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Music Scene Gentrification in the Lower East Side and Williamsburg

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Vassar College

Music Scene Gentrification in the Lower East Side and Williamsburg

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
Bachelor of Arts in Sociology

By

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Abstract:

This thesis explores at the causal relationship between music and gentrification in two New York City neighborhoods. The first case study discusses CBGB-centered punk rock scene in the 1970’s, which led to the development of the Lower East Side in the 1980s. The second case study discusses how indie rock acted as a catalyst for the emergence of Williamsburg and Brooklyn as the center of hipster cool over the last fifteen years. The commonality between both case studies is the successful courting of the emerging Creative Class, who brought economic capital and skyrocketing rents into each neighborhood. By looking at Census tract data from the last five censuses, the changes of each neighborhood can be tracked as bachelor’s attainment rates, (inflation-adjusted) median household income, and percentage of 20-34 residents, have increased incrementally over time. Thus, ethnic enclaves and lower-income residents that had called the neighborhood home for generations have been forced to move to outlying areas, disrupting their professional and personal lives.
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Introduction/Literature Review: The Day the Neighborhood Died

Before the analytical part of this thesis commences, I want to say a few words about my interest in this project. Since I was in my teens, I have been a huge fan of alternative/punk rock. This started out with a few Warped Tour visits, which led me to check out a few of punk’s forefathers, including the Ramones. From there, I discovered the other bands associated with CBGB and found music that I related to. Talking Heads reflected my nerdy paranoia; Patti Smith inspired me to write awful poetry, while Television led to countless air-guitar sessions. This music also fostered a love of New York City, the birthplace of the genre, and upon first visiting the city when I was 11; I loved the fact that it was filled with activity in a way that was the opposite of where I grew up, suburban South Florida. Once I was exposed to the concept of gentrification, it became clear that there was a connection between this process and the music that I loved. Thus, when the opportunity arose, I chose this as the subject for my first major academic project.

My main goal is to show how the organic creation of a music scene in a rough and impoverished neighborhood in New York City brings in Creative Class gentrifiers upon that scene gaining a certain level of notoriety. This process can be seen in a variety of New York neighborhoods (Harlem, Greenwich Village, etc.), but this thesis will focus on two particularly fascinating case studies. Punk rock transformed the Lower East Side from Skid Row to the counterculture capital of Manhattan in the 1980’s. Meanwhile, the indie rock scene in Williamsburg in Brooklyn altered the neighborhood’s reputation from being the home of various ethnic enclaves to being the “hipster” capital of the United
States. These two stories are at the heart of my thesis and will be explained in great depth in the body chapters.

**Terminology and Methods**

An important note is that the definition of gentrification that I will be utilizing was coined in Ruth Glass’ 1964 book *London, Aspects of Change*. In her book, gentrification emerges from the British term, “gentry,” or the upper class (1964: 22). Glass discusses residences in working-class London that were sub-divided and upgraded once leases expired. These upgrades caused the social status of the neighborhood to increase along with the rents. Therefore, the working-class were displaced. Glass observed this happening in numerous London neighborhoods and her analysis became the common method of looking at gentrification once it started occurring across the United States.

Another term that is important to grasp for this thesis is Richard Florida’s idea of the Creative Class. The Creative Class are the 38 million people who display some semblance of creativity in their daily occupation (Florida 2002: IX). This includes artists, but engineers, technologists, and teachers among many other professions. They are often young and spend time searching for “third place” hangouts that are separate from home of work (Florida 2002: 226; see Oldenburg 1989). Thus, determining where to live is different for the Creative Class than for others who often choose a location based on more traditional occupational and familial factors. Thus, they tend to gentrify areas, including New York City, in noticeable ways.
My sources consist of scholarly and non-scholarly materials for each case study. These range from the in-depth account of the Lower East Side’s economy provided in Christopher Mele’s *Selling the Lower East Side* to the slice-of-life anecdotes of Williamsburg in Robert Anasi’s *The Last Bohemia*. Additionally, I was lucky enough to interview Legs McNeil, the founder of *Punk Magazine* and the co-editor of *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk*. McNeil and I discussed the environment and music of the Lower East Side in the 1970s and the interview provided me with some great stories and thoughts on the punk scene of the time. A few maps and photographs are also included to give the reader a greater sense of the geography and status of the Lower East Side and Williamsburg.

Many of the main points of my thesis will be backed up with empirical data. For this, I have utilized data from the Untied States Censuses of 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010. The three variables I am utilizing are percentage of 20-34 year-olds, bachelor’s degree attainment rates, and median household income (adjusting for inflation). These will be tracked nationally, in New York City, in Manhattan (New York County) and in Brooklyn (King’s County) for those five censuses while information on these variables for specific neighborhood tracts will be discussed for the last three censuses, as they are unavailable until 1990. These tracts were selectively chosen and the reasoning for each will be explained in Chapters Two and Three. The inclusion of the census data is

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1 Legs McNeil also spent much of the interview sharing sexual encounters during that period of his life. I decided not to include those in the thesis.
effective at explaining the trends of the neighborhoods, especially in identifying
chronological points at which the creative class settles.

**Thesis Structure**

Chapter One is a both a thorough overview of the history of the Lower East Side and
an account of the punk scene’s origins in the mid-1970s as well as its heyday in the latter
part of the decade. This chapter will delve into the Lower East Side’s status as a home for
first-generation Jewish and Puerto Rican immigrants, give an account of the original
counterculture scene in the 1960’s, the descent into poverty shortly afterwards, the

Chapter Two acts as an extension of Chapter One and profiles the art scene (led by
artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat) that emerged in the aftermath of punk rock. This led
to an influx of the Creative Class that took advantage of city policies that both
encouraged economic development and tried to reduce poverty via cruel means. Thus,
tensions emerged that resulted in the Tompkins Square Park riots of 1989. While the
mostly underclass protestors garnered sympathy in the immediate aftermath, they
ultimately fell victim to gentrification. Today, the Lower East Side is one of the premier
neighborhoods in Manhattan and has little in common with the conditions that originally
spawned punk.

Chapter Three covers Williamsburg’s journey from being the center of sugar
manufacturing and the Hasidic community in New York City to having some of the
ingredients for gentrification in the late 1990’s. Some of the topics covered will include
Williamsburg’s geography and early history, a notorious cocaine bar (Kokie’s), and the
opening of a few music clubs. While the chapter cuts off before the huge migration of the Creative Class to the neighborhood, it will detail the small changes that signaled Williamsburg’s potential for growth as the 21st century kicks in.

Chapter Four discusses the major transformations in Williamsburg in the 2000’s. During this decade, Williamsburg emerged as the new “hip” neighborhood in Manhattan. Rents skyrocketed and luxury condos were built along the East River. This emerged in direct response to increased interest from developers following population shifts that occur after a major music scene emerges in the neighborhood. This chapter will go into great depth about the modern Creative Class’s impact in Williamsburg as well as providing anecdotes about topics such as McCarren Park Pool and the quick emergence of the popular band TV On the Radio.

Finally, the thesis will conclude with some thoughts regarding the sociological importance of cities originally presented by Georg Simmel. His ideas help make sense of the new dynamics of gentrification in New York City. These larger dynamics will change how cities develop in the future, as the struggle between intellect and community in urban spaces continues to play out in an unpredictable fashion. This seems likely, at the very least, to result in some displacement. I do not have all of the answers for how to solve the music scene gentrification process. However, I hope my work brings these issues into focus and allows us to think about how, we, as part of the community at a prestigious, largely upper class, college can begin to combat some of the major problems of gentrification.
Chapter 1: Poverty and Punk in the Lower East Side

Spent my whole life in the city
Where junk is king and the air smells shitty
People puking everywhere,
Piles of blood, scabs and hair
Bodies wasted in defeat
People dying on the streets
But suburban scumbags they don't care
They just get fat and dye their hair

Those biting lyrics are from Fear’s 1977 punk rock anthem “I Love Living in the City.” While Fear was a Los Angeles based band, the lyrics would have perfectly captured New York City in the late 1970’s. After all, New York City was in economic collapse and the tumultuous summer of 1977 included the horrific actions of serial killer David Berkowitz and a citywide blackout where 4,500 looters were arrested. However, at the same time a musical revolution was occurring. Punk, a harsh, arty, and occasionally nihilistic update of traditional pop and rock sounds, was the signature sound of the Lower East Side and was growing in popularity across the country. This chapter will explore the pre-1970s history of the Lower East Side, the birth of punk, and how the music altered the culture and the economics of the neighborhood as the 1970’s were ending and the 1980’s were beginning.

What is the Lower East Side?

Before discussing punk’s impact on the neighborhood, it makes sense to define the Lower East Side geographically. Most definitions of the Lower East Side differ, as there are no “natural borders”, only “invented ones” that “signify a century of cultural, political and social struggles” (Mele 2000: XII).

Figure 1: Map of the Lower East Side
Geographical boundaries of the Lower East Side can encompass the entire area between 4th Street and the Manhattan Bridge and 4th Avenue and the East River. Other definitions subdivide the Lower East Side, generally by envisioning it as specifically the area south of Houston Street. Others use the terms Lower East Side and the East Village, which is seen as the area north of Houston Street, synonymously. For the purposes of this essay, I define the Lower East Side in a broad sense that encompasses the East Village,
but also the area south of Houston Street. However, CBGB’s was located north of Houston and most of the discussion in this chapter will focus on events and places that are part of what is now considered the East Village.

**The Lower East Side Pre-1975**

It is important to note that the Lower East Side, in its pre-punk history, was primarily an immigrant neighborhood. The tenement housing built in the 19th century began hosting large numbers of Italians, Irish, and Germans upon the opening of Ellis Island in 1892. However, the most prominent ethnic group in the Lower East Side during this period was Jews. Jewish institutions such as Katz’s Deli on Houston Street served as meeting places for thousands of Jews from nearby tenement housing. Also, Little Italy served as a major sub-neighborhood housing thousands of Italians and covering a couple dozen blocks. However, it is now mostly seen as a tourist destination with Little Italy proper only covering about ten blocks (Little Italy NYC).

The Lower East Side also contains a major Puerto Rican enclave, affectionately known as Loisaida (which is Spanglish for the Lower East Side). The Puerto Rican population has typically lived along the alphabet avenues (A, B, C, D), otherwise known as Alphabet City. The Puerto Rican population began settling in the area in the interwar years, but the 1950’s brought an even larger wave of migrants (Mele 2000: 124-25). In the present day, Puerto Ricans are one of the most prominent groups in the Lower East Side, even though they were the ones most victimized by the gentrification of the 1980’s.

While always considered a separate entity from the Lower East Side, Chinatown serves importance in the area and is the largest Chinese enclave in the Western
hemisphere. It houses anywhere from 75,000-150,000 people (the exact number is impossible to quantify because of the non-citizen status of many residents) and is ever-expanding in both population and real estate (The History of New York’s Chinatown). Despite its status as a separate neighborhood, Chinatown’s presence contributed to the ethnic character of the Lower East Side during its early years, when the neighborhood resembled a “patchwork quilt” (Mele 2000: 153).

The first major shift to the Lower East Side occurred in the 1960’s with the arrival of the hippies between 1964 and 1968. At this point, there was a mass influx of performance spaces (St Mark’s Playhouse) and new shops (Peace Eye Book Store) that catered to the new, younger demographic of the neighborhood. All of these establishments were located north of Houston Street and caused the northern area of the Lower East Side to adopt the name, “the East Village.” Importantly, this term was never meant to describe the ethnic enclaves located in this area. Instead, it was a marketing ploy to attract younger residents with money (Mele 2000: 160). This plan was successful as “modern town houses” were built in 1968 on Avenue C (Mele 2000: 157). That being said, new housing projects were built in the same areas throughout the decade. Unsurprisingly, tensions emerged between the hippies and the lower-income residents in the area. While the presence of the hippies was positive for landlords and developers, efforts at integration were seen as patronizing to those living in poverty. One place where tensions ran high was in Tompkins Square Park, a major community center between 7th Street and 10th Street and Avenue A and Avenue B. Public spectacles such as a “be-in” in 1967 were relegated to the southern half of the park so that other residents could use the
northern half of the park. As these rules were broken, thirty-eight hippies were arrested in an incident that was indicative of the turf wars of the time (Mele 2000: 161-162).

It is important to acknowledge that the hippie invasion of the 1960’s birthed the first major music venues in the Lower East Side. The Fillmore East opened in 1968 on Second Avenue as a counterpart to the Fillmore West in San Francisco. The Fillmore East booked the top counter-culture bands of its era and was the site for famous live albums from artists such as The Allman Brothers Band, The Grateful Dead, and Jefferson Airplane. Perhaps more significantly, Max’s Kansas City opened in 1965 just north of Union Square. Max’s quickly became a favorite hangout spot for Andy Warhol and hosted some of the most notable proto-punk acts. The Velvet Underground was the first band to emerge in 1967 with an arty sound that deconstructed the common structure (verse-chorus-verse) and lyrical tropes (they wrote about sadomasochism instead of love at first sight) of rock and roll. Meanwhile, The New York Dolls also began their career with gigs at Max’s in 1972. The New York Dolls were direct influence on punk with a raucous live show and a rebellious image that proved too extreme to cross over to the mainstream. Patti Smith was also a regular performer who combined rock and poetry to ingenious effect. Smith would become particularly important in establishing punk nationally later in the 1970’s with her seminal album, *Horses*.

The hippie era of the Lower East Side was a short-lived phenomenon. Its demise was partially due to inauthentic media coverage including a 1967 *New York Times Magazine* article entitled “The Intelligent Square’s Guide to Hippieland” (Mele 2000: 167). However, more serious and violent problems were also present. Attacks on hippies
by Latinos were common at the end of the 1960’s (Mele 2000: 172). Also, on October 8th, 1967, a “hippie” couple was found murdered in their tenement building on Avenue B. One of the victims, James Hutchinson, was a prominent and respected marijuana dealer and activist. The murders were particularly controversial since the killers were black. This changed the public perception of the area. The media coverage of the East Village was no longer fawning, as the area was once again seen as a dangerous slum (Mele 2000: 175-176). Thus, the real estate development moved elsewhere and the Lower East Side was once again seen as in decline or even in a mode of “crisis.”

“Urban crisis” was a popular phrase in the discourse around cities at the time. This “crisis” was often seen in racialized terms as the white-middle class became attracted by suburban expansion, leaving a greater percentage of people of color within the city limits. This was seen as incredibly detrimental as the city lost much of its tax and leadership base (Beauregard 2003: 94-95). Additionally, there was a sense that those left could not bring the city back to prominence, as they were “less skilled culturally, economically, and politically” (Clark 1959: 119). The “urban crisis” rhetoric was invoked specifically towards New York City, as its status at the news center of the country made it easier to transmit local images of drugs, muggings, and porn theaters to homes across the country (Greenberg 2008: 61). This made it seem that New York was doomed to failure. However, by the end of the 1970’s, steps were in place to reverse the downturn.

1970 Census Data

Figure 2: Selected Census Data from 1970
As one can see from the table, New York County (Manhattan) had a 9.4% decrease in population (1.698 million versus 1.539 million) from 1960 to 1970, which is in stark contrast to the heavy growth of the United States population. In terms of 20-34 population, both Manhattan and New York City are above average for the nation, but they are not impressive percentages for large cities. In comparison, the 20-34 percentages of Boston and San Francisco were 36.3% and 30.5% in 1970 (1970 Census of Population).

In terms of median household income, Manhattan was also suffering. For 1970, this number was a little bit higher than the nationwide figure, but when one factors in the cost of living, this is not a marked increase. It is also interesting that the income for New York, as a whole, was higher than that of Manhattan. The idea of the “urban crisis” probably has some connection to this statistic as families and other well-off members of Manhattan’s workforce began to choose more suburban areas in the outer boroughs in greater numbers.

**Urban Malaise and the Emergence of New York Punk in the 1970’s**

*Figure 3: Photograph of New York City Subway Car, 1973. Taken By Erik Calonius.*
While the 1960’s offered increasing investment in the Lower East Side, the early 1970’s brought a mass wave of disinvestment. Unfortunately, much of this disinvestment occurred east of Avenue A, which directly overlaps with Loisaida. Additionally, Puerto Rican gangs emerged and police occupations occurred intermittently. Perhaps a bigger problem for the reputation of the Lower East Side was the pervasive drug use. Tompkins Square Park served as the head of the neighborhood’s heroin and cocaine sales, with lines of clients emerging from all over the tri-state area. Drugs were also sold in many bodegas, liquor stores, improvised street markets, and shooting galleries that lined Avenue D. Pictures from this era in Christopher Mele’s book *Selling the Lower East Side* are disturbing in their depiction of the desperation of drug addicts. It is clear to say that the with the major drug problem in the 1970’s, prospects for neighborhood hope seemed dim (Mele 2000: 195-200).

However, that was not the case for long as the Lower East Side became the country’s home for underground rock in the middle of the decade. Hilly Kristal opened
the famous club CBGB in 1973. The original intention was to host country, bluegrass, and blues music (those styles are the letters in CBGB), but that quickly changed. Seminal punk band Television, who formed right after a New York Dolls concert, fooled Kristal into booking them in March 1974. They were given three Sundays to perform and famed poet/musician Patti Smith was one of the first major fans of the group. Television soon became the house band for CBGB. At one point in 1974, they played Thursday-Sunday night for six weekends in a row (McNeil and McCain 1996: 170-173). This established the club as an important hub for rock music in the city. Other bands would follow in their wake. While Television were musically complex and angular, the Ramones were minimalist and aggressive with few songs over two minutes long. Talking Heads were also one of the scene’s leaders and quickly gained local fame for lead singer/songwriter David Byrne’s odd stage presence and quirky lyrics. Blondie had more pop polish than the other CBGB groups, but fit in well with the image of urban rebellion promoted by the club and its patrons.

While punk revitalized the status of the formerly dingy Lower East Side, it needed the neighborhood’s seediness in order to form. Early punk rock musicians and fans in the Lower East Side were “pioneer gentrifiers” who settled in the Lower East Side because of its low rents and dangerous edge (Smith 1979: 71). Most of the original musicians were not from the Lower East Side originally. The Ramones formed in the middle class neighborhood of Forest Hills in Queens while The Dictators formed in The Bronx. Meanwhile, Talking Heads were not from New York City at all as they formed at the Rhode Island School of Design before settling into a loft at 195 Chrystie Street (Fletcher
This outsider status was also true of many of the very first fans such as Legs McNeil (the founder of *Punk* magazine and the co-author of *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk*), who was originally from suburban Connecticut and moved to the Lower East Side immediately after high school. In my interview with him he stated that his attraction to the Lower East Side was that “you could do anything you wanted” because it “was such a mess.” After reading his book, it seemed that this was true of many other of the original punks’ desire to move to the neighborhood.

The Lower East Side was also essential to the content of punk music. Lyrical themes included urban decay (“New York, New York” by the Dictators), drug use (“Chinese Rocks” by the Heartbreakers), and sexual deviancy (“X Offender” by Blondie). Punk rock musicians also lived dangerously when not performing. Going to the “dope house” was a regular activity for musicians such as Television’s Richard Lloyd (McNeil and McCain 1996: 210). Also, the excellent Ramones’ song “53rd and 3rd” written by Dee Dee Ramone was based on his own experiences as a male prostitute who hustled on that Midtown corner. Punk, even to its detractors, should be seen as incredibly authentic form of musical expression that was ideal at depicting the Lower East Side in the mid 1970’s.

**Punk Goes National While Expanding in the Lower East Side**

The Ramones self-titled album was the first national punk album upon its release in April of 1976. It only reached number 111 on the Billboard 200, but this still meant

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2 This was not true for every member of every band, but it was true for many. In addition to Talking Heads; Blondie, the Ramones, and Terry Ork from Television were all residents of the Lower East Side (Fletcher 2009: 345-346)
that tens-of-thousands of people across the country became exposed to the rock underground in New York City (Allmusic.com). Debuts from Blondie and Television appeared within the next year courtesy of major labels. After this, the floodgates opened up and some of these bands would find significant commercial success. In 1979, Blondie even had a #1 hit with “Heart of Glass” (Allmusic.com).

The local New York punk scene continued to expand. Max’s Kansas City, which was closed for renovation in 1974, started being a major booking competitor to CBGB. Some bands tried to affiliate themselves with one of the two clubs and the clubs had an unwritten rule not to book the same bands within the same week (Charlesworth 1976).

New sub-scenes with new clubs also emerged. The Mudd Club opened in Tribeca in 1978 and became the home of No Wave, which was a particularly experimental and arty version of punk. This scene was primarily defined by the bands on the No New York compilation, such as the Contortions and D.N.A. These bands drew on the sound and attitude of punk, but added touches of funk, blues, and experimental music such as that of Yoko Ono. No Wave never had the same commercial reach as punk, but it did usher in the second wave of gentrification through its connection to a new East Village arts scene. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

**What Punk Meant to the Development of the Lower East Side**

Punk gave the Lower East Side attention outside of its own borders. By that, I mean that a definitive scene emerged around CBGB and the Mudd Club and it began gaining recognition throughout the New York area. Specifically, it was seen as an alternative to the uptown scene that was anchored by famous disco nightclub Studio 54.
Unlike the uptown scene, the downtown scenes lacked exclusivity and a celebrity cache, making them feel more welcoming and personal.

This scene can be seen as producing an emerging Creative Class as defined by Richard Florida. While Florida does not see this as a major trend until the late 1990’s, this has always been a major part of the New York City economy as it is the country’s leading center for many forms of popular entertainment such as theater and publishing. In fact, Florida notes Greenwich Village (which borders the Lower East Side) as a place towards which the Creative Class has “always gravitated” towards (2002: 7).

As I discussed earlier, the Creative Class spends much of their time in “third places,” or places that are not home and work (Florida 2002: 225-226; see Oldenburg 1989). These “third places” often consist of nightlife such as clubs and bars, and CBGB, Max’s Kansas City, , and the Mudd Club were three of the best in the city in the late 1970’s. A main feature of these clubs was they were not exclusive (with the exception of the Mudd Club, which had a door policy). The Creative Class often desires a “flexible” community that allows them to explore their area at their own whim (Florida 2002: 220). The punk scene of the 1970’s encouraged this. In 1977, NME (New Musical Express) described CBGB patrons as only interested in the “serious task of having a good time” (Farren 1977). Since nightclubs are supposed to result in a “good time” and are a pivotal part of the lifestyle of the Creative Class, it is only fitting that the Lower East Side was about to gentrify around the punk scene.

Like the hippie movement, the new downtown counterculture was attractive to real estate landlords and developers. Starting in 1978, rates of disinvestment slowed and
real estate capital prompted new development in SoHo and Chinatown, which meant more business for Lower East Side merchants (Mele 2000: 220-222). These changes occurred slowly, but they set the table for both the art boom and a full emergence of the creative class in the 1980’s, which in turn led to an onslaught of changes to the Lower East Side. Once again, this will be discussed later in Chapter 2.

1980 Census Data

As with the data for 1970, finding data for individual tracts that overlapped with the Lower East Side was not possible. Thus, we are once again using the data for New York County and New York City as a whole to try to analyze trends for the Lower East Side. As with 1970, the census data reflects a declining neighborhood and a declining city. The 1980 population of Manhattan was down to 1.43 million, which was a decline of 7.2% from 1970. Interestingly, while the population of Manhattan declined, it was smaller than the total population decline in New York City, which declined by 10.4%.

(1980 Census of Population) These declines make sense as the suburbs were expanding and the image of New York as being indicative of the “urban crisis” was becoming more and more prominent. It is possible that the new club culture in Manhattan and the Lower East Side played a role in the relatively limited decline of Manhattan’s population, but this is probably not the main reason for this statistic.

It should also be noted that while 21.8% of the population in New York City was between 20-34 in 1970, this percentage actually increased to 25.1% in 1980. This makes some sense as a secular trend since baby boomers began to fit into that age group. That
makes more sense than surmising that this trend is the result of the (still up-and-coming) club scene.

*Figure 4: 1980 Median Household Income in Inflation-Adjusted Dollars.*

As for median household income, Manhattan’s (inflation-adjusted) 1980 total was at $44,786. That is a notable 15% decrease over the course of the decade, while all of New York City had a 21% decrease. In comparison, the (inflation-adjusted) median household income for the United States rose 2% during the same time period. While the 1970’s economy was not great for the country as a whole, these drops indicate that it was very poor for New York City, which continued to be seen as a place in crisis. (1970 Census of Population, 1980 Census of Population)
Thus, the statistics for Manhattan and the Lower East Side seem to be trending positive in some areas, but negative in most areas. This means that gentrification in the Lower East Side is merely germinating at best, even as it was more present in other neighborhoods such as TriBeca and SoHo at this point in time. The declining population and wealth in Manhattan pointed to a fear of the big city that was still present for many young families and recent college graduates. They instead settled in outlying areas of the cities and the suburbs (Beauregard 2003: 159). However, as we will see with the 1990 census, Manhattan was growing again as music scene gentrification in the Lower East Side accelerated at full speed.
Chapter 2: Art, Commerce, and Failed Protest

“People were more interested in the phenomena [sic] than the art itself. This, combined with the growing interest in collecting art as an investment and the resultant boom in the art market, made it a difficult time for a young artist to remain sincere without becoming cynical.” (Keith Haring quotes)

This quote by artist and activist, Keith Haring, speaks to the impact, both positive and negative, of the New York arts scene in the 1980’s. This was a major period of change for both the Lower East Side and the city as a whole. The 1980’s brought new phenomena such as crack cocaine, rent hikes, population increases, yuppies, and ethnic tensions to the forefront of many neighborhoods. This was especially true in the Lower East Side, which would undergo a major period of gentrification and demographic shifts. This chapter will take a look at these processes and how they were spurned by the underground art scene that initially formed as an offshoot of punk rock.

The Art Scene Explodes

By the beginning of the 1980’s, punk had gone in an artier direction both musically and culturally. Punk began at CBGB, a dive bar, but its home base was now The Mudd Club, which put just as much of an emphasis on fashion and style as it did on music. The Mudd Club was also the site of one of the first major allegiances between rock music and art and many of the scene’s luminaries began their public work at the Tribeca venue (Grendron 2002: 299). Keith Haring was the curator of the fourth floor gallery while graffiti artist Jean-Michel Basquiat’s noise rock/No Wave band Gray frequently played at the club. The Mudd Club had a cool, and somewhat elitist vibe that transcended the idea of a typical rock club. This vibe forced Mudd Club to go from being an open-entry to a closed entry club in 1981 (Grendron 2002: 299). However, The Mudd Club closed in 1983.
as many in the art scene had become more prominent names and demanded bigger spaces for their art (Mele 2000: 218-219).

The Mudd Club was not the only important place for the underground music and art scenes to coalesce in the city. The public access television program *TV Party* was also influential. Running from 1978 to 1982, the show had a freeform, socially conscious ethos that was epitomized by its slogan, “*TV Party* is the show that’s a cocktail party but which could also be a political party” (The TV Party Story). This aesthetic attracted new and edgy musicians and artists to the program. Bands that evolved from New York’s original punk scene such as The Cramps made early appearances on *TV Party*, while the show’s name directly inspired the title of a song by noted California punk band Black Flag. *TV Party*’s circle overlapped with the crowd at the Mudd Club and several episodes were filmed there. One major player in both circles was Jean-Michel Basquiat, who performed a variety of tasks on *TV Party*, from running the camera to displaying his graffiti. By giving Basquiat and others (Chris Burden, John Feckner etc.) a venue for their work, *TV Party* was an influential space for the worlds of New York City underground music and avant-garde art to merge. Since host Glenn O’Brien dubs *TV Party* as “punk TV,” we can accurately categorize the art featured on the show a being a continuation of punk (The TV Party Story).

This is how the East Village was characterized when it began receiving prominent attention in the broader art world in 1982. Like the earlier art scenes that appeared in the Greenwich Village and SoHo, the East Village scene was labeled as a “new Bohemia” (Grendron 2002: 313.) While these artists were groundbreaking, the label created a hype
that was hyperbolic. Thus, a rush of galleries opened and glowing articles appeared in the
*Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*. Artists were often constructed as
“personalities” in media profiles. One of the main images of these profiles was that the
East Village was a place of residence that fostered rebellion and unconventional
lifestyles. However, these portrayals of rebellion did not focus on drug use or undesirable
living conditions, but instead honed in on trivial matters, such as the tendency for art
galleries in the Lower East Side to remain open on Sundays. Through these glowing
profiles, the art scene was “professionalized” and artists like Basquiat began leaving the
neighborhood just as its cultural profile was increasing (Mele 2000: 230). Thus, the
Lower East Side art scene was mostly over by 1984, but its influence on gentrification
continued through the rest of the decade.

**Real Estate Changes**

In the beginning of the 1980’s, Midtown Manhattan was in a rebuilding process
brought about by many new young, urban, professionals (Yuppies) who moved to the
area with a desire to be near the center of global finance. Because of this shift in
demographics, conversions to condominiums and office towers were necessary and the
Manhattan housing stock was reduced. This meant that people who had previously lived
in middle-income rental units were forced to move to areas such as the Lower East Side.
Thus, speculative investment occurred and landlords fed into this anticipation by
increasing rents in the Lower East Side, which rose 20 percent for substandard units in
However, once the art scene began exploding, more significant and damaging spikes occurred. Flipping, or the “continued reselling of a single property within a short time at successively higher prices,” became a common practice (2000: 224). A notorious example of flipping can be seen with the Christodora House, a famous low-income project on Avenue B. In 1984, the entire property sold for $1.2 million, but was immediately sold again at the price of $3 million. In this case, the rent did not increase for individual tenants, but it did for other victims of flipped properties that were individual units. Devious rent policies were not only carried out by investors and landlords, but from Mayor Ed Koch. Koch proposed the Artists’ Homeownership Program (AHOP) in 1982 to convert vacant and abandoned properties to housing for moderate-income artists. Unsurprisingly, the first chosen site was the Lower East Side. The goal was to prevent artist displacement, but this was already occurring because of the boom of the art scene. While AHOP was never fully implemented, its public controversy demonstrated Koch’s true intent, which was to rid the city of its most unsavory elements such as drugs, sex, and homelessness (Mele 2000: 238-239).

**The 1980’s and the Creative Class**

While the initial housing shortage played a major role in the gentrification of the Lower East Side, the “cool” reputation of the art scene made the problem significantly worse. Because of the increased amount of art collecting and the general media hype, neighborhood artists were forced to self-promote via such tactics as befriending rock stars (Yoko Ono) and actors (Matt Dillon) at parties (Bowler & McBurney 1991: 63-64). This same tendency spread to the dealers and gallery owners, resulting in a wave of tourists to
these galleries. The next step was that adjacent storeowners were forced to convert to serve the tourists. Second-hand stores became boutiques and inexpensive restaurants became pasta/wine bars (Bowler & McBurney 1991: 66). This reduced the amount of comfortable, affordable spaces for neighborhood residents. This idea even extended to the underground musicians and artists that made the Lower East Side “cool” in the first place. New York filmmaker Jim Jarmusch notes that at CBGB or Max’s Kansas City in the 1970’s, there would be a “good spirit of exchanging ideas which now is completely gone.” He further states, “the scene became more of a spectator scene than one of participants” (Bowler and McBurney 1991: 67).

The “spectators” that Jarmusch was referring to are an influx of the new Creative Class. The Creative Class yearns for the “authentic,” which Florida defines as a “real” place that “offers unique and original experiences” An authentic place will also have some kind of “buzz” (Florida 2002: 228-229). This “buzz” was certainly seen with the art of Basquiat, Haring, and Michael Holman. These artists were also seen as “authentic,” especially compared to the staid styles of uptown artists and museums. Authenticity was also a major characteristic of TV Party, which followed its own whims instead of conventional television rules.

That connection between the art and music scenes was also important for the Creative Class. Music plays a role in authenticity and it can attract gentrifiers. New York Punk

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3 It should be stated that the musicians and artists are also members of the “Creative Class,” but they were generally not the ones buying the art or feeding the speculative investment. When I say influx, I am more referring to those that moved into the neighborhood post-Basquiat to reap the benefits of being in the newly trendy Lower East Side.
never became massively popular nationwide, but it had a major role in characterizing the Lower East Side. Thus, it defined the neighborhood as “authentic” to members of the Creative Class. Yuppies and others moving to the Lower East Side may not have enjoyed the music of the Cramps or Sonic Youth, but they appreciated that it added to the “cool” reputation of the neighborhood (Florida 2002: 228-229).

Because of the mass conversions of storefronts, new “third places” emerged. While the Creative Class was unlikely to frequent family-owned restaurants, they would hang out at the pasta/wine bars or even CBGB (Bowler & McBurney 1991: 66-67). Richard Florida also notes that for the Creative Class, lifestyle trumps employment. They may have previously lived in Midtown or in the Financial District to be closer to work, but the commute was now worth it given the atmosphere of the Lower East Side (Florida 2002: 224).

Interestingly, the symbols associated with the Lower East Side in media representation had not substantially changed between the 1970’s and 1980’s. Decay and hardship were still emphasized. However, their connotation changed from being unfortunate to being “cool”. This was almost exclusively the result of marketing centered on the art scene. This marketing can be seen in the genesis of the Palladium, which was an attempt to create a Studio 54-like mega-club in the East Village. The Palladium, which opened in 1985, combined uptown sensibility with downtown style, enlisting Basquiat and Haring to decorate the club’s interior in an attempt to court former Mudd-Clubbers. However, in an attempt to further expand the audience for Lower East Side nightlife, The Palladium often hosted parties for Wall Street businessmen and served mineral water
The Palladium was a smash success, as it represented the full transition from underground to commercial. Lasting until 1997, The Palladium was a key “third place” for the gentrified Lower East Side (Mele 2000: 233).

**Tensions in the Lower East Side**

With the addition of the Creative Class and other gentrifiers into the Lower East Side, the character of the neighborhood changed. The artists commercialized the area, but this was partially because they failed to include the economically marginalized that made up a sizable percentage of Lower East Side residents. The same was true of the subsequent representations of the area, which glossed over the dire reality of poverty and homelessness. An example of this purposeful ignorance was the new name of “Alphabet City” for the blocks between Avenue A and Avenue D. This new name was seized by developers because of its playfulness, which served to break with the reality of the squalor that affected much of that area (Mele 2000: 235-236).

Other changes had a practical, and not just symbolic, effect on the economically marginalized in the Lower East Side. Christodora House, on Avenue B, had long served as attractive, low-cost housing option for families in the neighborhood. However, in 1986, Christodora House was converted to condos to attract gentrifiers. In this process, the developer behind the project, Samuel Glasser, stated that “an all-poor neighborhood is a bore” and felt that having a mix of poor and rich people was “fun” (Mele 2000: 243). Not only did this statement show a complete lack of concern for those who occupied the Christodora House prior to the conversion, but also it reflected the ethos of the real-estate
industry at the time. Profit could be made by making the Lower East Side “cool,” even if it meant that current residents had to suffer.

However, those residents formed a legitimate protest movement in the wake of gentrification. The phrases “Die Yuppie Scum” and “Mug a Yuppie” became commonplace sights, as they were scrawled on buildings and sidewalks. Meanwhile, less aggressive tactics such as boycotts and forming community lobbying organizations also occurred. Even squatters took action to protect their rights. They emerged as leaders of the protest movement and participated in the creative efforts of resistance, including poetry, painting, and music (Mele 2000: 256-259).

While these efforts were well intentioned, a new batch of city policies ensured that gentrification would not cease. Operation Pressure Point was initiated in the early 1980’s to curb drug use and sales across the city. The Lower East Side was a particular target of the operation, as 14,285 people were arrested in the neighborhood in the first month of the operation alone. (Mele 2000: 239). This did not necessarily curb the drug economy, which went further underground, but it appeared to the public that the neighborhood was getting safer. This was all that was necessary to keep gentrification going and for the protest movement to grow stronger (Mele 2000: 239-240).

**The Tompkins Square Park Riots**

As mentioned earlier, Tompkins Square Park is one of the key community centers for the Lower East Side. For most of its history, it was a place to relax and eat outside, as well as being the center of community demonstrations. That being said, by the late 1980’s the park had gathered a reputation as a dirty place filled with drugs and squatters.
Because of the concerns of police and middle-class gentrifiers, the city instituted a midnight curfew of the park, beginning in August 1988. A gathering by local residents at the first night of the curfew began as a small, peaceful protest. However, the police quickly and violently stormed the park. They clubbed both participants and bystanders and chased people through local businesses. The riot lasted for three hours and forty-four people were injured (Mele 2000: 263-264).

The riot seemed shocking to many ignorant residents, but was an inevitable result of tensions surrounding gentrification that had been brewing for the entire decade. In the aftermath, threats of another riot persisted with chants such as “This land is our land” defining the protests that continued in the park in the subsequent months (Mele 2000: 267). Surprisingly, many residents, both new and old, who were not affiliated with the riot, supported the protests against the police. Gentrification began to be seen widely as a negative phenomenon (Mele 2000: 267).

However, this rejection of gentrification, in spite of government and real estate pressure, was short-lived. Once it became obvious that the midnight curfew was not going to be enforced, the homeless camps in Tompkins Square Park kept expanding. This caused calls for the proposed curfew to be strictly enforced. Because of this, the city government decided to act by evicting the homeless from the park on a cold December day in 1989. Shortly afterwards, Tompkins Square Park was closed for a year for renovations, which installed playgrounds and an area for dogs in an attempt to appear safe and welcoming to gentrifiers.

**1990 Census Data and the Lower East Side Today**
To a certain extent, this renovation was the final proof of the presence of gentrification. We can see the changes in some of the Census data for 1990. Unlike with
the data that we have used for previous Censuses, data about individual tracts is available (as is shown in Figure 5). The Lower East Side consists of the even numbers of 2-30 of New York County. For the purposes of this paper, I have decided to analyze three of the tracts to provide a general overview of the neighborhood. Tract 12 covers the area between Ridge Street and Lewis Street from east to west and between Grand Street and Delancey Street north to south. Tract 28 runs between 9th and 14th streets and Avenue B and Avenue D. This tract is very close to Tompkins Square Park and is in Alphabet City, which was the poster child for gentrification. Tract 38 is in the western part of the Lower East Side and encompasses the area between 3rd and 9th street and between the Bowery and 1st Avenue. In 1990, this tract had 8,395 people and a whopping 43% were between the ages of 20-34. (1990 Census of Population) (Socialexplorer.com). If the “cool” and the Creative Class are primarily in this age group, then it is clear that some of them reside in these blocks, which experienced a great deal of gentrification during the previous decade. (1990 Census of Population).

Educational background was also available on a tract-by-tract basis in 1990. As a reminder, Manhattan had a bachelor’s degree attainment rate of 33.1% in 1980 (1980 Census of Population). In 1990, Tract 12 had only a 20.5% percent bachelor’s degree attainment rate. However, it should be stated that this tract consists of a portion of Chinatown that was, at this time, an only minimally gentrified area. As you can see from the table, the percentages were much higher in tracts north of Houston Street. This shows that the East Village and Alphabet City had a more educated population, which would be consistent with the presence of “creative class” gentrifiers.
The percentage for New York County as a whole was almost a 9% increase over the course of a decade and much of that increase is probably due to the gentrification of the Lower East Side, especially by those who had graduated from college in the 1980’s (1990 Census of Population) (Socialexplorer.com)

In terms of median household income, Manhattan averaged $53,605. That is a nice 20% increase from 1980. For comparison’s sake, the United States number was $49,255. This means that Manhattan overtook the United States in terms of higher average median household income, despite being behind in 1980. This happened, at least in part, because of growth in the Lower East Side. While tract data was unavailable in regards to this statistic in 1980, we can track our three tracts in median household income for the 1990 Census. As you can see from the chart, all three tracts are below the Manhattan average, but Tract 38 is somewhat close. However, all three tracts are above
the 1990 poverty line of a five-person household (https://usa.ipums.org/usa/volleyi/1990Poverty.shtml). This suggests that the Lower East Side had outgrown its image as an impoverished neighborhood and was closer to becoming on par with the rest of Manhattan in regards to economic status.

In sum, the Lower East Side changed tremendously in the 1980s. As the art world was booming, an influx of new, Creative Class gentrifiers emerged in the neighborhood. As a result, real estate prices increased exponentially and neighborhood landmarks such as Christodora House were altered in damaging ways. A protest culture emerged to fight neighborhood change and displacement, but it quickly fizzled out through city policies that restricted activity in Tompkins Square Park and removed the homeless from the area.

Things became worse in the 1990’s, even as the Lower East Side retained and capitalized on its counterculture image. The popular musical, Rent, which debuted in 1994, takes place in the East Village in the 1980’s. It both “pays tribute” to the neighborhood’s “artistic heyday” and glamorizes the struggles of those being forced out by gentrification (Tonooka 2008: 141). By making these struggles seem cool to Broadway patrons who are paying a large amount of money to attend the show or buying merchandise at Bloomingdale’s, Rent actually supports gentrification (Tonooka 2008: 154). Thus, the Lower East Side remains cool, but for all the wrong reasons. This commodification of the neighborhood currently results in a reality where McDonald’s in the neighborhood adds Kandinsky paintings to their walls in an attempt to appeal to the Creative Class (Mele 2000: 295). However, this attempt, even if financially successful, is merely a façade. The McDonalds has nothing in common with CBGB, which was forced
to close in 2006 because of rising rent, since it is not a legitimate countercultural or community-oriented space. A few spaces like that still exist (Nuyorican Poets Café and ABC No Rio come to mind), but for the most part the Lower East Side currently resembles much of Manhattan and not the rough and impoverished neighborhood that created some of the best, and most rebellious, music of the 20th century.
Chapter 3: First Steps to a Hipster Capital

“At seven p.m. you felt fear in the gloom and rightly so. Old New York hands donned their city armor. The street was quiet but not with the sprinkler hiss of summer lawns: no, Williamsburg was a ghost town” (2012: 22).

In this anecdote from his memoir “The Last Bohemia: Scenes from the Life of Williamsburg,” Robert Anasi details the condition of pre-hipster Williamsburg. It may seem obvious to state, but Williamsburg was not always the center of the cool and the young. Prior to the late 1990’s, it was primarily comprised of ethnic enclaves, including sizable Hasidim and Puerto Rican populations. Like the Lower East Side, this would change with the emergence of a counter-cultural music scene. This chapter will explore both the history of the neighborhood, its undesirable status in the 1990’s, and the beginnings of change at the end of the decade.

Williamsburg Geography

Figure 8: Partial Map of Western Brooklyn
The borders of Williamsburg are generally considered the East River/Kent Avenue on the west, Bushwick/Kingsland Avenue on the east, just above McCarren Park/Nassau Avenue on the north, and Flushing Avenue on the South. Broadway has typically been the dividing line between the North and South sides of the neighborhood. For the purposes of this paper, it should be noted that the North Side experienced gentrification before the South Side. The reasoning is that the ethnic enclaves mostly resided in the South Side, creating more resistance to music venues, which helped spur gentrification.

**Williamsburg 1903-1990**

Williamsburg’s modern history began with the construction of the Williamsburg Bridge in 1903, which linked the neighborhood, which is in the western part of Brooklyn, to Manhattan. This created a mass explosion in the population of Williamsburg, mainly consisting of immigrants who wanted to escape the overcrowded slums in the Lower East Side. One of the major new groups were Jews, especially Hasidim who migrated immediately after the Holocaust. At this time, industry was doing well in Williamsburg, led by Brooklyn Union Gas and the Domino Sugar Refiner, which was the largest in the world. However, due to various circumstances including the energy crisis in the 1970’s, industry in the neighborhood steadily declined after World War II. It was around this time that an influx of Dominican and Puerto Ricans settled in Williamsburg’s South Side. The crime rate in Williamsburg went way up at this time. Gangs were prevalent in all of Brooklyn, but some of the most notorious were in Williamsburg (New York Times 1974: 
33). This led to a negative reputation that would be hard to be overcome in subsequent decades.

*Figure 9: 1990 Williamsburg Census Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>% of 20-34</th>
<th>% of Bachelor's</th>
<th>Median Household Income ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tract 553</td>
<td>2,229</td>
<td>29.30%</td>
<td>22.20%</td>
<td>$43,195.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tract 547</td>
<td>1,597</td>
<td>28.60%</td>
<td>13.20%</td>
<td>$24,129.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tract 501</td>
<td>2,759</td>
<td>29.50%</td>
<td>8.60%</td>
<td>$35,616.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>2,300,664</td>
<td>25.80%</td>
<td>16.60%</td>
<td>$38,979.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>7,322,564</td>
<td>29.30%</td>
<td>23.00%</td>
<td>$52,481.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>248,709,873</td>
<td>28.20%</td>
<td>20.30%</td>
<td>$49,255.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 10: Delineation of Williamsburg Tracts*
To give an overview of what Williamsburg looked like demographically at the beginning of 1990, it is, once again useful to parse the Census data. Tract data is available and I chose three (553, 547, and 501) that give a good overview of the neighborhood. 553 is located in the North Side, 547 is located in the South Side, and 501 is located in the eastern part of the neighborhood, adjacent to I-278. All three of the tracts are roughly equal in their percentage of 20-34 year-olds. However, these percentages were noticeably lower than those in most of the tracts in the Lower East Side.

When looking at educational attainment, Tract 553 had a higher percentage of Bachelor’s Degree attainment than Tracts 547 and 501. This seems to coincide with the idea that the North Side was the more educated and affluent area of Williamsburg and the presence of some artists may have contributed to the higher percentage. Needless to say, that is still a fairly low percentage, especially compared with the Lower East Side (which had tract percentages ranging from 20.5% to 47.6%) and Manhattan in general, where the percentage was 42.2%. Thus, it is safe to say that the presence of the Creative Class in Williamsburg was very limited in the early 1990’s (1990 Census of Population) (Socialexplorer.com).

In terms of median household income, tracts in Williamsburg trailed that of New York City and the United States. This signifies that the area was still seen as lower-class and failed to attract gentrifiers, despite its close proximity to Manhattan, which had a much higher median income than Brooklyn at the time (see Figure 3). However, this pattern would not hold for long and this statistic would be more on par with New York City and nationwide levels over the next two censuses.
Williamsburg in the Early 1990’s

As hard as it is to imagine today, Williamsburg was considered a last resort at the same time that the Lower East Side, located just across the bridge, was gentrifying. The first subway station, at Bedford Avenue, was in poor condition. Few businesses were open on the street and some younger New Yorkers had never even heard of the neighborhood (Anasi 2012: 21-22). Williamsburg was often framed in contrast to the Lower East Side, partially because they were one subway stop away from each other. The Lower East Side was where you went for all social and work activities, while Williamsburg was a “frontier” and a “place to recover” (Anasi 2012: 31). Residents saw it as an affordable alternative in terms of residence, but mostly useless for all other purposes (Anasi 2012: 22-23).

Even fawning and prophetic profiles of Williamsburg noticed its unsavory elements. In his 1992 article for *New York Magazine*, “The New Bohemia: Portrait of an Artists’ Colony in Brooklyn,” Brad Gooch interviewed several artists and writers in Williamsburg. Even though Gooch noted that a growing number of artists are settling there, the subjects do not have positive takes on the neighborhood. One described it as “the land that time forgot” while another calls it “a working-class hick town” (1992: 28).

One of the important distinctions that the article made between Williamsburg’s art movement in the early 1990’s and the Lower East Side’s in the 1980’s is that these pieces were not being shown in their original neighborhood. Instead, Manhattan galleries were still doing most of the exhibiting (1992: 28). However, the Williamsburg social scene was starting to expand. Underground, Brooklyn-only parties started happening at
people’s apartments and abandoned buildings (1992: 29). This would be a sign that a desire for nightlife and social activities was beginning in Williamsburg, even though the amount of options paled in comparison to many areas of Manhattan.

Kokie’s

While “third places” did emerge by the mid 1990’s in Williamsburg, they were not places that would have been attractive to gentrifiers. One example was Kokie’s Place, a notorious cocaine bar on the corner of Berry Street and North 3rd Street. Kokie’s opened in 1991 and remained an in-the-know establishment for much of the decade, with unconventional hours, an intimidating façade, and an ugly interior (Anasi 2012: 48-49). In the 1990’s, the clientele for Kokie’s was still heavily Latino/a, which is fitting given the Columbian bartenders and Puerto Rican music that blared throughout the bar. However, the white minority were often the highest patrons (VICE Staff 2008).

Kokie’s appealed to the down-and-out who resided in Williamsburg in the mid-1990’s. According to Robert Anasi, it was a place to go when “everything was wrong and you couldn’t bear to go home” (2012: 74). Violence occurred in the nearby vicinity of the club (2012: 76). In essence, it was a place that fit the despair of the neighborhood at that time. However, as Williamsburg would change, Kokie’s would as well in a strange attempt to court gentrifiers to a cocaine bar.

The Beginnings of Change

In 1995, right near the Bedford Avenue Subway Station, the L Café opened. The L was one of the first real attempts to create a Lower East Side-type restaurant in Williamsburg. The location was perfect as it was as close to the Lower East Side as
possible, while easy access to the subway acted as a shield from the dangerous aspects of Williamsburg. The L Café also hit the sweet spot between being accessible and being authentic, making it an ideal “third place” for the creative class. This connection was strengthened by the many flyers advertising community services, ranging from new apartments to soliciting new band members. These ads encouraged a community to form and the L Café was to act as that new community’s center (Anasi 2012: 59).

Slowly, a music scene began emerging in Williamsburg. One of the first major clubs was Black Betty on Metropolitan Avenue, which opened in early 1999. Black Betty was primarily a dance club, but it was an eclectic one that catered to both new gentrifiers and longtime residents (Anasi 2012: 163). Live music was present on most nights, but not always in the indie-rock vein that would later stereotype the neighborhood (Ryzik 2006: 9). Also of importance was that it was started by a long-time Williamsburg resident. Black Betty was successful because it filled a void in the neighborhood. Williamsburg’s population was getting younger, but the neighborhood was still lacking real nightlife to draw in a major contingent of Manhattanites. Black Betty was also one of the first Williamsburg establishments to draw people in from Manhattan. Even though this is not equivalent to the tidal wave of buzz that would wash over Williamsburg in the 2000’s, it was a starting point of the seduction of gentrifiers.

Yet, for the most part, the Creative Class was still avoiding the neighborhood as Williamsburg lacked a variety of entertainment options and developers were not putting into any money into the area. Additionally, it was hard to attract a younger, more affluent crowd to a city where dancing was effectively outlawed due to a strange policy enacted by
Rudy Giuliani (Anasi 2012: 111-112). Thus, while it was clear that Williamsburg was changing in the 1990’s and losing a bit of its character in the process, this was still not full-scale gentrification. Rents rose, but it was mostly due to the dot-com bubble instead of an explicit attempt to attract gentrifiers (Anasi 2012: 137-138). Also, this was mostly confined to the North Side and there was little evidence of people being displaced during this time. However, it is tough to surmise the indie-rock boom of the 2000’s occurring without additions to Williamsburg such as Kokie’s and the L Café.

2000 Census Data

Figure 11: 2000 Williamsburg Census Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>%20-34</th>
<th>% of Bachelor’s</th>
<th>Median Household Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Williamsburg (Tract 553)</td>
<td>2,583</td>
<td>36.90%</td>
<td>36.20%</td>
<td>$45,683</td>
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<tr>
<td>Williamsburg (Tract 547)</td>
<td>3,364</td>
<td>27.40%</td>
<td>11.20%</td>
<td>$20,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williamsburg (Tract 501)</td>
<td>2,646</td>
<td>34.50%</td>
<td>25.60%</td>
<td>$46,686</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>2,465,326</td>
<td>23.20%</td>
<td>21.80%</td>
<td>$42,313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>8,008,288</td>
<td>24.50%</td>
<td>27.40%</td>
<td>$51,251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>281,421,906</td>
<td>20.90%</td>
<td>24.40%</td>
<td>$55,295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The young adult demographic in Williamsburg evolved in interesting ways between 1990-2000. Both Tract 553 (North Side) and Tract 501 (East of I-278) had increases of their 20-34 populations by at least 5%. These areas changed the most in the previous decade, adding new restaurants, shops, and bars that would appeal to the Creative Class. However, Tract 547, which is the South Side of Williamsburg, saw its 20-34-population percentage decrease slightly during the 1990s. This South Side saw very few changes in the 1990’s and its status as a major home of poor ethnic enclaves was still intact at the end of the decade. However, it should be noted that all three tracts had a
larger percentage of 20-34 year olds than Brooklyn as a whole (2000 Census of Population) (Socialexplorer.com).

In terms of educational attainment, there was a big difference between Williamsburg in 1990 and the neighborhood in 2000. Once again, Tracts 553 and 501 showed major increases in the percentages of resident’s 25-and-over with a Bachelor’s degree or higher. However, Tract 547 went in the opposite direction, as just 11.2% of its residents received at least a Bachelor’s degree. This was a 2% decline from 1990, which is in the opposite direction from Brooklyn (5.2% increase) and from the rest of the country (3.9% increase). The story with this data again suggests that North and East Williamsburg was gaining some Creative Class residents, while South Williamsburg remained unchanged.

In terms of median household income (adjusted for inflation), the story is similar. While Tract 553 saw median household income increase by a percentage (6%) roughly the same as the national increase (5%), Tract 501’s median income rose a whopping 33%, demonstrating major growth in the 1990s. Meanwhile, Tract 547’s median household income actually fell by 16%. Once again, this serves as statistical proof that South Williamsburg was stuck in a status of undesirability and fading further into poverty. In contrast, the tracts in North and East Williamsburg were clearly beginning to gentrify and their growth rates in all three statistical variables are impressive.

Yet even if this is true, Williamsburg was still far from the ideal New York neighborhood for the Creative Class. Rent was cheap and bars existed, but there was little effort on the part of the neighborhood or developers to encourage these kinds of
businesses or attract new residents. While some of the demographics were changing, Williamsburg did not have a community to support a music scene and some of the original “cool” locations such as the L Café closed at the beginning of the 2000’s (Anasi 2012: 165). Further changes, such as the emergence of a major music scene, which instigated full-on gentrification were still on the way in the next decade. This is when Williamsburg would become the cool place to live for the Creative Class.
Chapter 4: Williamsburg Rising

“Brooklyn's a death bed
For clones of the same kid
Stuck in the party
That was lame to begin with”

Those lyrics are taken from the 2007 song “Williamsburg” by New Jersey pop-punk group Armor For Sleep. This image of Williamsburg as a “hipster” paradise consumed the neighborhood throughout the 2000s. This has many direct ties to the Creative Class gentrification that occurred gradually over the decade. As the previous chapter demonstrated, Williamsburg began changing in the 1990’s and the demographics became younger and more educated in the North and East parts of the neighborhood. However, mass development did not occur and many parts of Williamsburg were still unsafe and crime-ridden. However, once clubs like Galapagos and Northsix opened and bands such as TV On the Radio and The Rapture began receiving local and national buzz, the Creative Class simply took over Williamsburg. This chapter will demonstrate this process and conclude with explaining how most of Brooklyn is being co-opted by the Creative Class as the areas of cheap rent in New York City become more and more scarce.

The Williamsburg Music Scene Begins

The original Williamsburg rock clubs, The Stinger Club and Galapagos, both opened at the tail end of the 1990’s. The Stinger Club was located on Grand Street and was owned by Cathrine Westergaard. One of the main charms of The Stinger Club was that Westergaard also served as a bartender (Powers 2000). This made The Stinger Club
appears more authentic, which improved its desirability as a “third place”. Meanwhile, Galapagos opened in 1998 and initially functioned as an art space, but the back room grew as a venue for concerts (Anasi 2012: 182). Galapagos had a different vibe than The Stinger Club and was even described as “stylish” by The Village Voice (Parker 2001). These clubs attracted an audience very quickly and were the host of some of the first concerts by local luminaries like Kimya Dawson, and others (http://www.songkick.com/venues/435911-stinger-club).

Other venues such as Warsaw and Northsix opened up shortly afterwards. These clubs were also geared towards bringing national acts to Brooklyn in addition to supporting the local scene. Warsaw was a 1000-seat venue that was placed right in the middle of a Polish enclave and was even converted from the Polish National Home’s ballroom. Meanwhile, Northsix was located in a commercial district right near the East River. Club after club was opening and Williamsburg was turning into “an elaborate web of people and establishments” (Powers 2000). Meanwhile, Bedford Avenue, the location of many of the clubs (as well as the hipster favorite Verb Café), was even nicknamed Avenue E, as it was seen as a basic extension of the Lower East Side (Powers 2000).

More clubs meant more places for bands to play. Thus, more bands formed and many settled in the area, notably at a loft that at one time housed members of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, TV On the Radio, Metric, and Stars (Pitch.com). Like the CBGB scene, Williamsburg bands varied somewhat in style, but were often both intellectual and

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4 I am defining a “Williamsburg band” as any group that was associated with regularly playing at those clubs in the early 2000’s. Thus, some bands that never resided in the neighborhood, such as The Rapture, qualify as a “Williamsburg band.”
aggressive. The Rapture, Yeah Yeah Yeahs, and Les Savy Fav anchored the scene with their blend of post-punk influences, danceable grooves, and quirky lyrics. Also, like Lower East Side punk, most of the leading bands were not originally from the gentrified neighborhood. Yeah Yeah Yeahs met at New York University, while others such as The National and Liars relocated to New York City from other places (Cincinnati and San Diego respectively). Perhaps the ideal example of a band that benefitted from the emergence of a “scene” was TV On The Radio. TV On the Radio seemed to emerge from nowhere. The band was a collection of animators, local celebrities, and producers who almost immediately got a record deal and a residency at the Stinger Club on little more than hype (Roberts 2004). Instead of building an audience organically, one materialized out of thin air. According to Robert Anasi, TV on the Radio gigs marked the first local show “where” he “didn’t at least recognize people in the crowd” (2012: 203). This was a sign of the old Williamsburg residents being shoved out of the social scene by new ones. This trend would only increase as the Williamsburg bands became more famous as they decade went on.

**Williamsburg Goes National**

The Rapture was the first of the Williamsburg bands to release an official recording with their 1999 EP, *Mirror*, which was released on Gravity Records. However, that record attracted only limited sales. The stage was partially set for a Williamsburg breakthrough by the commercial success of a Manhattan group, The Strokes. RCA Records released their debut album, *Is This It*, in July of 2001. Buoyed by intense hype and critical praise, *Is This It*, became a major success and went gold (sales of over
500,000 copies) by early 2002 (Record Industry Association of America). Yeah Yeah Yeahs were somewhat similar sonically and their major label debut, *Fever To Tell*, was the first Williamsburg album to be a commercial success. *Fever to Tell* also went gold and received a Grammy nomination for Best Alternative Album. The Rapture’s full-length debut, *Echoes*, followed later in 2003. While it didn’t find the same broad commercial success as *Fever to Tell*, it did receive national notice through its crowning of Album of the Year by Pitchfork Media, an important, taste-making music site (Pitchfork.com). Meanwhile, TV On the Radio, Grizzly Bear, and Animal Collective would all have top 20 albums by the end of the decade. The idea that Williamsburg was an indie rock mecca was entrenched in the consciousness of the cool by the mid-2000’s. Thus, recent college graduates and the Creative Class came swarming from not only Manhattan, but from the entire tri-state area.

**Re-Zoning and Rent Hikes**

As always, gentrification in a particular neighborhood does not come into full effect until it is endorsed by the city government and the real estate developers (Smith 1979: 82-83). This occurred in 2005 when the East River waterfront alongside Greenpoint and Williamsburg was converted from “industrial use” to “mixed use” by the New York City government. What this meant was that real estate began to be allowed right near the river, and developers seized on this opportunity with 10,000 new units available in high-rise condominiums, with the average unit costing over $500,000. (Anasi 2012: 191-192).
As you may expect, the creation of the East River high rises infringed in the lives of longtime Williamsburg residents. While some of these effects were fairly trivial (increased subway traffic), many were harmful. While the rezoning plan promised more affordable housing, as well as inland community parks, this was not done at a reasonable pace. By 2007, the rent for both housing and retail space near the L Station on Bedford Avenue (about five blocks from the East River) was “four or five times” as expensive as it was in 2002 (Davis 2007: 23). This had the effect of dividing the community and driving many residents out of North Williamsburg.

The practice of looking for slightly cheaper housing in South and East Williamsburg was common. These areas were highlighted in the Real Estate section in the New York Times in the 2005 article, “Williamsburg Reinvented.” While the article was mostly a promotion, it discussed the phenomenon of buying a condo or an apartment in Williamsburg, which would have been a foreign concept at the beginning of the decade. Owning property has damaging consequences, because it pits residents against each other as renters and buyers often have different ideas about the neighborhood. Owners seek beautification and further gentrification, since this allows their property value to increase. Meanwhile, renters are often less invested in aesthetic matters and can be opposed to gentrification, since it is against their economic interests.

**Williamsburg and the Creative Class**

New York City has always been a refuge for artists and others who form the Creative Class. It has long had unique “third places” such as Broadway musicals and great museums. Thus, it is no surprise that New York City was ranked highly among
creative cities in Richard Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class*. In Florida’s rankings (from 1999), New York City ranks 12th out of 49 major metropolitan areas in its share of Creative Class employees (32.3%) (2002: 239). In the Creative Index, which takes into account innovation and diversity, New York City is 9th (2002: 246).

While these statistics are impressive, it is important to note that they are pre-Williamsburg Creative Class gentrification. The emergence of new “third places’ in the neighborhood would likely bolster those rankings even higher. In the aforementioned “Williamsburg Reinvented” article, Anna Bahney states that most of the new “devotees” in Williamsburg are “young professionals…working in creative fields” (2005: 11). By this point, the Creative Class were the target of explicit recruitment. This not only includes the building of the waterfront condos, but also extends to the types of shops that opened. Bedford Avenue became the main retail strip and featured hip and expensive clothing boutiques and cheese shops. One interesting thing to note is that there was an absence of chain stores (Davis 2007: 23). This fits in with what the Creative Class generally desires as they reject the “heavily packaged” in favor of the “organic and indigenous” (Davis 2007: 23). Thus, local businesses that have a safe, slick sheen are often patronized instead of corporate chains or inexpensive outlets that may be associated with an undesirable ethnic group.

Any discussion of Williamsburg has to reckon with the term “hipster,” which became a major part of the cultural lexicon partially because of Williamsburg. The term somewhat overlaps with the Creative Class, but generally skews a little younger and suggests less job security. In the 1940’s, hipsters generally referred to jazz fans, but the
term mutated into its current definition in the 1990’s. Hipsters generally denote a group of people who thrive on both irony and elitism, especially when it comes to rejecting mainstream trends and conventional lifestyles. A variety of stereotypes have become associated with hipsterdom, including wearing tight jeans, drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon, and championing obscure films and music (Anasi 2012: 137). Hipsters became directly associated with Williamsburg, as the popular (3.4 million views) YouTube video “Hipster Olympics” is set in Williamsburg and the neighborhood also has a famed “hipster kickball” league (Anasi 2012: 212). Hipsters later became a commodified image, starring in car commercials and earning references in mainstream sitcoms such as 2 Broke Girls, which is set in Williamsburg.

Because of the emergent music scene, retailers and developers saw an opening to cater to the increasingly powerful Creative Class and a new hipster subculture. Thus, Williamsburg became a go-to spot on par with Austin, Texas and Portland, Maine, as well as a 21st Century answer to what the Lower East Side was in the 1980’s. Brooklyn, and Williamsburg in particular, was no longer a “place to come from,” but “a place to come to” (Zukin 2010: 60).

**Not Alternative Anymore**

Shortly after the full implementation of the Williamsburg Creative Class in the mid-2000’s, national corporations began entering the area. For instance, when McCarren Park Pool was restored after years of closure in 2005, it was done by national tour promoter, Live Nation, who saw the Pool as a great space to host concerts. The summer concerts have become yearly highlights for many residents and visitors with indie rock
luminaries such as Bloc Party, Neko Case, and Yeah Yeah Yeahs playing at McCarren Park Pool to packed crowds (Cline 2006). The concerts even had political backers as New York Senator Charles E. Schumer was in attendance during 2009’s Grizzly Bear show (Sisario 2010). This anecdote helps prove that hipsterdom and Williamsburg was no longer authentic or rebellious. The area was officially gentrified and the alternative became status quo.

With this reality, it was inevitable that tensions between old residents and hipster arrivals would emerge. Often they manifested themselves in odd ways, such as in a dispute between Hasidic Jews and cyclists over a bike lane on Bedford Avenue (Huffington Post 2010). Meanwhile, community activism took hold with the Latino community in Williamsburg who hoped to combat increased gentrification (Nelson and Morales 2011). However, as with all examples of gentrification, displacement was one of the most prominent negative consequences. In Williamsburg’s case, this was particularly true for the Hasidic, Puerto Rican, and African-American populations who were pushed out far away neighborhoods such as Carnasie, East New York, and Jamaica (Smith 2013). This was unfortunate, but inevitable. When the Creative Class decides to settle in a location, that location becomes upscale by reputation and long-time residents are forced to leave.

In the last few years, national chains have emerged in Williamsburg, as Duane Reade, Subway, and American Apparel have opened to controversy. Luckily, many of the long-time residents, and even some of the more recent Creative Class migrants, have rejected these chains (via a Facebook group entitled “I’m Boycotting Duane Reade to
save Williamsburg’) and continue to support local equivalents (O’Brien 2010). Yet, as rents continue to grow along with residential income, chains may soon be the only option.

**2010 Census Data and Williamsburg Today**

*Figure 12: Williamsburg 2010 Census Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>% of 20-34</th>
<th>% of Bachelor's</th>
<th>Median Household Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Williamsburg (Tract 553)</td>
<td>2,434</td>
<td>47.60%</td>
<td>52.00%</td>
<td>$67,261.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williamsburg (Tract 547)</td>
<td>4,924</td>
<td>24.80%</td>
<td>32.50%</td>
<td>$24,022.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williamsburg (Tract 501)</td>
<td>2,786</td>
<td>44.90%</td>
<td>53.90%</td>
<td>$65,020.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>2,504,700</td>
<td>24.80%</td>
<td>29.20%</td>
<td>$43,501.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>8,175,133</td>
<td>24.90%</td>
<td>34.10%</td>
<td>$51,902.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>308,745,538</td>
<td>20.40%</td>
<td>28.50%</td>
<td>$52,578.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the data above, Williamsburg’s reputation, especially on the North Side, as a great place for the young, Creative Class to settle seems to be a reality. Tracts 501 and 553 had substantial gains in this area, with Tract 553 having a whopping 47.6% of its population between the ages of 20-34. This tract features a sizable portion of the busy Bedford Avenue shopping district. Thus, this spike is unsurprising even if the percentage is staggering. Yet, Tract 547 had a slight decrease in this population percentage. The reasons for this are a little deceptive, especially since South Williamsburg was also gentrifying. One thing that stands out in this tract is that the percentage of its population that was under 18 was 40.9%, which was higher than Brooklyn, New York City, or the United States. Thus, it could be possible that this area appealed to families in a way that was not true of the two other tracts. However, Tract 547’s data for the other two variables
do point towards traditional Creative Class gentrification occurring in these blocks during the 2000’s (2010 Census of Population).

All three tracts received a large boost during the 2000’s in the percentage of 25+ with at least a bachelor’s degree. Also, the tracts have a higher percentage in this category than Brooklyn and the United States averages, something that was not true in the 2000 Census. While Tract 547 is at a much lower percentage than Tracts 553 and 501, it almost tripled over the course of the decade. This suggests that the Creative Class is moving in to this tract (as well as throughout Williamsburg) as their professions generally necessitate more education than that the Service Class or Working Class. Looking at the data on this variable is one of strongest bits of evidence to show how gentrification is a real phenomena in Williamsburg.

As you can see, the median household income growth in Williamsburg during the 2000’s was very impressive. All three tracts had incomes below the New York City and United States averages in 2000, but Tracts 501 and 553 (North Williamsburg) flew past the average in 2010. These tracts had income increases (adjusted for inflation) of 41% and 47% respectively while New York City’s increase was only 1% and the United States’ had a decrease of 5%. While Tract 547 still remained far behind the whole country in median household income (and can still be considered poor), its increase in median household income in the 2000’s was a solid 19%. This statistic indicates that South Williamsburg might be in the beginning stages of gentrification as the rents and cost of living in North Williamsburg have simply gotten too high for most without a large amount of discretionary income.
At this juncture, Williamsburg has become one of the coolest neighborhoods in New York City. This is, at the very least, partially because of the music that has been associated with the neighborhood. Williamsburg represents the idea of the authentic, but it has lost a significant amount of its character with the influx of the Creative Class. Many long-time residents, especially those who were part of ethnic enclaves, have been forced to relocate to more inconvenient areas where their lives have become substantially more difficult. This is the cost of gentrification. Williamsburg has become gradually less communal and more corporate and many of its residents have been left behind in a two-decade cycle of gentrification that has resulted from the presence of a much buzzed-about music scene.
Conclusion: The Significance of Music Scene Gentrification

As I hope my thesis has shown, there is a direct link New York City from the emergence of an alternative music scene in a specific neighborhood and the eventual gentrification of that neighborhood. This occurs through attracting the Creative Class, who have both cultural and financial capital and desire “third places” to frequent. When the Creative Class moves into a neighborhood, the rents in that neighborhood skyrocket and newer, more expensive units are built. This places the longtime residents in a precarious position as they are forced to either drastically cut back other expenses, move out of the neighborhood, or become squatters or homeless. This process has occurred in both the Lower East Side and Williamsburg.

Unfortunately, it is becoming true for other neighborhoods as well. As Sharon Zukin points out in Naked Cities, Brooklyn is now “a place to come to” (2010: 60). This has spread beyond Williamsburg. In a New York article, Charles Graeber presents his theory of the “L-ification of Brooklyn,” in which gentrification has occurred as a process that follows the L subway line (2005:1). By this logic, Bushwick would be the next neighborhood to gentrify. This is certainly true as in 2010, the New York Times called Bushwick “arguably the coolest place in the planet” when discussing the burgeoning artistic community in the area (Rosenblum 2010: 4) This has affected other areas in Brooklyn. Red Hook, which was once termed as “the crack capital of America” is now the proud home of an IKEA (Red Hook Justice). Other boroughs such as Queens and the Bronx have largely escaped major gentrification for a variety of reasons, but this does not mean that this will be the case in the future. Music scenes can pop up for a variety of
reasons and the Creative Class looks like it will continue to grow in the future, especially since the future of traditional manufacturing and service industries seems somewhat dire after the 2008 financial crisis.

It is ironic and somewhat paradoxical that underground and alternative music and culture are the one of the driving forces behind gentrification in so many cities across the country. I suspect the reason is that there are different personalities who are attracted to cities versus those who are attracted to suburbs and that this correlates between the different classes of the contemporary economy. Many upper class or wealthy people in certain fields (such as finance) may choose the suburbs, while the Creative Class desires a more unpredictable urban environment. This idea of “grit as glamour” creates a dynamic and complex community in cities where hipsters clash with the elderly and landlords rent apartments that were formerly inhabited by plumbers to 24-year-old graphic designers (Lloyd 2006: 88-89).

From a sociological standpoint, music scene gentrification is a fascinating shift in urban group dynamics. In his seminal text, *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, Georg Simmel posits that urban life has an “intellectualistic character,” while rural areas and small towns “rest more on feelings and emotional relationships” (Simmel 2002: 12). This emphasis on the individualistic and the intellectual seemed to, at least partially, transfer locations with the emergence of the suburbs in the middle of the twentieth century. In its place, the “urban crisis” left behind the more communal aspects of the city, such as ethnic enclaves. This community also characterized the music scenes that were discussed earlier in the text. However, Creative Class gentrification brings back the debate of intellect vs.
community. Can both exist simultaneously in the new metropolis or does urban life return to the mechanized state discussed in *The Metropolis and Mental Life*. With the displacement of families who have defined their neighborhoods for decades, I am tempted to say that the latter is more likely in the case of New York City.

Thus, it is better to focus on attempting to reverse the trend of gentrification in New York City than to hope it has a breaking point. However, this has no clear answers beyond asking developers and city officials to reverse their policies and start including all residents, particularly those with limited means, in conversations about the future of neighborhoods and cities.

As for gentrification, on a micro scale, longtime residents can expect increased police presence and for their neighborhood community sites (YMCA’s, corner stores, parks) to become less welcoming and possibly be closed due to the new presence of corporations and chains. With higher rents, they may be forced into greater economic pressures and have to cut back on necessary expenses, such as food or heating.

On a macro scale, gentrification often brings the emergence of community tensions, especially around how to define and divide neighborhood space. These tensions are often among racial lines and can result in violence, as in the Tompkins Square Park riots. However, the most common result is displacement. This could lead to homelessness, but more often, it forces people to move elsewhere. This elsewhere might be farther away from work or other relatives, deficient in certain neighborhood amenities, and could be unwelcoming. This is a hardship that should not be forced upon anyone and is the result of a practice that is deeply unfortunate, but is not necessarily the fault of
musicians or the broader Creative Class. Instead, blame should be laid at the feet of city
government and developers whose greedy actions are necessary for any major
gentrification to occur. Whether or not reversal is possible, the process of music scene
gentrification in New York City is a fascinating one that has unfortunately affected the
Lower East Side and Williamsburg in harmful ways.
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