dissertation I consider not level, but type of neighborhood attachment, closer to Hunter’s typology than the evaluations of strength of attachment above. The theory of attachment described below incorporates Hunter’s idea that attachment might be dependent on neighborhood characteristics—like divestment, deindustrialization, a counterculture movement, or gentrification—that influencing the neighborhood at the time. I add that these characteristics can serve as motivations for in-movers.

In this section I provide definitions of three neighborhood attachment styles followed by specific examples of how these styles map onto the Long Term, Medium Term, and New residents in Williamsburg. The “Why Williamsburg?” section below provides a more in depth account of residents’ initial decisions to move to the neighborhood and how their tenure cohort and neighborhood attachment style are related.

A necessity attachment means that a resident chooses a neighborhood based on tangible needs that the locale can meet. This includes access to work, affordable housing, and institutions, networks, or services—including groceries and other necessities, social services, medical care, or religious and ethnic organizations. Although the neighborhood may become meaningful to the individual in other ways, residents choose the neighborhood because of the essential goods and services it provides—the attachment to the neighborhood is primarily one of necessity.

Individuals may also choose a neighborhood for more symbolic reasons, like what the neighborhood represents—in this case residents have an identity attachment. What is important is not necessarily the goods or services one can get in a neighborhood, but rather what the neighborhood is known for. Perhaps there is a concentration of music studios or renowned restaurants, or maybe a neighborhood is known for being popular
among artists or upper-middle class parents. Individuals move to these neighborhoods because they find amenities that cater to some part of their identity, along with others like themselves. The networks here are based on interests or lifestyle rather than a more constraining variable like economic conditions or immigrant status. Individuals with an identity attachment often had a choice of where to move to, and the decision is at least partially made with consideration of the identity-affirming activities or institutions present in the neighborhood, sometimes at the expense of other needs.

A third reason why an individual might choose a neighborhood is because of the existence of, or potential for future benefits: an investment attachment. The housing may be relatively inexpensive but likely to increase in value, or perhaps the area has a good school district for their children or is seen as prestigious for its amenities. For these individuals a neighborhood goes beyond meeting needs or providing some kind of lifestyle or identity affirmation. In fact, an investment attachment to a neighborhood may mean that an individual moves to a there even if they feel it does not fit their immediate needs or identity—with the expectation that it eventually will or that these concerns are less important than the investment they are making.

These neighborhood attachment styles are not necessarily exclusive. For example, in Williamsburg a Polish immigrant may have come to the neighborhood in the 1990’s as a result of immigration networks (necessity attachment) but may have stayed because she participated in the emerging art scene at the time (identity attachment); or a wealthy New resident may have initially purchased in Williamsburg because of the good investment opportunity, but now identify with the culture around parenting and family life that is becoming more prevalent in the neighborhood. Individuals have the ability to develop
multiple attachments, but in the context of this study neighborhood attachment style refers to the primary neighborhood attachment, the initial motivation an individual had for moving into the neighborhood. Attachment style can influence how individuals feel about their neighborhood. In the coming chapters we’ll see how attachment interacts with tenure to influence experiences and perceptions of crime, community activism, gentrification and cultural displacement.

In the next few sections the reader will come to understand more about these tenure cohorts—first from a birds’ eye census view, the historical contexts of the cohorts, and finally hearing from the residents themselves about their decisions to move to Williamsburg. In subsequent chapters, tenure and attachment interact for how individuals perceive their neighborhood in the past and present, and the actions they have taken within the neighborhood.

**Williamsburg’s Demographics**

Census data for Williamsburg provide demographic trends that serve as a starting point for this research. This section compares American Decennial Census data and is occasionally supplemented with data from the American Community Survey. Six census tracts from the Northside and four from the Southside are included in the following trends. The information is compared between the Northside and Southside neighborhoods, and Williamsburg as a whole and the entire borough of Brooklyn. These figures give an idea of how Williamsburg has changed over time and also how it differs from averages for the borough. As justified in Chapter 1, the census tracts used in this section are in the Western portion of Williamsburg that has been the most affected by gentrification—but
in the Eastern part of the neighborhood there are also large populations of Latino residents as well as the much smaller Italian-American population.

As Williamsburg shifted from a working class factory town to an internationally known culture hub, the resident population changed accordingly. Education rates increased while poverty decreased and young in-movers were less likely to have blue-collar jobs. The construction of new residential units and the conversion of industrial buildings have developed around the existing three-story homes and public housing, creating a patchwork landscape in Williamsburg. Still, much of the long-term Polish and Latino population remained in the neighborhood as it transformed around them.

In 1970, just 4% of Williamsburg residents had attended some college, as opposed to 13.2% for Brooklyn as a whole (U.S. Census Bureau). In 1990 education rates in Williamsburg were similar to that in Brooklyn, but by 2013 the neighborhood had far surpassed the borough average, with 71% of Williamsburg reporting “some college or more” compared with 51.2% of Brooklyn. The Northside in particular showed a dramatic shift, with 84.4% of residents reported having at least “some college” in 2013 and 69.4% held at least a Bachelor’s degree, compared with just 30.6% for all of Brooklyn.

That same year, 2013, 42.7% of employed Northside residents, and 38.8% of Williamsburg residents overall, worked in “Professional and Related Services”. These numbers are in stark contrast with both the same area in 1990 (18.8%) and Brooklyn in 2013 (24.9%). Although the Brooklyn average has remained stable over time at around a quarter of the working population, that number has increased in Williamsburg, particularly on the Northside. This indicates that in-movers to the neighborhood are more

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1 Unless otherwise stated, all of the information in this section is from the U.S. Census Bureau, accessed via https://socialexplorer.com
likely to be part of the Professional classes than people living in other parts of Brooklyn, and that this increase in Williamsburg did not take off until at least the mid 1990s.

Williamsburg in the 1970s and ‘80s was not a wealthy neighborhood, until 2000 the area’s Average Household Income lagged behind that of the borough. In 1970 average family income in Williamsburg was 25% lower than the Brooklyn average, and in 1980 the gap was even larger at 28% when average household incomes were $11,083 and $15,333 respectively. After the first two decades of gentrification Williamsburg’s average household income ($42,731) nearly reached that of the borough ($46,292), and surpassed it in 2010. In 2015 the neighborhood’s average ($109,182) was 34% higher than the borough ($71,957).

Poverty rates dropped similarly over this time. In 1980 40.3% of Williamsburg residents were below the poverty level, compared with 18.7% of all Brooklynites. In 2014, 13.6% of Williamsburg residents ages 18-65 were living below the poverty level, less than the borough’s rate of 19.8%. The individuals living below poverty in 2014 were mostly concentrated in a few Southside tracts, in contrast to previous years when Williamsburg’s poverty was more widespread. This indicates that while the entire neighborhood has gentrified, the increase of wealth has been especially concentrated on the Northside and in the waterfront condos.

Between the 1990 and 2010 Censuses Williamsburg’s population only grew by about 3,500 residents, but the proportion of people aged 18-34 increased from 29.6% to 43.6%. Nearly half of the residents of the North and Southsides were young adults, compared with Brooklyn’s average, which barely changed over the same time, from

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2 The 1970 census only listed “Average Family Income,” for the rest of the years listed here “Average Household Income” was used.
28.4% to 27.1%. However by 2015 in all six of the Northside tracts 80% or more of the population was over 25. This indicates that while Williamsburg still averages 41.3% 18-34 year olds, most of those residents are in their late 20s and early 30s, more likely to be coupled and established in their careers. Although it was younger 20-somethings who made Williamsburg’s youth culture in the 1980s and ‘90s, the next generations of artists and students cannot afford the neighborhood today. They are moving to cheaper neighborhoods like Bushwick, Ridgewood and Bed Stuy.

Williamsburg’s newest residents, over 25, highly educated, and with a six-figure household income are more likely to own their homes than previous Williamsburg generations. In 1980 home ownership in Williamsburg was only around 10%, compared with a Brooklyn average of 23.4%. In 2015 this number had increased to 22.7% on the Northside, where new construction has been most prevalent, some tracts have as high as 34.4% owner occupied units.

The new construction in the neighborhood is one of the most visible measures of change. Not only do the waterfront condos stand out from the three and four-story housing in much of the neighborhood, but they also offer amenities that entice an entirely new demographic into the neighborhood. Most condos boast roof terraces, pools, and gyms but many include additional amenities. At 101 Bedford, where studios start at $2,650 a month, residents have access to a wine room and a creative arts studio. Some buildings are advertised to new residents by simultaneously mocking and manipulating hipster culture to sell apartments.

According to American Community Survey estimates, the number of housing units in Williamsburg increased by 55.1% on the Northside from 2010 to 2014. By
comparison, the total number of housing units in the entire borough of Brooklyn increased by only 2.6% over the same four years. With the increase in housing the neighborhood has also definitely become denser, losing the “small village” feel that many Medium Term and New residents have praised. Over that same period, the total population grew by approximately 8,000, individuals, a 28.9% population increase.

Even with all of these changes, the Long Term (im)migrant and ethnic communities of Williamsburg are still a significant presence. The 1980 census indicated a peak for the neighborhood’s (im)migrant populations. In that year 80.8% of Southside residents identified as Hispanic and 34% of the Northside were of Polish ancestry. In 2010, just a few years after new condo buildings opened, the Hispanic population had decreased but still accounted for 48.8% of the population within the most gentrified part of Williamsburg. The Polish population on the Northside shrank to 14.6%, but this is mainly a function of the increase of New residents, the real number of the Polish population only decreased by 415 individuals in thirty years. This section has highlighted the extreme demographic changes in Williamsburg over time, but has also suggested that much of the Long Term community remains in the neighborhood. This study aims to answer the question—how do these existing residents experience and deal with such drastic changes in the landscape and population of their neighborhood?

The Residents

Long Term Residents

Long Term residents are considered to be respondents who moved to Williamsburg, or were growing up there, by 1980 at the latest (although some had moved to the neighborhood as early as the 1950s). The group also includes two younger people
who grew up in the neighborhood in the 1990s. In this study 17 of the 50 respondents were considered Long Term residents. Two were (im)migrants; and thirteen grew up in Williamsburg with two more moving to the neighborhood as adults. Nine residents lived on the Northside and eight on the Southside.

Many Long Term residents came to Williamsburg (either themselves or through their parents) because of the presence of well-paying factory work or because other people from their hometown had moved there, often both reasons mattered. They were not attracted to Williamsburg specifically, but rather the presence of jobs and immigrants like themselves.

The Northside of the neighborhood was home to immigrants from Eastern Europe, predominantly Poland. The Italian-American community, recently bifurcated by the construction Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, was generally diminishing during a period of white flight to the suburbs of Long Island and New Jersey. Latino immigrants and migrants populated the Southside, predominantly Puerto Rican at the time and later Dominican. These residents recall being able to purchase necessities often from co-ethnics, they also remember entertainment opportunities in the form of movie theaters, social clubs, and working class bars. At that time Williamsburg was still a factory town with nearly half of local adults working in manufacturing until 1980. The waterfront was lined with factories but also pocketed with tracts of abandoned land or buildings; relics from a more active industrial past.

In the ‘70s as the city was cutting back municipal services crime increased, factories continued to downsize or close completely, and in the worst of it landlords in Williamsburg set their buildings on fire in an attempt to recoup insurance money.
Wealthy people from the suburbs drove in to buy drugs, funding a network of gangs and racial groups who fought over territory, and sex workers found clients along the trucking routes (Foderaro 1987; Curtis 1998). Still, most residents had strong networks among their families, neighbors, and churches. Williamsburg had its problems, but residents claim they didn’t feel unsafe, in fact some residents felt safer back then (See Chapter 4).

The ethnic enclaves of Williamsburg coexisted within less than one square mile of each other. Eventually tensions arose, as a result of competition over resources as well as racism. White homeowners on the Northside refused to rent to people of color, instead opting to leave apartments empty (Susser 1982). Later in the 80s and 90s, Medium Term residents recall being harassed by Latino youth.

At the time residents of North Brooklyn, regardless of race, ethnicity, or immigration status, were nearly all working class or poor. The conditions of being poor in a divested neighborhood meant that residents who were sometimes in conflict around racial or ethnic tensions had to work together to secure basic city services. A New York Times article published in 1980 praised a women’s group—the National Congress of Neighborhood Women—for its remarkable ability to operate with women from all parts of the neighborhood (Harrison 1980). Metropolitan Avenue, a film also released in 1980, documents the creation of a coalition of local associations in Williamsburg including Polish, Irish, Italian, Puerto Rican, Dominican and Black residents. Throughout the film the individual associations and the coalition advocate together for more police protection, against the reduction of public services, and to protest the cancellation of a local bus route. Still, despite some organizing efforts that crossed racial boundaries, the general
understanding among Long Term Williamsburg residents was that it was best to stick to your own (racial) territory.

Medium Term Residents

Long Term residents were asked about how Williamsburg had changed over the years and several of them mentioned “The Village People.” They were referencing Manhattan’s Greenwich and East Villages to categorize the artists, students, and other young people who were indeed coming to Williamsburg partially as a result of gentrification and increasing rent in those neighborhoods. These avant-gardes were rejecting their suburban upbringings and participating in a “back to the city” movement. Williamsburg was attractive because it was cheap and close to Manhattan, but it also represented an alternative to the more hectic pace of the city, and soon an art scene began to flourish. The majority of these Medium Term residents moved in from the late 1980s to the early 2000s into a neighborhood that had felt the effects of depopulation and city divestment for decades, but that had also been slightly improved thanks to the efforts of Long Term organizers.

Medium Term residents rented abandoned manufacturing spaces with varying degrees of legality, they threw parties, opened businesses, played music, and showed their art in local galleries. They came to be part of a growing community of artists, musicians, and other people who were rejecting 9-5 lifestyles, and the neighborhood became a symbol of an avant-garde movement.

Williamsburg was becoming a cultural touchstone in the way that Greenwich Village had been half a century before. Medium Termers were the first middle-class, white Americans to move to Williamsburg and were younger, more educated and less
likely to live in a family unit than Long Term residents. These in-movers were early in the trend of the reversal of white flight from the suburbs back to the city, and the grit of a divested neighborhood appealed to their artistic sensibilities. In the following chapters, we’ll see that the visible signs of divestment and disorder were badges that these Medium Term residents accepted as part of their edgy, bohemian narrative. Their brushes with danger were retold time and again as evidence that they were having a real urban experience.

The condominiums and upscale restaurants were not yet there, but the institutions that came to define Williamsburg at that time—cafes, bars, and performance spaces—had started to appear. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the city began to restore services that had been cut for more than three decades. Residents noted an increasing police presence at that time, and the L train was overhauled in 2002 to keep up with a growing population, ridership increased 16% in the first five years of the 2000s, just as Williamsburg was beginning to attract a broader range of visitors from around the city (Donohue 2006).

*New Residents*

Around the mid-2000s professional young adults typically living in Manhattan or other Brooklyn neighborhoods began visiting Williamsburg for the parties, galleries, and bar scene that the area had become famous for. These were not the artists or students who made up Williamsburg’s youth culture- but instead slightly older individuals with professional jobs and incomes to match. Many of the New Residents in this study reported that they came to Williamsburg once or twice in the mid-2000s but didn’t imagine themselves coming back to purchase an apartment a few years later. To them it
was dirty—ok for a party but not a place they’d want to live in. They evaluate its recent past as sketchy, unsafe or “less classy” than other gentrified neighborhoods like Park Slope or Brooklyn Heights. Many of the New residents in this sample moved to Williamsburg because luxury apartments were selling for at discounted prices- the result of external factors of city-supported gentrification and economic recession. They found Williamsburg to be a good investment, especially after finding more traditional “Brownstone Brooklyn” neighborhoods unaffordable. As the high rise condominiums opened Williamsburg’s population increased by 29% from 2010-2013. In this study, New residents are people who moved into the neighborhood after it was rezoned in 2005, but the bulk of New respondents came after the luxury housing on the waterfront began selling in 2007.

On the Northside, where gentrification has been felt most acutely, resident demographics witnessed a dramatic shift with the surge in luxury housing development. The average New Resident was more highly educated, more likely to own their apartment, and more likely to work in professional services than earlier neighborhood residents. Williamsburg continued to change as these wealthier residents moved in, sometimes as a result of their mere presence, other times in response to their engagement around particular projects. This meant more public and private services in the neighborhood-clinics, pre-schools, dentists, parks, and the re-opening of McCarren pool. The New Residents also attracted and encouraged the arrival of corporate stores like Starbucks, J Crew, and Whole Foods, cementing the loss of the nonconformist flair of the ‘90s.
Former Residents

Former Residents are by no means homogenous and often reflect the same feelings about the neighborhood as their original tenure cohort, that is the cohort they would have been a part of if they hadn’t moved out of Williamsburg. These residents have been physically displaced either because they could not afford the rent, or because they were disenchanted with the neighborhood and decided to move.

There were four main reasons why people left the neighborhood: 1) Some residents were physically displaced because of rent, they often tried to stay in the neighborhood—looking for other apartments in Williamsburg before expanding their search to neighboring spaces in Brooklyn and Queens, this was common no matter how long the individual had lived there. 2) Other residents moved because they felt like they no longer fit into the neighborhood. This was not often a motivation for moving for the less mobile Long Term residents, but as the culture of the neighborhood shifted from artsy to corporate some Medium Term residents decided to leave because they already felt culturally displaced. This was also sometimes a result of aging out, as some of Medium Term residents hit their mid-thirties the neighborhood didn’t hold the same appeal. 3) A third reason people might leave Williamsburg is if they “cashed out”—or left the neighborhood because they owned property that they then sold. No one in the study fell into this category, but interviewees reported that friends, family members, or former landlords had done this. When rents skyrocketed they sold and took the opportunity to move to nearby suburbs in Long Island, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Florida was a popular destination for Puerto Ricans and Dominicans and Polish people sometimes moved “back home.” 4) Two of the Former-Long Term residents left the
neighborhood because they perceived that they or their children would have better opportunities elsewhere.

All Former residents, regardless of race, class, or original tenure cohort, felt that Williamsburg has become too much of an attraction. They noted that the neighborhood no longer serves its residents and compared it to Manhattan to emphasize how the tourist crowds, population increase, and upscale retail had changed their experience of the neighborhood before leaving and on visits back. This is part self preservation, there’s no sense in longing for a neighborhood you can’t afford to live in, but it also speaks to their detachment from a space that was feeling increasingly foreign. Regardless of the reason they left, nearly all Former residents of Williamsburg experienced cultural displacement before moving.

For the most part Former Residents had less in common with each other than they did with their original tenure cohorts. In the coming chapters Former residents are sometimes discussed separately, but at other times are incorporated with their original tenure group, depending on the topic. Including this group of residents lends insight into perceptions of neighborhoods and gentrification after a resident is displaced, a point of view that much of the literature on gentrification fails to account for.

**Why Williamsburg?**

*Long Term: Necessity*

Many Long Term residents found work in the neighborhood, but perhaps more important were the networks of other in-movers like themselves (MacDonald and MacDonald 1964; Haug 2008). When asked why they or their family moved to Williamsburg, nearly every Long Term resident mentioned their ethnic or work networks.
Paul was born in Williamsburg in the late ‘80s, a few years after his parents moved to Brooklyn: “a lot of people from my dad’s town [in Puerto Rico] came to Williamsburg. So a lot of the neighborhood was neighbors [from Puerto Rico].” The same was true for Richard, whose mother moved to the neighborhood from Puerto Rico in the 1960s: “My mother...had older generations before hand helping her.” And George’s family from the Dominican Republic also had a network of people when they immigrated in the 1970s: “it’s been very helpful to have a lot of my family here, my parents were able to make this their home.” Former Long Term resident Arnold, recalls coming from the Dominican Republic as a child and settling in Williamsburg: “My Uncle was kind of like the point man for immigration, he had set up there, so that’s how we went there.”

Immigrants from Poland moved to the Northside for the same reasons. Marcin moved to Williamsburg in 1965: “I came because I have family here.” Gosia’s father moved to New York in the early 1970s, and moved his family over in 1976: “basically [he] got off at JFK and at that time a family friend who he knew from the village back in Poland was here and ended up [here].”

During the twentieth century, sections of Williamsburg developed around ethnic, racial, and religious communities that were fairly homogenous, at least for a few square blocks. Neighbors were often extended family members, or from the same hometowns or regions as one another- creating insular villages within the neighborhood. While the effects of this were not all positive (racist housing restrictions, ethnic gangs and disputes over territory) Long Term residents who were (im)migrants or second generation benefitted from their social networks, and the cultural businesses that thrived in these ethnic enclaves. Long Term residents had connections in Williamsburg before they or
their family arrived, and with the constrained choices of being poor or working class, an immigrant, and possibly a non-English speaker and/or a person of color, these networks and resources were mandatory for survival in New York. They moved into or grew up in a neighborhood that served their needs but was harmed by external factors such as planned shrinkage and divestment from political and economic forces. Long Termers rarely romanticize their neighborhood, they do not emphasize the danger they experienced or find beauty in urban decline. Instead they were realistic about the benefits and insularity their neighborhood provided, as well as the disadvantages of living in a neighborhood left behind. Their attachment of necessity is prevalent in the survival-focused organizing they participated in: protests against the suspension of city services and collectives to organize and empower tenants (see Chapter 3). Williamsburg itself had no special significance, aside from the resources it represented to them, these residents were attached to the neighborhood through the necessities of the resources it provided.

Medium Term: Identity

While the earliest Medium Term residents came for the low rent, they eventually built up artistic networks around themselves. These networks were not created out of necessity like those of Long Termers, but of desire to live in an artist enclave. Rob remembers moving to Williamsburg because it was “amazingly cheap” but he was soon followed by his fellow musicians: “I was the first one in [the band] to move here and the rest of the band followed, and for a while we were all living in the same neighborhood and one of us owned a bar and the other one was a bartender at the bar. Magical time.” James and his girlfriend, both artists, came in the mid-80s: “She got invited to go and live
in Williamsburg, we were just a big crowd of twenty-somethings from five or six different countries...everybody was an artist, or an architect or a writer.”

Several external factors fueled Medium Termers’ identification with Williamsburg: including a decaying industrial environment and a relatively high crime rate. In addition to the growing scene of art, music, and nightlife that Williamsburg was becoming known for, these external factors helped Medium Termers establish themselves as urbanites, honing a bohemian or pioneer identity that was closely associated with the neighborhood itself. This also explains why Medium Termers wax romantic about what has been lost through gentrification, more so than their Long Term neighbors. This group rallied around the preservation of their avant-garde community, organizing against the entrance of waste transfer stations, power plants, and condo towers alike. Later-arriving Medium Term residents came to the neighborhood because it was already known for its concentration of artists and was compared to former iterations of SoHo and the East Village. By 1992 there were estimated to be over 2,000 artists in Williamsburg, the six Northside census tracts where most of the early gentrification occurred, had a total population of approximately 9,000 (Gooch 1992). This concentration of artists (including their galleries, events, and performances in public spaces) began to influence the culture and reputation of Williamsburg. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, a desire to be part of this phenomenon was an even stronger motivator for in-movers, Williamsburg had a cultural draw all its own. Patrick, a musician, visited in the late ‘90s and moved in soon after because of how he related to the artist vibe: “My impression was that it was a place where artists could live for not a lot of money and feel like they were in their element because there was an artistic community and the environment was conducive to art-
“making.” On the other hand Courtney, a few years later in 2003, decided to move to Williamsburg to have the experiences of the artistic community without herself participating in it: “I came to Williamsburg the day of the marathon and it had a really nice feeling... people were out at the cafes and it just felt like a neighborhood and I liked the idea of loft living.” Later Medium Termers like Courtney came to the neighborhood because it provided opportunities for cultural consumption related to an artistic or creative identity. As Williamsburg garnered outside attention, earlier Medium Termers fought to stay in the increasingly expensive neighborhood because their identity was tied to the creative community that had thrived there.

By the early 2000s Williamsburg was an established brand that attracted international attention for its underground parties, curated thrift shops, concerts, and destinations like the Brooklyn Brewery. Writing about Williamsburg in 2010, Sharon Zukin noted how these parties and “places for cool cultural consumption” (2010: 37) changed the image of the neighborhood leading to an upgrading of retail and eventually significant shifts in the real estate market as wealthy newcomers were attracted to the hip neighborhood. By the mid to late 2000s, New residents moved to Williamsburg because of real estate deals and the area’s burgeoning reputation as the center of New York “cool.”

New Residents: Investment

People who moved to Williamsburg after the 2005 rezoning are considered New residents, although there is a distinction between those who moved in before and after the condo boom. When asked why they moved to Williamsburg, earlier-New residents recalled brief motivations, focused on what Williamsburg meant to them, essentially:
cool. Margot felt that it was “a cool place to be,” Ali wanted to live “in a cool area,” and Mark was attracted by the “good nightlife.”

None of the New residents moving in after 2008 mentioned the neighborhood’s atmosphere or cool reputation as their primary motivations for moving to the area. To this group, it was the deals for real estate investment that attracted them. After the 2005 rezoning, real estate developers began building luxury housing in Williamsburg. By 2010 there were 173 projects, either completed or still under construction, but in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, there was a temporary surplus of luxury housing (Friedrich and Quinlan 2013). Developers of luxury real estate made deals to attract potential buyers, making these units brilliant “investments” for people who were already looking to buy real estate in New York. In fact, of the eleven New residents in this study, six moved to the neighborhood primarily because they considered it a smart investment. Caithlin and her husband moved to Williamsburg in 2009, at the height of the real estate panic: “…we wanted to invest some money. He got a bonus that year which was pretty nice so we wanted to invest it...Williamsburg was the best bang for our buck at that time. We were in the recession and we got a huge deal on the apartment.” Ella echoed the “real-estate as investment” strategy. She and her husband had been living in a loft in Chelsea since the 1970s, but decided to sell their larger space and invest that money in Williamsburg: “Well we were looking in the recession, it was just 2011 and this part of the neighborhood with all of these buildings, they were still looking for people to live in them...And I thought this would be a good move because I figured it would appreciate, because real estate is sort of an investment.”
These newcomers knew about Williamsburg because of its avant-garde scene, but that was something they were more likely to tolerate than gravitate towards, and certainly not participate in. Convenience and a return on investment were most often the priorities. Sarinda and her husband were living in Fort Greene and were looking to buy an apartment around 2010. They realized that they could get more space for their money in Williamsburg, and while Sarinda found it to be “less classy” than Fort Greene, she felt that the schools in Williamsburg were better. After a few searches in “Brownstone Brooklyn” her husband suggested they start looking in Williamsburg, “I didn’t want to but we did anyway.” Josie and her husband were planning on buying a home in Brooklyn and had been searching in Park Slope for about a year before they decided to check out Williamsburg in 2010. She had visited the neighborhood in her early twenties and remembered it as: “cool... it felt unsafe and dirty to me before, back in like 2006.” Although not their first choice for neighborhood, “we found the condo and it was exactly what we wanted, so we bought it.”

These New residents unanimously feel that the neighborhood has improved in recent years, with the addition of upscale restaurants and boutiques along with the minimization of graffiti tags and underdeveloped space- signs for them of social disorder. New residents also express how convenient they feel the neighborhood is with large, chain stores, subway access and a ferry (which, at $4 per ride and $6 on weekends, is almost exclusively used by New residents and visitors). Residents in this group express that they gambled on Williamsburg, since it was not previously known for luxury and convenience, but that their risk has paid off. Because these, New residents invested in property in Williamsburg, they are also invested in the aesthetics and the amenities the
neighborhood has to offer. They organize for increased park space, as well as the exclusion of certain activities—and therefore people—from public spaces, helping to establish their neighborhood as a wealthy enclave.

Conclusion

Urban neighborhoods change over time: from bucolic to industrial, prosperous to divested, or hip to luxurious. Individuals moving into these spaces at different periods have varying motivations for doing so. Tenure and attachments to neighborhoods can influence their perceptions and experiences of that place. As the meaning of a neighborhood changes, diverse groups of people are attracted to it for specific reasons—sometimes they are related to the individual’s needs, other times the prestige of the neighborhood.

In this study attachment style reflects residents’ motivations for moving to Williamsburg and the state of Williamsburg at the time. Tenure interacts with demographic factors like class, education, and race to inform the types of attachments residents have to the neighborhood. In the following chapters we’ll see how these attachments, based on tenure, influenced how residents perceived crime, retail, and community activism. Williamsburg has a history of strong community groups and resident participation around local issues. In the next chapter we’ll see how residents have exerted ownership over the neighborhood through community activism, and how the goals of these groups differed by tenure cohort.
Chapter Three
Activism and Ownership in Williamsburg

Over time neighborhoods change—whether through gentrification, urban renewal, divestment, white flight or an influx of immigration—former European neighborhoods become home to thousands of Latino and Asian immigrants (Hum 2002), a poor, working class Black neighborhood is transformed by Black professionals (Pattillo 2008), or an Italian ethnic enclave is cleared out for high-income development (Gans 1962). The public spaces and institutions of these neighborhoods change with resident turnover, and different populations gain and lose ownership over a neighborhood. Since the second half of the twentieth century, Williamsburg expanded from a white working class neighborhood to include Latino (im)migrants, avant-gardes, college students, hipsters, and wealthy professionals. Struggles for ownership and tensions between these groups have played out over decades in public parks, pools, and streets in Williamsburg. This chapter details some of these struggles, while also looking at how tenure cohort and attachment style have influenced residents’ goals for the neighborhood, and which community groups and local movements they have participated in. Examining community organizations over time allows us to see how resident tenure groups shape their neighborhood through collective action.

Tensions Over Space

“Post-Concert Open Air Drug Market in Williamsburg!” reads a sensationalized headline in a 2011 issue of Brooklyn Paper, a print and online newspaper covering stories, ads and classifieds from all over the borough (Short 2011). The story focuses on the plight of Susan Fester, a resident of Williamsburg who is upset about the crowds have been filing past her apartment to attend an annual summer concert series produced in part
by a local non-profit, Open Space Alliance. The article features a four-minute video (one of nine parts) that Fester posted to YouTube under the handle “StopOSAConcerts.” In the video dozens of concertgoers, most young white men, purchase balloons filled with nitrous oxide, colloquially known as laughing gas. Purchasers inhale the contents to achieve a body high and sometimes hallucinations at the (low) risk of asphyxiation and even death. The videos go on for twenty minutes, as revelers continue to purchase the balloons and obstruct traffic despite the presence of police and fire engines. While Fester’s complaints are reminiscent of an urban version of “get off my lawn,” the incident also speaks to a broader conflict shaping neighborhood tensions in Williamsburg. In a changing neighborhood, various groups compete for ownership of public space—whether this involves community activism to improve some perceived problem, or an attempt to control how spaces are used and by whom. The following account of a local concert series provides a context for current tensions before looking at the evolution of community activism and ownership as the neighborhood gentrified.

The Open Space Alliance is a non-profit that was founded in Williamsburg in 2003 by Steve Hindy, the owner of the now internationally famous Brooklyn Brewery. The alliance acts like a park conservancy, but for all of the open space in North Brooklyn. OSA partners with other organizations as well as the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, with a stated mission to “raise private funds to expand and improve open space in North Brooklyn” (Open Space Alliance 2017). The alliance’s website currently lists twenty board members who are required to make annual contributions to the organization to secure their position. The price tag on the annual fee is not disclosed on the website, but the twenty board members include lawyers, doctors, directors of real
estate agencies, and stockbrokers—certainly not your average Long Term or even Medium Term resident. There is an affiliated “OSA Community Committee” that does not require a membership fee, but this component is advisory rather than a decision making body. This combination of public space with private funding and decision making mirrors other tensions that a gentrifying neighborhood experiences, and in Williamsburg it comes to a head over public events like the concert series.

Williamsburg’s public-space concerts began in 2005 when Clear Channel donated a quarter of a million dollars towards the cleanup of McCarren Park Pool, a Works Progress Administration project that had been drained and abandoned since the late 1980s. That summer, a local choreographer staged a performance in the pool, residents could purchase tickets from $15-40. The next year Live Nation, Clear Channel’s outdoor venue branch, began holding ticketed concerts in the pool while a small, Williamsburg-based marketing company called “Jelly NYC” organized free shows in the same space called “Pool Parties.” In 2008 OSA took over the pool production schedule after winning a bid with the Park’s Department. When renovations began on the pool the next year, OSA moved both concert series to the new East River State Park, a few blocks away on the waterfront. By the end of the summer in 2010, Jelly NYC and OSA had a strained relationship because of financial disputes. In 2011 the OSA/Live Nation ticketed concert series continued on the waterfront while the free “Pool Parties” moved to alternative Brooklyn locations.

The move from the McCarren Park Pool to the East River State Park also meant funneling thousands of people through an entirely residential portion of the neighborhood, incurring backlash from residents. In a 2011 article about the concerts, the New York
Times interviewed Medium and Long Term residents who were upset about the noise, trash, and disrespect that they experienced during the events (Leland 2011). A woman who lived in the neighborhood since 1957 commented: “You can’t hear yourself think…We want them to stop.” Her twenty-six year old daughter added that she liked having new people in the neighborhood, but that the events made it seem as if “they unleash beasts at 10 p.m.” A Medium Term resident cautioned: “One of these days one of these suburban kids is going to say the wrong thing to the wrong person.” The complaints recorded by the NYT and Susan Fensten’s video detailed above were both in 2011, in reaction to the Live Nation ticketed events, not Jelly’s free “Pool Parties”

OSA’s goal is to raise money for board members’ discretionary use on public space in the neighborhood. Within three years of gaining control of concert scheduling they had successfully driven out a free concert series that reflected the DIY/artistic culture of many Medium Term residents, while maintaining a corporate concert series that charged up to $50 per ticket. Ironically, the ticketed concerts meant the closing of a heavily used public park for several-hours-long stretches during the hot summer months. During these events, tarp boasting “Open Space Alliance” hung from the park’s gates completely closing off residents’ views of the waterfront, sending a clear message that this space was not open to them.

The Open Space Alliance reflects a trend of exclusionary practices in Williamsburg and other gentrifying locales where non-elected “elites,” like commercial and residential property owners, have the power to make decisions for and about the neighborhood. Sharon Zukin discusses an example of this in Manhattan’s Union Square where the public park is under private management. Associations like the Union Square
Partnership add security and commercial programming to the park—strategies of control that “tend to reinforce social inequality” (2010: 128). While the Open Space Alliance straddles the desires of Medium Term and New residents, it also reflects the neighborhood’s transition from a “DIY” hipster culture to wealthy, corporate, and securitized. In this climate, issues that are taken up by the organization become centered around elite interests, an outcome that has been a gradual departure from Williamsburg’s activist roots in the 1960s and ’70s.

**The Evolution of Community Activism in Williamsburg**

On March 3, 1977 Northside residents had something to celebrate. After 16 months of resident occupation, the city finally reversed their decision to close a local firehouse. In November 1975, when the city first ordered the closure, Northside residents began a resistance movement “The Peoples Firehouse” to keep the needed service in the area. Families, elderly residents, and even Boy Scout troupes took turns occupying the building twenty-four hours a day (Bahrampour 2013). Sleeping on mattresses inside the firehouse, residents organized fundraisers and even held Christmas celebrations in Engine Company 212 (Susser 1982). For nearly a year and a half residents struggled to maintain a basic city service in their neighborhood, building a community movement to fight back against city policies of divestment through planned shrinkage.

Some gentrification literature suggests that neighborhoods see an uptick in political activity as wealthier, more educated residents flow into a locale (Wilson 1996; Byrne 2003). But in Williamsburg residents have a half-century tradition of organizing around community needs, a pattern that is replicated in other divested neighborhoods around New York and other U.S. cities (DeSena 1999; Sampson 2012). In this chapter,
we see how cohorts of Williamsburg residents have engaged with community activism differently depending on their neighborhood attachment and the condition of Williamsburg at the time (Chernoff 1980; Hyra 2016).

Long Term residents in the ‘70s and ‘80s responded to the city’s policy of planned shrinkage by creating both temporary and enduring community based organizations (CBOs) as methods for survival in a divested environment. In doing so they exerted agency over their survival in Williamsburg, claiming ownership over a neighborhood that the city was leaving behind. In the 1990s and early 2000s Medium Term residents also came together to organize against the intrusions of pollution and city-sponsored gentrification in the form of a large-scale rezoning—usually allied with the neighborhood’s Community Board, an appointed, advisory board to City Council. Their struggles against gentrification, globalization, and environmental degradation were driven by their attachment to a quirky, artistic, bohemian neighborhood. Medium Term organizers knew that if those projects advanced, the identity of Williamsburg would be threatened, and their ownership over the neighborhood would be lost. New Residents have also organized in Williamsburg, including a high-profile battle with the city to fund a new waterfront park. The efforts of New Residents differ from the previous tenure groups in that their activism is focused towards neighborhood aesthetics and the worth of their real estate investment, in contrast to the survival or identity struggles of Long and Medium Term residents. This chapter considers the evolution of community organizing in Williamsburg as representative of changing ownership over the neighborhood. The section closes with a case study of Williamsburg Walks- an event organized by New Residents that helped apply a new type of ownership and brand to Williamsburg.
The Significance of Community Organizations: Ownership and Displacement

Williamsburg has a strong history of activism, even during a period where American culture was characterized by a shift away from civic groups (Putnam 2000; Marwell 2007). Each cohort group in Williamsburg has engaged in some form of action, but the different realities, needs and desires of these groups have yielded very different actions over time. Because these tenure groups vary by class, immigration status, and education, they identify and define neighborhood issues differently. This is also a result of the changing nature of Williamsburg. Long Term residents had to organize for survival- to provide services that the city had cut. New Residents have moved into a neighborhood that has recovered from divestment but is now facing over-crowding and super gentrification. Their attachments to the neighborhood are different too. Long Term residents moved to the neighborhood out of necessity, for jobs or immigrant networks, Medium Term residents for an affordable place to make art and/or the identity of living in that scene, New residents because of an investment opportunity and the status of the neighborhood. These attachments, coupled with the realities of the version of Williamsburg they moved to affect the actions that seem valuable to them. The individuals in these groups have organized around issues that are relevant to their values, interests, and definitions of problems (Small 2004).

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Andrew Deener’s concept of “symbolic ownership” explains how “local actors” like business owners and new residents changed the reputation of gentrifying Venice Beach (2007). Deener found that these actors used commerce and community events to signal whom the neighborhood belonged to—claiming ownership through the use of retail and community events. The theory of
“symbolic ownership” is applied in this chapter and Chapter 5 to show how residents and business owners assert their ideas of what a neighborhood should be, and who it is for. Through public events and retail clusters, certain groups achieve an ownership or heightened presence in a neighborhood’s public space (Deener 2007; Wherry 2011). This ownership currently creates an image of the neighborhood that focuses on its new attributes and attractions as a site of luxury and consumption, effectively erasing previous images that the neighborhood was associated with (Kasinitz 1988; Jayne 2006).

Through aesthetics, events, retail options and real or invented histories, neighborhoods become defined around one or more of these competing narratives. But local actors may have different ideas of what the neighborhood is and should be. When actors with competing ideas attempt to define neighborhoods, a struggle for symbolic ownership occurs. Often “the tastes of new residents…dominate the landscape” and cultural displacement of existing residents begins (Levy and Cybriwsky 1980). Although North Brooklyn still has working class, poor, and (im)migrant populations, it is symbolically owned by young, educated, upper-middle class, singles and families who have more economic capital, as well as a different social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984).

Challenges to their claims of symbolic ownership deepen feelings of cultural displacement for existing residents. As the neighborhood’s activism changes, space is claimed by incoming others, and community organizations shift to issues that may be irrelevant or even harmful to Long Termers. The following sections consider how the motives of community organizations have changed over time in response to neighborhood and demographic shifts.
Long Term Residents: Fighting for Necessities

As Williamsburg was depleted by deindustrialization and divestment, residents saw a reduction of city services. In the 1970s, renters feared arson, often rumored to have been started by landlords looking to cash out on property that had little worth beyond insurance claims. At the same time, the city threatened to close firehouses in the neighborhood. Hospitals and schools also faced severe budget cuts or closure, some areas lacked access to fresh food, and police presence in the neighborhood was minimal. All this was occurring as working class jobs disappeared from Williamsburg, fostering a drug economy and leading to gang violence in the neighborhood. As we will see in the next chapter, most Long Term residents did not feel personally threatened by gang related activities, but they did feel that their neighborhood was being left behind and neglected by the city. Victims of planned shrinkage, they created formal and informal Community Based Organizations (CBOs) to protect each other from negligent landlords, or to provide their communities with the necessities that the city failed to (Susser 1982; Marwell 2007; Greenberg 2008). Similar to the residents of Mario Small’s (2004) Villa Victoria neighborhood in Boston, Long Term residents exercised agency and social capital to organize for improved housing and services, rejecting the notion that this neighborhood was a slum.

As with many neighborhoods suffering divestment, residents in Williamsburg demanded policy changes through community organizing efforts (Mollenkopf 1983). On the Northside coalitions of these groups were somewhat successful at wielding political power (DeSena 1999). Residents and organizations on the Southside often bargained through the area’s political machine led by Assemblyman Vito Lopez and his Ridgewood
Bushwick Senior Citizens Council (Marwell 2007). In exchange for political loyalty, constituents and local organizations received services, employment and funds towards affordable housing development (Marwell 2007, Stabrowski 2015).

The Northside:

After a devastating fire in 1974, parishioners of St. Nicholas Roman Catholic Church worked together to help neighbors whose homes were destroyed. The volunteers formed the “St. Nicholas Neighborhood Preservation Corporation.” Later the “St. Nick’s Alliance,” they went on to establish housing for seniors, advocate for factory jobs, and rehabilitate buildings, while provide jobs for local community members (St. Nick’s Alliance 2016). Still operating today, they have worked together with Southside organizations and run an afterschool program, senior citizens center, and the borough’s first charter high school.

On the other side of the BQE, The Norman Street Block Association was initiated at the same time. Documented by Ida Susser in the 1970s, the organization started as part of the “Federal Block Associations” which created “self-help programs aimed at reducing maintenance costs” for the city (Susser 2012: 186). The Norman Street chapter was created with police assistance, but the residents drove discussions towards their own needs. They organized a summer lunch program for residents, arranged for “play streets” or street closures during summer vacation, and attempted to turn a vacant lot into a park—although the city sold the land to a developer after promising it to the Association.

The People’s Firehouse, mentioned above, began in response to more city service cuts and still operates today, though it is less active than St. Nick’s Alliance or community organizations on the Southside. Today, People’s Firehouse Inc. is focused on
tenants rights, affordable housing, fire prevention and economic development in the neighborhood, and they sometimes partner with Medium Term and New residents’ organizations in the neighborhood.

Additionally, the Northside Neighborhood Community (NNC) and the National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW) were also grass roots organizations that advocated for housing rights and public services. The NNC was comprised of a board of residents who assisted in the creation of the Norman Street Block Association and The People’s Firehouse, and they also successfully advocated for city-built homes in the wake of a factory’s imminent domain destruction of buildings that housed 94 families. The NCNW organized around the depletion of transportation, police and firefighting services, as well as budget cuts to daycare and senior citizen centers.

The Northside’s CBOs often succeeded in restoring or maintaining city services and advocating for tenants. Occasionally ethnic and racial groups worked together towards goals like maintaining a local bus line or tenants’ rights (Noschese 1985). However racism among the mostly-white Northside residents also influenced local organizing. Often, the only Puerto Rican members in Northside organizations were individuals who had married a white resident. As was typical in white ethnic enclaves at the time, most Northside landlords refused to rent to people of color (Susser 1982). In the mid 1980s, racial tensions mounted around public space- the neighborhood’s McCarren Park Pool. The pool was opened in 1936 and attracted residents from around Williamsburg and other nearby low-income neighborhoods. In the 1970s and early 80s crime rates rose in New York and the pool was not immune with robberies and fights being a regular occurrence. As a result of divestment the pool fell into disrepair, with a
multi-million dollar renovation project scheduled after the 1983 season, but in 1984 Northside residents lobbied the city to permanently close the public pool, even chaining themselves to the fence during construction efforts (Wolf 2012). Nearby residents didn’t want “outsiders” coming to their neighborhood (from less than a mile away) and so chose to keep the neighborhood pool closed instead of sharing it with their Latino and Black neighbors (Wiltse 2007).

The Southside:

While Northside residents struggled against planned shrinkage and the constraints of class, Southside Latinos and most public housing residents had the additional obstacle of systemic racism—both formally in terms of city policy and informally by the actions of local whites. Their organizations reflected this not only by providing services and advocating for residents, but also by giving them a platform to celebrate their culture with festivals and parades.

Los Sures was founded in 1972 as the Southside United Housing Development Fund Corporation. It began as a housing rehabilitation cooperative in response to abandoned buildings and illegal evictions by landlords, in addition to the effects of planned shrinkage that Northside residents also experienced. Los Sures still advocates for housing management and ownership to be controlled by community members, and also manages city-owned properties. In addition the organization provides social services on the Southside: including a food pantry and a senior center. In the face of gentrification, Los Sures and other CBOs face a new challenge: maintaining and adding to the neighborhood’s affordable housing stock. As the demographics of the neighborhood change, Los Sures is also committed to “preserve[ing] the history of the neighborhood’s
residents” (Southside United HDFC- Los Sures 2015). This is achieved by hosting Dominican and Puerto Rican cultural events, block parties, and “El Museo de Los Sures” which holds exhibits on the history of Williamsburg and showcases Latino artists.

A year later, Nuestros Niños began providing day care for local preschoolers, as well as creating jobs in the neighborhood. After forty years the organization is still extremely popular among residents. Despite recent disagreements around rent increases, the organization is thriving with three sites in South Williamsburg, serving over 300 children (Dai 2015).

El Puente was established in 1982 in reaction to gang violence, when crime was at its peak in Williamsburg. The founders “called together church leaders, artists, educators, health providers, and other community activists” to quell violence in the neighborhood (El Puente 2017). Nationally organized as “Leaders for Peace and Justice,” they focus on empowering the community through health, social justice, arts and environmental initiatives, including a high school focused on the “Peace and Justice” principles. Similar to Los Sures, the organization’s goals and activism have shifted over time from neighborhood revitalization to preservation of the Long Term community as it is threatened by gentrification.

Community Based Organizations were prevalent in Williamsburg’s North and Southsides in the 1970s partially because of the The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). The federal law, passed at the end of 1973, provided funds for CBOs to hire part and full time employees. The act brought together existing community action and job creation programs under one funding umbrella, giving block grants to states who distributed funds. It was a victory for congress under Richard Nixon, but
CETA was later dissolved by Ronald Reagan in response to a conservative argument that the private market would better benefit the city and that this sort of funding in inner cities was a waste of non-urban tax payer dollars (Mollenkopf 1983). CETA was "designed to train the most disadvantaged of the labor force for employment and to help them find jobs...in highway maintenance, sanitation, clerical work and other areas to be determined by local officials” (The New York Times 1973). Many ‘local officials’ distributed funds to community based organizations (CBOs) under the assumption that short-term workers in CBOs would save the city money during its financial crisis. The People’s Firehouse, National Congress of Neighborhood Women, St. Nick’s Alliance, and Los Sures on the Southside all received CETA funding, giving at least some aid to organizations who were fighting for basic services in their divested neighborhood. In the end, the activism that helped insulate the community from the ravages of divestment contributed to priming the area for gentrification starting in the early 1980s.

Medium Term Residents: Identity and Preservation

Medium Term residents who came to Williamsburg in the 1980s and ‘90s were moving into a neighborhood that was still being affected by the city government’s divestment, but the activism of the 1960s and ‘70s had already affected the neighborhood’s trajectory. As a result, issues like restricted city services and dilapidated housing conditions were both already being dealt with, and of less concern to in-movers who were often young, single, and thought of Williamsburg as a stop over between college and family life. At first, Williamsburg was a bedroom community to the artists and students who worked, showed art, and went to school in Manhattan. Later, Williamsburg became the center of its own art and party world, sometimes referred to as
the New East Village as New York’s latest ‘bohemia’ (Gooch 1992). Most Medium Termers did not participate in community organizing until the area’s reputation as an artist colony became threatened—first by a waste transfer station and later by city-led gentrification under Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

In 1993, when the city first expressed interest in the rezoning and development of the waterfront, then-new artist and student residents attempted to change the course of the proposed plan. Coming together as “Williamsburg/Greenpoint Organized for an Open Process” (WOOP) the coalition began working on a plan that claimed to represent the various groups in the community. WOOP and other organizations held meetings where community members could voice their hopes for the waterfront rezoning, contributing to the 197-a plan (see Chapter 1) that called for mixed-use zoning, affordable housing, waterfront access and environmental protection among other demands. The intentions of the document were to advocate for public goods, but in interviews some critiqued WOOP for not getting input from Long Term Latino and white ethnic residents. Medium Term residents were more likely to resist the area’s political machine—possibly because of their lack of integration with the ethnic communities, instead they lobbied for the support of Community Board members. WOOP is credited in the final 197-a plan, submitted by the Community Board, but eventually the goals, strategies, and actors of WOOP were absorbed into other CBOs.

The longest existing Medium Term organization is “Neighbors Against Garbage” or NAG. The acronym was changed in the early 2000s to “Neighbors Allied for Good Growth,” the alteration alone suggests how the organization adapted to the changing landscape and demographics of Williamsburg. NAG was founded in 1994 in opposition
to a proposed expansion of a waste transfer station on the Northside’s waterfront. NAG organizers argued that the station posed an environmental threat to the community, and if it was allowed to expand would take up too much of the area’s waterfront. After their success against the transfer station, NAG also helped stop the development of a power plant. NAG members were also involved in the planning of the 2005 rezoning, pushing for waterfront parks as the 197-a community plan went back and forth with City Council in the early 2000s. They currently team with other organizations on environmental issues in North Brooklyn, but are often more aligned with New residents groups today.

GWAPP, founded in 2000, is another Medium Term organization that has changed the meaning of its acronym over time. Originally “Greenpoint/Williamsburg Against Power Plants,” it now stands for “Greenpoint Waterfront Association for Parks and Planning.” The organization successfully protested against the construction of a power plant on the Greenpoint waterfront, only to have to then fight against a larger one in the same area. But when both plant proposals were defeated, the neighborhood got hit with the rezoning instead. Today GWAPP is still active around waterfront issues- holding meetings about water quality and other environmental issues, and working with “Where’s Our Park?” a new organization.

Naturally some of these groups counted Long Termers among their members, and they sometimes partnered with existing CBOs on specific issues. In the aftermath of the rezoning Medium Term groups like NAG and Long Term groups including Los Sures and the People’s Firehouse joined with Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation to form the Greenpoint-Williamsburg Collaborative Against Tenant Displacement. Yet overall Medium Term organizations focused on environmentalism and urban planning—
including but not limited to affordable housing. These issues were more central to the college educated, middle-class gentrifiers—aware of the health hazards caused by years of industrial pollution and threat that the luxury high rises would challenge Williamsburg’s growing reputation as a quirky, artistic neighborhood (and certainly their ability to remain living in it). Medium Term residents didn’t have the same concerns as Long Termers in part because the basic necessities of the neighborhood were already in place thanks to the work of activists in the 1970s and early ‘80s, but also because many Medium Termers did not plan on living in Williamsburg long-term. The successes of their organizers against power plants and waste transfer primed the neighborhood for a rezoning plan that would further gentrify the neighborhood, now with wealthier professionals instead of struggling artists. Once again the nature of community activism in the neighborhood protected current residents, only to attract wealthier newcomers.

New Residents: Investment in Aesthetics and Reputation

By the time New residents arrived in Williamsburg the waterfront rezoning was complete. New real estate construction, upscale restaurants, amenities like banks and medical clinics and corporations like Starbucks and J. Crew welcomed New residents to the neighborhood, especially after 2010. The version of Williamsburg that New residents moved into was one that was curated with them in mind, the result of an influx of invested capital following decades of divestment, resistance, and community organizing. Of the twelve New residents included in this study, eight moved directly into new condo towers throughout the neighborhood, and two more eventually moved into them. Participation in traditional community organizations has been lower among New residents, in interviews some of them mentioned their children’s school or local parent
groups as the ways they participate in community affairs, many also joined a fight for an additional parcel of waterfront park space.

More than half of the New residents were parents of children under five years old. When asked about participation in community organizations they all referenced the Brooklyn Baby HUl- a website for Brooklyn parents (almost entirely mothers). Users share advice on chat forums, sell or donate outgrown baby clothes and furniture, and plan events for each other and their children, like “nights out” for moms and holiday parades for kids. The New resident parents also discussed joining their child’s school or daycare parents’ associations, and some mentioned participation in neighborhood activities like park cleanups or consumption-based fundraisers- but these were mostly one time events rather than actions toward a long-term goal. The only organization that New residents occasionally mentioned being part of was “Friends of Bushwick Inlet Park.”

As part of the 2005 rezoning Williamsburg and Greenpoint were promised an extensive swath of parkland on the neighborhood’s western edge. Some of it would be state park, some of it city, others would be public spaces maintained by waterfront condos. However an eleven-acre parcel of river-side property (adjacent to the existing portion of Bushwick Inlet Park) was privately owned by Norman Brodsky, who operated a massive record-storage building on the site. For years Brodsky and the city could not come to an agreement on how much the land was worth. The issue went back and forth between the city, the Community Board, organizations like NAG and the property owner for over a decade. In 2008 “Friends of Bushwick Inlet Park” was founded to organize Williamsburg residents for the park, however activity picked up in 2015 when Brodsky threatened to sell the land to private developers. Under the rallying cry “Where’s Our
Park?" some Medium Term and many New residents held fundraisers, staged protests and marches, petitioned city council, and even camped out one night at the would-be park. New residents especially rallied behind this cause, utilizing their social and political capital to raise funds and bringing children along to the marches in designer strollers. By December of 2016, the city struck a deal—agreeing to pay $160 million to Brodsky, and millions more in city funding will need to be spent in the clean up and design of the park. Critics argued that the time and money spent on this parcel of land (in an area that already has several waterfront and inland parks) should have gone to neighborhoods still feeling the effects of city divestment like Bed Stuy and East New York.

Like with Medium Term organizations, New ones do include more established residents, but the organizations of each tenure group are usually started by a member of that cohort and reflect the goals and priorities of the incomers. New residents in Williamsburg have organized in smaller groups towards more specific, insular goals focused around the welfare of their nuclear family i.e. socialization, a sense of community, and improvement of children’s education. These desired outcomes are not unique to New residents, but they were previously accomplished through religious and ethnic associations, as well as having family living nearby.

The actions of “Friends of Bushwick Inlet Park” have positive implications for Williamsburg broadly, another park is a better service for the community than a condo building- but it is unfortunate that another private real estate development is viewed as the only alternative option for waterfront development. The waterfront parks are a place where Hasidic families play, elderly Polish women congregate, Latino men fish off the docks, nannies meet up while providing child care, tourists photograph the skyline, New
residents watch their children in the playground, teenagers hang, and scores of children and adults play soccer. However diversity does not equal inclusion. Rhetoric and community action around other public spaces in the area makes it clear that not everyone is necessarily welcome.

In the summer of 2012 McCarren Park Pool was reopened after twenty-eight years, and a few miles away barbecue pits were installed in Cooper Park—both yielded community outcry. While New residents did not organize against the pool’s reopening, they were vocal about the event online. According to a New York Times article during the pool’s reopening: “Some of the blog posts and comments in recent days have echoed the racially tinged dialogue of the 1980s, with neighbors of the pool blaming teenagers from outside the community” (Foderaro 2012). Local news and media outlets interviewed individuals at the pool’s grand re-opening and published stories about the long lines and excited crowds. A common theme in these reports were residents’ concerns that the pool would bring people from outside of Williamsburg, specifically teenagers of color. This sentiment echoed by one of my respondents who did not believe that families of color live in the neighborhood:

Alec: “I remember the first summer when it opened I was like ‘oh that person’s obviously not from around here but they’re going to McCarren park, to the pool.’

SM: How did you know the person wasn’t from around here?

Alec: “Black and Latino teenagers. They can’t afford apartments here.”

At Cooper Park the racist rhetoric was slightly less overt but still present. New Residents, many who lived in new condo towers around the park, lamented the loss of green space and complained in advance of the installation that they would potentially smell the smoke in their houses and that trash would be left behind: "Now my children will be dodging rotten chicken bones along with the garbage that is already there"
(Hoffman 2012). Others worried that additional renovations would compromise their pets’ experiences of the park: "The intent of our park should be to provide a safe haven for our dogs to run freely with their canine friends." New Residents spoke at Community Board meetings and signed an online petition to prevent the barbecue pits being dug in the park, but Long Term residents from the nearby public housing were in support of the new grilling area. Karen Leader, a NYCHA resident and Community Board member advocated for Long Term residents: “We’re not allowed to barbecue on NYCHA’s property and this would give us a place to barbecue and enjoy the taste of grilled food during summer” (Short 2012). In response to protests launched by the New Residents, another NYCHA resident was quoted as saying: “It makes me annoyed to deny us this space…This is something we’ve wanted in Cooper for a while, just a little area for us to cook” (Short 2012).

Eventually the barbecue pits were installed, but the controversy around them reflects the ongoing tensions of a gentrifying community where resident groups have different expectations and desires for the use of public space (Perez 2004; Freeman 2006; Pattillo 2007). New Residents attempt to claim their ownership over the space by couching it in terms of their children’s safety, and even privileging the experiences of their dogs over those of Long Term residents. While not as formal as Friends of Bushwick Inlet Park or a local PTA, New Residents did organize in an attempt to control the use of public space in Cooper Park. In trying to elevate the aesthetics and reputation of Williamsburg, and by default the value of their real estate investments, New Residents organize to control the use of space in Williamsburg.
**Gentrified Community Events: A Case Study of “Williamsburg Walks”**

Recent community organization in Williamsburg has frequently centered on questions of public space. Nowhere is this connection more salient than in “Williamsburg Walks” a street closure event on Bedford Avenue, the Northside’s main retail and transportation hub. Walks began in 2008 as part of a larger “New York City Summer Streets” initiative by then Mayor Michael Bloomberg. This section details the inception and development of the first three years of Williamsburg Walks utilizing ethnographic observations at planning meetings and the event, internal documents created by the planning committee, and brief interviews with residents. An in depth analysis of this event illustrates how uses of public space reflect the tensions of ownership and cultural displacement in a gentrifying neighborhood.

Recently there has been a boon in the development of community events in Williamsburg’s public spaces, which attract visitors and new residents (Cybriwsky 1999). These events, which range from movie, music and culinary festivals to ‘family fun days’, help to brand Williamsburg as a destination of leisure and culture. But these events also impact Long Term residents and their use of the neighborhood’s public spaces. This event can be viewed as a strategy in the branding of Williamsburg as a luxurious and upscale community. Because Williamsburg Walks is part of a broader initiative proposed by the Department of Transportation (DOT) and the City of New York it is important to understand how these events are planned and how they affect residents of diverse neighborhoods.
Changing Public Spaces

Public space affords city residents the opportunity to interact, socialize, consume and relax beyond the private realm of their apartments. In most urban neighborhoods there are three types of public space: the shops and institutions that are visited on a frequent basis (grocery stores, churches, subway stations, schools); places to spend leisure time (parks, cafes, restaurants, pedestrian malls); and special-event public spaces like block parties and festivals. As outlined by Carr (1992) public spaces — whether daily, leisure, or special-event— should be responsive, democratic and meaningful. Carr argues that they should serve the needs of users, be open to all people and allow individuals to interact and make connections between their private lives and larger context, be it a neighborhood, organization, or so on. The situation becomes problematic when residents do not feel comfortable in their neighborhood’s public spaces, either a product or cause of cultural displacement.

As we will see in Chapter 5, when Williamsburg began to gentrify, existing business owners and new entrepreneurs catered to the new clientele, and the shopping streets of the neighborhood changed due to private business investment. Public policy also had an important impact in the shift towards a new Williamsburg. Policy makers are not oblivious to Cybriwsky’s point that “the quality of a city’s public spaces has much to do with whether a city, or a particular neighborhood, succeeds or fails as a place to live or do business” (1999: 224); and in recent years city policy has supported public space initiatives throughout the city to attract residents and visitors. In Williamsburg this was characterized first by a rezoning of the waterfront for condos and public parks, and then with initiatives like Williamsburg Walks. Both tactics relied on private investments to
realize a public policy goal, altering both the physical spaces and the reputation of the neighborhood (Cameron and Coaffee 2005).

While not all events that go on in gentrified public space are the calculation of business-minded policy makers teamed with real estate developers looking to brand a neighborhood, community events do send signals about the locale. During events like Williamsburg Walks select actors organize activities and make the rules. At public space events the neighborhood is symbolically owned by the groups and businesses that have a presence on the street, communicating to visitors the aesthetics of luxury and consumption that Williamsburg has become famous for.

*Evolution of Williamsburg Walks 2008-2010: Planning and Execution*

Williamsburg Walks was initially proposed to be “a celebration of the Williamsburg community, centered around a pedestrian-only Bedford Avenue” (Colvin et al. 2008: 4). The event has taken place each summer since 2008, occurring on anywhere from one to six weekends per year. Each year, a few blocks of Bedford Avenue are transformed from a busy thoroughfare into a venue for picnics, art, and neighborly interaction.

While the event changed significantly over the first three years, the slogan “rethink your public space” remained constant. With this mantra the organizers (several of them urban planning students from local universities) hoped to communicate that the event should be about community- neighbors getting out to know one another and using the newfound public space for just about anything non-commercial. Flyers in 2008 reminded residents and visitors that the event was not a street fair “there will be no funnel cake and no cheap tube socks,” a derogatory reference to existing ethnic and religious
street festivals in the neighborhood, “we simply want the community (YOU) to come out and enjoy the public space” (Colvin et al. 2008: 47). The emphasis for Williamsburg Walks, at least how it was marketed, is that it is a social experiment— a new way of building community.

The opening event took place on July 19th, 2008. Volunteers set up barricades preventing car traffic on Bedford Avenue from Metropolitan to North 9th streets. Businesses on Bedford were allowed to use the sidewalks in front of their buildings as extensions of their restaurants or boutiques, and individuals were encouraged to enjoy and creatively use the street. For the most part people simply walked down the street as if it were the sidewalk, but some made use of tables and chairs that had been set up and others sat down with a book or even suntanned. The event wasn’t well publicized in the neighborhood and many residents were confused about the point of the closure. Organizers later acknowledged that promotion was done mainly on NAG’s blog, and by word of mouth. From both my observations at the event and photographs that were later posted on the site, the event was overwhelmingly homogenous. Most people in attendance were young, white Americans. There were few families on the street, and Long Term Polish and Latino residents were almost completely absent.

After the first few Saturdays in 2008 people began to vend on the street. A few people were selling food or having yard sales. Something that the planners did not anticipate was that for many people, amateur entrepreneurialism was how they would use their public space. Local merchants complained that the commercial activities taking place on the street were detracting from their businesses, so for 2009 only street vendors
who already had licenses to operate on Bedford were allowed to sell during Williamsburg Walks.

After the inaugural year, planning for Williamsburg Walks was taken over by NAG, who hosted a planning meeting for the second year in April 2009. Based on a survey by non-profit Transportation Alternatives at the 2008 Walks, there was a perception that people did not really understand the purpose of the street closure. Respondents also mentioned that they would like some activities to be provided (Colvin et al. 2008). While commerce was a concern, the foci of the 2009 planning meeting was how to bring more programming to the street and to better promote Williamsburg Walks. The individuals present at the meeting decided to have activities catering to “art, music, community organization, local food [and] family activities (Nemitz 2010: 8).

The 2009 Walks were better attended, a result of more programming and activities for visitors. Many of the restaurants and cafes had once again extended their services onto the sidewalks, a few of the boutiques placed clothing racks or merchandise outside of their stores, the usual sidewalk vendors set up their wares, and the street was a bit more active than the previous year. Children colored on a giant roll of paper unfurled on one of the streets, there were intermittent performances- some planned, some spontaneous- and several local community groups had information tables on the street. Although illegal vending was prohibited, there were still some people selling food - a woman and her son cooking platanos under a tent, another woman selling horchata from large jugs.

While the 2009 events were more successful in getting people to use public space, there was still an issue of illegal vending which became a central issue for the 2010
edition of Williamsburg Walks. An internal summary document that the planners wrote after the 2009 event stated “several people at the wrap up session complained that too many activities were taking place reinforcing the feeling of Bedford Ave as a ‘permanent Mardi Gras’ and diverting people from shopping” (Nemitz 2010: 8). This indicates that by 2009 the purpose of Williamsburg Walks had shifted from being a “social experiment” to a local-commerce focused event.

On April 21st the 2010 “Williamsburg Walks Community Brain Storming Session” was held at a neighborhood restaurant. In 2010 the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) was involved, in addition to NAG. Representatives from PPS, a New York-based “place making” nonprofit gave a presentation on the mission of the year’s event: celebrate the neighborhood, relax, shop at local stores, and rethink public spaces. Illegal vending was a major theme at the meeting, the organizers stated that over the past two years they had realized the importance of enforcing a ‘no vending’ rule. As a result of pressure from local businesses, the organizers decided that having a police presence at the event would be necessary to dissuade vending. They maintained that vendors who were normally on the street would be allowed to continue selling, but no new vendors would be permitted. When one resident asked why it was such a problem organizers replied that the extra vendors made it too crowded, and they were trying to promote the established businesses. While promoting local business is one of the many benefits of Williamsburg Walks, it was clear from this meeting that it had become a primary goal. As the brainstorming continued people gave ideas about how to get Walks visitors to patronize stores, including a scavenger hunt or a booth where you could sew your own bag to use while
shopping. After meeting with local business owners, one organizer said he wanted any ideas “that connect the programming with the merchants.”

The 2010 Walks were heavily programmed and well attended, by some residents. The children’s block had an outdoor gymnasium, an art competition was staged throughout the blocks, and the local Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) group set up a picnic area. Williamsburg businesses who do not have a presence on Bedford Avenue were allowed to use some space in the street. A boutique had a table where they handed out flyers for their shop and a garden supply store set up a green oasis at one end of the event.

Brooklyn Brainery, a collective offering DIY classes, and Green Mountain Energy, a renewable energy company, both had booths set up in the street, although they are not local to Williamsburg. Despite not being neighborhood institutions, these businesses fit in with the ideals of the New residents and organizations that planned the event, so their presence was permitted. Someone who did not fit in with this image was Charles St. George. Charles was selling jewelry at the corner of a side street. His location away from the main event was surprising since he was clearly an authorized vendor, and at the planning meeting organizers confirmed that the usual vendors would be permitted. Charles showed me a letter he received from Williamsburg Walks planners stating that there would be no street vending allowed and police action would be taken if he set up his booth on Bedford Avenue. Charles is a usual fixture on Bedford, and has been for a few years—longer than some of the newer boutiques and bars. He said he appreciated what Williamsburg Walks did for the community, but he found it unfair that he was suddenly not allowed to sell in his regular spot. Groups like Brooklyn Brainery and
Green Mountain, although not local, were encouraged to take up space on Bedford Avenue because these organizations reflect the concerns and hobbies of Williamsburg’s New, wealthier residents. Charles’ “street boutique” does not fit with these tastes and so he was explicitly excluded from the event.

Although the 2010 event was more successful in attracting families it was still not representative of the diverse community. Flyers advertising the event are deliberately vague “Are You Suffering From Don’t Talk to Your Neighbor-itis?” and the materials are never translated into other languages. The lack of outreach to the Polish and Hispanic communities in the neighborhood inhibits their participation. I met Lillian and Stan, a Polish and Ukrainian couple, sitting on chairs on the sidewalk at the periphery of the event. I asked if they had participated in any way “There’s nothing here for us,” Lillian replied. Gladys, a Puerto Rican woman, was studying the activities map with her husband and daughter when I approached them. It was around 5pm on Saturday and the event was packing up for the day. I asked if they had participated in Williamsburg Walks and Gladys replied that they had just wandered over because they were wondering why the street was closed.

The lack of outreach to Long Time residents coupled with the increasing focus on consumption reflects broader tensions over ownership in Williamsburg. Williamsburg Walks is a special event which takes place in an ‘everyday’ public space—a commercial street. While the event is taking place, the space becomes a medium to highlight Williamsburg as a leisure destination, focusing on luxury consumption in the neighborhood while minimizing the presence of Long Term residents. Long Term residents are further excluded from the event by the organizers’ level of control over the
activities coupled with an ideology that rejects a “carnival” atmosphere. These actions are dismissive of events like block parties, Dominican and Puerto Rican day celebrations, and the Italian neighborhood’s Giglio Feast—a century-old festival that takes place for two weeks each summer. Different aesthetics and rules apply at these long-standing neighborhood events, thus Walks contrasts with Long Termers’ expectations for public space events, making their participation and presence at Walks even less likely.

**Cultural Displacement in Community Events**

Williamsburg Walks, which continues today, certainly provides many benefits to the neighborhood. Having a car free street gives everyone (theoretically) an opportunity to enjoy public space. Residents and visitors were able to use the street to share food, play games, and make crafts—undoubtedly leading to a stronger, if temporary, sense of ‘community’ among participants. However the event has become a strategy in the creating the new Williamsburg, leading to the privileged inclusion of some and adding to the exclusion and cultural displacement of others. Long Term residents were rarely present at the event despite the fact that they often socialize in other public spaces. There is nothing at Williamsburg Walks to attract these groups, and thus they are left on the periphery if present at all (Bélanger 2012). Although the initial concept of the event seems benign, a critical exploration of the processes leading up to Williamsburg Walks exposes it as a microcosm of gentrification and the fight for ownership in the neighborhood.

In addition to Williamsburg Walks, other outdoor festivals and events have taken over public space in the neighborhood: “Taste Williamsburg”—a display of all the best local “food and beverage purveyors,” “Willifest”—the first international film festival in
the neighborhood. More frequent events like “Smorgasburg” and “Brooklyn Flea,” food and artisanal flea markets respectively, take over waterfront public space each weekend.

Writing about New York’s transformation into a tourist destination, Miriam Greenberg (2008) notes how poor, ethnic, or otherwise diverse neighborhoods are branded for tourists. The histories and less mainstream aspects of the neighborhood are ignored while opportunities for consumption are emphasized: “None of these branded visions made reference to…[the] famously polyglot, racially diverse, proudly working class culture, except to extol the shopping and entertainment opportunities such culture at times provided” (Greenberg 2008: 11). Events like Smorgasburg, Brooklyn Flea and Williamsburg Walks celebrate the diversity of the neighborhood in only the most superficial way—as a means of consumption for people who can afford it. A few Polish and Hispanic restaurants were featured at “Taste Williamsburg” or “Smorgasburg,” “Willifest” had film representation from these cultures, but participating in these events is expensive and they do not have multilingual advertising campaigns.

The original purpose of Walks was to utilize temporary public space, but at the 2010 event nearly everything one could do on the street served as advertising for local businesses. Returning to Carr’s (1992) requirements that public space should be responsive, democratic and meaningful we can see where events like Williamsburg Walks fall short. With a focus on consumption, less wealthy residents were not engaged in the activities – the event was not responsive to their needs and desires of public space. The event is not democratic in outreach or programming.

There is no way for residents like Lillian, Stan and Gladys to meaningfully connect their private lives to the public environment in Williamsburg (Carr et al. 1992).
Events like Walks have the capacity to bring diverse neighbors into contact with one another, but end up exacerbating existing tensions as a strategy for New residents and organizations to claim ownership over Williamsburg’s public spaces.

**Conclusion**

The evolution of Williamsburg Walks during its formation reflects broader changes in the neighborhood over time. As demographics shifted, the needs and desires of different resident groups diverged - the culture of Long Term residents became less important, and promotion of the neighborhood and its businesses became a priority, as we’ll see in the next chapter. The organizations and goals of Williamsburg residents vary from one cohort to the next, sometimes putting these groups in conflict with one another. Long Term residents came to Williamsburg for necessity through work and/or ethnic networks, Medium Term residents were attracted to the neighborhood’s artistic identity (and their ability to have one there), and New residents are, quite literally, invested in the neighborhood’s status. There is overlap among organization efforts, for example Long and Medium Term residents worked together in fighting the city’s plans for rezoning. Still, neighborhood attachment style coupled with the predominant demographics of each group, have influenced the formation of community-based organizations and how they try to claim ownership over the space.

Long Term residents largely organized out of necessity, even survival, as their neighborhood was characterized by dwindling infrastructure, substandard housing, and the threat of arson. Many of the organizations created at this time still exist, and reflect the persistence of residents to care for their neighborhood when the city has abandoned it. Long Term residents organized to protect themselves and their community from the
outcomes of divestment and deindustrialization—since many didn’t have the option of “exiting” Williamsburg they protested and organized around reinstating basic services (Hirschman 1970; South and Deane 1993). Early Medium Term residents moved to Williamsburg while some of these struggles were still ongoing, but living in a place perceived as “run down” kept rents low and afforded these incomers the authenticity of a truly bohemian landscape (See Chapter 6). For the most part, Medium Term residents did not get involved with local organizing until Williamsburg’s identity as an artistic enclave was threatened—first by concerns about trash incinerators, and later real-estate led gentrification. The organizations that did form to combat these threats were concentrated on the Northside, primarily the waterfront. Smaller actions included protests of corporations like Starbucks, Apple and Whole Foods coming into the neighborhood—again issues that challenged Williamsburg’s preservation as an artist enclave and later an authentic, hip neighborhood. This battle over identity doesn’t reflect Long Term residents who are more concerned about housing, nor New residents who largely hailed these institutions (all of which had outlets in the neighborhood by 2016) as bringing convenience to Williamsburg. New residents have primarily organized around issues that elevate the status of the neighborhood—like efforts to improve local schools and increase green. These actions are sometimes about dictating what public space looks like and how they are used.

Participation in community events helps residents feel ownership over a neighborhood. As resident groups shift, so does the ownership, leaving some residents to feel culturally displaced (DeSena 2009). This changing ownership also affects perceptions of the neighborhood, as we will see in Chapter 6. While the environmentalist
and anti-gentrification movements of Medium Term residents did not necessarily alienate Long Termers, the evolution of these groups have advocated for events or issues that actively exclude or ignore the needs of Long Term residents. The newest iteration of community organizing in Williamsburg focuses on claiming ownership over space by denying it to others. Festivals like Williamsburg Walks are temporary, if high-profile, versions of this claim to public space; while the “Friends of Bushwick Inlet Park” campaign or the racist tensions around McCarren Pool and Cooper Park reflect a desire to dictate a more permanent part of the neighborhood’s public landscape.

As a result Long Term residents have less reasons to be in Williamsburg’s public spaces, and have less opportunities for interactions in public space. As they lose their symbolic ownership they are not imagined to be a part of the neighborhood, making their occasional presence in the most gentrified areas suspicious—a theme that will reemerge in Chapters 5 and 6. The next chapter turns towards experiences and perceptions of crime in Williamsburg. Residents in this sample rarely reported feeling unsafe in the, but perceptions of crime and safety differed between tenure groups. Chapter four displays how Long Term, Medium, and New residents perceived of crime based on their attachment style to Williamsburg and their integration in the community.
Chapter Four
“Dangerous Enough”
Perceptions of Safety in a Changing Neighborhood

Crime and gentrification have a complicated and contested relationship. Early research on the topic argued that gentrification leads to a decrease in personal crime (MacDonald 1986) but two studies using data from gentrifying neighborhoods in Baltimore argued that these areas saw an increase in crime (Taylor and Covington 1988; Covington and Taylor 1989). More contemporary research suggests that some types of crime like theft and larceny see an increase with the onset of gentrification (Kreager, Lyons and Hays 2011), or that the already muddled relationship between crime and gentrification is further shaped by race- with some crimes increasing in predominantly Black gentrifying neighborhoods but dropping in white or Latino locales (Papachristos et al 2011). Still others find lower crime rates to be a cause of gentrification (O’Sullivan 2005). An additional wrinkle in this relationship is that gentrification dismantles social networks that may have insulated poorer residents from local crime (Kirk and Laub 2010).

Regardless of the relationship between crime and gentrification, residents of changing neighborhoods evaluate crime and visible social disorder differently based on tenure. As we’ll see in this chapter, Long Term and Medium Term residents lived in Williamsburg during the peak of crime throughout the city, and experienced its drop off in the 1990s. Despite living in the neighborhood at the same time, residents of these tenure cohorts had different perceptions of danger and safety. Long Term residents felt insulated by their neighborhood institutions, including, sometimes, organized crime syndicates like Italian mafia connections or Latino gangs on the Southside. Medium Term residents have incorporated accounts of crime in the neighborhood into their
pioneer narratives of early gentrification in Williamsburg. New residents are aware of
Williamsburg’s past and have positive, if unfounded, views of the impact of
gentrification on crime.

Perceptions of Crime

Wilson and Kelling’s infamous “Broken Windows Theory” proposed that visible
signs of a neighborhood’s disorder—like graffiti, public drinking, and buildings in
disrepair—would indicate that an area lacked social order or surveillance, leading to an
increase in crime. They recommended the policing of these smaller infractions to prevent
more serious crime by way of signaling that the neighborhood was cared for. Their
recommendations influenced an era of controversial policing tactics in New York and
other US cities beginning in 1994. Violent crime did decrease in New York as broken
windows policing and CompStat—a method of tracking crimes by location—were
implemented. Yet scholars have called into question how much of the drop off in crime
was due to these policing tactics. Some research suggests that the waning of the crack-
cocaine epidemic, improved economic conditions, and demographic shifts that led to a
smaller population of 18-24 year olds also influenced the decrease in crime (Fagan,
Zimring and Kim 1998; Karmen 2000; Harcourt 2001). Additionally, broken windows or
“quality of life” policing has been criticized for targeting people of color, and poor and
homeless populations (Harcourt 1998). The causality between visible signs of disorder
and actual occurrence of crime has been debated and critiqued by criminologists,
sociologists and law professors (Sampson and Raudenbush 1999; Fagan and Davies
2000; Herbert 2001; Welsh, Braga and Bruinsma 2015). Still, urban scholars have
explored the idea that these signs of disorder might influence perceptions of crime.
In his 1990 book Wesley Skogan used data from forty neighborhoods in American cities to better understand perceptions of disorder and community reactions. He found that observations of noise, drinking, vandalism and abandonment signaled a breakdown of the social order to outsiders—a conclusion that influenced Wilson and Kelling’s theory above. In her account of the gentrification and rebranding of Boston’s South End, Sylvie Tissot cites a 1979 study of the neighborhood in which incoming, wealthier residents identified signs of disorder including: dirty streets, trash accumulation, noise, and that the neighborhood had too many dogs (2015). Perceptions of crime, safety, and disorder can differ among respondents, but some trends have been noted. Hipp (2010) argued that one’s race may impact how one sees crime, with whites perceiving more crime than non-whites. Rountree and Land (1996) found that higher levels of integration in the community had a moderating affect on perceived risk. Robert J. Sampson has written about crime and neighborhood effects throughout his career (Sampson 2004; Sampson 2012). In an earlier article he asserted that collective efficacy—trust, cohesion and social integration—is negatively associated with violent crime (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997). Other sociologists have since debated whether collective efficacy has an effect on actual crime rates (Pattillo 1998, Browning 2002) but a more definitive quantitative study found that collective efficacy at least influenced feelings of fear (Gibson et al. 2002).

As we’ll see below, there is an inconsistency between how different residents evaluate the presence or threat of crime. While race, the physical environment, and level of collective efficacy can all play a role, I argue that neighborhood attachment style and
tenure cohort can also predict how individuals feel about crime or disorder in their neighborhood.

Crime in Williamsburg

To many Long and Medium Term residents, Williamsburg was a dangerous place, or at least a place where dangerous things happened. Gang fights, muggings, and/or drug use were the most frequently mentioned disturbances, at least by residents who lived in the neighborhood in the ‘70s, ‘80s and early ‘90s. Few residents mentioned mafia activity in the neighborhood, but Italian crime syndicates were a significant presence on the Northside during this period. Yet most people did not report feeling unsafe.

Most residents did not believe Williamsburg could gentrify because the area had been decried as undesirable for so long. And in fact the image of the neighborhood changed significantly before wealthier people moved in. Perhaps the most important aspect that shifted were rates of crime and the perceptions of danger or safety in the neighborhood. Crime dropped off significantly in Williamsburg, and throughout New York, from the peak in 1991. The precinct that patrols the Northside reports a 70.2% drop in crime from 1990-2015, and in the Southside a 69.4% decrease (Police Department of the City of New York 2017). Certain crimes, or at least the frequency with which they’re reported, have increased over time. Specifically grand larceny, defined as $1,000 or more but discounting cars which have their own category, this increased 72.6% (642 in 2015) from 2001 to 2015; in the Northside precinct it increased 182.1% (488 in 2015) in that time (Police Department of the City of New York 2017). The increase in grand larceny, particularly since 2001, may indicate crimes of
opportunity in a gentrifying neighborhood—with wealthier people around, there are more expensive goods to be stolen (Papachristos et al 2011).

The occurrence of crime in Williamsburg varied starkly between sections of the neighborhood, specifically between the North and Southsides. In the 1960s and ‘70s when crime was starting to climb, residents of the Northside report that the neighborhood felt safe as long as you stuck to the territory where your ethnic group—Italian, Polish, Puerto Rican or Dominican—dominated (DeSena 1990). But by the ‘80s there were perceived signs of disorder—prostitutes, abandoned buildings, graffiti—on the western portion of the Northside as well. While the Italian mafia presence may have acted to keep many crimes out of the Italian Northside, gang activity on the Southside meant that criminal activity was taking place on the street—even if it was mainly directed at rival gang members. Medium Term residents do not make as much of a geographical distinction between the North and Southside, as newcomers were less likely to follow the tacit rule of staying in the territory of ones ethnic group. When it came to questions about crime and safety, New residents admitted that their perception of Williamsburg pre-condos was as a gritty, cool, but dangerous neighborhood that they would not feel comfortable raising a family in. Occasional reports of violent crime are shocking to them, but they do not feel personally in danger. Concerns about property crime were raised in several interviews with New residents.

Long Term

Williamsburg is a neighborhood of neighborhoods. Typical of New York, the demographics and social scene of the area can change drastically over the course of a few blocks. Northsiders felt that they were safe as long as they stuck to their territory.
To them the Southside was where all the dangerous activities took place and as long as you “stayed with your own” you were fine. But for residents of the Southside, the crimes that gave Williamsburg its hazardous reputation were happening on their streets, in their apartment buildings and homes. Still, most of my respondents did not recall feeling unsafe. In fact Long Term residents may have benefitted from organized criminal activity in their locales. Using ethnographic and quantitative data to study New York from the 1960s through ‘80s, Mercer Sullivan (1989) noted that certain “patterns of street crime” could bring resources and services into an otherwise poverty-stricken neighborhood. Sullivan reasoned that stolen items became affordable goods, and when protecting their turf from rivals, gang activities had the consequence of providing security for local residents. Like the Southside gangs, the Northside’s Italian mafia presence also afforded some level of protection to local residents and businesses even when city-wide crime rates were high (Skaperdas 2001).

**Southside**

Maria is a middle aged Puerto Rican woman who grew up on the Southside, raised a family there, and is now helping raise grandchildren in addition to working for a community center for aging members of the Latino population. When asked to describe her neighborhood when she was growing up (the 1970s and ‘80s) she immediately spoke about crime and visual signs of disorder: “There were gangs, there were shootings, there were a lot of abandoned and burned buildings. Chaos.” However she claims that this environment did not necessarily feel dangerous to residents: “Honest to god I’ve never felt unsafe…being raised here you knew everyone, you knew the street dealers, you knew the thugs… if gang violence was gonna start they’d warn
the people you know pick up your kids, something’s gonna happen .... I’ve never been robbed, burglarized, mugged, anything like that.” Maria wasn’t even aware of how dangerous her neighborhood was perceived to be until she started High School in Manhattan “once you do an introduction and I said Southside Williamsburg, everybody looked at me like oh my god they kill people over there, and that’s the first time I got the feeling of how bad my neighborhood was perceived”.

Arnold is a Dominican man around Maria’s age. He was a teenager during the crack epidemic of the 1980s and therefore has a memory of a rougher version of the neighborhood. Like Maria, he acknowledged that you generally could rely on your neighbors and that people more or less had a choice to take part in the “chaos” that Maria described. “When I was growing up Williamsburg was basically a slum...gutted, burned buildings...The nice thing about it was it was a Latino neighborhood so we were, I think by default, forced to be a sort of insular community... but I knew where the trouble was and I was getting into trouble and I had to decide- keep going down the trouble path or not.” Although he was briefly caught up in the Williamsburg trouble scene, his biggest complaint about the neighborhood at the time was how the problems were ignored by the city until wealthier residents moved in: “... dangerous poverty, it’s not getting the right protections from the people who are supposed to protect you like the police and the firemen...until someone decides it’s a really cool place to live.”

Growing up about a decade later, George, a Dominican man in his late thirties, experienced the height of crime in Williamsburg as an adolescent and a teenager. Gesturing out the window of his rent-stabilized, Southside apartment, George recalls what the neighborhood used to look like: “When that building burned down people
cheered because that was a notorious drug, homeless...basically blight. Growing up it was...a lot of vacant lots, a lot of blight, a lot of drug paraphernalia around. You still see it now but not as much as before, it was very blatant.” But like Maria and Arnold, George was entrenched in the community with many cousins, aunts and uncles living nearby, “even given all of that it was great that it was a lot of, predominantly Puerto Rican/Dominican at the time.” George also said he never felt unsafe, even though he was aware that the neighborhood could be dangerous: “I pretty much always felt safe but there were times where, if it was late at night and in a strange area you had to be careful...Nothing really ever happened... if you weren’t out there trying to blatantly disrespect somebody that wasn’t going to happen. It was very rare instances. But there were people that I knew that were involved in nefarious things...but if you weren’t involved with that you didn’t really have much to worry about.”

Paul is the youngest of the Southside Hispanic residents in this study. He says that when he was growing up the neighborhood was mostly relaxed: “everyone basically knew everyone...[but]It did have its rough patches, gangs, individuals just robbing, no cops around, a lot of drugs.” Echoing Maria and George he was aware that the neighborhood had problems, but never felt particularly threatened. The closest he came to encountering violence in the neighborhood was when a family friend was being attacked by a rival gang member on the street below, he and his father ran out of the apartment to help defend him. Like Arnold, Paul noted the lack of cops in the neighborhood, at least until it started to gentrify: “I think I was in high school and I noticed a cop car, then another and I thought ‘woah either someone’s getting robbed or they’re looking for someone’ but it was just a regular patrol. That’s when I really
started to realize... things are changing, cops are starting to come by, people are fixing
up broken down buildings... It started growing, but now it’s ... rich people.”

The accounts of the next two residents lend support to the theories of
neighborhood integration and crime perception detailed above. Rosa is a 67-year old
Puerto Rican woman who owns a share in a co-op and identifies as American,
regardless of what others might assume her identity to be, “I didn’t grow up with my
ethnic background.” She described growing up and raising her own children in
Williamsburg: “there were drugs and there were gangs and for quite a few years there.”
During those years she said the working class members of the co-op looked out for each
other, but many left as the neighborhood deteriorated. She was aware of the crimes
going on in the neighborhood, and while she was not a victim of them nor necessarily
very threatened by them, the environment did influence her experience of the
neighborhood “you really didn’t want to be out there sitting in the park” she did not feel
as at ease in Williamsburg as other Southsiders did, possibly because of her lack of
identification with the Latino community: “I’m not a typical Hispanic female, and I
wouldn’t want to be considered that either. Don’t ever tag me as a Hispanic woman,
because I can do the same job a man can do, and a man who is not Hispanic. I can do
the job that anybody can do if I want to.”

Renaldo, a 69 year-old Mexican American, moved to the neighborhood in his
late twenties after finishing a stint in the Vietnam War. He moved to Williamsburg to
work in the “sugar house” the Domino Sugar Factory. He moved to Brooklyn from the
Midwest and although he spoke Spanish, was an outsider to the existing Latino
community. When he had the weekends off he would drive upstate and spend the
weekend out of the city, as he tells it this was to keep himself out of trouble. “There was nothing but drugs here...people around here had fear to go out at night or in the evening because all the drug trafficking and prostitutes, a lot of bars and killings, drug sales on every other block...I didn’t hang out in the neighborhood at all, if you did you were taking your life in your own hands.” Renaldo’s experience then was closer to Rosa’s. They did not feel protected by the “insular community” that Maria and Arnold described, nor did they have the family attachments that George and Paul mentioned. Rosa and Renaldo were both outsiders, seemingly by choice. They experienced less collective efficacy of the neighborhood than others because they participated less in the institutional and social life of the neighborhood. As a result they had more fearful perceptions of Williamsburg’s crime rates than their more integrated counterparts.

A lack of integration heightened feelings of danger for gentrifiers too. Born in Williamsburg in the late 1990s, Aaron is the only Long Term resident in this sample who is the child of a gentrifier. He grew up at the same time as Paul and close by, but he has a much different perception of safety in the neighborhood. Aaron’s mother moved into the Latino section of the neighborhood in the early ‘90s and bought a house in a neighborhood that was just beginning to gentrify. Aaron remembers not feeling safe: “... there were parts that were completely dangerous, and at night I wouldn’t feel totally comfortable walking from the train...it definitely wasn’t a comfortable neighborhood, especially not on the Southside...sometimes at night we would hear gun shots.” While Aaron denies that anything actually dangerous occurred to him or his family members, their position as outsiders to the community meant that they were not forewarned of gang activity and did not feel protected by the surrounding community.
Although they were never harmed, Aaron and his family saw signs of crime and disorder around them, which made the neighborhood seem unwelcoming and uncomfortable.

**Northside**

I spoke with Peter, Mike and Anthony as they ate lunch together one sunny January afternoon. They are all members of the Swinging Sixties Senior Center, an organization that provides meals, programming, and education for older adults in the neighborhood. At the time of the interview, the center was facing eviction and won a case against their landlord in Spring 2015.

The men ranged in age from 65 to 71 and they were all life long residents of Williamsburg. Peter, Mike and Anthony remembered the neighborhood as being mostly safe in the 60s and 70s. They acknowledged that there were drugs and gangs, but maintained that their neighborhood was safe, as long as you stuck to your own territory. In contrast to the anecdotes of Rosa and Renaldo who were living on the Southside during that time, Peter recalled a story from his youth that, to him, indicated the safety of the neighborhood: “I was drunk, I had change, money in my pocket, fell asleep outside and I woke up, still had all my money.” The men maintained that their area was safe, but that social norms of Williamsburg at the time were based around racialized territories:

Mike: *Usually the groups stuck together. The Italian stuck together, the Puerto Ricans stuck together.*
Anthony: *Like you gotta stay on your own territory, and then there’s no problems.*
Peter: *That’s why they say. There’s a Northside, a Southside. The Spanish had the Southside, and we had the Northside...once you got out of your area you were at your own risk...we knew we weren’t allowed to go over there, they knew they weren’t allowed to come here...*
Mike: …the territory, this is my neighborhood that's yours, you get caught over there you get a beating that's all. It was stupid.
Peter: Then you have McCarren pool...
Anthony: Yeah, they used to come off over there.

Mike, Peter and Anthony are referring to the pool on the borderline between Greenpoint and Williamsburg. Recall from Chapter 3 that the white, Northside residents petitioned the city to permanently close the pool because of conflicts with Latino and Black youth. In her study of Williamsburg and Greenpoint in the 1970s, Ida Susser (1982) notes that Northside residents preferred to leave apartments empty rather than rent to people of color. Territory was not mentioned as often among Southside residents in this study, but Northside white ethnics were invested in maintaining the boundaries of their neighborhoods. Racist actions and rhetoric were commonplace on the Northside. Marcin, who moved to Williamsburg from Poland in the 1950s, talked about when Williamsburg was “bad,” he remembers “Puerto Rican people burning houses.” While arson rates were higher on the Southside, it was unlikely Puerto Rican residents or even gangs were responsible. Several studies on arson in New York and other cities at the time maintain that these fires were most likely to happen in non-owner-occupied buildings in divested neighborhoods, often structures with housing code violations or tax arrears where it was more profitable for a landlord to collect insurance money than attempt to rent or sell the building (Brady 1983; Hemenway, Wolf, and Lang 1986; Hackworth and Smith 2001). But attributing these actions to Southside Latinos justified the racist actions taken above that kept the racial and ethnic “territories” intact (Kasinitz and Hillyard 1995).
By the 1980s, the Northside had declined as well but remained safer than the Southside overall. Gosia, a woman in her forties, moved to Williamsburg from Poland with her family in 1976. When describing the neighborhood she grew up in she named many signs of disorder, but denied ever having experienced actual danger: “Factories, broken glass, a lot of homeless people, prostitutes on Kent Avenue.” She recounted that the area felt dangerous, deserted, “you just didn’t go out after 8 o’clock. Once it got dark you didn’t go out...There was a firehouse across the street and I think that was the reason we didn’t have break-ins...other neighbors did have break-ins. The cars got vandalized quite often. ...It was so desolate and a place you didn’t walk down to the water. There were barbed wire fences and tons and tons of garbage and you just didn’t go there, you didn’t park your car there and the only time the neighborhood gathered there was during the fourth of July.” Coming from a small town in Poland and not yet being able to speak English fluently could only have enhanced Gosia’s lack of security in the neighborhood, and her memory of the bad old days are more about aesthetics than actual crime. While she did not feel safe hanging out in the neighborhood, her two brothers felt free to explore. Additionally these comments are referencing a time when Williamsburg’s popularity as a nightlife destination was growing. The difference is that for Gosia these aesthetics signaled danger, whereas the post-industrial landscape and vacant buildings were intriguing to newcomers.

Medium Term

James, a white artist, lived in the same neighborhood just a few years after Gosia’s family moved there. Coming from a suburban American town via Milan and Berlin, he moved to Williamsburg in 1983 following a small network of friends and
fellow artists. Now an art dealer with a studio in Park Slope, James’ body language makes it clear that he is relishes the details of what Williamsburg was like back then: “it was a very degraded, beleaguered place.” He recounted a story of a time when his storefront apartment was “invaded” and he called the cops, who responded not from the neighborhood, but from Queens. As he tells it, “the cops were like, ‘what are you living here for anyway? This place is a sewer.” James paints a Wild West portrait of the neighborhood: “And there were gun fights all the time and people would get held up, getting held up at gun point was like paying a tax. And it would be like ‘yeah that’s my $15 quarterly tax,” but then immediately retracts the severity of it upon probing:

SM : So you had said earlier that Williamsburg was not a violent place...
James: No, no, no Williamsburg was not a violent place, it was not especially violent. That’s a myth. It wasn’t this big, urban, you know south Bronx.
SM: I feel like people would say that getting held up at gun point multiple times...
James: Only on certain...that didn’t actually happen that often. I was only held up once. Most friends of mine were held up once or twice.

Owen moved to Williamsburg after art school in 1985. “There was a big difference between the Southside and the Northside....[on the Southside] there were a lot of drugs and there was a lot of violence you would hear things all the time...but I never heard of anyone getting mugged.... I don’t think the violence was really that frightening.” According to Owen, as long as you took precautions you weren’t at risk. He remembers one day when he let his guard down. He was shooting photos while doing a series on “derelict buildings” and he ventured to the Southside with his camera, “that wasn’t a good idea, taking nice cameras to corners where drug deals were going on and I got chased by kids like ‘don’t take our picture.” Rob, a musician who moved to the neighborhood in 1994, also recounted visible, if exaggerated, signs of disorder:
“prostitutes on every street corner.” While he didn’t recall being physically threatened himself he told me about the night a man delivering pizza got mugged in his vestibule: “probably by the prostitute that sometimes slept there.”

Abby lived in East Williamsburg for six years between 2002-2008. Once again she felt unsafe in the environment she lived in, but was never personally victimized. “Yeah I did [feel unsafe] because when I moved there I was told by people in the neighborhood including the guys in the Bodega, don’t go beyond Montrose Avenue. We’d hear gun shots at night, especially in the summertime… I’ve never been robbed, mugged, nothing has ever happened to me.”

Kristy first came to Williamsburg in 1985 for a party. She visited a few times before moving there and describes the neighborhood in the 80s as feeling abandoned, “When I first moved here someone was honking at me at midnight when I was walking by the waterfront [where prostitutes would pick up clients], there was a hooker/drug dealer and a drug addict that lived across the street from me, so yeah, it was dangerous enough.” Dangerous enough to feel edgy, but not so dangerous that she, or most other young newcomers would leave.

The accounts of Medium term residents (and Former residents who lived there in the ‘80s and ‘90s) were in line with those of the Long Term residents when it came to actual experiences of crime. While both groups acknowledge its presence, they weren’t necessarily affected by it, but Medium Term residents did feel threatened by the crime, where Long Termers generally did not. On the Southside there was criminal activity taking place, but it was mostly between gang members. Eventually James altered his description of Williamsburg: “The violence was gang related and drug related and
focused on certain streets. So it was concentrated. It wasn’t…random, most of the neighborhoods were really tight, nice places you could walk through day or night.”

Around the 2000s the narratives shift. Women were still concerned with crime, or at least more than men because they are far more frequently targeted for sexual assault and rape. But men and women who come to Williamsburg in the 2000s are more likely to talk about “grit” than crime, and this narrative comes with its own set of implications.

“Williamsburg used to be kind of dirty. Williamsburg used to be a place where my family would come or my friends would come and say ‘why are you living here?’...There was a dirtiness to it and I feel like now with all the condos in there, it’s kind of, it’s just like the East Village.” Alex, who moved out of the neighborhood in 2007, now feels out of place when he visits, he was nostalgic for the dirtier version of Williamsburg: “It was more interesting, there was more excitement, there was more realness to it.”

Christine moved to Williamsburg in 2001 after college, her boyfriend already had an apartment there. She remembers there being “incidents that have rattled me” but she doesn’t attribute that to Williamsburg, “I’ve never felt more unsafe [in Williamsburg] than anywhere else no…I think it’s a part of living in New York, or in a highly populated urban area.” She does remember the creation of a group that offered free rides home for women, in response to a series of sexual assaults against women in the neighborhood.

Anna moved to Williamsburg in 2003 and lived in a few apartments before moving into a condo with her husband in 2012. She remembers that in 2003 it
“definitely felt more dangerous...I lived across from the projects, so you know, that felt a little dangerous...I don’t even really think about that kind of stuff anymore...and by now the neighborhood is so safe. I barely notice that there’s projects over there.” For Anna, a Hispanic-American woman in her 30s, the mere presence of the projects was enough to feel threatened, although she had never been targeted. Anna now lives next to the same projects today but barely notices them because the neighborhood has gentrified so much. She mostly feels safe in the neighborhood now but it’s “still a little bit sketch...there are very drunk people walking around, that can be a little bit intimidating. There’s a guy with an electric guitar and he hangs out near the Grand stop and he’s just ranting and raving...there was a guy with a knife just walking down the street and angrily stabbing our garbage cans and I’m pretty sure I called the police... Yeah so that’s the main thing, just sometimes really drunk people hanging out.”

Williamsburg has so many bars that there was recently a liquor license ban for new businesses, there are always drunk people in front of bars, on the street and at the subway stations. But the “sketch” that Anna is talking about is not young professionals at happy hour, she’s referring to the residents of the housing projects being visibly drunk in public space- a population that otherwise she can normally forget exists. The “sketch” or “grit” is something condo owners like Anna have to be willing to look past, at least in some parts of the neighborhood. Still, a healthy amount of gritty aesthetics adds “edge” to Williamsburg, which had to be rebranded before luxury condos could be sold to wealthier newcomers.
New Residents

Newer residents have a different perception of Williamsburg’s grit. To them it wasn’t a backdrop to their artist colony or adventurous youth, but rather something that discouraged them from imagining Williamsburg as a place they would live in and certainly not a place to start a family.

In 2010 Amy and her husband moved into one of the waterfront buildings, called “The Edge,” after their broker showed them an apartment. They thought it was a good investment and Amy didn’t plan on living in the area long-term. She had first visited a friend in the neighborhood in 2005 “I thought gritty.” When they moved here in 2010, Amy remembers feeling uncomfortable because there were a lot of car jacking’s. “We’ve had a few break-ins into our garage, bikes were stolen stuff like that. I never felt like my safety was ever compromised but I felt like my stuff’s safety was compromised…” This is consistent with some of the literature that suggests that property crimes increase during gentrification (Kreager et al. 2011), but the presence of theft did not act as a deterrent in the way that aesthetics had.

Josie, a Mexican-American woman who has a psychiatry practice in the neighborhood, first came to visit Williamsburg in 2006. Her friend encouraged her to come check it out: “so we came, and I was like ‘yeah it’s cool stuff but…too much graffiti, and lots of empty factories.” When she and her husband returned to look at apartments in 2010 (5 years after the rezoning and just about when the waterfront condos were beginning to be populated with residents and stores) she still felt like the waterfront was unsafe so they bought further inland, closer to the train.
I interviewed Stephanie one afternoon in her tenth floor, condo that she shares with her husband and two children. The living room was crowded with toys for her toddler and infant, with large windows that looked out onto New York’s East River and the Manhattan skyline. A self-described graduate student and stay at home mom, Stephanie first started visiting friends in the neighborhood in 2001. “We’d take a car service to get to a bar or something we wouldn’t want to walk around at night, and I even had a friend, walking right around here, and they were like mugged. So I kind of thought of it as dangerous.” She no longer feels that way about the neighborhood: “there were just a lot of crazy things, that don’t really exist anymore I don’t think or not as much out in the open...but that guy did just get shot, there was a shooting on Scholes Street yesterday right in front of one of those luxury buildings, and someone was stabbed on the Southside a couple of days ago, so there are still little things that go on, but no I don’t feel unsafe here.”

Today murals have replaced the graffiti that New residents saw when they visited, chain businesses and the increase of other cosmopolitan professionals in the neighborhood have made New residents feel more comfortable. Property crime still exists as well as occasional violent crimes but luxury housing residents feel separated from the crime by virtue of living in a building with doormen and private security who control access to the building, an urban gated-community (Atkinson and Flint 2004; Low 2011). More often, newcomers reactions stressed the security they feel living in Williamsburg: “people...say that it’s much safer” “safe...convenient” and “generally safe and genuinely a happy place to be.”
The Significance of Crime for Identity Attachment

Medium Term residents moved to Williamsburg through networks of fellow artists and friends or because they were intrigued by the neighborhood- the graffiti made it interesting, the bad reputation kept the rent cheap, and the parties were mythical. Within interviews, within sentences even, they waver on their perception of danger. Nearly every one of them recalls a specific incident where they did feel very threatened or were in actual danger. The specific recounting of one or two incidents is interesting on its own because it contrasts with the accounts of Long Term residents. It’s likely that while spending their entire lives in a high-crime neighborhood, Long Termers at some point experienced a criminal act either personally or through a close friend or family member. But Long Term residents don’t recall these stories specifically or in detail the way Medium Term residents do. The fact that James, Rob and Owen have a precise story to call back to, complete with fragments of conversations from 30 years ago, implies that this was not their first telling. In fact these anecdotes are shared with a bit of nostalgia. The incidents, their brushes with Williamsburg’s infamous street life, have been incorporated into their narratives of their time there.

Priced out of the East Village by increasing rents, many Medium Term residents were chasing after that neighborhood’s 1960s and 70s reputation by creating an artist community in the vacant factories and underused storefronts of Williamsburg. However they were accomplishing more than that, these new residents were helping to change the image of the neighborhood. The galleries, bars, coffee shops and music venues that they opened began to garner attention from around New York City, by the mid-90s the neighborhood was hailed as one of the “15 hippest in America” (Walljasper and Kraker...
Reporting of the neighborhood in the New York Times changed drastically as the area gentrified. Using the New York Times online archives, I categorized articles about Williamsburg every five years between 1980 and 2000 to track how reporting about the neighborhood changed over time. In 1980 articles about crime, arson and disorder accounted for 41.5% of articles (22) about the neighborhood, while only 9.4% (5) were about artists, cultural events or local restaurants. By 2000 those numbers had flipped, with 5.5% of articles (10) about crime, and 48% (88) about arts, culture, restaurants and nightlife.

The exaggerated “quarterly tax for mugging,” the industrial, “dangerous enough” environment and the fact that their parents and friends (and in some cases cops) questioned why they lived there at all contributed to the thrill of participating in an authentic avant-garde lifestyle. This narrative is nowhere more apparent than in “The Last Bohemia: Scenes from the Life of Williamsburg, Brooklyn,” Robert Anasi’s (2012) memoirs about his experiences in the neighborhood from the late 1980s to 2008. Writing in the mid 2000s, Anasi states that white flight “brought the frontier to Williamsburg” perpetuating the colonialist trope that Neil Smith (1996) criticized in his analysis of gentrification on the Lower East Side.

Imagery of “pioneers” “settling” and “taming” is frequently evoked in discussions about early gentrifiers, both in their own narratives or as a critique (Zukin 1982; Smith 1996; Lloyd 2006). In her film Gut Renovation, documentarian Su Friedrich has a conversation with a fellow artist in the early 2000s as the neighborhood is being rezoned for luxury housing, “It’s the evolutionary process and we’re watching it you know and it’s just, it’s so interesting... to really be on the inside of it as a pioneer
and to see this” a few minutes later Su weighs the artists’ contributions to the neighborhood: “By renting spaces in industrial buildings artists were helping to sustain those buildings and...were making the streets safer by populating them at night.” This is a familiar pattern of gentrification that has happened in neighborhoods around the world from Chicago to Berlin to Melbourne. This “pioneering” by middle class artists and students was a crucial moment in Williamsburg’s history. Without that step, developers would have found it harder to convince would-be wealthy residents to buy luxury high rises on the waterfront (Mele 2000; Sullivan and Shaw 2011).

The Medium Term residents served this purpose for future Williamsburg residents. They were the youth with middle class backgrounds finding adventure and cheap rent in a divested neighborhood. They went to the same colleges as the wealthier New residents, and they may have even been at the same parties in the early 2000s. For the Medium Term and Former-Medium Term residents, their anecdotes are what separate them from the people moving into condos today. The stories validate their bohemian experience at the time, and give them a foundation from which to decry gentrification. They may have noticed more crime because they were less integrated into community institutions, but the visible disorder was also romanticized, even inspirational to the artists and musicians of this cohort.

**Conclusion**

Perceptions of crime in Williamsburg have varied over time, with both tenure and attachment style. Former residents of Williamsburg did not differ as a group on their recollections of crime or safety. Rather, they were more likely to have a similar opinion to other people who lived in the neighborhood at the same time as them.
Attached to the neighborhood out of necessity, Long Termers viewed crime as background noise to their experiences of life in Williamsburg. Additionally, they may have even benefitted from certain criminal activities that offered protection or a source of income or resources into the neighborhood. Long Termers moved to Williamsburg to participate in the blue-collar workforce and racial or ethnic enclaves. In addition to work and family presence in the neighborhood, religious institutions and locally owned businesses anchored them. In line with the literature, feelings of collective efficacy and social integration—through friends, family, and institutions like churches—were significant for perceptions of safety, particularly on the Southside. Residents who lacked this social integration were more likely to feel threatened or intimidated. The majority of Long Termers were able to acknowledge that social disorders existed without feeling like their personal safety was compromised. Given the high crime rates in Williamsburg at the time, it is likely that Long Term residents at some point were, or knew, the victim of a crime. The important contrast here is that Medium Termers incorporate crime-related anecdotes as part of their narratives of life in Williamsburg, while Long Termers do not. Their necessity-attachment style to Williamsburg means that the crime wasn’t romanticized or exaggerated, it simply existed.

As we have seen Medium Term residents also report feeling safe a majority of the time, but several of them recalled one or two specific dangerous moments that they experienced. Getting mugged or having your apartment broken into are surely traumatic, violating events in ones life. However in the context of their interviews, respondents included these anecdotes about danger or gritty aesthetics as a way to substantiate their presence as urban adventurers. Having an identity-style attachment to Williamsburg
meant that the urban environment and associated disorders had to be incorporated into Medium Term residents’ stories of their time in Williamsburg. The grit and crime present in Williamsburg became a badge of honor for Medium Term in-movers.

Only one new resident mentioned serious crimes in her interview, but it was clear she did not feel her safety was compromised— referring to stabbings and shootings as “little things”. Since New residents have an investment-attachment to the gentrified neighborhood, they focus on their perception of how it has improved— it used to be “gritty, grimy, dirty” but is now convenient and family friendly (see Chapter 6). Crime rates have dropped throughout New York in gentrified and non-gentrified neighborhoods alike; Williamsburg today would be a safer place even without the new investment. However the neighborhood feels safer to New residents because of the presence of condos and corporate businesses as well as the disappearance of visible signs of disorder. For these investment-attached newcomers, gentrification can then be justified as a process that improves the neighborhood.

Depending on tenure and attachment style, the “grit” of Williamsburg— the graffiti, the abandoned lots, the burned buildings, and the gang activity— was a fact of life, a claim to edginess, or a justification for redevelopment. In the next chapter, we’ll explore how changes in retail shifted Williamsburg’s reputation from slum to luxury enclave, and how the avant-garde culture of Medium Termers was central to the transition. In the following chapter, we’ll see how retail change and a shift in neighborhood identity has further accomplished the cultural displacement of Long and some Medium Term residents, and their estrangement from the neighborhood’s public space.
Chapter Five  
Shifting Identities: Experiences of Retail Gentrification

The physical decay and crime detailed in the previous chapter were symptomatic of New York’s budget crisis in the 1970s, as the city’s economy shifted away from production, city officials looked to tourism to pad the city’s budget. Still, despite the city’s negligence, various Brooklyn neighborhoods did gentrify along different trajectories. Park Slope and Brooklyn Heights began to gentrify piecemeal in the 1970s as individuals and families purchased brownstones and the images of these neighborhoods began improving (Lees 2003; Osman 2011). During the 1980s and ‘90s DUMBO and Williamsburg attracted artists to their vacant factory spaces. In the past few years more peripheral neighborhoods like Bed-Stuy and Bushwick have been flooded with middle and upper class students and young professionals. More recently, Downtown Brooklyn has been the site of large-scale commercial and housing development, with the sports and event complex Barclay’s Center as the keystone.

Influenced by the activities of Williamsburg’s Medium Term residents, the neighborhood has a hip reputation revolving around its art and culinary offerings. In the mid-2000s VisitBrooklyn.org, partially funded by the “I <3 New York” campaign, featured 103 attractions in Brooklyn, 57 of those were art attractions— including galleries, film festivals, music spaces, and artist collectives. The site also profiles 227 restaurants. Of the 23 Brooklyn neighborhoods listed on VisitBrooklyn.org, Williamsburg had the most destinations. The neighborhood also had more appearances in the New York Times Food and Dining section than comparable locales. By 2012 there
were 165 articles referencing the neighborhood, with other popular neighborhoods receiving 40 or less.

In recent years Williamsburg has been branded through media (Zukin 2010) as well as public policy that allows permits for events like Williamsburg Walks, Smorgasburg, and the Northside Music festival. Yet the neighborhood’s popularity did not stem from hard-branding, grand projects, cultural institutions, or star architects (Gomez 1998; Evans 2003). Before any active branding, Williamsburg was already developing a reputation for its hip identity as a center for culture and consumption. This chapter examines how Williamsburg’s reputation changed as a result of retail changes, and what this meant for residents.

Williamsburg’s identity shift began relatively organically, in contrast, even, to similar New York neighborhoods like Manhattan’s Lower East Side (LES). The LES has seen more concerted efforts at neighborhood (re)branding, specifically through the operation of a Business Improvement District (Kasinitz and Zukin 2016). The former BID (now the Lower East Side Partnership) organized marketing schemes for the neighborhood that coordinated business owners for street festivals and “gallery nights” with the aim of attracting visitors. The BID also produced shopping and gallery maps, and provided services for businesses like the purchase of security cameras after a break in. In addition to a formal branding mechanism via the BID or Partnership, the Lower East Side has major cultural institutions like the historical Tenement Museum and the contemporary art “New Museum” which both draw visitors from around the world. With the goal of increasing property values, the BID assisted businesses in harnessing the area’s visitor population to cement a local culture of upscale consumption, a stark
contrast to its history as a bargain-shopping district. The BID and now the Partnership work to actively brand the LES as a destination for what Kasinitz and Zukin (2016) call “the global ABC’s of gentrification:” art galleries, boutiques, and cafes—thus serving real estate interests in the neighborhood.

Such attempts at organizing businesses in Williamsburg have largely failed. The “Northside Merchants Association” (NMA) is a loose grouping of local business owners in the most gentrified section of the neighborhood. The group occasionally organizes around services like trash collection or decorations during the holiday season, but is generally sleepy with a dormant Facebook page as their only online presence. The NMA sometimes runs special events like the 2012 “Shop, Drop, and Drink!” but the efforts are haphazard and not widely publicized. Their “Shop Williamsburg” commercial map has also not been updated in several years. Business owners in Williamsburg are not actively marketing the neighborhood as a brand, even though the identity of Williamsburg is very much reliant on consumption opportunities.

This chapter focuses on the retail changes of Bedford Avenue, Williamsburg’s main commercial strip. Retail has played a key role in the neighborhood’s identity shifting from a focus on production and necessity, through bohemian artist culture, and towards a global destination for luxury consumption. The following sections detail the changing commercial strip and what this meant for residents—from Long Termers who are now culturally displaced from much of the public spaces, to New residents who find convenience and comfort in the area’s abundant retail.
Identity and Exclusion Through Retail Gentrification

Along with housing stock and public spaces, shops and businesses are part of an urban neighborhood’s built environment. Over time the uses and character of localities shift: from production to consumption following deindustrialization, wealthy to poor during periods of suburbanization, or immigrant enclave to arts district as resident demographics shift. As these changes occur, retail businesses help create a new, though sometimes contested, neighborhood identity.

Storefronts and businesses can communicate an area’s character, aesthetic, function, and even demographics to residents, visitors and media. They can also signal who does and doesn’t belong in a space. Williamsburg features expensive restaurants, cafes, boutiques, and bars. Like the trendy establishments in Lloyd’s Wicker Park “such local institutions both drive neighborhood identity and reflect it” (2006: 100).

Local institutions signaling an artist enclave (and the beginning of gentrification) began opening in Williamsburg in the early to mid-‘90s. The L Cafe opened in 1992, serving coffee and small meals but also an environment that catered to students, artists, and other newcomers. A local writer recalls that it was not “a place to work, rather to discuss your work, the work you intend to do, or the work you have no intention of taking on but are more than happy to go on about” (Kinsella 2004). Galapagos, a bar and performance space, opened in 1995 and “helped put Williamsburg on the art map” (Moynihan 2014). Six years later, Supercore, a Japanese restaurant and café, opened on Bedford’s Southside with the intent “of not only offering the local community of artists and young people a place to dine, but also providing a creative space where they can gather and socialize” (Supercore 2008).
Businesses like these communicate an area’s identity while inviting new institutions. These types of businesses are essential in the transformation of once working class neighborhoods into districts that cater to artists, foodies, fashionistas, or the wealthy. Neighborhoods with a critical mass of these amenities become attractions for visitors and tourists, not just because of what will actually be consumed there, but also the general atmosphere of the area. As Clark points out, it’s not the individual stores or the products they offer, but “more general aesthetics and imagery, the overall gestalt” (Clark 2003). The “overall gestalt” affects how people interact with and perceive of a locality and eventually matters for tangible outcomes like city funding in the form of increased public services in a “revitalized” neighborhood. The rezoning of Williamsburg’s waterfront would not have occurred if the area had not already become a cultural hub that attracted outsiders. Local shops contribute to a neighborhood’s aesthetic and in turn they influence the perceptions and narratives about neighborhoods.

Media narratives for neighborhoods around the world make reference to Williamsburg. Online magazines and blogs that specialize in fashion or travel run articles comparing neighborhoods and even entire cities to Williamsburg. Merely stating the name indicates something about a place: “Melbourne Meets Williamsburg in Fitzroy” (Young 2013), Berlin in its entirety is “the New Williamsburg” (Williamsburg 2015), Shimokitazawa is the “not as pretentious or annoying” Williamsburg of Tokyo (Rivera 2017), and Tulum is the “Williamsburg of Mexico” (O’Connor 2015). These neighborhoods and businesses reference an established, cultural touchstone participating in what Zukin, Kasinitz and Chen refer to as a “global toolkit of revitalization” that
attempts to harness local character to attract tourists, but also entails the homogenization of businesses and public spaces (2016: 24).

In 2016 a New York-based programmer made a phone app called “Where is Williamsburg?” which directs users to the “Williamsburg” of whatever city they’re in. From New Delhi to Detroit, users can find the hip Williamsburg-esque neighborhood—defined in each locale by a concentration of cool bars, restaurants, cafes, and clothing boutiques. The app now has over 8,000 user-submitted points in cities around the world, directing visitors to “the Williamsburg” of their city. In fact, in Barrio Universidad, the Williamsburg of Madrid, there is a thrift store named “Williamsburg.” The consumption and cultural offerings that made Williamsburg unique are now replicated through a combination of gentrification and globalization, creating far-flung urban neighborhoods with very similar images, symbols and retail offerings. Worse than simply the homogenization of urban cultures, these neighborhoods hold more appeal for global cosmopolitans than for existing local residents. As Williamsburg became known as an international destination, it was ceasing to function as a retail strip for locals, turning the once self-sufficient neighborhood into an entertainment zone for tourists, visitors, and wealthy residents. When places around the world become “Williamsburgs,” more local residents become culturally displaced from their neighborhood’s public spaces.

Today Williamsburg still has some of the cafes, bars, and art institutions that originally put it on the “hip” map, but most have been replaced with upscale or even big-box establishments. According to the “Where is Williamsburg?” app, the Williamsburg of New York is nearby Bushwick, signaling that the avant-gardes and the establishments that cater to them have moved on. In the absence of advanced retail gentrification, stores
can create a sense of familiarity or belonging for existing residents, ethnic businesses especially can be important resources for immigrant populations and artists and other avant-gardes create community around their local institutions as well (Jayne 2006; Duyvendak 2011). The aesthetics and products in local stores—including prices, style, and presentation—can influence an individual’s sense of belonging or feelings of alienation, exclusion, and cultural displacement. Retail gentrification not only changes what goods and services are offered in the neighborhood, it also signals who is and isn’t welcome in the space (Byrne 2003; Patch 2008; Zukin et al. 2009). The Polish and Latino businesses of Williamsburg did more than serve the necessities of local residents, they also contributed to residents’ sense of ownership over the neighborhood. New businesses offer luxury consumption tailored to the tastes and incomes of the wealthier new residents or visitors—often at the expense of existing residents. Medium Term resident Henryk illustrates this when discussing a new grocery store located at the base of a waterfront luxury condo: “It’s expensive. It’s also too fancy...going to [Brooklyn] Harvest Market when it looks so fancy, it just doesn’t feel, I don’t feel like that’s my place. I don’t know if it’s the way it looks or the prices, just it feels weird.”

As we’ll see in this chapter, new or adapted retail helps to “create symbolic boundaries that exclude longtime residents” (Sullivan and Shaw 2011: 419). As a result Long Term residents have fewer reasons to be in public space, necessities may be more expensive or harder to find, and local immigrant languages disappear from neighborhood signage (Patch 2004; Sullivan and Shaw 2011). Through retail gentrification, the histories and culture of existing resident groups are either manipulated or effectively erased from
the public spaces of the neighborhood, a concept that becomes especially troubling as
“Williamsburgs” are recreated around the world.

A Note on Methodology

In this chapter, interviews with business owners and employees elucidate the role
of retail in processes of gentrification. In some cases below the actions that these local
actors take influence the reputation of the neighborhood, the decision of a designer to
open a pop up shop adds to Williamsburg’s status as a destination for fashion. At other
times the business owners take cues from the neighborhood’s new reputation, like
redesigning a bakery into a cafe or updating inventory to include organic products. In this
way, individual stores and the appearance and status of entire neighborhoods interact as
an area is branded and marketed towards consumption.

By tracing the retail trajectory of Williamsburg, we can begin to understand how
local actors and businesses have affected the identity of Williamsburg away from
industrial and immigrant past toward a luxury consumption based present. The narratives
of local business owners and employees reveal how these players purposefully shape the
symbolic atmosphere of a neighborhood. Storeowners’ perspectives are then
supplemented by accounts from local residents who discuss what the neighborhood’s
retail meant (or didn’t mean) to them.

In addition to interviews with storeowners, employees, and residents, this chapter
benefits from archival data on retail changes in both neighborhoods. As noted by
Schlichtman and Patch (2008) business directories help to “triangulate” otherwise
qualitative data, allowing for accuracy and more robust descriptions of neighborhood
trends and characteristics. This is especially essential for scholars of gentrification—the
method offers a way of looking back on what was, while minimizing the influence of nostalgia and other subjectivities that arise in interview responses. Patch used Cole’s reverse telephone directories to label Williamsburg businesses as “gentrification related” or “nongentrification,” but a few years later Kasinitz and Zukin (2016) used the same directories with a different categorization scheme. In their study Kasinitz and Zukin (2016) compared main commercial streets on Manhattan’s Lower East Side and Brooklyn’s Bedford Stuyvesant, making distinctions between types of businesses including personal care, restaurants, and art galleries among others. Drawing on both of these systems, I use six categories of store types including retail, restaurants, and services. Distinguishing between types of businesses provides a finer understanding of not only when Williamsburg’s retail began to change, but also how specific shifts affected the neighborhood’s identity over time.

The Cole’s reverse phone directories, have catalogued residential and business listings by street address since the 1940s. I compared the retail listings for Bedford every ten years from 1970-2010, as well as the last available year at the time of research, 2013. Each business listing for a .8-mile stretch of Bedford Avenue was recorded for each tenth year (1970 and 1980 were not available so 1971 and 1981 were used instead, then 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2013 the latest year available at the time the quantitative data was collected). The stores were then coded by category whenever the type of store was obvious or an online search yielded information. In cases when the type was not identifiable the store was qualified as “unknown”. After the names and types of stores were recorded I examined the spreadsheet of businesses to analyze how long each business remained in the neighborhood. From this data on tenure I was able to calculate
the percentage of new and continuing businesses from decade to decade for each location. This data provides a more quantitative context of the changing retail landscape on Bedford Avenue as cycles of divestment and gentrification affected the neighborhood.

**Bedford Avenue**

Bedford Avenue is the main shopping and transportation street in the super-gentrified portion of Williamsburg. It was never the center of production during the neighborhood’s industrial history, but it was and is the center of local commerce. Until as late as mid-2000s the majority of the stores on Bedford served both the Long Term working class and Medium Term artistic residents. The neighborhood change that went on as the number of young artists and students entered the area is well documented (Patch 2004; Krase 2016; Zukin 2010). Polish butchers, Italian bakeries and Latino grocers co-existed with hip vegetarian bistros and local bars from the 1990s through the early 2000s. However as commercial rents rose, Long Term owners retired or were priced out, their children unwilling or unable to take over their leases. By the end of the decade more extreme change was happening as condos with million dollar apartments began filling, the residential changes affecting additional retail changes in the neighborhood.

Williamsburg’s new luxury buildings boast subterranean parking, rooftop pools, and even “wine rooms” for residents. Local restaurants have captured international attention, and chain stores have begun to rent store space. Now “super-gentrified” (Lees 2003), Williamsburg is a destination because of the amenity-filled condos and hotels, Michelin star restaurants, popular music venues and upscale boutiques.
Long Term, Northside residents note that Bedford Avenue in the 80s was lacking in retail variety, although they could get what they needed and the Southside and Greenpoint offered more retail options as well. While it is true that the street hit a low point of 59 total businesses in 1981, most of these stores were categorized as grocery (including the butchers, bakeries, and bodegas- the NYC equivalent of a convenience store), bars, restaurants, clothing and services such as laundromats, carpenters, plumbers, and a pharmacy that served the Williamsburg community (See Figure 4). Nine years later in 1990 the number of retail spaces had increased to 80, climbing to 98 by 2000.

By the mid ‘90s Williamsburg was already receiving attention in local and national newspapers that spoke of the area’s party scene in 1996, and “renaissance” in 1997 (Strauss 1996; Walker 1997). Also by 1996, an international website that lists parties and festivals around the world began including Williamsburg galleries on their site (Artnetweb 1996). Part of this reputation relied on the presence of cafes, bars and
restaurants, which nearly tripled from 8 to 21 in a ten-year period. By 2013 34% of the listed storefronts on Bedford Avenue were bars or restaurants, 23% were “other” which included 6 real estate offices, a wine store and a video store specializing in foreign films. Of the twenty “retail” businesses on the street (including pet stores, housewares, clothing, antiques and a bookstore), fourteen could be characterized as “boutique” based on aesthetics and prices. From 1981-2010 the number of “services” on Bedford (generally including cleaners, barbers, hair salons and Laundromats) ranged from 7-10. However in 2013, only three years after the last count of 10, there were 21 businesses that could be classified as services, 9 of which were categorized as “beauty” including spas, upscale hairdressers, and nail salons.

Some of the newer businesses in this section were attracted to the changes that had already taken place on Bedford; others are established stores that changed their goods or aesthetics to reflect the shift in neighborhood imagery. No matter the tenure of the store, interviews with business owners and employees indicate how shops on Bedford have altered the retail landscape from one of everyday necessity to upscale recreation and personal care.

Successful Adaptations on Bedford Avenue

In 2004 Jason Patch wrote about a “double landscape” that was emerging in Williamsburg, one that was industrial but increasingly focused on consumption. At the time this landscape represented immigrant and artist communities, working class and luxury, some signage included local ethnic languages and others that communicated the aesthetics of French bistros and upscale diners. More than ten years later it’s less common to experience the “double landscape.” Ethnic signage and stores catering to
necessity are still present but much less visible, the dominant landscape is now comprised of luxury consumption through art, clothing, food and drink. Long time storeowners who have managed to stay have had to change their businesses to attract more cosmopolitan clientele: updating their décor and offerings, and eliminating ethnic languages on signage.

As late as 2010 “Vittoria” bakery was visually an odd man out on Bedford Avenue, a relic from another time complete with linoleum floors, bagels stacked against the windows, and muffins and cookies laid out on big yellow trays. Like the new cafes and bars it was a social hub, but mainly for older adults who were Long Term residents. One day at the end of the summer in 2010 “Vittoria” was closed and I imagined it had finally gone the way of other Long Term Bedford businesses. Predictably, a chic café opened a few weeks later; unpredictably that café was still “Vittoria”.

“Vittoria” has been a Bedford Avenue institution since the 1960s. Joseph, the current owner, inherited the business from his father. He knew he had to make a change or go out of business, so he renovated. The walls are now exposed brick, the floor is wood, and an antique scale sits on top of the counter next to an espresso machine. He plans on eventually opening a wine bar in the backroom. “We’re going for more of a café than a bakery- hoping to catch the younger people...the cappuccino crowd,” he explains. I asked if his clientele had changed since the big renovation, “Yeah, oh yeah. The regular mix have dwindled away.” Joseph’s attitude around this was positive, he was happy to be attracting visitors and newer residents.

The Northside Pharmacy was another long-time establishment on Bedford Avenue. Pharmacies under different names and owners had occupied the building for over 100 years, but in 2013 the current owners could no longer afford the rent and
a Dunkin Donuts moved in. One of the owners, Halina, complained:

“Everybody who has to renegotiate a lease... there’s no way [they] can possibly stay...being an independent business owner staying in Williamsburg is really very tough. I see corporations coming... it’s only corporations that can afford to stay in those places... It’s just stunning, who would have thought this neighborhood would have gotten so expensive?”

In order to be able to stay in the neighborhood, the pharmacists had to buy their own building; they couldn’t afford to be on Bedford Avenue so they moved to a nearby side street. With the move the business became more upscale, selling high-end cosmetics in an updated storefront, a far cry from the crowded shelves and outdated fixtures of their previous location. The Polish word for pharmacy, “Apteka” is noticeably missing from the new storefront, and their website refers to the business as a “boutique apothecary.” They didn’t lose customers because of the move but “I am saying goodbye now once every three days to someone who is leaving- not just Williamsburg but Brooklyn, even New York. The rents are insane.” But at the same time new customers are coming in

“I don’t know exactly where they’re moving from, I think some of them are from the city, and I think there are a lot of people from Europe. Someone said ‘Oh my god this is just like the pharmacy we have in Paris.’ You definitely see less of the Polish, definitely less of the Spanish, more Americanized.”

She lamented the fact that neighbors and friends were being pushed out by rents, but acknowledged that there were better transportation services, access to medical care, and food options.
“In the 70s when I graduated all my friends were like “Oh my god, when are you moving out?” and then eventually “Oh do you know of a good apartment [in the neighborhood]?”

Like the pharmacy and the café, Ayman’s corner store has also changed with the times on Bedford. Ayman is a Palestinian immigrant who has been working in Williamsburg since he came to the US in 1994. First he worked at his brother’s deli until he took over the corner store in 2007. He described how his store changed to keep up with the neighborhood. According to him, Williamsburg used to be:

“warehouses… factories, it was a lot of construction workers, a lot of factory workers. It wasn’t so many people visiting like now, tourists from all over Europe and South America, it was just neighborhood people that you know, that come all the time, now it’s a lot of different people.”

Ayman is surprised at the prices people are willing to pay now. He says that the store has gone from selling “just normal products that people would buy all the time” to “organic, more organic, gluten free, more healthy stuff, more expensive stuff.”

Ayman did not open a business in Williamsburg for any particular reason other than he was already working across the street. He would like to stay in the neighborhood indefinitely “it’s a great area, there are no problems here, no one will ever bother me, nice people and I’ve known the neighborhood for a long time” but he knows that will be almost impossible when his lease expires: “I have an old rental it’s like $7,000, but I know it can be a lot more, I have a little bit more than 2 years and I know I’ll be out of here.”
The corner store is a business of necessity, and in that way it reflects the old Bedford Avenue. While they do carry expensive organic products, they also sell staples of everyday life that cost the same or less than the larger, local grocery stores. Ayman opened his business as a way to provide for himself and his family, while serving local residents. His goal was not to bring the community together, but his store is one of the most diverse mixing grounds of local residents in the neighborhood. The brief conversations that people have in Ayman’s shop do not result in friendships, artist collaborations or other “community building” like the L Café or Supercore mentioned above, but it is one of the few businesses in the neighborhood where elderly Polish men, Caribbean nannies, Latino teenagers, and condo moms come into contact with each other. At some point everyone needs to buy a container of milk, whether it be organic, soy, or as Ayman refers to it “just normal”.

The storeowners in this section can be said to have an attachment of necessity to Williamsburg. They opened (or took over) businesses in the neighborhood because they already lived or worked in the area and retail rents were affordable. The businesses they chose to open catered to the daily needs of local residents— bread, medicine, and groceries. These businesses survived through Williamsburg’s initial stages of gentrification because of their ability to adapt, although as we will see later in the chapter landlords also play an important role here. Unlike the local shops that were priced out of Williamsburg, Vittoria, Northside Pharmacy, and Ayman’s corner store all shifted their aesthetics and products to attract New residents. In all three cases Long Term residents still patronize these stores as well. The pharmacists at Northside know their established clientele by name and talk them through directions for their prescriptions in English or
Polish. Ayman engages customers in conversation and always seems to know what’s happening on the block. Despite Joseph’s delighting in the fact that he can now lure “the cappuccino crowd” his store also still attracts Long Term residents. On any given day one or two of the five tables are taken up by a group of older women chatting in a mix of English and Polish. The symbols of gentrification—laptop users at the cafe or vegan treats at the corner store do not outweigh the familiarity of the faces behind the counter for Long Term residents. Unfortunately adaption is not a common outcome for retail establishments in Williamsburg. Long Term residents are less likely to visit the many new retail businesses in the neighborhood.

Entrepreneurs Attracted to “Williamsburg”

“Radish” was a newer restaurant that opened in May of 2010 (and closed by 2013) replacing the popular vegan sweet shop “Penny Lane.” Laura and Amy, two friends in their mid 30s chose Williamsburg as the venue for their take-out restaurant for a number of reasons. Amy already lived in the neighborhood and the rent was cheaper than anything they could get in Manhattan; but they were also searching for a place that had a sense of ‘community’. Williamsburg had “more of a neighborhood feel- we have regulars we know their name or what they want…it’s a community store, very homey where people feel like it’s an extension of their kitchen.” Laura also stated that because a lot of food gets produced in Williamsburg (Mast’s Brothers Chocolates, The Brooklyn Salsa Company and Bacon Marmalade) “it’s a good environment for that sort of creativity.” The focus of the food is seasonality, and the décor evokes a 19th century general store; but the prices are in line with any modern luxury service. Soda from the seltzer tap is $4 and a package of 12 eco-friendly paper straws will cost you $8.
When I asked about the types of customers they have, Laura stated that they served “a broad cross section of the neighborhood- we’re on the ‘mommy network,’ at lunch we have young professionals, real estate brokers, free lancers who work from home. Then at night we have commuters at dinnertime, and on the weekends tourists.”

Her tally of customers describes the newer inhabitants of Williamsburg but leaves out long-term residents and people who can’t afford high-priced take out. Laura also mentioned that her store filled a gap in the neighborhood because before opening she would see “people coming home from work with Whole Foods bags, but they could be getting their take-out here!” In reality there is no shortage of take-out food in Williamsburg, and the Polish bakery around the corner also offers home-style meals to-go. The gap that “Radish” filled was then more aesthetic, reflecting the new, luxurious, upper-class version of Williamsburg.

The owners of newer businesses were attracted to the new image of Williamsburg, even if they can’t exactly say why. Robert, the owner of “By Robert James” is unique for this research because his first store existed on Orchard Street for five years before he opened a second branch on Bedford Avenue in 2012. His clothing line focuses on NYC locally made pieces, with shirts in the $150-200 range.

When asked why he chose the new Williamsburg location he replied, “I just wanted to vend in Williamsburg...I was reading some of the tea leaves maybe a little later than I should have. My realtor started pushing me to come here a while ago.”

After a minute he seemed to less candidly remember his store’s mission: “one of the great biggest tenets of this store is community. Building our own community maintaining that, being a part of the community that we’re already in...especially for a
neighborhood like this that has changed so much and...maybe the old timers kind of take an issue with the development and change I think it’s nice when everyone can kind of mingle together and remember that we’re all the same.”

At the time of the interview Robert James was in a temporary location, a “pop up” store in a building that was about to go under construction. In 2014 he was lucky enough to find another storefront just a few blocks away, but the nature of pop-ups and the general quick turnover of high-rent stores means less chance for ties between storeowners— with each other and their customers. Additionally, the likelihood that a less wealthy resident enters a boutique with $200 shirts to have the chance to “mingle together” is already slim.

Goorin Brothers, a small national hat chain, opened their second Brooklyn location on Bedford in 2013. The store is carefully curated to resemble an early twentieth century shop, but the prices ($50-$250) remind you that you are definitely in modern Williamsburg. Like most retail and service workers, the employees cannot afford to live in the neighborhood, they commute from up to an hour away. The customers are described as “diverse...It’s pretty much the same as what you see getting off the train” meaning people in their twenties and early thirties who are also not local to the neighborhood. This is in contrast to the business that was formerly occupying the same storefront- Trojanowski Liquor, closed in 2013 due to increasing rent. The liquor store predominantly served a diverse mix of longtime residents and would acknowledge the neighborhood’s various cultures with multilingual signage.

The Goorin Brothers grand opening was the culmination of an eight-year endeavor to get a Williamsburg location. The CEO and head of stores had been scouting
out spaces in Williamsburg for years before they decided on the perfect storefront. According to the manager, they wanted a location in the area because “even then [2005] they felt like there was an up and coming artist scene here...they liked the Bohemian feel, it was so much more laid back than Manhattan, they wanted a shop here.” While some might argue the artist scene was already dissolved by 2005, Williamsburg’s branding as a hip destination was still gaining momentum- enough to start attracting stores like Goorin Brothers in the first place.

The newer businesses often claim that they actively seek to “build community” but the skyrocketing rents push out long-term businesses that already have a familiarity with the neighborhood and long-term residents. These residents are often not included in the “community” that newer stores try to achieve. However, the older stores that were able to adapt are actually more likely to be sites of interaction for residents of different class backgrounds and tenures in the neighborhood. These places of necessity- a pharmacy, a corner store, and a bakery turned café are used by neighborhood residents regardless of class, ethnicity, or other demographics and thus day to day interactions across these groups are more likely to occur in those spaces, if at all.

These entrepreneurs were attracted to Williamsburg for what it represented. Like many Medium Term residents, they can be said to have an identity-style attachment to the neighborhood. Laura and Amy of “Radish” chose Williamsburg over a Manhattan location because they wanted a “neighborhood feel” and to be part of a food culture that had become prevalent in Brooklyn. The owners of Goorin Brothers also preferred Williamsburg to Manhattan because of its “laid back,” bohemian atmosphere. Robert wanted to “vend” in the area because of what the name “Williamsburg” means— wealthy
residents and visitors, tourists, and other upscale boutiques like his own. For these storeowners, Williamsburg fit the brand and aesthetics they wanted for their business, and likewise they contributed to the changing landscape of the neighborhood. The newest businesses in Williamsburg include Whole Foods, Apple, CVS, J. Crew, and Levis. These corporations are not in Williamsburg because of an identity attachment but rather an investment strategy. For many of these stores the Williamsburg location doesn’t bring in enough traffic to justify the storefront, but they capitalize on the existing cultural cache of the neighborhood to reflect positively on their brand (Kurutz 2017). Like New residents, these businesses consume and exploit the neighborhood’s artistic past while contributing to its displacement. The incoming chains are aware of the stigma of being a “big box” store in a neighborhood known for its individuality. Some companies like Urban Outfitters or a NYC grocery chain avoid their companies’ names, labeling the stores as “Space Ninety 8” and “Brooklyn Harvest Market” respectively. Others have added specialized touches for Williamsburg locations like beer taps to fill growlers at the New York pharmacy chain Duane Reade, and a special menu of craft-brewed coffees at the local Starbucks. Predictably, residents of different tenure cohorts have varying perceptions of the neighborhood’s past and present commercial life.

Resident Reactions to Change

Perceptions of Williamsburg’s retail scene, both in the past and currently, differ among residents based on their tenure in the neighborhood. When residents were asked to describe what their neighborhood was like in the past Medium Term residents immediately brought up the dearth of retail. Folks moving into the neighborhood in the 1980s, ‘90s and even early 2000s frequently remarked that there was nothing there. Long
Term residents were more likely to describe the neighborhood in terms of geography, and what ethnic groups were associated with the different parts of Williamsburg. They talked about the type of housing and how much rent cost and only mentioned retail after they were probed. When asked if they could buy groceries and other necessities in the past they answered in the affirmative. When New residents describe the neighborhood they almost never needed probing about businesses, revealing that shops, restaurants, and nightlife are intrinsic features of their Williamsburg. These amenities, and the convenience they bring, are among the top reasons New residents moved to Williamsburg.

Maria describes not just necessities but also entertainment offered in the local retail landscape of the 1970s: “We had a shoe store, we had fruits and vegetables…we had mom and pop shops…you could find almost everything you wanted, kids clothes, women’s’ clothes, everything was reasonable. We had a Woolworth years ago, the discount stores, record shops, soda shops, little candy stores, an arcade…”

Amanda, who identifies as a Hispanic woman who “passed” for Italian, was a Catholic schoolteacher on the Northside in the 1980s. Now in her 70s, she and several of her peers felt that the neighborhood business used to cater to the residents of the neighborhood, but that that’s no longer true. Two former residents who grew up on the Polish Northside and Latino Southside both spoke to the fact that not only did their neighborhoods have what they needed in the ‘70s and ‘80s, but that the businesses were run by immigrants and migrants like themselves: “That was the interesting thing,” Arnold recalled, “You could do all your business in Spanish. Everything we needed was there. And as the neighborhood evolved a little more, even professional services were there.”

Gosia indicates that Northside businesses also served ethnic and working-class
populations: “The stores on Bedford Ave consisted of mom and pop shops, there were two Polish stores, a little Italian coffee shop, a Laundromat, liquor store, and one bodega.”

But when Medium Term residents began arriving in the early 1980s they found a residential neighborhood with “nothing” in it. Similar to their accounts of crime, being in the neighborhood before certain landmarks helped legitimate Medium Term residents’ status as urban pioneers. When James moved in in 1983, “There was a rancid diner, two pet shops and a Hasidic notary public...Kasia’s [restaurant] opened after I moved to Williamsburg, if you got there before Kasia’s things were really old school.” This comment affords James and his friends “old-timer” status, they were in the neighborhood before the retail started to reflect the hip, new residents of the 1980s and ‘90s. The scarcity of retail, while not a problem for Long Term residents, was a badge of honor for Medium Termers- they had chosen to live in gritty conditions, a neighborhood with graffiti tags on the walls, abandoned buildings, and only a few “awful” restaurants (Osman 2011; Tissot 2015). But later James goes on to talk about a job he had selling advertisements for a local paper where he mentioned several more businesses: “I was walking around the Northside, Southside, doing that, bodegas, restaurants, Polish restaurants, hardware stores and the local bars, Palestinian delis.” There are suddenly many more businesses in the Williamsburg that James inhabited; they just weren’t businesses that were particularly interesting for him and other Medium Term residents.

Another indication of this is Kristy’s narrative about how the neighborhood felt when she moved there in 1988. From my archival data count just two years later in 1990 there were 80 storefronts on Bedford Avenue, but as she remembers, “Bedford Avenue felt almost entirely abandoned. There were very few shops that were open, there were a
couple of delis, I can’t remember if the video store was open, I think Vinny’s Pizzeria was there...you definitely could not get the New York Times here.” “Abandonment” then means that there are businesses for necessity, but desired objects like the New York Times are not available, possibly because English was rarely a first language in the Polish and Latino neighborhoods and it was more expensive than other daily papers. Allen recalled that people would go to Vittoria, the bakery turned café, for coffee because “there weren’t alternatives.” The absence of Manhattan-levels of variety was interpreted and is remembered as a total void. He recalls when the L café opened, “I sort of see that as that first cultural milestone of bringing together people, the cultural pull...you would go there rather than the greasy diner across the street.”

Medium term residents who complain that “nothing was open then” and that “there was no food to buy” go on to admit that there were establishments that sold meat, fruit, vegetables, milk and canned goods, there were bars, pet shops, laundromats, and at least one diner, even during the period when Bedford had the least amount of retail. But there is also a limit to the amount or type of retail that Medium Term residents welcomed as the neighborhood gentrified. Allen laments that brands have moved into the neighborhood: “I think last year we turned the next corner with the J Crew and the Starbucks, because for a long time we kept the chains out.” Courtney agrees: “It’s kind of crazy to me that Apple is opening on Bedford, and I don’t find that especially useful.” Henryk notes that the retail is no longer for local residents: “It caters to different residents... I think a lot of businesses cater to tourism, to outside people, I would even say more often the businesses right now cater to people who come here for a short time, half a day or a day.”
Margot, a Former resident who lived there in her early 20s, moved to Williamsburg for its parties and hip lifestyle. Reflecting on what the neighborhood had become by 2015, she said: “I almost feel that this is going through a second if not third phase of gentrification. It used to be catered towards individuals who wanted record stores, cool stuff and now places have been kicked out and now it seems like it’s being replaced by chain stores.” Margot and the other residents above are mourning the loss of the types of stores that they welcomed, establishments that initially made Williamsburg desirable for artists and students back in the 1980s, ‘90s and early 2000s. Medium Term and some Former residents experienced a cultural displacement not unlike their Long Term counterparts who felt more at home in their (im)migrant, working class neighborhoods before the arrival of coffee shops and music venues.

Although Williamsburg used to be known for art and underground parties, the area has become a draw for its upscale bars, clubs, and especially restaurants and artisanal food. At it’s lowest count in 1990 there were 8 restaurants and bars on the .8 mile stretch of Bedford Avenue, by 2000 that number was 21 and by 2013, 46 businesses were categorized as bars or restaurants, and that’s just a portion of the various restaurants on the miles of other streets that comprise the neighborhood. From outdoor food markets like Smorgasburg, to Michelin star restaurants, Williamsburg has become a foodie destination. What Medium Term and Former residents see as a death of their “Williamsburg” turns out to be a boon for New residents who may have been attracted by Williamsburg’s creative culture, but came for the short commute and the recession-era deals on luxury housing.
Stephanie is characteristic of many New residents in Williamsburg. She has two young children and currently stays home with them, she and her husband purchased a condo in the waterfront towers. When asked to describe her neighborhood, she replied: “Convenient… we have a supermarket right here…we have like J. Crew and Urban Outfitters, and we don’t shop at those places that much but I guess it’s nice, you know, that they’re there. But then you have to also think they put other places out of business; they’ve definitely raised the rents. But you know, like my husband and I have a date night every week, we probably go to a new restaurant every single week and we really only go out in Williamsburg, so that’s, I mean that’s amazing.” She likes having J. Crew and Urban Outfitters around, even if she doesn’t often shop there, because they signal something about the neighborhood she lives in. The chains that Medium Term residents deride go largely unnoticed by Long Term residents, but are welcomed by New residents, even when it’s acknowledged that big box stores threaten the existence of the small scale retail that helped make Williamsburg popular.

When many New residents were moving into condos in 2008-2010 they were leaving the convenience of Manhattan or the charm of Brownstone Brooklyn. Williamsburg was a downgrade, a sacrifice they made because they could afford to buy there. The gourmet supermarkets hadn’t yet arrived, the market for indoor children’s’ play spaces hadn’t emerged, and the waterfront parks were still under construction. Josie moved into the neighborhood in 2010. That year there were 35 restaurants and bars on Bedford Avenue alone (not counting side streets), there were 17 businesses selling grocery items, and 16 retail establishments like boutiques, book stores, and jewelry shops. “When we first moved here there weren’t great restaurants, Tops [the only large grocery
store for many years] was sort of crappy it was old and oddly configured, it felt grungy...It didn’t feel like a full on neighborhood. And now it does. There’s all these amenities and that’s really awesome.” Sarinda also complained about the grocery store in her part of the neighborhood “…the C-Town was really like an old school C-Town, pretty crappy, I didn’t know where we were gonna go grocery shopping.” The retail has adapted to meet the aesthetics, needs, and deeper pockets, of New residents, and as a result they celebrate the convenience. Although they at first struggled to feel comfortable in “grungy” Williamsburg, New residents agreed that they can now get “everything” in the neighborhood.

Perceptions of Williamsburg’s retail vary from necessity, void, saturation and convenience depending on tenure—a topic that will be expanded upon in the following chapter. What Long Term residents viewed as satisfying their needs, Medium Term residents deemed empty and abandoned. In turn, the grimy place that didn’t feel like a neighborhood to New residents in 2008 had been an exciting and communal experience for Medium Term residents. With the arrival of chains like Starbucks and Whole Foods along with expensive restaurants, Long and Medium Term residents alike now feel culturally displaced from the neighborhood that used to serve their needs or desires.

**Why Streets Change**

Because of relatively strong tenants’ rights laws in New York, retail changes at a faster rate than residential units. Some business owners noted that the frequent turnover of buildings was leading to rent increases. This is a believable cause and effect because once a new owner purchases a property, he or she (or more likely “they” as many of the current owners are companies and LLCs) would increase rent to quickly make back the
capital on their investment. However, a review of deed transfers reveals that this may be more neighborhood gossip than reality. The New York City Department of Finance maintains a digital archive of property records for city lots including deeds that indicate transfer of land ownership. These records are available online through ACRIS (Automated City Register Information System) from 1966 to the present (Department of Finance 2015). By looking up addresses I was able to determine the “BBL” Borough/Block/Lot identifiers for parcels along Bedford Avenue. From there you can view all sales and changes of deeds for a parcel of land from 1964 to the present. The table below lists the deed sales through 2009.

In Williamsburg the deed transfer rates reached their peak in the ‘80s (See Table 2 below) with a significant slow down in the first decade of this century as gentrification was picking up. From 2010-2015 there has been a spike, 56 properties have changed hands, possibly reflecting a trend of landlords “waiting out” the early period of gentrification in the (correct) hope that their real estate would fetch more a few years later. In the Spring of 2005, the city announced that large swaths of the neighborhood would be rezoned for high-rise, luxury residential development. It’s telling that of the 29 properties that were sold in the 4 years after the announcement, 23 of them were on the Northside section of Bedford, where gentrification had already intensified and where developers were confident they would make a steep return on their investment.
Table 2. Deed Transfers on Bedford Avenue by Decade 1970-2009  
Department of Finance, NYC

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<th>Decade</th>
<th>Number of Deed Transfers</th>
<th>Percentage of Housing Stock Transferred</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970-1979</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>55%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980-1989</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>56%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990-1999</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2009</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>37%</td>
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In 2013 the restaurants, cafés and bars on Bedford, made up exactly a third of the businesses on the block. Fifteen of these establishments were new between 2010 and 2013, 6 opened in locations that formerly did not have retail (likely, former first floor apartments), and three more replaced small grocery stores and a pharmacy. Again, this change is not based on displacement from rampant building sales, but rather long term building owners who saw an opportunity to collect higher rents on retail space that, for decades, had sat empty or rented for far below the rate for other city neighborhoods. In the past, the businesses were more likely to have served the neighborhood population, while today they cater to tourists, young people, and the upper middle class who can afford $15 cocktails and designer clothing. The economy of Williamsburg relies heavily on shopping and nightlife outposts that draw visitors from around the city and the world.

The trends in deed transfers suggest that the surge of businesses opening in Williamsburg (94 between 2000 and 2010) were not caused by new landlords but longer term landlords who understood the demand for added (or different) retail space. A scene in the documentary *Gut Renovation* (Friedrich and Quinlan 2013) shows a local butcher emptying out his store. He claimed it wasn’t about the rent, he could have afforded a sizable increase, but “people don’t want it” the landlord would not renew his lease. The
butcher’s comment echoes something I heard multiple times from Long Term residents, that newcomers don’t cook at home, they go to restaurants or get takeout. The landlord wanted to replace the butcher shop with a new type of business, one that reflected the changes going on in Williamsburg. Eventually, a restaurant opened in the storefront. Ayman echoed this sentiment. He will be out of his store by 2017 primarily because “The landlord wants to do something else” so he or she will raise the rent past a reasonable increase that Ayman, or any convenience store owner, could pay.

These comments show that landlords and business owners can be initial mobilizers of neighborhood change. For Ayman and the butcher’s landlords, retail turnover wasn’t about rental prices but rather aesthetics and place making. The landlords or building owners observe upscale restaurants and boutiques in the neighborhood and desire to have that sort of hip business in their building as well. Aside from aesthetics, they are aware of the processes of gentrification—they will be able to charge more for residential and retail rents if the neighborhood becomes a destination. In many gentrifying neighborhoods, new businesses predate large-scale real estate investment, luxury housing development, and corporate investment. These local actors anticipate this and have cumulative effects on the communities where they open or rent to businesses. The building owner who favors the boutique over the bodega is making an individual decision that it is both a cause and effect of broader neighborhood changes. Little by little the signs and symbolic ownership of the shopping streets shift, as individual decisions have a tangible effect on the whole gestalt of local shops.

Why did some business owners blame store turnover on increased rents by new landlords? It is perhaps less painful for Long Term business owners to believe that their
stores are being displaced by new building owners who want to make a faster return on their investment, but that doesn’t seem to be the case in Williamsburg. The owner would rather have a business that brings in higher rent, but also one that upgrades the aesthetic appeal of the building and neighborhood- thus improving their investment.

**Conclusion**

Williamsburg’s transition from local community, to magnet of cool, to enclave of the wealthy is nowhere more apparent than in the local shopping street. In the Williamsburg of the 1970s and ‘80s, owners were providing necessities to the immigrant and working class communities of the neighborhood. Historically, owners set up business because of personal connections or because the street was already home to other shops like theirs or store owners like themselves. New business owners described the allure of Williamsburg as its own force, not a personal connection that encouraged them to open a business there.

New storeowners in gentrifying neighborhoods often cite a desire to create community but their intentions are not necessarily inclusive of all resident groups (Sullivan and Shaw 2011). Because this type of retail shift is characteristic of gentrification globally, it is important to understand the roles that local businesses play in the symbolic changes of a gentrifying neighborhood (Zukin et al. 2016). An aesthetic featuring exposed brick, bare wooden tables, and antique decor, has become popular, even cliché in Williamsburg and many other gentrified locales. The trend evokes an early 20th century bohemian scene, erasing actual local history to create an “authentic” urban setting (Zukin 2010). These aesthetics harken back to a different time and place, Williamsburg’s immigrant and manufacturing history is ignored in this strategy. As
mentioned above the disappearance of necessity businesses includes the erasure of ethnic products and languages, leaving Long Term residents without a sense of ownership over these spaces. The process is continued with the omission of Long Termer’s histories and cultures as the aesthetics of an imagined past saturate the neighborhood.

The changing retail environment has also impacted who makes use of the streets on a daily basis. The gradual dissolution of the local shopping street alters the demographics of customers who are present in public space by changing peoples’ daily paths through a neighborhood. As we’ll see in the following chapter, Medium Term residents maintain that there was “nothing” in Williamsburg when they first moved in, but the data in this chapter contradicts that narrative. Descriptions by Long Term residents and counts of local businesses show that in the past Williamsburg’s retail catered to the necessities of daily life. As shops that served the needs of older adults, poor, working class, and people of color disappeared from the main commercial strip, these populations had fewer reasons to be on Bedford Avenue and the surrounding area. Long Term residents are then only occasionally present in the most gentrified parts of the neighborhood, making their presence noticeable and even suspicious.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the re-opening of the pool in McCarren Park fanned flames of racial tension that are not always felt at the surface level in modern Williamsburg. Recall the conversation with a New residents about the pool that reflects the impact of the elimination of people of color from Williamsburg’s public and retail spaces. Because the neighborhood’s Black and Latino teenagers can rarely afford the food and clothing options on Bedford Avenue, their presence at the pool is surprising to gentrifiers. Usually absent from public spaces, these teens are assumed not to be residents,
not to belong in Williamsburg—a potentially dangerous assumption if their activities become “quality of life” infractions for which gentrifiers call the police (Freeman 2006).

The aesthetics and products that are welcoming for wealthy New residents and visitors can have the opposite effect for existing residents, even when it comes to potential benefits of retail gentrification. One touted advantage is better access to retail and services, especially well-stocked grocery stores (Alwitt and Donley 1997). But even grocery stores can signal exclusion, recall Henryk’s evaluation of the new grocery store above as “too fancy” which made him feel like he didn’t belong there. The aesthetics and signals used to attract wealthier residents can act as “symbolic boundaries” for Long Termers and even Medium Termers, preventing them from making use of new amenities (Sullivan 2014).

There is a need for city governments to protect the rents of small business owners in gentrifying cities, but this must extend to Long Term “discount” stores and purveyors of necessities as well as boutiques and art galleries. As we see in Williamsburg, once the market is set for big box stores, some landlords will gladly oust small business owners whether they are an established pharmacy or a pop-up boutique. The future economic stability of industrial neighborhoods and cities hinges on their ability to attract new residents, business, and visitors—but policy makers must approach this change in a way that does not exclude existing residents. Despite all of the negative effects listed in this conclusion for Long Term residents, it is Medium Termers who express the most bitterness about cultural displacement when it comes to retail change. In the final chapter, we turn to additional aspects of neighborhood change that affect feelings of cultural displacement for Long Term, Medium Term, and Former residents.
Chapter Six
Narratives of Gentrification

The preceding chapters have considered residents’ experiences of a neighborhood going through gentrification. This chapter explores how individuals evaluate the process itself, starting with their perceptions of the neighborhood before gentrification, what they identify as benefits and disadvantages of the process, and the degree to which they feel cultural displacement as a result. The initial discussion of perceptions calls into question some commonly held stereotypes about gentrification and the way that it changes neighborhoods.

In order for Williamsburg to gentrify, the neighborhood had to go through a shift in image. The change in retail and identity in Chapter 5 is part of this process but additionally shifts in Williamsburg’s reputation were necessary for wealthy New residents to feel comfortable investing in the neighborhood’s luxury housing. Conflicting with the accounts of Long Termers, early gentrifiers recall that in the 1980s and ‘90s there was “nothing” in Williamsburg. The area seemed provincial to in-movers who often migrated to Williamsburg from American suburbs, sometimes after living for a short stint in Manhattan. To these Medium Termers Williamsburg was a place to indulge in a bohemian identity, an escape from traditional trappings of adulthood like traditional, fulltime employment and the creation of a family. Eventually the nightlife and art scenes launched Williamsburg to international fame. Since the rezoning, Williamsburg has shed its avant-garde identity and gained a global reputation as a site of consumption. In contrast to the non-traditional, bohemian culture that once persisted there, it has become known as a family-friendly neighborhood among wealthy professionals. The second
section of this chapter discusses how these perceptions changed and why they were necessary for the attraction of New residents.

**Perceptions of Gentrification**

Long Term residents were candid when discussing gentrification and the changes that have happened in their neighborhood. They acknowledged the many problems Williamsburg had in the past with service budget cuts and higher crime rates, while maintaining that there was a vibrant social life. As evidenced in the preceding chapters, they recall Williamsburg as a family-oriented neighborhood that catered to their needs. Still, Long Term residents felt that some of the changes that came with gentrification were positive—including improved infrastructure and services, a broader diversity of economic class, and a healthy tax base. They felt that the area became more beautiful with parks, and some reported that the neighborhood was safer. Respondents were also asked about what had changed for the worse with gentrification. Only two Long Term residents complained about the noise or how crowded the neighborhood has become, as we’ll see that is a common complaint among Medium Term and New residents. For the majority of Long Termers, the main concern with gentrification was physical and cultural displacement.

Maria was beaming with nostalgia as she recounted the various organized and informal activities she participated in growing up in Williamsburg. She acknowledged the physical markers of divestment in her neighborhood but maintained that it was a fine place to live. In some ways, she relishes the area’s newfound popularity: “*We played out front, we played in the park, we were cheerleaders, we had a lot of activities, clean fun... it was good in a sense, it wasn’t good when you saw the graffiti, it wasn’t aesthetically*
pleasing but our basic needs were here...When everybody started coming over...from Manhattan... it sort of brought this flair, this fun, this difference...the fact that you see people enjoying Williamsburg’s Southside, it gives me pride.”

But her tone changed as she remembered Latino social clubs that have been displaced during the course of gentrification: “Now they’ve converted all these social clubs into sidewalk cafes, it’s disappointing because I wanted my grand babies to experience that... That really hurts because you felt like you had this sense of home and then you had it taken from you.”

Long Term residents could easily name improvements to their neighborhood that have come in the wake of drastic demographic shifts and public and private investment. But as they listed these positive changes they were also clear that the improvements were not “for them.” Mike and Renaldo, both retired factory workers, are acutely aware that the increase in city services were for new residents: “now you’ve got people with money, the neighborhood changes. And the cops are around more, the garbage men come around more, when it was poor people they didn’t care.” Renaldo adds: “It’s not for the people who lived here for years, when it started to change, I think the approach was let’s get rid of the people that live here, like Hispanics.” Like Lance Freeman’s (2006) respondents in Harlem and Clinton Hill, Long Term residents were aware that the investment that has flowed into Williamsburg was in response to, and to attract more, wealthy new residents. Additionally, they were upset that because of drastic increases in the prices of housing, their children cannot live on their own in the neighborhood, nor are there ‘people like them’ who can afford to move in.
Long Term residents were happy about the investment, as it provided basic services and amenities that all city residents should have access to, but as a result they experienced cultural displacement in two ways. First, they were acutely aware that the development was not for them, and that it may even herald the physical displacement of their networks or themselves. Second, the development often came at the expense of many of their social institutions and local businesses. Mike was worried not just about physical displacement of long term residents, but also of the local senior center where he spent his days: “...they’re kicking people out, it shouldn’t be like that, they’re trying to get rid of this [Senior Citizen] center, it’s supposed to be for the old people…”

Antoinette patronizes the same senior center added that: “the neighborhood has changed greatly... and they’re trying to push us out, they’re doing a very good job.”

As detailed in the previous chapter, Medium Term and New residents often suggest that there was “nothing” in Williamsburg before their arrival. These damaging descriptions are often recycled in media accounts celebrating the benefits of gentrification. George, a thirty-something Dominican-American, countered that narrative with his own memory of Williamsburg, and summarized the cultural displacement that many Long Term residents expressed: “So many great things have come out of Williamsburg and it gets lost in this dynamic of oh it was all completely crime ridden and it was all just blight and everything. There hasn’t been a focus on maintaining some equity, some of that original character and feel, that’s important. It’s been skewed completely to high end... this big focus and emphasis on nightlife, you know, big business, chain stores, and just extracting money...it has taken away some of that quality of culture,
a lot of that has been lost... those are some of the things that I feel sad about... when you look at Williamsburg now, that could have been maintained.”

But when asked about their pre-gentrification experiences, early Medium Term residents often spoke about what was lacking. Moving into a post-industrial neighborhood that had been divested for at least a decade led newcomers to describe the neighborhood in terms of physical decay and nothingness. Most of them seemed to be unaware of the existing Latino and European communities, and instead focused on what was missing.

Penny bought a house on the Southside in the early ‘90s, and although she owned a business in the neighborhood she didn’t really interact with her neighbors: “It was a dangerous area... a lot of abandoned buildings and boarded up buildings, empty lots and shells of buildings, a lot of graffiti back then.” Carol is a photographer and freelancer who moved to Williamsburg in 1981. Her assessment of the neighborhood reveals how invisible the long-standing populations were to in-movers: “Nobody came here. I would never say I lived in Williamsburg because people would always think I meant Virginia.” According to Kristy, “In those days everybody lived in Manhattan... there really wasn’t anything happening.”

But what some recognized as a void, others fetishized and referred to as a “magical” quality of Williamsburg, something to be “discovered.” Artists and musicians especially recall parties in abandoned warehouses, fire spinning and musical performance at the fenced-off waterfront, and a “sprinkling of artists” throughout the neighborhood. Morgan, Rob and Henryk all remember Williamsburg in this way: “It was really magical,” “...a magical time,” “...it was really beautiful scenery.”
Whether they perceived Williamsburg to be vacant or magical, more than half of the Medium Term respondents appreciated the neighborhood’s slower pace in contrast to Manhattan’s hectic Lower East Side where many of them worked at restaurants and displayed work in galleries. This was the quality that many of them missed the most when assessing the effects of gentrification in their neighborhood. Allen remembers: “It was just really sleepy...” Erin cherished the “neighborhoody vibe.”

Medium Term residents who came to Williamsburg a bit later or who did not identify with the art community praised the renovated parks and green spaces, as well as the convenience that increased retail and infrastructure has brought to the neighborhood. Originally Carol had felt that she couldn’t get anything she needed in Williamsburg but after gentrification things changed for her: “I don’t need to go into Manhattan anymore, I used to go in at least everyday. There’s good food, I can get my computer repaired, I can go to [the grocery store].” Bernadette and Courtney both arrived in the early 2000s, their statements capture the three main benefits that Medium Term identify- safety, improved education, and convenience: “The communities have all around become much safer, the schools have gotten better from what I hear. There’s so much more, it’s super convenient.” ... “I’m happy that...the public schools are getting better.”

Medium Term artists were more likely to have identified with the post-industrial creative enclave that developed in Williamsburg in the 1980s and ‘90s, and were thus less likely to recognize many benefits to gentrification. Instead they lamented the loss of artistic culture. The conflict between gentrification and the arts has not gone unnoticed by policy makers, and it has been the focus of two recent reports—one by the policy organization “Center for an Urban Future” and another by Mayor DiBlasio’s initiative,
“Create NYC.” The Create NYC report surveyed 220 artists around the city and found that 76% cited cost or space as their primary challenge to living and working in New York (Department of Cultural Affairs 2017). According to the Center for an Urban Future’s report, median rent rose by 23% in New York between 2000 and 2012, but rates were higher in popular ‘creative’ neighborhoods like Bushwick (50%), the Lower East Side (43%) with Williamsburg/Greenpoint having the highest rent increase at 76% (Center for an Urban Future 2015). The Center’s report singled out Williamsburg’s cultural scene as being hit especially hard by gentrification. Between 2011 and 2015, twenty-four music venues around the city had closed, seven of these were in Williamsburg. In the same period Williamsburg’s count of art galleries decreased from 71 to 43 (Center for an Urban Future 2015).

Sitting at her kitchen table one morning, Morgan, an artist and teacher, spoke harshly about the effects on the housing market: “It makes me mad that they’re [wealthy New residents] are able to have whatever they want in my neighborhood and the people that I care about can’t stay here.” Erin also felt regret that the group she termed as “the original gentrifiers… the people who were sort of lighting the way,” could no longer afford the neighborhood anymore.

Artists and musicians who lived in Williamsburg were the ones most likely to feel cultural displacement in terms of the new corporate nature of the area and the large crowds on weekends. They critiqued incoming residents and mourned the loss of what they viewed as a more authentic, artistic culture. One rainy morning in Vitoria Café, musician and Medium Term resident Noah hunched over a coffee and told me about when he first moved into Williamsburg in the 1990s: “…it had recently come out of
really heroin infested days with a lot of shootings...there was an artistic community and the environment was conducive to art-making. And now it's transformed into an environment that's not so much about the inhabitants anymore, really full of people who can afford to pay the highest rents in New York...most of the artists have moved out because the cost of space just skyrocketed...everything's being taken over by corporate interest.”

Others echo this sense of loss. Erin remembers when most people she met in Williamsburg were artists: “It used to be like yes we have jobs and we’re working but we were all artists and musicians as well...but now I’m meeting lawyers and investment bankers... people who are here because it’s a trendy place to live or because there’s luxury housing with views of the river.”

Medium Term residents say they first noticed that “their” neighborhood was changing when ATMs were installed, or when people with sweatshirts from elite art schools started populating the neighborhood. But the entrée of wealthier, non-creatives and upscale businesses in the early 2000s heralded the absolute end of the artistic enclave that first attracted them. They refer to the neighborhood as impersonal and uncomfortably fancy, no longer a place that they feel ownership over. Allen mentioned feeling out of place at new businesses: “Sometimes I don’t even feel welcome at these places.”

One of the most frequent complaints Medium Term residents make about gentrification is that Williamsburg is now crowded, and has become a tourist destination—far cry from the semi-abandoned industrial neighborhood they found in the 1980s and early ’90s. In addition to the disappearance of bohemian culture, Medium Term residents lament the loss of their “sleepy” “quiet” neighborhood, a retreat from their jobs and
social lives in Manhattan. The crowds that now congregate around the subway, spill out of bars and restaurants, and flood waterfront food and music festivals are a significant drawback for Medium Term residents, perhaps the most visible sign for them of what has been lost. This theme will be further examined in the “Local to Global” section below.

Most New residents visited Williamsburg in the early 2000s, although a handful first came to the neighborhood when they were looking to buy real estate. Like Medium Termers, their descriptions of Williamsburg at that time focused on what they perceived to be lacking. But the qualities that lent Williamsburg a “magical” and “bucolic” vibe to Medium Termers held no such appeal for New residents—they describe Williamsburg’s past as dirty, dangerous, and lacking, erasing the vibrant neighborhood life that Long Term residents experienced. Caithlin felt “… after a certain point there was really nothing going on.” As late as 2006 Ali perceived the neighborhood as “largely abandoned” and Josie found Williamsburg to be “unsafe and dirty.”

Since New residents perceived that Williamsburg was “abandoned”, “dirty”, “grungy”, and “had nothing going on,” they find many benefits to gentrification, while their list of negative outcomes is much more limited. Convenience was by far the most frequently cited benefit of gentrification for New residents, particularly those raising families in the neighborhood.

Stephanie recalled her first visits to Williamsburg in the early 2000s: “I remember thinking ‘oh we have to just be careful, and look around and stuff,’ we wouldn’t walk around at night…we would always take a car service home.” When she decided to move to Brooklyn from Manhattan to raise her children, Williamsburg wasn’t on her radar, but it ended up being the best neighborhood for her husband’s commute and they moved in
2008. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, New residents felt more comfortable and at home in Williamsburg as more retail opened in the area: “I think the neighborhood has become more convenient for us. It used to be that you would have to go into Manhattan for everything...I do appreciate the convenience factor, like the Duane Reade right here...[Gentrification] has brought more convenience into the neighborhood, in terms of the stores that are available, we have some very high end shopping now, we just have a variety of different things that we didn’t have before. With gentrification, the simple fact that there are more people living here, and probably more people with money, we’ve gotten things like the ferry, I would say probably we got more services.”

The topic of convenience came up with most new residents, occasionally multiple times within one interview. Helena finds not only the amenities convenient, but also the location: “…And everything’s so convenient... Everyone wants to hang out here...it’s really convenient for everyone to meet at my place. And then if you want to go out there’s something across the street.” Ella and Ashley both expressed surprise for how infrequently they leave the area: “I very rarely go to Manhattan except for working occasionally”…“I haven’t been into Manhattan except for three times in the past year, which is, for me, phenomenal.” At first displeased with the area’s retail, Sarinda now believes: “this neighborhood will become basically self sufficient for us.”

The convenience that Stephanie and the other New residents admire revolves around the retail that has come into the neighborhood, as well as amenities that would never have been provided for Williamsburg residents in the past: including ferry service to Manhattan, manicured waterfront parks, and maintained and well-lit sports fields. Gone are the “grungy and oddly configured” long-time grocery stores and bodegas,
replaced with boutique versions of standard NYC grocery chains, upscale corner stores, and a new Whole Foods. Many of the residents in this section are also new parents who hadn’t considered Williamsburg as a place to raise children until the infusion of luxury real estate and corporate retail. These amenities helped mark Williamsburg as “Family Friendly” to a new generation of wealthy professionals- a theme that will be explored later in this chapter.

When asked about the negative aspects of gentrification, most said they were aware that physical displacement was a problem facing Long Term residents, but tempered that with the fact that those who owned property benefited from gentrification. Some New residents suggested that those Long Termers could also enjoy the benefits of gentrification if they owned their homes or lived in public housing, though many studies have shown the negative effects of gentrification for residents who stay in place ignoring the effect that now broken social networks and disappearing ethnic stores and businesses also have on an individual’s life (Hyra 2016). Some complained only that established businesses were shutting down, overlooking the fact that residents were also displaced. Caithlin was upset to have seen her favorite coffee shop and other established businesses get pushed out: “The major con is that small businesses are being destroyed,” while Alec lamented the loss of dive bars. Ella, denied that Long Term residents would miss anything: “When you talk to people who have been here forever they don’t think it was so great, it’s yuppie kids who lament things.”

Like their Medium Term counterparts, New residents appreciate Williamsburg’s slower pace. While Medium Termers would argue that this quality no longer exists in the neighborhood, New residents often mention coming to Williamsburg for something more
charming” or “village” like than Manhattan. The presence of tourists and crowds on the weekends were a source of tension for New residents as they were for Medium Termers. Marta and her husband generally try to leave the neighborhood on weekends with their small children: “The weekends here are just insane like we try to avoid it, it’s just too much, everywhere feels really crowded even going to the park…it just feels like there’s way too much going on.” Ali and Ella attribute the crowds to Williamsburg being a tourist destination: “It just seems like yeah it’s…foreign tourists”... “On the weekend it’s mostly filled up with foreign, or younger tourists.”

As we’ll see in the “Local to Global” section below, New residents are beginning to push back on the “Disneyfication” of Williamsburg (Zukin 1996; Wherry 2011). They have petitioned to decrease activities that attract crowds to Williamsburg, despite the fact that they often first visited Williamsburg for a concert, shopping, or a food festival. Interviewees expressed that they moved to Williamsburg at least partially for its laid back atmosphere and they are committed to reestablishing Williamsburg as a local community.

Former residents were included in this research specifically because of their usual absence in gentrification studies. Their experiences of crime, retail changes, and community activism have most frequently aligned with the views of other residents from their would-be tenure cohorts, had they stayed in Williamsburg. However they were more likely to acknowledge guilt about gentrification.

Owen recalls a conversation he had with the co-owner of his gallery: “We’re not gonna perpetuate the process of gentrification. How are we gonna do that? Well we’re going to create art institutions that actually reach out to the local community and bring them in in a way that the east village never did... tone it down because we don’t want to
James also felt remorseful about how his and his friends lifestyles may have affected the neighborhood: “By the end of the ’80s it turned into a subculture…I wouldn’t have jazzed it up nearly as much as I did had I known…how much that would exacerbate the social relations and spur on gentrification. I now believe that art is a serious stimulus for gentrification.” This was one of the most notable differences between Medium and Former-Medium Term residents, artists who stayed in Williamsburg did not speak about their possible roles in gentrification. Having stayed in the neighborhood and personally seen the processes unfold, Medium Term residents are more likely to place blame on private real estate interests and the city (Mele 2000). Further research would need to be conducted to better understand this balance between the disassociation that Medium Term residents feel towards their role, or the over-emphasis that Former residents place on their collective actions.

**Filling the Void**

How did residents have such drastically different ideas of what Williamsburg provided and what it was lacking? Twenty-two of my fifty interviewees used the word “nothing” in reference to the neighborhood. Medium Term, New and Former Residents alike spoke of a time when “there was nothing there,” “nothing was open,” and there was “nothing going on.” Whether referring to the 1980s, ‘90s or as late as 2010, incoming cohorts of residents felt a void in Williamsburg. The boundaries and characteristics of that void changed over time, however all of these comments had one thing in common—they never came from Long Term Residents.

This perception of “nothing” is necessary for the pioneer narrative that has been documented by several academic accounts of gentrification (Lloyd 2006; Smith 2008;...
Towes 2015) as well as more popular media sources like Gothamist and the New York Times. Three New and four Medium Term residents invoked this “explorer” motif by repeatedly using the word “discovery.” These residents, over the course of three decades, discovered Williamsburg or some aspect of it- a restaurant, a street, a waterfront park. The accounts of nothingness, vacancy, void, pioneering and discovery are critical for understanding how gentrification progresses, specifically how these perceptions justify gentrification and displacement in media accounts, investment decisions, and ultimately city policy.

Long Term residents acknowledge that in the 1970s and 80s Williamsburg had problems with crime, environmental hazards, and services like police and fire departments, hospitals, and schools. As detailed in Chapter Three, residents actively organized to provide their communities with the services they deemed lacking. But even with these issues, Long Term Residents felt that Williamsburg provided for them in terms of necessities like groceries and pharmacies, as well as social activities for children and adults. For other needs, residents traveled as little as one subway stop to Manhattan’s Lower East Side, formerly home to a bargain shopping district, or three stops to Union Square, a transit hub servicing several major train lines. Residents of Williamsburg could also take local buses to nearby Greenpoint for more clothing and grocery options, serving the Polish community in particular.

Long Term Residents were aware of perceptions of their neighborhood as blighted or undesirable, but they recall experiences that were telling of a rich community life, despite unattractive aesthetics and inattentiveness by the city.
Not only did Long Term and lifelong residents feel that the neighborhood served their needs, some also mentioned that recent investment and developments in the neighborhood have actually come at the cost of necessities or luxuries they once enjoyed. While Amanda felt that in the past the neighborhood catered to its residents, today she observes: “they’ve done away with a lot of stores, making all these big [residential] buildings” and Maria remembers: “a cleaner environment in the sense that there weren’t so many bars and sidewalk cafes.” Rosa, a lifelong resident, is impressed by new businesses: “Coffee shops, and wineries, and beer shops, bars,” but she’s upset that she can no longer get some necessities: “There are still a lot of senior citizens in this area and there’s no such thing as a store for senior citizens to walk in and buy a pair of pants, not anymore.”

Many of the Medium Term respondents had initially lived on the Lower East Side, or had planned to before moving to New York, and nearly all of them grew up in suburbs or rural America. Their expectations of New York were based on the bohemian counter culture of 1960s and ’70s Greenwich Village. But whether they moved to Williamsburg by choice or because of displacement from the Village, Medium Term residents often felt that Williamsburg was lacking, relative to the Manhattan neighborhoods where most of them worked and, at least initially, spent their free time.

Their narratives about void have more to do with the neighborhood relative to Manhattan, than Williamsburg’s specific deficiencies. Medium Term Residents did not share Long Termers’ concerns about defunded fire, police, and educational services. The aesthetic shortcomings were sometimes appreciated, even fetishized by the incoming group, particularly among artists. As referenced in the previous chapter, Medium Term
Residents found themselves in a residential neighborhood with “nothing” in it. Like with crime, being in the neighborhood before certain landmarks helped legitimate Medium Term Residents’ status as urbanites, despite their suburban upbringings, lending them more authenticity than those that came after them. Creating the idea of a void was necessary to their identity as urban pioneers who discovered the neighborhood and allowed them to express disappointment when their discoveries were no longer their own.

Carol maintains that at the time “Nothing was open…You couldn’t really shop in the neighborhood.” She refers to herself as “sort of like the original gentrifier” and was upset when, a few years later, she saw so many kids in Oberlin shirts, her own alma mater. When her husband Allen moved in a few years later he bemoaned the fact that you couldn’t get the New York Times or the Village Voice in the neighborhood, and he recalled driving over to the East Village (about fifteen minutes away) for dinner or to go out on weekends because of the lack of these amenities in Williamsburg. James remembers: “Williamsburg 1.0 or something… there was nothing out there, there was one gallery, then there were two…stores were boarded up.” Businesses that catered to the new artists and student population began opening in the late 1980s. Unless pressed, Medium Term residents often only discuss businesses that catered to them—before they opened there was “nowhere” to buy groceries or meals.

By the late 1980s there were a few restaurants and galleries, as well as party and art scenes that appealed to new residents and visitors. Williamsburg was becoming known as a destination for underground events, a reputation that grew through the mid 2000s. The excitement of “discovering” the nascent scenes of Williamsburg is reflected among incoming cohorts from the 1980s through the mid 2000s. In the ‘80s Morgan was
taken with both the built and natural environment of post-industrial Williamsburg: “the waterfront was phenomenal, just a magical sort of space. There was an abandoned aspect too, a lot of it really struck my imagination, it was very inspiring.” Kristy discussed the excitement of ‘discovering’ what seemed to her to be an empty neighborhood: “I don’t think anyone, nobody knew about it yet, it was uncharted territory at the time...Bedford Avenue felt almost entirely abandoned.” This narrative of discovery and being the first to an “up and coming neighborhood” continued into the 2000s. According to Erin, “It wasn’t a draw in that way, in 2002, it was just a place to live...back then it felt like we were still kind of part of somebody discovering it.”

The air of astonishment and unpredictability of “exploring” a place like Williamsburg persisted even in the experiences of the last of the Medium Term residents who moved there through the mid 2000s. In contrast to their largely suburban upbringings, these residents found spontaneity and excitement in their exploration. When Alex moved in in 2005, “Williamsburg used to be kind of dirty...a place where my family would come or my friends would come and say ‘why are you living here?’... It was more interesting, there was more excitement, there was more realness to it.” Like with experiences of crime, the perception that there was “nothing” in the neighborhood when you arrived or that you “discovered” it and that friends and family found the place dangerous or aesthetically bankrupt all legitimated the notions of adventure and exploration that many Medium Term residents experienced.

These statements about void and “nothingness” are in contrast not only with the findings presented in the preceding chapters but also the accounts of Long Term Residents who claimed that they had everything they needed. Henryk provides an
interesting perspective on the disparity of these accounts. He moved from Poland in 1990 when he was in his early-twenties and began living and hanging out with artists in Williamsburg, as a result he straddles the cultures of both the Long and Medium Term Residents. He recalls the neighborhood that existed when he moved to it in 1990, just a few years after Carol, Allen, James and Owen complained of “nothing” and blight: “there was a number of Polish restaurants, some local food places, and a few delis, some Polish meat stores and vegetable stores, there were definitely more stores and business that catered to residents of the neighborhood.” According to Henryk, not only was he able to get what he needed but he felt like the businesses in the neighborhood back then were more useful for local residents than the boutiques and cafes that proliferate now.

For some people the narrative of nothing persisted into the late 2000s. Medium Term Resident Penny owned a restaurant on the Southside that closed in 2007. She moved North to the new condos, but her parting impression of her old street on the Southside was: “it was a wilderness, just terrible, and when I closed the restaurant it felt like tumbleweeds were rolling by.”

Medium Term Residents took pride in “exploring” the post-industrial landscape of Williamsburg and recall the lack of businesses catering to them as a badge of honor. Like their occasional brushes with crime, living in a neighborhood when there was “nothing” legitimized their status as artists, bohemians, and pioneering urbanites. However the underdeveloped aesthetics and unpredictability that gave Williamsburg its cool reputation in the ‘90s and early 2000s could not have attracted a wealthier class of residents when the expensive condos were being built in the mid-2000s.

Many of the New Residents had visited Williamsburg years before they moved in.
They mention coming to the neighborhood for a party or a concert or to go shopping in one of the then-numerous thrift stores. These individuals remarked on the gritty character of the neighborhood, something they could overlook for an outing or two, but definitely not a place they would consider living in. For some of the New Residents, they still described Williamsburg as “scary,” “dirty,” or “empty,” as late as 2010 when they visited with a real estate agent to look at their future homes.

Ella would visit Williamsburg with her husband and children in the late ‘90s to get dinner at a popular Thai restaurant. She remembers thinking: “God I would never, ever, ever consider living in Williamsburg, there’s nothing there, it’s dead” but in 2012 she sold her apartment in Chelsea to move into a Williamsburg condo on the waterfront. Caithlin first visited in 2005 and felt that “it was pretty grungy and gritty” but moved into the neighborhood five years later when her husband decided to invest his bonus in real estate. In 2010, Sarinda didn’t want to move to Williamsburg from Fort Greene, a neighborhood she considered to be classier: “Coming from there to here felt very different...it just felt a little more haphazard.” Sarinda had adjusted to the neighborhood by the time I interviewed her in 2015, although she griped about the neon sign on a fast-food restaurant and she still orders her groceries online instead of shopping at the “pretty crappy” grocery store closest to her house.

Josie was not impressed with Williamsburg when she first visited in the mid-2000s, but she and her husband came back in 2010 to check out the new condos: “it felt like more of a neighborhood, like there were all these shops,” which made her feel more comfortable but “it was winter...it was dark early when we’d come to see some of these condos and we were like ‘oh god, this feels scary’. Now everything’s developed, it
doesn’t feel scary at all…” In addition to the physical environment feeling uninviting, Josie was disappointed with the lack of amenities at the time. Ashley felt similarly when she and her husband came to Williamsburg in 2010, they found themselves leaving the neighborhood at first for groceries and other necessities, as well as dining out, but now: “I feel like I can find everything here that makes us happy.”

Like their Medium Term counterparts, New Residents to Williamsburg felt that the neighborhood was lacking when they first arrived. By 2010, most of the descriptions of Williamsburg had softened from “gritty,” “grimy,” and “dirty,” to “isolated,” and “haphazard.” The second set of descriptors suggest inconvenience and a slower pace, instead of the adjectives previously used to describe Williamsburg, which would have been more of a barrier to the wealthy New Residents.

New Residents in this sample were most likely to move to Williamsburg after 2010. Coming from “classier” Brownstone Brooklyn or Manhattan neighborhoods, they found Williamsburg to be quieter, having more of a “small town feel.” While most New Residents mentioned this as a draw, they also found Williamsburg at first to be inconvenient and lacking in retail amenities that they had previously had access to. Within the next six years dozens of “big box” stores, and several national bank chains opened in the area that once prided itself on its lack of chain retailers. After these changes, the addition of ferry service to Manhattan, the creation of a new park, and several other features New Residents use the word “convenient” most frequently when asked to describe the neighborhood. These shifts in demographics and the built environment stripped away at the “scary” and “gritty” Williamsburg.
The ‘narratives of nothing’ presented in this section conflict with what Long Term residents perceived as a vibrant neighborhood that tended to their needs. But claiming that ‘nothing’ was there before is important for the justification of redevelopment. Gentrification first started in Williamsburg with the migration of artists, students and other ‘bohemians’ in the late 1970s, but redevelopment on the scale that has now happened there could not have occurred without the city’s growth agenda (Logan and Molotch 1987). Like Medium Term and New residents, city government maintained that Williamsburg was blighted and had “nothing” going on through 1990s and early 2000s, as evidenced by their multiple proposals to locate trash incinerators and power plants in the neighborhood before deciding to rezone for luxury development (Curran 2004; Marwell 2007; DeSena 2009). This changed when Michael Bloomberg became mayor in 2002 with an ambitious redevelopment plan for Brooklyn’s waterfront.

Popular media reports of the neighborhood also cast it as afflicted with problems of like decay, arson and violent crime. Using the New York Times online archives, I identified 257 articles written about Williamsburg in 1980, 1985, 1990, and 1995. In 1980 there were 22 articles about crime and disorder in Williamsburg, and 5 about culture, restaurants, art or artists. By 1995 those proportions had changed drastically. There were still 14 articles about crime and disorder that year, but there were 18 in the ‘culture, restaurants, art or artists’ category. That year there were also 3 articles about the beginnings of gentrification and neighborhood change in the area. ‘Narratives of nothing’ are perpetuated by incoming residents, media reports, and through the actions of city government. They function to ignore and erase the culture and institutions of Long Term residents. Neil Smith likens gentrification to colonization and expansion, he asserts that
“The frontier discourse serves to rationalize and legitimate a process of conquest” (Smith 1996: xv). If crime and disorder make up the bulk of what is reported and believed to be happening in a specific neighborhood, then gentrification appears to benefit everyone. Displacement isn’t a concern if ‘nothing’ was there before, justifying the erasure of people and cultures from a gentrifying neighborhood.

Family Friendly

New residents often talked about Williamsburg being a “family-friendly” place, despite the fact that they hadn’t previously considered it as a destination for child rearing. The respondents who had been to Williamsburg in the early to mid 2000s found the neighborhood to be gritty and slightly dangerous, a cool place to come out for an evening, but not somewhere they’d want to live and certainly not where they wanted to raise kids. This is in contrast with the Italian, Eastern European, and Latino populations who did and still do raise children in Williamsburg. In an online argument that was later summarized on an NYC-based culture and news website Gothamist, a Former-Medium term resident referred to these Long Termer populations as “breeder famil[ies],” revealing class and racial tensions around the meaning of a family neighborhood (Whitford 2016).

Today Williamsburg is known for catering to young families. What changed New residents’ perceptions of Williamsburg from undesirable to family friendly? And what constitutes their understanding of a family friendly neighborhood? As we will see, for the majority of the last fifty years Williamsburg had a higher population of youth (residents under 18) than Brooklyn as a whole. That number has been decreasing in the borough and the neighborhood over time, as Williamsburg’s reputation as a family neighborhood increased.
For Long-term residents Williamsburg was always a family neighborhood. Theresa remembers it as “very family oriented,” and Amanda recalls: “there were so many children around.” Repeating a classic trope of New York City neighborhoods in the ‘60s and ‘70s, respondents maintained that everyone was looking out for everyone else’s children (Jacobs 1961). Even Rosa, who was less integrated in the neighborhood as an adult, recalls that when she was a child: “everybody was like a big family” and that her elderly neighbor “would watch to see us come home from school, that was like a family looking after the kids.”

Like Rosa, Maria remembers the community feeling of familial ties on the Southside as well: “having people watching over you, because there was a sense of that, a tone of community...it was like, people knew you and they could see you, they respected you, they cared for you, they watched out for each others children.”

George feels lucky to have grown up surrounded by his extended family and close friends, “there’s like a big support system there.” Paul also describes the familial nature of the neighborhood: “it was pretty cool...everyone basically knew everyone.”

To insiders Williamsburg has always been a family neighborhood with institutions and networks catering to family life, but these networks and the people who comprised them were often invisible to newcomers. In this sections Medium Term and New Residents reflect on when they began noticing the presence of children in Williamsburg. Long Term Residents never noticed this sudden appearance because to them, it was how the neighborhood had always been.

Medium Term and Former Medium Term residents generally did not mention children or families when asked what their neighborhood was like, aside from mentioning
occasional harassments by teenagers. Few of these incoming residents had substantial interactions with Long Term residents. Not embarking on parenthood themselves, children in the neighborhood and institutions like schools and day care went largely unnoticed by this artist/student population.

When these Medium Term residents began having children, they repeated a similar pioneer narrative that we see reflected in “the first restaurant” to open, “the first artist” to move in, etc. Carol talks about raising kids in the 1990s: “I did find Williamsburg Nursery school, my son was the first child to be in the preschool program. That was the beginning of the Williamsburg kids stuff.”

For most Medium Term residents the children of the Black, Latino, and white ethnic communities were simply background, not relevant to their experiences of Williamsburg. Now that wealthier, cosmopolitan families are moving into the neighborhood, Medium Term residents are more likely to notice the presence of children. Courtney, who moved to the neighborhood in 2003 says: “it’s kind of amazing how many little children are in this neighborhood now.” Anna, who has lived across the street from a New York City Housing Project since 2003, says that she sees “way more people with babies than even a couple years ago.” But the number of youth in her part of the neighborhood actually dropped during the period she has lived there. In 2000, just 3 years before Anna first moved to Williamsburg there were 843 children (or 7% of the population) under 5 years old in the two census tracts that include the projects as well as Anna’s street. By 2012 that number had dropped to 475 children under 5, or 4.1% of all residents. The percentages dropped similarly in the three tracts that Anna would walk through between the subway, the local shopping street, and her home. In 2000 the percent
of children under 5 in those tracts ranged between 5.4-6.1% and in 2012 the range decreased to 1.4-3.6%.

Anna and Courtney’s estimation that they see “way more people with babies” is perhaps more indicative of the types of people they see with babies. As the area has gentrified, people of color and working-class and immigrant families have been pushed out while wealthier people with children have moved in. Anna and Courtney don’t see more children, they see more people like themselves with children. They also see more institutions catering to families, which is one factor drawing some New residents to Williamsburg.

Of the eleven New Residents in this sample, seven of them have children, and for each of them parenthood affected their decision to move to Williamsburg. Most of these residents had visited the neighborhood in the early to mid 2000s either to attend a concert, go out for drinks, or because they were invited to a party. While these residents agreed that Williamsburg was a fun place for a night out, they had not imagined raising children here until the condos began opening in the 2010s.

When Josie and her husband first started looking to buy an apartment they search in Park Slope: “Initially we were looking in Park Slope because we were thinking that we wanted something that was family friendly” after being unable to find something they liked in their price range the couple bought in Williamsburg in 2010. By the time of her interview in 2014 she saw the neighborhood differently: “now it feels even more family friendly…. Since we moved in so many in-door play spaces have opened up for children… it feels like a family neighborhood… I'm so thankful we didn’t move there, like
all you could be there [Park Slope] was a parent, but here you can still be an adult and
go out and have drinks with a friend but still have the family stuff.”

Stephanie felt similarly to Josie when she and her husband began looking for a
neighborhood to move to from Manhattan: “I lived in Brooklyn previously in Carroll
Gardens so I wanted to move back...and raise our kids in Brooklyn,” but she was
imagining a different aesthetic than Williamsburg offers. She had come to the
neighborhood in her twenties to go out, “it seemed like a fun place to come for a quick
jaunt...but I didn’t think of Williamsburg as a place I would really want to raise my
kids...I kind of thought of it as dangerous and all aluminum siding houses and I wanted
that kind of brownstone Brooklyn charm, you know, that’s what I was thinking of with
Brooklyn.”

New Residents may not have initially thought of Williamsburg as a family
neighborhood, but it is now established as such. However the question remains, how did
Williamsburg come to be perceived as a family-friendly place by upper-middle-class
professionals? Especially while Williamsburg’s youth population was at its lowest point
in forty years (See Table 3).

Most of the Long Termers mentioned family networks or the presence of children
in their descriptions of Williamsburg, but only 2 of the 12 Medium Termers did so.
Three-quarters of the Medium term residents now have children and felt that they were
the first generation to have children in the neighborhood, recall Carol’s position that the
preschool her children went to in the early 2000s was “the beginning of the Williamsburg
kids stuff.”
More than half of the New Residents in this sample are parents, and this affected their decision to move to Williamsburg as well as their experiences of the neighborhood. They feel that Williamsburg has only recently become a place fit to raise children. Local media sources reference the trend and one neighborhood blogger writes: “In the decade or so since I've lived in Williamsburg, the neighborhood has changed a great deal and experienced a tremendous baby boom” (Horne 2015). But in reality the percentage of the population under 18 has decreased over time, with a slight increase since 2010 (See Table 3).

In 1970 there were 10,812 young residents of Williamsburg, or 36.7% of the population. As the area experienced a population dip in the 1980s before beginning its recovery in the 1990s, the percentage of residents under eighteen hovered around the averages for Brooklyn as a whole 31.5% in Williamsburg in 1980, and 28.3% in the borough. In 1990 those respective numbers were 28% and 26.3%. These numbers include babies, children, and teenagers, but even the increase for children under five years old is negligible, from 6.6% of the population in 2000 to 7.1% in 2014. The real number of young children has grown only in a few tracts that have seen a general population explosion. The tract that includes many of the new waterfront condo buildings has experienced a 442% population increase over fourteen years, from 868 to 4,706 residents. Several tracts in the Eastern portion of the neighborhood have actually seen a decrease in young children, as increasing rents have displaced working and middle class families.
Table 3. Percent of Population Under 18yrs old, U.S. Census Bureau

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northside</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southside</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williamsburg</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>26.9</td>
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Medium, New and some Former Residents reported seeing more children in the neighborhood now than ever before. However the numbers presented above suggest that the children in Williamsburg today may simply be more visible to these resident groups. This is a combined effect of the following: increased outdoor public space, differences in childcare practices between Long Term and Newer Residents, an increase in retail and institutions geared towards children, and the higher visibility of white children among white respondents (Mollica et al. 2003).

Today Williamsburg’s waterfront—once lined with factories and later decaying foundations with wild flora growth—is one of the neighborhood’s most popular assets. As discussed in Chapter 1 the previous, more natural state of the waterfront did have an appeal for many people, but it would not have been an acceptable environment for the wealthy professionals who have moved into the condo towers that exist along the waterfront today. Buildings and shops fill the stretch of shoreline but there are also two adjacent public parks with soccer fields, playgrounds, a dog run, and a weekend food market that attracts thousands of visitors in the summer months. The waterfront is an accessible amenity to all Williamsburg residents, and throughout the day nannies,
caregivers, and parents bring children to the parks. People of different ethnic, class and social backgrounds come into contact in these parks- not in necessarily significant ways but they do inhabit the same space.

In addition to the parks, several parenting blogs in the neighborhood host weekly meet-ups. These blogs are predominantly read and written by upper middle class women who gather at these events. The meet-ups take place in neighborhood restaurants and cafes, where mothers, children and strollers congregate— increasing the visibility of children in Williamsburg. Sometimes seating at these locations spills out onto the sidewalk, so their presence is even evident to passersby who take note of the “baby boom” in their neighborhood.

Nearly all of the New residents mentioned participating in at least one of the parenting blogs, specific to either Brooklyn or Williamsburg. In addition to meeting up with other parents from the sites, users also organize events for children: outdoor family movies, Halloween costume parades, Easter Egg hunts, and Santa brunches. In the past, these events and block parties would have occasionally been planned by community associations but more often they would have take place in the context of neighborhood ethnic or religious institutions, something that Medium Term and New residents would be far less likely to participate in, or even notice. Now these events occur in public parks or restaurants, spaces that are trafficked by a broader population of neighborhood residents, making children and family activities more visible.

The shifting nature of childcare is another factor in the appearance of more children in Williamsburg. In previous decades if parents worked their children would be taken care of by relatives, a neighbor who might be watching several other children, or in
one of the community-run preschools. This is not a common practice among the wealthier residents of Williamsburg. Non-guardian caretaking is performed by individual nannies for each household, the new Montessori day care and a handful of preschool centers. In the case of nannies, the fact that they are dealing with one or two children, rather than someone watching four or five children in their home, gives them a great deal of mobility compared with former childcare practice. With one or two children nannies can take them for strolls in the neighborhood, to the park to socialize with other children (and nannies), and they may even be performing errands for the family (Brown 2011). This more public form of child rearing, coupled with new nursery schools make childcare more visible, leading the average observer to infer that there are more children being cared for.

The increase of children and childcare in public space are part of the reason that Medium Term and New residents notice a baby boom, but another is the up scaling and specialization of retail in the neighborhood. In the past basics like diapers, baby formula and food, and children’s clothing could be purchased at the small number of pharmacies, grocery stores, and clothing stores in North Brooklyn. With the simultaneous increase in wealth and specialization of neighborhood retail, children’s boutiques, toy stores, and even commercial indoor play spaces have become a significant presence in Williamsburg’s retail landscape. From hand-made greeting cards congratulating new parents, to signs outside luxury lingerie stores announcing that they carry nursing bras, signs of parenthood have also become an important part of Williamsburg’s economy.

The numbers of children in Williamsburg have increased slightly in some tracts, while others have seen a dip. The area is not experiencing a baby boom as much as a general population boom, due to the increase of high-density housing. The population
increase has mostly been of wealthy professionals, and as a result of their lifestyles, children and childcare has become more visible in Williamsburg. The movement of childcare and events for children into public spaces, and the more specialized retail market for family goods has made the youth population of Williamsburg more visible. Medium Term and New in-movers would have noticed less children when there was less park space in the neighborhood, when most holiday celebrations took place in churches, and when children were under the care of family members who socialized in homes or at ethnic and religious institutions instead of restaurants or cafes.

Regardless of the real numbers, the common perception among Medium, New and even some Former residents is that Williamsburg is now a neighborhood where people move to settle down in. Indeed the most recent stage of Williamsburg’s gentrification—upper class couples in the luxury housing towers—would not have happened without a shift in Williamsburg’s reputation from a party scene to a family friendly neighborhood.

If the neighborhood had always had lots of children, then it is not the presence of youth that signals Williamsburg as a “family” neighborhood for New Residents, but rather the visibility of specific children and families that look like them. Because they are an international, cosmopolitan population this has more to do with class, where in the past Williamsburg populations were more divided by race or ethnicity. When interviewees say that it has become a family neighborhood, it is code that Williamsburg has been sufficiently upgraded to a point where wealthy people feel safe, that it is convenient for their lifestyles, that it seems more like established gentrified neighborhoods, like Park Slope, and that there are other people there like themselves.
Recall Anna, the Medium Term resident who is amazed at how many babies are in the neighborhood now, although the percentage of children in her part of the neighborhood has actually decreased. She lives across the street from New York City Housing projects where in 2010 63% of residents were Hispanic, and 16% were non-Hispanic African Americans, what she is noticing is more white children. Sarinda mentioned that she runs a website of parent resources in North Brooklyn: “I’m definitely more focused on the sort of young families, second generation type people living here.” In this statement she’s comparing Williamsburg’s current “baby boom” to its bohemian past, the families are the second generation, assuming that the first generation was artists and hipsters. Like in the void section, Long Term families and families of color go unnoticed, their histories in the neighborhood are erased as Williamsburg is just now becoming a “family friendly” neighborhood for wealthy New residents.

**From Local to Global and Back Again**

A common, though less fraught, trend in these narratives were evaluations of whether or not the neighborhood felt ‘local’—a term which held different meanings across cohorts. For Long Term residents, the neighborhood was local in that it provided daily necessities, socialization, religious and ethnic associations and many even worked in the neighborhood. Medium Term residents often worked and socialized in Manhattan, at least at first. The artists and creatives of this cohort found Williamsburg to be almost provincial. Their lifestyles, parties, concerts and galleries attracted like-minded others from around the city, and eventually the world, to Williamsburg. Williamsburg became a global destination because of the activities of Medium Term residents—a step that was both necessary to maintain the artistic culture and contributed to its eventual downfall.
Without the popularity that Williamsburg gained over the early 2000s, most New residents wouldn’t have been as eager to move into the neighborhood. They enjoy the chains and luxury shopping and dining that this global destination has attracted, but they also claim to have moved to Williamsburg for its “village-like” qualities when compared to Manhattan. Recently, some New residents have organized to drive out weekly food and craft festivals that they feel attract too many visitors, ruining their version of Williamsburg’s local appeal.

As has been detailed in previous sections, Long Term residents found their neighborhood to be a positive environment. In spite of crime and other issues, they recall having everything they needed. Many residents worked within the neighborhood and social life happened at neighborhood institutions like churches, ethnic clubs, and local bars. Occasional ethnic or religious festivals like the Italian-Catholic Giglio feast or Puerto Rican Day celebrations may have attracted co-ethnics and others, but aside from the Olympic-size swimming pool, there weren’t many reasons for non-locals to be in the area until the late 1980s.

Long Term residents rarely mention that Williamsburg felt quiet or that there was a slow pace of life. Only one Former Long Termer, Gosia, expressed disappointment about the shift away from the local: “I get a little frustrated how crowded it is and overwhelming... Now it just feels like the city, Manhattan where you don’t know anyone.”

In contrast the majority of Medium Term residents often praised Williamsburg’s “laid-back” atmosphere and lamented that it had changed into an upscale, global destination—partially as a result of their own efforts.
Although most Medium Term residents described their early experiences in Williamsburg in terms of void, they also relished the quiet neighborhood they moved into. Allen remembers the area in simpler times: “I just [thought] of it as kind of a backwater, very quiet.” Kristy appreciated the “nice combination of quiet working class and industrial,” while Erin remembers spending time on her porch, “I felt like that part of the neighborhood was a little bit relaxing. We actually had a front porch, we would hang out outside a lot...bucolic and peaceful and quiet.” Former Medium Term resident Alex moved back to Brooklyn after a short stint in Manhattan: “I’ve always liked having somewhere a little bit more mellow to come back to at the end of the day. So we wanted something a little slower and with a little bit more culture and so we moved back out to Brooklyn.”

At this time Williamsburg wasn’t even on the radar of most New Yorkers, let alone an international community of tourists, but Medium Term residents (particularly artists and musicians) were invested in making Williamsburg an attraction. They knew an art scene would not be sustainable in a strictly local community, Medium Termers had to attract outsiders to keep their galleries and performance spaces afloat. They spoke of promoting the neighborhood in the early days of gentrification, and some, like James, admit they wouldn’t have “jazzed it up” as much if they knew what would follow.

The activities and pastimes of these residents made Williamsburg famous, visitors from around the city, and eventually artists and bohemians from around the world started coming to check out the street art, the storied bars and parties (Gotham 2002). As media attention grew, a broader range of tourists began reading about Williamsburg in New York guidebooks, and even international magazines like GQ, turning it into an
international destination. All of the press and attention has significantly changed Williamsburg’s character. Carol resents that after gentrification, “I feel like I live in a city, but I used to feel like I lived in a neighborhood…” According to Courtney, “People compare it to SoHo on the weekends.”

Comparisons to Manhattan are telling for New residents as well. Most of them would never have moved to Williamsburg without all of the popularity, press and concomitant development. As evidenced earlier, they rejected the “quieter and slower pace” even as late as the mid-2000s—the grit and dirt, the substandard grocery stores and lack of upscale retail, the “vinyl siding” houses and what they perceived as visible signs of disorder. Yet many claim to have been attracted to Williamsburg because it wasn’t as hectic as Manhattan, or because of its “village feel.” Ashley and her husband decided on Williamsburg because they “wanted a little community or a village life...something a little bit more charming...” Caithlin described the area as a “mix between suburban and urban,” and Ella agrees, referring to the neighborhood as similar to a suburb north of the city: “it’s extremely quiet on the streets, particularly during the day when everyone’s working, it’s like Westchester.” But they also worry about the neighborhood’s “Manhattan-ization.”

New residents find Williamsburg on the weekends to be overwhelming. The area fills with tourists and visitors heading to the food and artisanal flea markets on the waterfront, summer music festivals, and the dozens of popular restaurants and bars. Attractions like these were usually New residents’ reasons for visiting Williamsburg before they lived there, but as locals themselves they now resent the global tourists that flood into their neighborhood each weekend. In recent months a coalition of Medium
Term and New residents have begun working together to limit the amount of attractions in the neighborhood. They have succeeded in shutting down a weekend craft market, and are now eyeing the weekly food festival in a waterfront park, attempts to re-center Williamsburg as a “local” neighborhood (Hogan 2017).

The local character of Williamsburg and most other pre-gentrified urban neighborhoods is not typically something that Long Term residents necessarily miss or even comment on. For them it was just something that existed- stores catering to the needs of the existing population, a social life built around neighbors and family members, and small scale buildings in much of the neighborhood. The local nature of Williamsburg was only fetishized later, as the neighborhood became an international destination. New and Medium term residents both commented on how quaint, quiet, and village-like Williamsburg was when they first moved in, the more positive flip side to dirty, gritty, and unsafe. Williamsburg shifted from a local community to a global destination over the course of three decades, but now Medium Term and New residents are using their political capital to reclaim some of Williamsburg’s “local charm,” or at least their definition of it.

Conclusion

This chapter challenged some common stereotypes about gentrification and also revealed markers that signal changes to gentrifiers. It is often assumed that Long Term residents are the most upset about gentrification and would experience the most extreme cultural displacement (Freeman 2006; Valli 2015; Hyra 2015). Long Termers are at risk for physical displacement and certainly do experience cultural displacement but this research suggests that early gentrifiers (Medium Termers) actually express the most
resentment about super-gentrification. Long Termers were more likely to identify benefits to gentrification, although they acknowledge that the improvements to the neighborhood were “not for them.” Long Term residents welcomed these changes, but found it unfair that it came at the expense of the gentrification that helped erase their ethnic and religious cultures in the neighborhood.

Although Long Term residents have seen the most drastic changes in Williamsburg, they were also less likely than Medium Termers to mention crowds and tourists as an issue. Some of them even appreciate the vibrancy, and express pride in seeing how their neighborhood has flourished. Medium Term residents were much more likely to be upset about Williamsburg’s popularity. Their frustration with the neighborhood’s status as a travel and luxury destination and their bitterness over cultural displacement illustrates how their attachment to the neighborhood is different than for Long Term residents. Many Medium Term residents moved to Williamsburg to contribute to or at least participate in an artistic lifestyle, and accounts of Williamsburg at the time refer to it as a bohemia (Anasi 2012; Campo 2013). Like Richard Ocejo’s (2011) “early gentrifiers,” the identity of Medium Termers was tied to Williamsburg’s reputation, and their “symbolic power” and ownership over the neighborhood was threatened with the rezoning and more advanced gentrification. The new retail, housing, and incoming population cause all established residents to experience some degree of cultural displacement, the identity-style attached Medium Termers are more affected by these changes than Long Termers are.

Residents of different tenure groups and attachments also had different perceptions of Williamsburg’s aesthetics over time. Through the mid-2000s symbols of
Williamsburg’s divested past were still evident, even on the now super-gentrified Northside. Members of all of the tenure cohorts observed graffiti, abandoned factories, and outdated housing stock, but these signs were interpreted differently. We learned in Chapter 4 that integration within the community can ameliorate many negative effects of a divested neighborhood. While Long Termers acknowledge the visible signs of blight, it was mainly viewed as background. The “void” aesthetics held more meaning for early gentrifiers who did not have strong connections within their neighborhood. Whether they found it depressed or magical, the “nothingness” that existed when they first moved to Williamsburg was something that added authenticity to their narratives of bohemian city life. These aesthetics did not hold any romantic value for New residents. As late as 2010 they complained that certain areas felt dirty, unsafe, or empty—even as Medium Termers were deriding how gentrified the neighborhood had become. Each incoming group of gentrifiers imagined that there was “nothing” there before their arrival in the neighborhood.

The corporate stores that have begun to fill Williamsburg have been an important signal for New residents— not only do these businesses provide convenience, they also symbolize that the neighborhood is mainstream and worthy of corporate investment, a positive sign for their own property investments. However the trope that neighborhoods become more “convenient” when they gentrify may be the result of different expectations as well as newcomers’ hesitation to patronize ethnic businesses. In fact some Long Term residents only complain about not having access to some necessities after retail gentrification occurred.
Signals also matter for the perception that Williamsburg is now a family friendly neighborhood. Despite the fact that the population of young children in the neighborhood has actually decreased with gentrification, Medium Term and New residents alike claim that Williamsburg is experiencing a “baby boom.” Long Term residents have always perceived it to be a family neighborhood, so they do not remark on a sudden uptick of children. But the increased presence of white children, more public forms of childcare, and specialized stores for children’s goods falsely signal an increase in the population of children for both Medium Term and New gentrifiers.

Finally, we might expect that Former residents would have felt differently about their neighborhood than individuals who managed to stay, and in order to get a more conclusive understanding of this additional research needs to be done. But for the respondents in this study, having left the neighborhood did not necessarily mean they felt more resentment about gentrification. And in fact Former artists were less likely to fetishize the neighborhood, and more inclined to think about how their actions and lifestyles as artists helped spur gentrification in the neighborhood. Still, the finding that Former residents did not differ significantly from others of their original groups is counterintuitive, and merits further research.

In the concluding chapter the implications for these findings as well as relationships to crime and retail are further explored. These chapters have introduced interesting nuances and conflicted with some stereotypes of gentrification. I argue that these details are important for policy makers to consider as urban change continues to evolve and second-tier cities or neighborhoods begin to experience gentrification. Finally, I propose additional questions and avenues for future research that this study has inspired.
Chapter 7
Conclusions

Gentrification has become a primary method of urban growth. Most major American cities no longer have a healthy production economy; local governments have turned to private investment, supported by policy and fueled by a culture of consumption. City governments justify their encouragement of gentrification because of the tax base and tourist dollars it theoretically provides. Yet the entrance of wealthier in-movers transforms and challenges the identity of the poor, working class, immigrant, or minority neighborhoods that were often the ones to be divested, and thus gentrified. Having experienced any combination of deindustrialization, high crime rates, reduced city services, or retail blight—residents of these neighborhoods survived periods of disinvestment and even fought to attain services that the city denied. Now an influx of capital and wealthier newcomers, are displacing existing residents physically and culturally.

This dissertation considered how factors like tenure and neighborhood attachment style influenced an individual’s experiences of neighborhood change and perceptions of gentrification in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The focus was on Long Term and Medium Term residents’ experiences of cultural displacement, but also how New and Former residents viewed the changes. In conducting this research I aimed to tell the story of how residents experience the lived effects of gentrification on a daily basis. Residents who are not (yet) displaced from a gentrifying locale endure material, social, and symbolic effects from the changes in their neighborhood. This research contributes to the field of urban sociology by contemplating how neighborhood attachment and tenure interact affect experiences and perceptions of gentrification. Focusing on aspects of neighborhood life
and perceptions of gentrification has provided an in depth account of residents’
gentrification experiences, introduced new avenues for future research, and challenged a
few widely held assumptions about gentrification.

**Tenure and Attachment**

The fifty residents in this study were quota sampled by tenure, as I initially
intended to focus on differences by tenure cohort. While analyzing interview data it
became apparent that although length of tenure in the neighborhood did influence
residents’ experiences and perceptions, the sheer number of years lived in the
neighborhood could not account for the differences. Unsatisfied with how previous
theories of attachment mapped onto studies of gentrification, I created my own
framework of neighborhood attachment styles: necessity, identity, and investment. The
attachment style, coupled with a distinction among Medium Term and New residents,
offers a more nuanced look at how gentrification progressed in the neighborhood, and
why it mattered differently to resident cohorts.

An important contribution of this work is that style of attachment can be a better
predictor of behavior in the neighborhood than other shared life conditions like race, class,
or immigrant status. Henryk, who moved to Williamsburg from Poland in the early 1990s
became entrenched in the neighborhood’s art and nightlife scenes. He formed an identity
attachment to Williamsburg and expresses a lot of disappointment with how it has
changed. Anita immigrated to the neighborhood from South America and moved to the
Puerto Rican and Dominican Southside where she was often assumed to be of those
backgrounds, but unlike most Long Termers she took up yoga classes in the
neighborhood and also joined Williamsburg’s avant-garde artist scene. Despite their
Polish and Latina immigrant backgrounds, Henryk and Anita act more like other identity-attached residents. George, a Long Term Dominican resident of the Southside, is the same age as Henryk and Anita, but was born in the neighborhood, giving him a necessity attachment. This is reflected in his dismissal of the nightlife obsession in Williamsburg, which he feels has overtaken the Latino culture. Nerina, a self-described Latina, is new to the neighborhood. Even though she wanted to move to a place with a lot of diversity, she described Williamsburg from her first visit in 2007 as dirty and empty—she didn’t think it would be a good investment. In her shopping and socializing rituals she sticks to the Northside rather than the predominantly Latino Southside.

In another study of the neighborhood these residents may have been grouped together in terms of age, ethnicity, or immigration status. However by looking at tenure and attachment style we can draw distinctions between these residents and the ways they perceive of, and interact with, Williamsburg. Breaking the sample down by attachment style also allows for a better understanding of the differences between early and later gentrifiers. The following sections aggregate some of the most important findings for each attachment style—the erasure of necessity, the cultural displacement of identity, and new actions towards investment.

The Erasure of Long Termers

The (in)visibility of Long Term residents and their cultures was a consistent theme throughout this study. The symbolic erasure of existing populations began when early gentrifiers moved to the neighborhood and found what they described to be a cultural and retail void. Medium Termers complained that there was nowhere to eat, nowhere to buy groceries, no one came there, and there was nothing to do. This rhetoric
of Medium Term residents ignores the Puerto Rican, Dominican, African American, Polish, and Italian populations who were all established in the neighborhood. The absence of middle-class suburban retail and institutions or the lack of variety of Manhattan caused these early gentrifiers to overlook what Long Termers described as “a vibrant community.” In the ‘90s retail began to expand from the necessities of Long Term residents to also include establishments that appealed to the Medium Termers. This early stage of retail gentrification did not immediately push out Long Term businesses, but eventually rents rose and, as seen in Chapter 5, landlords made conscious decisions to bring in different kinds of retail. Bedford Avenue and the surrounding streets now house many upscale brands as well as expensive independent stores, Williamsburg is no longer a neighborhood of necessity, but of luxury. The main shopping street cuts through Polish and Latino sections of the neighborhood. Materially, there are barely any businesses left that serve the daily needs of these residents; and symbolically, Polish and Spanish languages, flags, and other indicators of their cultures are largely absent from the retail and public spaces.

In Chapter 3 we saw how Long Term residents are discouraged from using public spaces in Williamsburg. Recall the efforts to prevent barbecues in Cooper Park and the exclusionary elements of Williamsburg Walks. The failure to translate Walks’ promotional materials, the lack of outreach to Long Term businesses, and the planners’ derogatory comments about long standing community events all signal to Long Termers that the event is not for them. The “Family Friendly” section in Chapter 6 revealed that Long Term residents truly are rendered invisible to many Medium Term and New
residents who cannot recall children being in the neighborhood until there were middle-
class and wealthy white children.

As Williamsburg becomes a super-gentrified enclave, ownership of the
neighborhood is now dominated by wealthy New residents, upmarket retail, and public
spaces and events that act to exclude Long Termers—giving these residents even less
reasons to be in Williamsburg’s public and retail spaces. Aside from the cultural
displacement this causes for Long Term residents, it can also cause suspicion around their
occasional presence. The reopening of McCarren park pool brought concerns that
“outsiders” would now be attracted to Williamsburg. One respondent in this study noted
that the Black and Latino teenagers at the pool were “obviously not from around here.”
The exclusion of these residents from public space does more than eliminate their culture,
but even challenges their right to participate in the neighborhood they grew up and live in.

Cultural Displacement of Medium Termers

This dissertation is comprised of many instances and examples of cultural
displacement, but one of the most interesting findings is that Medium Termers seem to
experience it more harshly than Long Termers. Long Term residents are more likely to be
affected by gentrification as they tend to be older, less educated, and have a lower income.
Physical displacement, unaffordability of daily necessities, the breakdown of social
networks, and the displacement of local institutions all have the potential to affect Long
Term residents who have less mobility than the early gentrifying Medium Termers. Still,
Medium Term residents expressed the most bitterness about how Williamsburg had
changed and, unlike Long Term residents, were rarely able to name any benefits. This
relates to their different attachment styles and what Williamsburg has meant to the two groups.

Long Term residents came to Williamsburg primarily because of the survival networks and necessities it provided for them. The opposite was true for Medium Termers who formed an identity attachment to the neighborhood. In contrast to Long Termers, the earliest artists and students who moved to Williamsburg complained that it did not serve their material needs, but it did allow them to be part of an avant-garde community. In interviews Medium Termers complained about the lack of amenities, retail, and culture in the neighborhood, but the notion that Williamsburg was lacking served incoming residents in multiple ways. Medium Termers were enchanted by the post-industrial landscape as well as the small-town feel of Williamsburg compared to Manhattan. As shown in Chapter 6, moving into an “empty” yet “magical” neighborhood provided Medium Termers with the opportunity for exploration and discovery. Most were moving to the city from middle-class, suburban towns, and to them life in Williamsburg was unpredictable and exciting. The retail options in the neighborhood did not match middle-class norms, and were thus dismissed as subpar, but these inconveniences only added to the bohemian lifestyle that legitimized Medium Termers as artists and urbanites. Respondents took pride in the fact that friends and family thought that Williamsburg was grimy and gritty, and even recount instances of crime with a tinge of nostalgia and bravado. In line with Smith’s (1979) analysis of gentrification, Medium Termers used words like “wilderness” and “colony” to emphasize their identities as urban pioneers.

Medium Termers have an identity attachment to Williamsburg, they moved to the neighborhood because of what it represented. In the 1980s and ‘90s the expanding art
scene coupled with the perceived void of amenities and brushes with crime all worked to affirm in-movers identities as avant-garde bohemians. For this reason they were the most affected as Williamsburg’s identity shifted, especially after the 2005-rezoning. The big-box corporate stores, waterfront condos, and presence of tourists do not necessarily bother Long Termers who expressed that they only wished more of their own culture and institutions had been preserved. But for Medium Termers these elements have changed what Williamsburg represents. Parts of their own identities were tied to a specific iteration of Williamsburg that no longer exists. The grief of gentrification for Medium Termers is not that Williamsburg is now expensive or crowded, but rather that their identity no longer fits that of the neighborhood, and some even feel that that identity was exploited to make Williamsburg what it is today.

**Investing in the Future**

As the latest arrivals in Williamsburg, New residents feel the effects of gentrification in a very different way. Most of them moved to Williamsburg primarily because they could afford to buy apartments in the area. Again and again in interviews they reminded me that Williamsburg was not their first choice of Brooklyn neighborhoods, but they say they have come to appreciate the area’s “local vibe”. Compared to Manhattan, where many of them were living previously, they claimed that Williamsburg has a community or village feel. Some New residents described Williamsburg as charming, “a mix between urban and suburban,” or quiet- at least on the weekends. But New residents’ perceptions of “local” are very different from how previous generations experienced “local” Williamsburg. Long Term residents socialized, shopped, attended religious services, and often worked within the neighborhood; they
also usually had family living nearby. Catering to the necessities of its residents and rarely attracting visitors, Williamsburg was a local working class neighborhood. Medium Termers now look back fondly on Williamsburg’s small-town feel in the ’80s and ‘90s, but they also experienced it as a void. New residents who visited as late as the 2000s thought of it as grimy and dirty, they would not have lived in that version of “local” Williamsburg. These newest residents moved to the neighborhood after it became globally known for art, music and nightlife and wouldn’t have invested in the area without the changes and improvements it gained partially as a result of that popularity. Yet Williamsburg’s reputation as an adult playground has become a negative for New residents.

Many businesses in the neighborhood take on a nineteenth-century aesthetic—the way goods are displayed in wooden barrels at the cheese shop, the intricately tiled floor at the pharmacy, and the exposed bricks that are typical of restaurants and cafes. Even the new Dunkin Donuts tries to blend in with wood paneling and an etched sign. However these traditional aesthetics must be paired with modern convenience and luxury in order to be appreciated by New residents. As detailed in Chapter 5, they didn’t like the few Long Term businesses that remained, especially the grocery store. Top’s was a no-frills store with outdated décor and less variety than newer shops. The store had served the Northside’s working class population for years but before other options opened, New residents preferred to get their groceries from Fresh Direct rather than what they considered a “crappy…grungy” store. In order to be appreciated by New residents, retail cannot reflect the old local of Williamsburg, but rather a romanticized ideal. They do not want Williamsburg to be local, they want it to seem local based on aesthetics.
In Chapter 3 we learned about the community organizing that each tenure cohort participated in. The goals of the various organizations were different based on neighborhood conditions that the cohorts faced and the values of their attachment styles. With an investment attachment to Williamsburg, New residents organized around their children’s education and socialization, and elevating the status of the neighborhood with grand projects like a new waterfront park. They also acted to assert control over the neighborhood’s public spaces, as seen with the examples of racist complaints about the pool, the tension of barbecues in Cooper Park, and the execution of Williamsburg Walks. These are all examples of New residents trying to limit the presence of Long Termers in public space. This is not surprising behavior for gentrifiers as it has been documented in other accounts (Pattillo 2007; Tissot 2015), what is surprising is that New residents are now trying to control gentrified events as well. In many of their interviews they echoed Medium Term residents’ complaints about the overcrowding in the neighborhood on weekends. Now a group comprised of some members of “Friends of Bushwick Inlet Park” has succeeded in driving out a waterfront craft and flea market and have now turned to the expulsion of a weekly food market as well.

The preferences and actions on the part of New residents are reminiscent of Brown-Saracino’s (2004) “social preservationists” who wish to keep the “authentic” nature and residents of a gentrifying area. However what they’re preserving is not Williamsburg’s history or residents nor something representative of older versions of “local” Williamsburg, but rather their own romanticized ideals of community life. Instead, wealthy gentrifiers have the goal of increasing their investments by turning Williamsburg
into an upper-class enclave, a strategy that relies on aesthetics and the controlled removal of alternative versions of the neighborhood in order to create their idea of a “local vibe.”

**Future Research and Policy Implications**

This dissertation uncovered new findings and challenged existing stereotypes about how residents experience neighborhood change but the depth of detail compromises its utility towards understanding gentrification more broadly. The qualitative findings presented here could be operationalized into survey questions and administered on a much larger scale. For example, residents of gentrified neighborhoods would answer questions about their experiences and perceptions of crime, their history of membership in community organizations, if they feel “at home” in their neighborhood, and how their access to groceries and other retail has changed over time.

A quantitative survey on the topic of cultural displacement would be informative beyond academia, it could also be a useful tool for community organizations and policy makers trying to minimize the negative effects of gentrification. In contrast to most Medium Term residents, Long Term residents identified some benefits to gentrification. A survey measuring these opinions would help to determine which aspects of gentrification actually benefit existing residents and what changes need to be made to city policy in the face of gentrification. For example, one important finding from this research is the importance of pre-gentrified retail and institutions to Long Term residents. It follows then that in addition to rent stabilization and the creation of affordable housing, local leaders must also make provisions for affordable rent for retail and institutions like churches, senior centers, or ethnic clubs that make up the daily social life of Long Term residents.
Former residents were nearly always consistent with the opinions of their original tenure cohorts in evaluating crime, retail, and overall gentrification. The only subgroup that differed were Former-Medium Term artists who repeatedly voiced their guilt about abetting gentrification in the neighborhood, Medium Term artists still living in the neighborhood mostly avoided this topic. A follow up study of current and former resident artists would lend insight into the interaction of art and gentrification.

Another avenue for future research is the question of how landlords make decisions about retail tenants. Some business owners mentioned that the landlords were not amenable to lease renewals because they wanted to do something different with the space. The landlords’ decisions seemed to be based not just on economics, but aesthetics—or what having a restaurant instead of a butcher might say about their building or neighborhood. Future studies could continue this research by interviewing landlords about their preferences for renting retail space, what signals they use to determine when the local market is “ready” for new types of business, and how they view their role in a changing neighborhood. Understanding this will provide insights into how decisions about retail space promote gentrification.

This dissertation has interrogated the ways that residents experience gentrification. While Long Term residents identify some improvements during this process, they have also expressed that they know these changes were not for them. As we have seen with the exclusionary actions of gentrifiers, existing residents may have barriers to accessing these benefits at all. The improvements to schools, the renovation of parks, and the increased number of medical services are not enjoyed equally by all residents. Despite politicians’ claims, gentrification does not trickle down outside of the immediate area that gains an
investment of capital. To the contrary the physical displacement of poor residents can lead to new concentrations of poverty at the edges of our cities. As this process occurs again and again in neighborhoods and cities around the world, it is important to delve ever further into understanding the effects of cultural and physical displacement, which affect access to the touted benefits of gentrification.
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