

## The History of Gentrification and the Example of Fort Greene, Brooklyn

By David Kellman

As of 2018, the average price for an apartment in Fort Greene, Brooklyn is \$3,400 per month, the median sales price for a home is \$930,000 dollars. About 40 years, Fort Greene was listed as one of the poorest neighborhoods in New York City. Nowadays when you ponder how can one place go from one of the least desirable places to live to one of the most sought after, the first thing that comes to mind is Gentrification. Gentrification comes to mind in Brooklyn when the per capita income is \$45,000 in arguably one of the most difficult places to find a home. How did Brooklyn get here and what is Gentrification? Merriam Webster's Dictionary describes it as "the process of repairing and rebuilding homes and businesses in a deteriorating area (such as an urban neighborhood) accompanied by an influx of middle-class or affluent people and that often results in the displacement of earlier, usually poorer residents."<sup>1</sup> Colloquially, gentrification is understood to be the process in which wealthy individuals move into a less affluent neighborhood and displace its original, less wealthy residents. But, before we get there, let's start by talking about neighborhoods or rather what is neighborhood. The New York Public Library describes the history of neighborhoods as first being early residential spaces in New York City as designated wards. Through the centuries, and as the city grew those wards began to develop their own culture and identity that would

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<sup>1</sup> (Merriam Webster dictionary n.d.)

eventually become neighborhoods. In order to better understand gentrification in Brooklyn, it's more important to understand the history of its neighborhoods.

In a very brief nutshell, gentrification starts with a neighborhood with a fairly modest economic base. The middle class begins to move elsewhere. Then neighborhood experiences disinvestment first economically and then from the municipality. Over a period of time, the lack of economic diversity and opportunity leads to higher crime and poverty rates. The overall result is a sharp decline in property values. As the property value continues to fall the neighborhood gets discovered by artists, bohemians, and graduate students who find the location attractive for its reasonable distance to the downtown area, and cheap rent. Block by block the neighborhood gets fixed up through various social amenities, such as art galleries, cafes, and culture venues. As more capital begins to seep into the neighborhood, mom and pop businesses close in favor of larger commercial properties. The bohemians are followed by lawyers, stockbrokers, doctors, and other professionals. What soon follows is the presence of commercial developers building upper middle class residential high rises, high property taxes, and higher rents. The increase in the cost of living leads many of the neighborhoods original residents to leave. That is more or less the process of gentrification.

However, is that an accurate way to describe every gentrified neighborhood? New York City is the most diverse place in the country. Each neighborhood is made up a diverse collection of people from a range of nationalities and backgrounds. I don't think a general definition of

gentrification is adequate to describe the processes in New York. This essay begins by taking a look at exactly what gentrification is, and how academics tackled the subject. It expresses how Fort Greene, Brooklyn fits into the general ideas of gentrification, but sets itself apart by maintaining a diverse community throughout its existence.

### **The Neighborhood of Fort Greene Brooklyn**

The neighborhood's border starts right off the Manhattan Bridge. Major thoroughfares outline its exterior. On its west end is Flatbush Avenue, the borough's main artery. The road divides Fort Greene from Downtown Brooklyn. On its South side is Atlantic Avenue, another Brooklyn main street, separates the neighborhood from adjoining Prospect Heights. On its east end is Bedford Avenue. The de facto start of Bedford-Stuyvesant. In the North the neighborhoods continued to the Brooklyn Navy Yard that rests in the Wallabout Bay.

The neighborhood is home various points of interest that includes the Brooklyn Academy of Music, a performing arts center. Brooklyn Technical High School, one of the most competitive schools in the city. The neighborhood is home to three universities, St Joseph's, Long Island University, and The Pratt Institute. As well, the Williamsburg Savings Bank building, the 37-story clock tower, serves as the neighborhoods beacon.

Fort Greene's primary attractions are its proximity to Manhattan, old brownstone townhomes, and the Atlantic terminal. Fort Greene is not only one stop off the subway from

Manhattan, the center of where most New Yorkers work, but also is directly next to downtown Brooklyn. The borough's downtown functions as a major city, playing home to the county's largest business district, Brooklyn's legislative and judicial buildings, and financial institutions like J.P Morgan and Chase. Also, a good portion of the neighborhood is made up of old historic Brownstone row houses that have become popular in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The most significant fixture to the neighborhood is the Atlantic Terminal, Brooklyn's biggest subway hub. Time Square in Manhattan isn't important just because of the big lights, restaurants and Broadway shows, but the fact that almost every subway line in New York's mass transit system funnels through its station. The Atlantic terminal works in the same way, by acting as the center of where most residents of Brooklyn pass through each day. This only adds to the allure of wanting to live in these neighborhoods; your home is next to a place that can get you almost any location in the five boroughs.

### **Theoretical Models of Gentrification**

There is a lot of academic literature on the topic of gentrification. Fortunately, the bulk of the writing on the subject falls into one of two camps. First, there are consumption-based theories. These arguments stem from ideas from geographer, David Ley\*. These suggest that gentrification occurs because of a socially driven change in ideology and lifestyle of young urban people in the latter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For an assortment of reasons, these people favored urban culture centers filled with contemporary artistic types of people; which would

later be attributed as cool and hip city living. citation needed here Then there is the production-based theory. While consumption theories use more of a cultural explanation, production side theory looks at gentrification from a more economical lens. Here, Gentrification is explained to be the result in changes in capital investment in land, rising costs of construction and transportation. Buying new homes in late 20<sup>th</sup> century suburbia became more expensive than purchasing homes in the city. Chris Harnett, in his assessment of academic works on gentrification argues that the process is a battleground between theoretical and ideological contests in urban geography, mostly between “the key role of choice, culture, consumption, and consumer demand, and the structural Marxists who stress the role of capital, class, production and supply.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, both theories are not necessarily against one and other, but rather choose two different vantage points to explain the process.

### *Consumption Theory*

The consumer side theory favors gentrification influenced by the people, while production side theory favors the process being motivated by larger class interests and the changing direction of the flow of money. It’s a popular notion among gentrification theorists that the phenomenon is based on a lifestyle change among the professional young middle class. This “New Middle Class” includes the children of baby boomers strayed away from the tastes and values of their predecessors. These individuals are highly educated, a part of a new cultural sophistication, and have a higher occupational status.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the previous generations (1940s-1960s), that favored suburban living. The new middle class (1970s-1990s) moved toward urban-

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<sup>2</sup> (Hartnett 1991)

<sup>3</sup> Smith, Neil. *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print. 18

city living. Several things supported this trend. During the 1970s an energy crisis crippled America's infrastructure, because oil prices skyrocketed, which made transportation costs dramatically rise. Suburban living, which was entirely dependent on automobiles and gasoline, soon began to look less appealing. As well there was a change in the structure of households. Young professional adults started to get married at a later age and have fewer children. There was less dependence on having space and sprawl to support larger families. Also, there was less of a concern about the quality of inner-city schools. Continuing, the new middle class favors urban architecture and spaces. The previous generation enjoyed suburban sprawl. A family lived in residential zone, and then commuted to a commercial area for work and recreation. The new generation wanted residential living near work and amenities; a lifestyle that urban living provides.<sup>4</sup>

Ley's argument calls to attention the idea of post-industrial cities, where white collar service occupations supersede blue collar productive occupations, bringing an emphasis on consumption and amenity not production or work. "The values of consumption rather than production guide central city land use decisions"<sup>5</sup>. For example, Commercial development favored office buildings and retail, instead of Factories. The model explains the shift in de-industrialization of major cities during the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the base for gentrification. The economy slowly turns from blue-collar production occupations to white-collar service industries. In New York City, where through most the city's existence, the economy was driven by heavy industry, such as text-tiling, shipbuilding, and other forms of

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<sup>4</sup> (Hartnett 1991)

<sup>5</sup> (Smith 1996) 13

mass manufacturing. As these jobs slowly left the city, so did the working-class residents that depended on them.

Harnett summarizes consumption theory by explaining that the concept places emphasis on culture, economics, and politics, specifically in that order. What lays the groundwork for possible gentrification is the complete change of how an industrial and a postindustrial city function. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the growing dependence on technology in the factory and the less need of unskilled labor in the production process led to a major change in the labor force. This coincided with a shift from a society that produces goods to a service producing society. As well, a hallmark of the Post-Industrial city is the role of government. The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked the end of government's Laissez-faire policy (government not interfering with business). Decision making and the allocation of resources were now in the realm of politics and not just the market place.<sup>6</sup>As such government regulation on how space can be used (land zoning, rent control) plays a direct impact on how the post-industrial city is shaped.

### *Production theory*

The other set of arguments on gentrification are production theories. Here gentrification is the result of investments being targeted outside of urban space due to land speculation. The disinvestment of urban spaces causes property value in the inner-city to decline, which leads to further economic depreciation. As time passes, inner city property is

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<sup>6</sup> (Hartnett 1991) 176

purchased at extremely low costs, redeveloped and sold at a profit. Basically, as the rise in cost of post-World War city construction and its distance from the city center increased; the rehabilitation of inner-central city structures becomes more economically viable. Old properties and houses can be bought for less than a comparable new house. Furthermore, the desirability of living closer to the city centers has grown because of costly gasoline prices and the increased use of public mass transportation.

When landlords and real estate developers see the difference in a property's actual value and its potential value that is when they reinvest into it. The idea of this process was articulated by urban geographer Neil Smith, in what he calls rent gap theory. The basis of the rent gap is when a property has depreciated enough so the capitalized ground rent of a site or neighborhood is less than its potential ground rent. Gentrification occurs when the gap is wide enough to ensure a profit.<sup>7</sup> When the property value drops low enough, an investor can buy it, fix it up, and sell it for considerably more money than they paid for it.

An example of rent gap theory is the situation of a property at East 10<sup>th</sup> Street in the Lower East Side, Manhattan. The sales price went up from \$5,706 to \$202,600 in 5 in half years. Property tax assessors marked actual property value at \$26,000-\$28,000. The point is that the inflated property value was completely speculative. Its real value was far lower.<sup>8</sup>

Historically, this process began to appear towards the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the late 1800s all the most expensive land was close to the city center. The surrounding property was valued less as it grew further from the metropolis. Therefore, building homes on

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<sup>7</sup> (Hartnett 1991) 179

<sup>8</sup> (Smith 1996) 56



the outskirts of cities could yield developers the highest profits due to the low cost of land. This is considered the earliest roots of what we would know as urban sprawl; the uncontrollable expansion of the areas surrounding a city. As the population moved out of the city during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the land values in the inner cities began to fall.<sup>9</sup>

Gentrification in Fort Greene favors both models. Fort Greene's popularity as a fashionable neighborhood began to rise in the 1860s with the creation of brownstone townhome row houses. Almost all the townhomes still exist in the neighborhood today. During the 1970s, as the destitution hit its peak, Young urban professionals began purchasing and renovating old abandoned brownstones due largely to the desire for antique architecture, and its proximity to downtown Brooklyn and Manhattan, supporting consumption-based arguments.<sup>10</sup> Production theory also plays a role because the townhomes purchased were extremely undervalued or "dirt cheap". The neighborhoods decline coincided with that of all areas that experience decline in a Post-Industrial City.

Gentrification seems to stand out concerning the United States is because of a heavy cultural symbolism that was attached to suburbanization. The period after World War II, had Americans searching for that era's version of the "American Dream". While the dream is always prosperity and success, the goal in the 50 was less symbolic and more specific. In this case, "making it" in America meant being married with children, with a house in the suburbs on a cul-de-sac. What makes gentrification so rich for inquiry is that the generation the latter 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> (Smith 1996) 77

<sup>10</sup> (Freeman 2006) 40

century completely reversed that tradition. The new “making it” in America, is to own a brownstone in the city that is reasonably close to a subway, a supermarket, and has a washer/dryer.

Scholarly literature does a pretty good job of showing how gentrification works in urban centers in America. However, comprehension of the topic needs a more specific examination. Gentrification in Fort Greene, Brooklyn gives us a good example of the process in a specific community. Fort Greene is perfect largely because it had the specific traits of a neighborhood that gets gentrified, but also maintained its culture that is founded by its rich history.

### **The History of Fort Greene**

The borough of Brooklyn was originally known as the Dutch settlement of Breukelen. The colony was founded in 1646 as part of the Dutch’s New Netherlands. Much of modern-day Fort Greene rests around an inlet on the northwestern cove known as Wallabout Bay.<sup>11</sup> The area was known by the Lenape Indians as Rennegachonk. In 1637 a Walloon by the name of Jansen de Rapelje purchased 335 acres of land encompassing much of modern-day Fort Greene from the Dutch West India trading company. The land’s name was changed to “Waal boght”, which translates to “Bend in the River” or “Bay of Walloons”. The area of New Netherlands would fall to the British in 1664 and the city was renamed New York. Under British rule, the

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<sup>11</sup> The name was derived from Walloons, or the French speaking people from Belgium who settled there

only thing that changed in the region is the city's name. The British essentially allowed the region's inhabitants to continue to do business as they wished, if the British gained wealth from the colonies' success. The Walloons would continue to occupy the modern Fort Greene for the next century in a half.

During the Revolution, the British used the area's bay to house Prisoners of War aboard ships. 11,000 people would later die on these ships due to abuse, mistreatment and disease; their bodies would be simply tossed overboard or at best get a shallow grave along the bay. A couple of years later in 1781, the Jackson family would buy some of the old Walloons land from Cornelius Remsen. They would later build the area's first shipyard<sup>10</sup>.

In 1801 the United States government bought roughly 200 acres around the Wallabout Bay in the east river for \$40,000. Shortly after, in 1806 construction of the Brooklyn Navy Yards, the major American ship building yards was completed. The Yards would later play a major role as an economic base for the neighborhood for the length of their activity spanning a little over 160 years. Much of the housing projects were built to accommodate the surge of the working class in the area during the World War II and still remain there till this day. After its creation the neighborhood grew even further. Various businesses, services and amenities began to come to support the working class that worked out of the navy yards. <sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> (Freeman 2006) 35

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the city of Brooklyn restructured the neighborhood of Fort Greene to accommodate working class families to support the Navy Yards. However, by the middle decades, architecture trends began to change. Beginning in 1868, the new construction favored rows of brownstone townhomes aimed at the upper middle class. These Romanesque and Second Empire style homes remained as they were for the next one hundred years and would later be one of the major icons of Brooklyn living. This shift to build competing class residences would later play a large role in the neighborhoods social and commercial dynamics for the rest of its history.<sup>13</sup>

The neighborhood along with the park gets its name from revolutionary war general, Nathaniel Greene, who supervised the military encampment, Fort Putnam, there at the Battle of Brooklyn during the Revolutionary War. During the War of 1812, the fort was rebuilt and named it after him in his honor. After the war, the old fort grounds were used as a public space for rest and recreation. In 1845 the city of Brooklyn zoned the space for use as a park after widespread support, especially from Brooklyn Daily Eagle editor, Walt Whitman. In 1948, the Brooklyn legislatures commissioned the architects, Fredrick Law and Olmstead and Alvert Vaux to redesign and update the park. Their project built a crypt for the 10,000 American prisoners of war that died on board British ships during the Revolutionary War. The park was called Washington Park and finished its renovations in 1850. The park would grow to be a natural marker of class division. In 1897, the city had the park renamed Fort Greene Park. The park's

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<sup>13</sup> (Freeman 2006) 35

most prolific addition was the Prison Ship Martyr's Monument. The monument was built by architectural firm, McKim, Mead, and White in 1908 after winning a design commission from the City of New York.<sup>14</sup>

By the late 1860s the East end of the park was filled with extravagant mansions and brownstones, the west end of the park was a completely different story. In an 1858 article by the New York Times entitled "Homes of the Poor", the Fort Greene extending towards Flatbush Avenue was painted as a city of shanties. An extensive amount of poor Irish filled the neighborhoods vacant lots to the point that the times referred to the area as "Young Dublin".<sup>13</sup> Alternatively, by the 1880s, with the rise of upper-class housing, the neighborhood began to rise as a fashionable place for the wealthy to live. While part of the area closer to the Navy Yard remained poor to working class, the rest the neighborhood became the 2<sup>nd</sup> richest place in Brooklyn.

Along with wealthy New Yorkers and the Irish, there were a sizable number of Black Americans among Fort Greene residents in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. By 1860, roughly half of Brooklyn's black population lived in Fort Greene. A good example of a product of the amount blacks in the area was the opening of Colored School #1 in 1847, which was the future boroughs first school for blacks.<sup>15</sup> This level of racial and social diversity would continue to define Fort Greene for the rest of its history.

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<sup>14</sup> (Freeman 2006) 37

<sup>15</sup> (Freeman 2006) 39

In the latter half of the 19th century, the part of the neighborhood east of Fort Greene Park became home to many affluent New Yorkers. In what today is known as Clinton Hill, several millionaires built beautiful mansions. John Underwood of Underwood Typewriter, the Liebman's of Rheingold Brewery, and the daughter of Pfizer co-founder Charles Erhart had homes there. The probably most famous and wealthy resident was Charles Pratt. He would later found the Pratt Institute in 1887. Pratt built his home and home for his children along Clinton Ave in 1875. Today, those homes make up the campus of St Joseph's College for Women.<sup>16</sup> The Pratt Institute was created after Pratt retired as an oil tycoon, to train workers in the furthering industrializing economy. Later, it would better famous for its visual arts, and architecture programs. The success and prestige of the school would cause local privileged residents to further invest in the neighborhood's future. Later I will discuss in more detail of how Pratt's influence would shape the neighborhood. The affluence of the area led to the acquisitions of more cultural institutions for example the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1907.

The Brooklyn Academy of Music is the oldest cultural institution in the country. It had its first performance in its concert hall in 1861. At the time, its place of residence was on Montague Street in Brooklyn Heights; the most prestigious neighborhood in Brooklyn. The Brooklyn Academy of Music, or BAM, was created by the upper-class philanthropic residents of Brooklyn, as a place to put on performances. Since its creation BAM, has put on numerous events and concerts that rival the Metropolitan opera house in Manhattan. In 1903, the original

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<sup>16</sup> (Hymowitz 2017) 31

building burned down. Instead of rebuilding a new one at the same place, the administrators decided to move the concert hall a few blocks down the street to the edge of Fort Greene. It so happened that the Montague street location's land value was high enough that relocating the concert hall would be far more cost effective.<sup>17</sup> The Architectural firm of Henry Herts and Hugh Tallant designed the current main building for the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The new site opened its doors in 1908 to a gala featuring a Metropolitan opera rendition of Goud's Faust. Bam would continue to put on Met events until 1921. BAM would go on to have several famous speakers including Booker T. Washington in 1915 and Winston Churchill in 1932.

BAM historians suggest that after World War II, the facility just like the rest of the New York City fell into decline due to urban sprawl. With the appointment of Harvey Lichtenstein in 1967, BAM began to experience resurgent growth. The institution would become the neighborhood's keystone. By the 90s, BAM was internationally recognized as a center of cultural growth. It has secured its place as a fixture in the neighborhood, by ensuring the area surrounding its walls held a degree of cultural integrity. According to Sutton, BAM took a prominent role in Fort Greene's revitalization in the two previous decades. The organization began to help facilitate private investment in the adjoining business district along Fulton Street by influencing investors to open trendy boutiques and restaurants. Their overall goal is to recapture the cultural and fashionable roots of Fort Greene's past in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Sutton puts it, BAM has gained stark opposition from longtime residents of the neighborhood.

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<sup>17</sup> (BAM through the years n.d.)

Their claim is that the direction that private investors and BAM are going in, is only adding to further gentrification and possible displacement.<sup>18</sup> Here is an example of both theoretical models at work. As the neighborhood's cultural currency grew thanks to the BAM, so did interests from the larger economic forces. Greater interests in cultural enclaves supports consumption theory. The larger economic forces that followed the neighborhoods rise support production theory.

After World War II, New York City's Administration was looking to find a conclusive answer to the city's slum and shanty problem. That answer was Robert Moses, the ubiquitous urban planning czar. Moses was an extremely powerful city planner during the middle 20<sup>th</sup> century but was primarily effective after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. After the era of Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia, Moses gained approval on almost all of his public works projects. His projects included a diversity of infrastructure projects, like the Battery Tunnel, most of the Harlem River Bridges, the Triborough Bridge and numerous highways. Moses gained approval and completed all of his projects without ever serving any public office. Arguably the most significant of his works was the creation of government subsidized public housing, or more popularly known today as "Projects". Public housing would come to be a key component of gentrification in New York.

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<sup>18</sup> (Sutton 2007) 8



Public Housing Projects are government made, serviced, and distributed building created for low income working families. Conceptually speaking, they were created as cure for the varying levels of destitution and poor living conditions for lower class New York residents. Public housing projects were meant to consolidate general public services (water, heat, electricity) and provide them universally for the tenants, but under government supervision. The first of these projects to be approved were the Fort Greene houses in 1941. The Projects were built in Fort Greene for two functions. The Projects, would first finally get rid of the abandoned, shanty filled, homeless and destitute area of Fort Greene between the Navy Yards, Fort Greene Park, and Flatbush Avenue extension. Secondly, the houses were supposed to eliminate the commute for the employees that belonged to the working class, that had jobs at the Brooklyn Navy Yards, which was located five minutes away.

Moses' plan to revitalize Fort Greene went even further. In 1949, he and his associates, proposed a plan to clear the remaining slums between the newly built Fort Greene houses, Long Island University's Brooklyn campus, and the Brooklyn Hospital. His Slum Clearance plan under Title 1 of the Housing act of 1949 was quickly approved the same year by the city and housing fiancé agency. The plan ordered the acquiring of all the tenements, vacant lots, and housing in the area through Eminent Domain. The idea was that upon restructuring the 15 acres of land, the property value would significantly rise over the course of a couple of years

due to the area's proximity to the downtown Brooklyn area.<sup>19</sup> The housing complex along with the projects would create one large zone of residences for low-to-middle income families.

At the time, the Project housing was called a herald for ambition, and was looked at a way to revitalize an otherwise run-down part of the neighborhood. By the time of its completion in 1944 the Fort Greene houses included 350 units that rested on 38 acres. About 75% of the acreage was open and sprawled, which earned it the nickname the "town in the park". Instead, by the 1950s, the housing project began to show its colors as a well-intentioned idea that failed.<sup>20</sup>

By the 1950s the projects began to get a reputation for being inadequately conceived, poorly built and over hyped solution to slums.<sup>21</sup> Having government-maintained housing only works if the housing gets properly funded. Project communities began to become married with crime, gangs, juvenile delinquency, and drugs. The New York Times did a series of articles throughout the 1950s analyzing the general disinvestment into the public housing. Most popular were the articles written by Harrison Salisbury, pieces that would later be released in his book "The Shook-Up Generation". Here he investigated the reprise of gang lifestyle among the urban poor living in Brooklyn public housing buildings. His interviews helped illustrate what it was like living in the projects during the 1950s, just less than a decade after they were

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<sup>19</sup> (Fort Greene Slum Clearance Plan: under Title 1 of the Housing Act of 1949 1949)

<sup>20</sup> (Morrone 2010) 23

<sup>21</sup> (Salisbury 1967)

created. There's a story from one resident that explains that no one ever used the elevator in the buildings because they were often broken, filled with drug attics, or covered in urine.<sup>22</sup> Public housing was supposed to be government managed. In reality, the projects were plagued with mismanagement because of the nature of the tenants that they were servicing. Why maintain facilities for the poor when they don't have a lot of money. The tales painted a picture of the discouraging disinvestment of the projects.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, the consolidation of the poor into the horribly managed housing projects helped the lower property values in surrounding areas.

By the late 1960s Fort Greene was statically considered a poverty area, along with 26 other neighborhoods in New York City. What makes a neighborhood impoverished can be classified by three things, juvenile delinquency, welfare, and a high percentage of families with annual incomes under \$4,000 dollars. At the time the neighborhood was primarily black and Puerto Rican, making up 70 percent of the residents. 25 percent of the overall neighborhood residents were on government assisted welfare.<sup>24</sup> However, on the other side of the Fort Greene Park, in the area surrounding Pratt Institute, the rate of poverty was far lower. The neighborhood surrounding the art school has numerous high-end mansions and well-maintained brownstones. The homes surrounding the area maintain a census tract of less than 6% poverty rate. The obvious division in class structure and culture between the residents of

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<sup>22</sup> (Salisbury 1967)

<sup>23</sup> (Morrone 2010) 23

<sup>24</sup> (Habenstreit 1974) 2

Clinton Hill and Fort Greene would remain apparent for the next two decades.<sup>25</sup> The stark class division between residents that are in such proximity to one another (the entire neighborhood is barely a square mile) is one of the reasons why gentrification in Fort Greene so different. Most gentrified neighborhoods are predominantly poor, that was never the case with Fort Greene.

Fort Greene declined as all other neighborhoods in the inner-city did during the 1960s. A new socio-economic climate in the United States that had people moving away from urban city centers in favor of living in suburban areas. As well, starting in the late 50s, a large amount of business left Brooklyn harboring an era of de-industrialization. Led on by the large departure of industry and other social factors, more and more Brooklyn residents started leaving Brooklyn; their replacements were largely less economically well off. This continued even more private and public disinvestment in the neighborhood.

During the 1970s, the city of New York went through economic stagnation, just like the rest of the country. The social programs of the New Deal under the Roosevelt administration were growing too costly for the city. Coupled with that, was the oil crisis of 1973, where Arab oil producing countries put an embargo on the U.S. for its support of Israel. New York was hit especially hard by this. Desperately needing government intervention to help the city of New York's tanking economy, a federal bailout was proposed. The Federal Government, response to any form of publicly funded aid was frank. Popularized by the New York Daily News's famous

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<sup>25</sup> (Habenstreit 1974) 26

headline “Ford to city: Drop Dead”, then President Gerald Ford, had absolutely no intention of helping the city’s financial issues.<sup>26</sup> The local government dealt with this by drastically cutting funding to a plethora of social public programs and federal instructions like police, fire, , and sanitation departments. The shrinking budget allowed the disinvestment in inner-city neighborhoods. The result was fairly formulaic. With economic stagnation the unemployment rate rose, crime increased, garbage accumulated. Coinciding with the economic recession was also the birth of the most recent graffiti revolution. With the decrease in the budget for sanitation and police departments, graffiti spread like wildfire, furthering depressing property values. <sup>27</sup>

The biggest blow to the neighborhood was a string of closures in Brooklyn institutions and industries. The decline first came with the closure of the long-anchored source of news in the borough, the Brooklyn Eagle, in 1955. Also, the Brooklyn dodgers’ baseball franchise left to L.A. in 1958. With the closure of the Rockwood Chocolate Factory in 1957, which in its heyday was the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest manufacturer of chocolate in the country. Its closure in the late 50s sparked the end of industrial jobs in Brooklyn. Many companies left because they looked to have their headquarters in places with less punishing wages, taxes, and real estate costs. Not to mention Truck friendly streets and bridges. <sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> (Ripper 1975)

<sup>27</sup> (Freeman 2006) 35

<sup>28</sup> (Hymowitz 2017) 77

However, none of these hurt the neighborhood more than losing the Navy Yard. At its peak during World War 2, it was Brooklyn's largest employer, employing 70,000 people. The War's end signaled the beginning of the decline of the Navy Yard. In 1966 Secretary of Defense Robert Mcnamara announced its closure. Since it opened in 1806, the Navy Yards had provided a stable force of jobs to working class residents of Fort Greene. It's departure led to a spree of closures to of the area's industrial complex. After the industry left, the retail and restaurants soon followed. This set the stage for the rise of the inner-city turning into a ghetto during the 1970s.<sup>29</sup>

There were numerous efforts to revitalize the neighborhood, most were community-driven. One successful one came from the office of downtown Brooklyn development during the Lindsay administration in 1973. The proposal was to turn Fulton street between Flatbush Ave and Jay St into business district later named "The Fulton Mall". The streets would be closed off to residential and commercial traffic. It was completed in 1983. It consists of two hundred discount stores and fast food joints. The businesses catered mostly to low income and working-class blacks and Latinos, but also attracted the area's new racially liberal whites. The mall was very successful and was one of the 10 most profitable downtown shopping areas in the country.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> (Morrone 2010) 32

<sup>30</sup> (Osman 2011) 224

Ruth Glass, a British sociologist, coined the term Gentrification in her 1964 essay “London: Aspects of change”.<sup>31</sup> It examined how white-collar middle-class residents were replacing working class residents in urban neighborhoods. It was during this time that literature was beginning to get published about the phenomenon. One such book was Fort Greene U.S.A. written by Barbara Hebenstreit in 1974. Hebenstreit presents a sociological examination of a poverty-stricken neighborhood. The book goes into detail of the lives of the poor, how they must navigate the bureaucratic systems of welfare, and the affluent and the poor co-exist. Much of the discussion in the opening chapter describes a kind of us vs them mentality. Often the “them” is the middle-class residents complaining about the poor residents from the housing projects.<sup>32</sup> Even then, class division surrounded around how people occupied urban space. How would we find a way to explain this process?

### **Urban Pioneerism and Fort Greene**

The word Gentrification was being used by urban geographers well into the 1970s. Yet, it wouldn't be until the 1980s until the public became aware of the process, when newspapers would publish articles on the phenomenon. If the 1960s was a time when people abandoned the city for the suburbs, the 1980s was the return. At the peak of the “back to the city” movement, people wanted in on greater New York. As much of the “respectable areas” of

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<sup>31</sup> (Glass 1964) 342

<sup>32</sup> (Habenstreit 1974) 20

Manhattan began to be too full, the middle class went to look elsewhere; even Brooklyn.

Journalist Randall Rothenberg explains in a 1980 New York Times article about the push of the real estate market into the less desirable Brooklyn. “No matter how hard it tries to “correct” its image among jaded know-it-all Manhattanites, Brooklyn remains something a New Jersey joke.” As elitist as that might sound, most affluent residents of Manhattan avoided Brooklyn as if it was another country. Yet, as affordable housing on Manhattan Island began to disappear, New York residents needed looked at alternative options. “The only artists moving into SoHo and Tribeca these days were those who can afford a 100,000 mortgage; the real paintbrush pioneers are braving Williamsburg, yes, Williamsburg.”<sup>33</sup> The gritty and possibly dangerous nature of the New York inner-city gave the area a foreign image. Moving there, a place that was literally minutes away, was advertised with the same uncertainty as early Americans pioneering west. This narrative supports Production Theory. Economic forces pushed the “new middle class” to find new alternatives from a space with less residential options.

Much of early gentrification was proliferated by young urban professionals, the Real Estate industry and the creative community. As more artists began to funnel into the northern part of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, the people in real estate saw an opportunity. The real estate industry started to market the northern part of the Lower East Side the “east village” in order to capitalize on the geographical proximity to the more respectable, secure, culture and high rents of Greenwich Village.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> (Rothenburg 1980)

<sup>34</sup> (Smith 1996) 15



In the HBO series “How to Make it in America”, Stars Victor Rasuk and Luis Guzman walk the streets of the Lower Manhattan, their hometown, discussing the neighborhood in an interview. Guzman makes a joke stating that “Some people call this area Alphabet City; we don’t...” Guzman’s comment is referring to the real estate industry and other urban pioneers trying to change the neighborhood’s name. Through most the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century the Lower East Side’s residents were predominantly Hispanic, so much so that it mostly known commonly as Loisaida. As gentrification continued the people that grew up in these neighborhoods got to see it change into something else.

For real estate agents, art tamed the neighborhood, creating an exotic but benign sense of danger. The marriage of the real estate market and artists went south by 1987, coinciding with the stock market crash that year. Landlords without their hands tied to rent control, increased rents on their tenants soon as their leases were up.<sup>35</sup>Fort Greene went through a similar period of Urban Pioneerism. At the time the neighborhood was suffering from the crime wave bomb that was being referred to as the crack epidemic. Among the art collectives that were making Fort Greene their home. There were black creative intellectuals that were shaping the neighborhood. The documentary *Brooklyn Boheme* (2012) examines this moment in history where during the 1980s and 90s, the neighborhood was home to a black creative movement. The film features many famous artists from filmmaker, Spike Lee, Comedian Chris Rock singers

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<sup>35</sup> (Smith 1996) 96

like Erykah Badu. One could be argued that in Fort Greene, the black intellectual creative community were the urban pioneers that helped create the conditions for Gentrification.<sup>36</sup>

In his book “The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City, Neil Smith<sup>37</sup> begins by analyzing Frederick Jackson Turner’s the significance of the frontier in American History, written in 1893. While Turner looked at the edge of the frontier as wilderness that needed to be civilized from savagery, Smith postulates that the frontier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the urban decaying city centers that needed to be transformed into civility. Smith theorizes that the American city in the era of suburbanization was seen by the white middle class as an urban wilderness, the habitat for disease, crime, danger and disorder. He compares the inner-city population to the Native Americans of Turners time; “people that were part of their physical environment.” He’s explicit with the notion that the frontier is where savagery meets civility<sup>41</sup>. Savagery in this case is the decrepit ghettos of the inner-city, while civility is the more affluent areas of the town. In this scenario, the area that is being gentrified is a new fertile territory to exploit for the resource of not just profit but promise. I’m suggesting is that disinvested inner-city communities act as a catalyst for development in both economics and culture. Yes, there’s the possibility to exploit the tired property values of a neighborhood by pouring time and money into them to then resell them for profit. However, there are also people that buy and rent homes in these communities (the gentry). They see the neighborhood

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<sup>36</sup> (Diane Paragas 2011)

<sup>37</sup> Smith, Neil. *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print

as a stepping stone to improving their lives, much in the same respect as the traditional homesteaders that plowed to the Pacific Coast on the fringes of the frontier.

Smith suggests that understanding gentrification is construed through the vocabulary used by newspapers and editorials. For example, calling the gentry urban homesteaders or urban pioneers adds to nuance of the frontier myth in the inner city. Smith points to an article in a local magazine, *The New Yorker*. It shows a couple moving to Ludlow Street in the Lower East Side part of lower Manhattan. “No one would think of living here” — “we liken our crossing Houston Street to pioneers crossing the Rockies”.<sup>42</sup> This was written at a time when neighborhoods South of Houston Street ( SoHo) were a haven for disinvestment, crime, and vice. Today, Soho is a beacon of the trendy New York, being one of the main fashion districts on Manhattan Island. However, at the time this frontier ideology was fueling much of the early gentrification in New York City. Inner-city neighborhoods were located on prime land stock for relatively low value. The poor and working classes that make up the original residents were defined as uncivil making them, in some cases, easily marginalized or discardable through displacement.

### **Displacement**

If there is one problem with gentrification, it is the threat of displacement. Displacement is a key component to the topic. It’s almost irrelevant to discuss gentrification without bringing up displacement.

The first reports of gentrification appeared from newspaper accounts in city specific areas; for example, several newspaper articles discussing how young urban professionals are renovating homes in the inner-city.<sup>38</sup> As more cities began to share the same symptoms of gentrification, the media began to speculate about a possible back to the city movement. Kathryn Nelson's observation on displacement counters previous conceptions. In her analysis, national estimates of displacement are flawed, because they didn't consider reinvestment and renovation caused by abandonment or other market processes.<sup>39</sup> Housing and Urban Development's survey of gentrifying San Francisco found that displaced households didn't have significant changes in housing conditions.<sup>40</sup> In short, displacement is hard to empirically prove.

Even in New York City, housing regulations make displacement difficult to pinpoint. What skews displacement are the portions of New Yorkers who own their property. Gentrification has little effect on homeowners because their housing costs are tied into paying off debt and maintenance costs. Normally, rising property taxes could affect homeowners, as their house could be assessed for a higher value. However, New York City's Housing regulations favor homeowners instead of commercial or multi-family units.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> (Nelson 1988) 17

<sup>39</sup> (Nelson 1988) 18

<sup>40</sup> (Nelson 1988) 19

<sup>41</sup> (Freeman 2006) 76

Two things that might spur displacement are landlord/lease holder relationships and implications caused by rent regulation. When an apartment is rent regulated, the government placed laws or ordinances that regulate how high rent can be for residential housing. Gentrification causes an increasing gap between the average market rate of an apartment and the rent regulation. One of the many bi-laws of Rent Control is that as soon as the rent regulated occupant leaves, that apartment returns to market value. This might give a landlord who is looking to increasing his or her pockets, more incentive to find ways to get the resident to leave to make more money.<sup>42</sup> Another rent related issue is when building owners sell their property to land developers. The property owner can choose to not allow the occupant to renew their lease at the end of its term and sell the property. My favorite example of this process is a tale of a local barbershop that was on Myrtle Ave. The shop's owner bought the building and one across the street from it back in the late 70s when the neighborhood was in the middle of decline for a fraction of what someone would pay for it today. At the turn of the millennium a development firm to sell his property approached him. At the time he refused, exclaiming, "come back when you have a real offer." Years later when they apparently came with a better offer, he sold his buildings for one million each, and a hundred thousand dollars for every other property owner on the block that he managed to persuade to sell. His shop and tenants rested on the edge of Myrtle Ave and Flatbush extension. What rests there now, are two forty story buildings, the Toren, and the Avalon, both of which are high end upper class

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<sup>42</sup> (Freeman 2006) 70

residential apartment buildings.<sup>43</sup> What becomes of the tenants that used to occupy those homes? They are forced to move elsewhere as a result of displacement.

### **Gentrification and the search of urban authenticity**

Much of the discussion is about new residents changing the character of a neighborhood that distances itself from its original uniqueness. The theories on gentrification postulate neighborhood change as a phenomenon that is tied firmly in the shaping of cities during post-war deindustrialization. While that is largely accurate, one could also argue that similar neighborhood change could have existed even longer before. This idea is fully explored in *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn: Gentrification and authenticity in post-war New York*, by Suliman Osman. In it, Suliman argues that a lot of Brooklyn's modern history was about shaping its own narrative. Residents of different generations have been always trying to define what is Brooklyn. In 1941, Herbert J. Ballou cartographer of the Brooklyn council for Social Planning summed it up best “While official records contain verbal descriptions of many of the [original] village boundaries, the landmarks by which the boundaries are identified have long since disappeared.”<sup>44</sup>This speaks to the organic nature of neighborhoods. Even earlier, in 1886, the Brooklyn Eagle said, “South Brooklyn, is a term which has grown to be somewhat vague.”<sup>45</sup> Neighborhoods are constantly growing and changing. Gentrification is tied to an idea that

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<sup>43</sup> (2004, May). Personal Interview

<sup>44</sup> (Osman 2011) 22

<sup>45</sup> (Osman 2011) 24

outside influences change the identity of a neighborhood. Suliman's book makes us ask the question "What if identity is another part of the story that shapes the future of neighborhoods?"

### **Who benefits from Gentrification?**

Columbia Professor of urban planning, Lance Freeman argues in *'There Goes the Hood: views of gentrification form the ground up'* that the primary benefits of gentrification are real estate investors, young urban professionals (**Yuppies**), and government elites. As he puts it yuppies gain access to space conveniently located to the downtown area, where their jobs and cultural amenities are. Real estate agents profit from accurately exploiting speculating on what was considered marginalized property. While the government elites see the rise in a higher tax base, and a decline in need of social services, with a displacement of the poor.<sup>46</sup> These players in the game of gentrification belong to the capital class, or those who control the investing and profiting of capital; Mortgage Lenders, commercial and residential developers. The middle class are also a part of the lower level of this capitalist class through smaller investments in the new available living space.<sup>47</sup> However, gentrification also benefits long term residents of the neighborhood, by providing amenities that normally wouldn't be found in the inner-city without the aid of the new interest of the capital class.

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<sup>46</sup> (Freeman 2006) 59

<sup>47</sup> (Freeman 2006) 60

It's long perceived that long term residents see the least benefit from gentrification because of academia portraying them as victims of the capital class; most notably through displacement. Yet some aspects of that argument are taken for granted. Little things like a supermarket with decent produce, a drug store, or moderately priced restaurants are amenities that are pretty much void in inner city neighborhoods pre-gentrification.<sup>48</sup> I can attest to this as a resident of Fort Greene. As I recall it, up until recently, if I wanted to get half decent produce for reasonable prices, I'd have to travel half a mile to a mile on the outskirts of my neighborhood or outside of it. The same goes for most amenities that the residents of more affluent neighborhoods take for granted.

In inner-city neighborhoods, instead of going to the supermarket, most residents rely on corner stores or bodegas for their diet. In the United Kingdom, academics explain this idea in what they call "food deserts". Basically, in poorer neighborhoods where there is less access to super markets and nutritional foods residents are forced to settle with corner stores for sustenance. These stores often don't have a wide variety of nutritional products and are often a lot more expensive than at food markets. Corner Stores are much smaller than actual Super Markets therefore they don't have commercial capital to negotiate for cheaper prices.<sup>49</sup> While there isn't much empirical evidence of this in the U.S., it's always been a joke among people in the inner cities. – For example on the television channel MTV 2, a small anecdotal public service announcement airing in 2001 starring rap artist, Dennis Coles, better known as the Ghost Face Killah of the rap group Wu-tang. In these shorts Mr. Coles, as "Pretty Tony" would discuss how

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<sup>48</sup> (Freeman 2006) 62

<sup>49</sup> (Freeman 2006) 63



to live off small amounts of money, while hustlin' by purchasing cheaper food at your local bodega or corner store. While largely comical, it paints a picture what is true in poorer neighborhoods. Access to good food is usually reserved to more affluent neighborhoods.

Freeman, gives another example of how gentrification can be beneficial to long term residents. Freeman points to the example of a man named James who bought his apartment for \$18,000. Over the course of the following decades when the housing market began to boom in the neighborhood, his apartment would now sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars. Regardless of the dissidence about whites moving in, more police protection, and greater amenities, it's impossible for long term residents to ignore the benefits of gentrification.<sup>50</sup>

Black homeowners are another group of people that benefit from gentrification. These people, who belonged to the middle and working class, that bought their homes at low costs back in the 1960s 70s and 80s, kept the neighborhood viable through the worst of the decline.<sup>51</sup> "the very people who bought their brownstones during white flight are the same people who are making money selling to upper class now"- Jerry Minsky, a senior vice president of the Corcoran group, the Manhattan real estate agency.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> (Freeman 2006) 60

<sup>51</sup> (Newman 2001) 1

<sup>52</sup> (Newman 2001) 2

Truth be told, my grandmother happens to one of the many black middle class residents to whom Mr. Minsky was referring. My grandmother moved to the East Flatbush end of Brooklyn in 1969 for work as a registered nurse. Her home in the Kingsview cooperatives, on Ashland and Myrtle Ave corner of Fort Greene was purchased for \$16,000 back in 1995. Her co-op rests on the same plot that was cleared in 1949 for Moses' revitalization project. In 2006 the buildings cooperative board approved of the complex going private owned. Even though she chose to wait to sell until after the housing market collapsed in 2008, she still sold her apartment for over \$300,000. Reporter, Andy Newman, referenced "Grandma riding off into the sunset with a suitcase full of money" as a kind of joke in his 2001 article on Fort Greene gentrification, but funnily enough that's exactly what happens.<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps these benefits to black homeowners in Fort Greene and Clinton hill might add some form of hope of depreciating the wealth gap between blacks and whites. The depth of income difference between blacks and whites is far greater than the differences in wage, and that's best seen in the stock of housing values.<sup>54</sup> Oliver and Shapiro in their book, *"Black Wealth, White Wealth"*, note that gentrification showcases another bigger problem- "Housing prices are always higher and climb higher in comparative white and black (or integrated) neighborhoods. Oliver and Shapiro's research indicates that non-white neighborhoods are affected more by gentrification because their property value is often lower than their middle class white counterparts. It's irrelevant whether the discrimination is intended or not, the point is the

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<sup>53</sup> (2006, May) Personal Interview

<sup>54</sup> (Freeman 2006) 61

housing appreciation gaps between the races showcases the price that is paid just by simply being black”.<sup>55</sup> Black Americans and other minorities are the ones primarily affected by gentrification. Yet, Blacks aren’t generally a part of economic group that has the power to influence the kind of neighborhood change that is associated with the process.

### **What’s so unique about Fort Greene?**

What makes Fort Greene different from other neighborhoods that are gentrified is race and class. Gentrified neighborhoods are usually exclusively filled with minorities, but Fort Greene has always had a sizable white population; even during its nadir. The classic scenario of gentrification has white middle class replacing poor to working class minorities in a neighborhood. However, in Fort Greene, the neighborhood has always had a diverse history. “Skilled black workers, mostly shipbuilders, settled there in the 1840s, establishing the foundation for a middle-class black community”.<sup>56</sup> In the early 20th century, the neighborhood had large Italian, Jewish, and Irish populations. During World War II there was increased production of shipbuilding and manufacturing at the Brooklyn Navy Yards. The workers that came to fill the ranks of those seeking employment there were of all hues.

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<sup>55</sup> (Oliver 1996) 147

<sup>56</sup> (Bird 1984)

In truth what separated Fort Greene from the rest of distressed neighborhoods were the black home and business owners. Many black working to middle class workers bought their houses cheaply during the 1960s, 70s and 80s and maintained the community when most other neighborhoods in New York City were falling apart.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps this is what helped keep the neighborhood ethnically diverse as early gentrification began to unfold. “One of the things that still makes Fort Greene special is its racial and ethnic mix.”<sup>58</sup>

Another thing that makes Fort Greene gentrification unique is the addition of the black gentry. The gentry are always perceived to be young single whites. In the neighborhood the increasingly notable presence of whites indicated gentrification. In this case whites are assumed to be gentrifiers; they could be artists, students, or belong to some other profession.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps it’s a case of racial profiling wielded by those researching the phenomenon. Gentrification is neighborhood change from working class to middle class. It’s related to race, but it’s not mutually exclusive. Continuously overlooked, is that there really isn’t much income difference between some of the gentry and the original residents (black, white or otherwise). The entire reason why people move to poor neighborhoods, sparking gentrification is because it’s relatively more affordable than where they came from.<sup>60</sup> The reason why minority gentry aren’t noticeable is because they are the same skin color as most of the original residents.

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<sup>57</sup> (Newman 2001)

<sup>58</sup> (Bird 1984)

<sup>59</sup> (Freeman 2006) 80

<sup>60</sup> (Freeman 2006) 89

Freeman uses older members of the neighborhood to express his point about the black middle class in Fort Greene and Clinton Hill. He points to black a woman who was raised in the Fort Greene Housing projects, who later got her master's degree, and continued to live in the neighborhood for over seventeen years. There was another black resident who also grew up in the projects, went to the Pratt Institute blocks away, and now teaches. Freeman takes note that none of these people fit the example of the gentry, but are college educated and work white-collar jobs; just like those who would normally fit the description of gentrifiers.<sup>61</sup>

In fact, a strong black middle class thrived in Fort Greene throughout much of the 1980s. Most interestingly the neighborhood would foster homes for a whole bunch of artists that would come to impact the following generation. The Director-actor Spike Lee filmed most of his earlier films in the neighborhood. His production company, 40 acres and a mule, that has produced over 35 films, is still to this day based in Fort Greene.

*“Where it was, right there at that specific moment in time, for however long it lasted. Fort Greene was a place where these young, smart, college educated artists in many different fields. That’s where they came together”- spike lee.*<sup>62</sup> Lee’s first production studio was 3 blocks from BAM. As discussed earlier, cultural institutions and community organizations helped lift the neighborhood.

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<sup>61</sup> (Freeman 2006) 90

<sup>62</sup> (Pargas 2010)

Lee is referring to the kind of cultural phenomenon that was taking place in the late 1980s. Black and Hispanic artists were making the neighborhood the breeding ground for creativity, much in the same respect as the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Actor- Director, Chris Rock also got his start in Fort Greene. Renting his first apartment right behind the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Rock got his first job as a cast member on the show, Saturday Night Live while living in Fort Greene. Upon first coming to the neighborhood, Rock described the neighborhood as *“A place in Brooklyn where black people live; and it’s nice?”*<sup>63</sup> An affluent resurgence of the black middle class, in the late 1980s, helped stabilize the neighborhoods demographic during the early periods of gentrification. Yet, it wasn’t just a place where black people lived. There was also a good amount of white folks.

### ***So...Is Gentrification a Race Thing?***

Traditionally, black neighborhoods differ from other minority neighborhoods in that they have relatively many fewer whites. Considering the way race is enforced in the urban areas of America over the past 50 years, “black neighbors not only have black identities but [have] a devoid of a white presence as well”.<sup>64</sup> Just look at early hip hop culture for example.

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<sup>63</sup> (Pargas 2010)

<sup>64</sup> (Freeman 2006) 80

Hip hop was birthed in the New York inner-city. Its players were black and largely remained black up until recently. Even though Fort Greene has always been diverse with a decent white population, there's still surprise at the sight of more whites. "Surprise at the visibility of whites was even evident in neighboring Clinton Hill even though the white population has always been at least 20 percent. Nevertheless, in the past whites ceded certain spaces in the neighborhood to blacks, particularly at night".<sup>65</sup> Up until a few years ago, it was fairly rare to see white people walking along Myrtle Avenue near the Fort Greene Projects, especially at night. The same went for Fort Greene Park. Growing up, I could remember being scolded for being anywhere near the park after dark, let alone in it. Then recently, I can recall walking home around midnight, and making a joke after noticing two white female joggers entering the park. "Whites are expected to fear and avoid black spaces."<sup>66</sup> To original residents of the neighborhood, white people in black spaces still seems odd. "Social scientists have postulated that the equating of black neighborhoods with crime, poverty and general under desirability is the reason why whites are reluctant to share residential space with blacks. "When whites move into predominantly black neighborhoods, they upset the prevailing notions of who belongs in particular areas."<sup>67</sup>

As Freeman discussed, even in Clinton Hill [and Fort Greene], the sight of whites in the neighborhood still turned heads. So, what makes this community different? Perhaps its the way in which public space in the neighborhood is used. Before I pointed out how historically Fort

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<sup>65</sup> (Freeman 2006) 81

<sup>66</sup> (Freeman 2006) 81

<sup>67</sup> (Freeman 2006) 81

Greene Park acted as socio-economic meeting ground for the neighborhood. As it did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the park separated residences by class. On the north and east side of the park, century old brownstones fill the blocks displaying the neighborhoods wealth. On the south and west sides, along Myrtle Avenue, the Fort Greene projects and other working-class residences represent the opposite end of the class structure in the neighborhood. Also, being that crime and poverty go so well together, it's only natural that the less desirable spaces to occupy would be located on less affluent side of the neighborhood. Although, what is to attribute to obvious racial and socio-economic difference that has grown over the years, even though those parts of the community still remain relatively low income? Much of the change is attributed to the revitalization of Fort Greene's "Main Street", Myrtle Avenue.

During much of its recent history the thoroughway was nicknamed "Murder Avenue" because of the high level of crime that plagued the area during its lower years; especially under the zenith of the crack epidemic of the 1980s. Due to its reputation, the avenue became a de-facto "blacks only" area. Myrtle Avenue bounced back from disinvestment largely through help from the neighborhood. Community based organizations played an important role in reinvestment and revitalization. Organizations like the Myrtle Avenue Revitalization project local development corporation (MARP) and the Myrtle Avenue Brooklyn business improvement



district. Their objective is the continual maintenance of the neighborhood's main street, by provide entrepreneurial, cultural, recreational and employment opportunities to residents.<sup>68</sup>

Often community-based organizations were created with the help of local cultural institutions. One such was the Pratt Area Community Council, which was networked to the Pratt Institute. The PACC is arguably the most recognized of community-based organizations in the neighborhood. The organization formed in 1964, the PACC spent its early years trying to reverse the decay of disinvestment in the area through simple means, such as advocating change in city policy from demolition towards preservation and encouraging the selling of abandoned federally financed buildings to local residents. In the 1980s, the organization developed another department dedicated to fighting for tenant rights, preserving affordable housing, and helping community residents become first time homeowners.<sup>69</sup>

As its name suggests, the PACC, works in correspondence with the Pratt Institute. As of 1993, the President of the school, Thomas F. Schutte, explained that Myrtle Avenue challenged the future of the institution. Schutte was appointed as chairman of MARP in 1999, and along with other community-based organizations began cleaning up the avenue from the bottom up. First, they acted small by cleaning up graffiti, sweeping sidewalks etc. Then, they worked to larger projects, like finding retailers to occupy vacant buildings.<sup>70</sup> By the mid-2000s, Myrtle Ave in Fort Greene was completely transformed from what it once was. As more businesses, better

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<sup>68</sup> (Myrtle Avenue Brooklyn Partnership 2018)

<sup>69</sup> (<https://impacctbrooklyn.org/about/> n.d.)

<sup>70</sup> (Bernstein 2011)

recreational facilities, and a more desirable aesthetic appearance came to a previously nadir part of the neighborhood, the more likely that different types of people are going to want to enjoy the new amenities the area has to offer; in this case the new gentry.

Freeman spends much of his book exploring how gentrification can be perceived to be racially motivated but demonstrates that there's much more to it than that. Yes, white people in spaces traditionally occupied by people of color points gentrification, but that's not the full story. The case of "the black gentry" often gets left out. Furthermore, in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a lot of Fort Greene's revitalization was led by Community Organizations often backed by local institutions.

### **Conclusion**

Neighborhood change is not gentrification. Gentrification is neighborhood change. This is fundamental to understanding the phenomenon. Its only one thing that may occur to any neighborhood's lifetime. Neighborhoods aren't static, but a kind of living organism that grows, dies, or transforms over time. What makes a place like Fort Greene a neighborhood began the day people decided build and make a place out of its space. It was created by the larger macroeconomic structures favored by Smith's Production Theory. Things like the Brooklyn Navy Yard and its proximity to downtown which later influenced land speculation. Its character was also a product of changes in culture over time as found in Ley's Consumption Theory. Culture

like shifts in architecture that favored making Brooklyn's popular brownstones, or institutions like the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Examining the history of neighborhoods like Fort Greene help us understand the phenomenon of gentrification with greater context. It isn't when white people move into and displace a neighborhood filled with people of color. No, it's just one piece of the narrative. A narrative where throughout its history different people, institutions, and economic forces have been constantly trying to define it.