

Brooklyn's Experimental Frontiers

A Performance Geography

Jasmine Mahmoud



A female dancer swings her torso forwards and backwards, arching and contracting. Her right arm, sheathed in a white glove, lifts up and extends an orange stick toward the ceiling. Her left arm, enveloped by foot-long white feathers, arches downward towards the floor. With the orange “beak” in one hand and white feathers on the other, she is the swan. She moves with delicately punctuated steps; her torso continues to undulate. When she snaps her wrist, the orange beak stick is actually a clacker, two sticks that clap together to make the water bird’s call. Nearby, another swan dancer crouches, enveloped by the stage’s set: tall, ridged clumps of brown paper that resemble a tree trunk and a dusty stage that evokes the forest floor. The two eventually dance together, undulating their torsos, delicately stepping onstage and clacking their beaks.

This dance, *Soul’s Migration*, was part of *Winter in the Woods*, vignettes about fairytales created by choreographer Djahari Clark and other collaborators. The event was presented during

Figure 1. The exterior of The Bushwick Starr, 207 Starr Street, Brooklyn, NY. April 2014. (Photo by Jasmine Mahmoud)



Figure 2. *Winter in the Woods* by choreographer Djahari Clark and other collaborators, March 2011, at *The Bushwick Starr*, Brooklyn, NY. (Photo by Eric Booze)

March 2011 at the Bushwick Starr, a 60-seat venue in Bushwick, a North Brooklyn neighborhood. In June 2011, the Bushwick Starr presented the fourth annual Bushwhack Series, a festival featuring 10 new works by local theatre artists, including *The Complete & Condensed Stage Directions of Eugene O’Neill, Volume 1: Early Plays/Lost Plays* performed by the experimental collective New York Neo-Futurists, who read only stage directions (rather than dialogue) from *Abortion, The Movie Man,* and *Servitude*, three O’Neill

plays (Leseman 2011). The following year, in November 2012, the Bushwick Starr was filled with Brooklyn Flo-etry attendees who wore paper masks; Bushwick resident Modesto “Flako” Jimenez ushered in the night of poetry and music, saying, “the colors man, it’s all about the colors. And being able to embrace each other past and present. Brooklyn is changing fast” (ZoeMap 2012).

Brooklyn *is* changing fast. Beyond the Bushwick Starr, experiments in other art genres are everywhere, inside and outdoors. Rare is a bare wall; street art covers most external surfaces. Around the corner from Bushwick Starr is a portrait of a woman—her face turned to the side revealing an eye decorated with thick mascara and eyeshadow, her long black hair coiled into an up-do and a hexagonal jeweled earring dangling from her ear. The 15-foot canvas for this mostly black-and-white portrait is a brick wall at the entrance to the Jefferson Street subway station. Another painting, “puff monster,” bleeds a cartoon-like Cyclops into pink-and-white cloud figures. On a two-story building, two young black girls smile, captioned with diagonally striped orange, yellow, and grey block letters that spell “THE FUTURE.”

As in many urban areas, geographic place and aesthetic experience entangle. The North Brooklyn neighborhoods of Williamsburg and Bushwick have, over the past two decades, become home to a growing number of venues that present experimental performance, over 30 in operation at the time of this writing.¹ Both neighborhoods are also defined by their prox-

1. Existing venues in Williamsburg and Bushwick that present experimental theatre, dance, and performance include: Big Sky Works, The Brick Theater, Brooklyn Fire Proof, The Bushwick Starr, CAVE, Chez Bushwick, CPR: Center for Performance Research, Fitness Center for Arts and Tactics, fort useless, Glasshouse, Goodbye Blue Monday, Grace Exhibition Space, The Grapevine, The House of Oops, House of Screwball, In Real Time, IV Soldiers, The Johnson’s, Kingsland Ward, The Living Gallery, The Loft 202, Morgan Avenue Underground, NY Studio Factory, Panoply Performance Laboratory, The Revolutionary Theatre Forum, The Schoolhouse, Silent Barn, S.L.A.M., Studio 4J, Triskelion Arts, Tutu’s, Vaudeville Park, and Wall Space Gallery. This list was compiled using data I collected, and through websites such as brooklyn-spaces.com and artsinbushwick.org.

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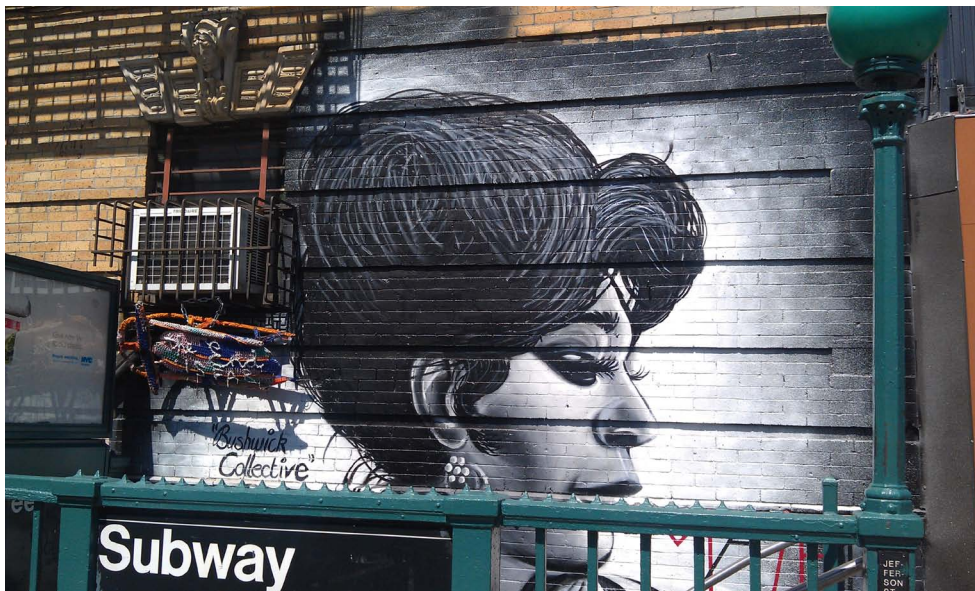


Figure 3. Street art by the Bushwick Collective found at one exit of the Jefferson Street subway station in Bushwick, Brooklyn, NY, August 2013. (Photo by Jasmine Mahmoud)

imity to Manhattan, by the prevalence of former and in-use warehouses, and by their majority of nonwhite residents, a majority that has decreased over the past decade, as the population in each neighborhood has increased. In 2010, Williamsburg had a population of 123,000 that was about 50 percent Hispanic, 5 percent black, and 40 percent white (City-data.com 2013). In 2010, Bushwick had a population of 140,000 that was about 60 percent Hispanic (down from 69.5 percent in 2000), 25 percent black, 10 percent white, and 5 percent Asian (Furman Center 2011).

My interest is in the ways Williamsburg and Bushwick as neighborhoods have been described in terms of race, gentrification, the arts, and the artists housed there. One recurring narrative concerns the mostly white artists who move to and make experimental art in low-income, predominantly nonwhite, postindustrial neighborhoods, a narrative that has become, it seems, a prerequisite for conversations about gentrification, urban renewal, and cultural districts. This narrative is often framed through the term “frontier.” In 2008, I asked Robert Honeywell, cofounder of the Brick Theater in Williamsburg, about the neighborhood:

Being out here now that everybody is out here—not everybody but you know what I mean—Brooklyn has a sort of new, I don’t want to use all the cliché words: “cutting edge,” blah, blah, blah, blah. But you know what I mean? Even though it’s been here forever it has the feeling of a frontier. (Honeywell 2008)²

Following up on Honeywell’s assertion, in 2013 I asked Sue Kessler and Noel Allain, cofounders of the Bushwick Starr, “Would you consider Bushwick to be a frontier?” Even though this was five years after Honeywell described Williamsburg as such, they both replied, confidently,

2. Data is based upon interviews with Michael Gardner and Robert Honeywell (2008 and 2013), cofounders of the Brick Theater, Williamsburg; Ann Marie Lonsdale, General Manager of CPR: Center for Performance Research, Williamsburg (2013); Sue Kessler and Noel Allain, respectively Executive Director and Artistic Director and cofounders of the Bushwick Starr (2013); Modesto “Flako” Jimenez, curator and theatre and performance artist, Bushwick (2013); Ali Ha, founder and owner of Factory Fresh, a gallery in Bushwick (2013); Elizabeth Streb of S.L.A.M (Streb Lab for Action and Mechanics), Williamsburg (2013); Hector Canonge, an artist who in 2013 curated the Brooklyn International Performance Art Festival (BIPAF) and Performeando, a series of Latino/a performance art (2013); and Andrew Dinwiddie and Caleb Hammons, curators of CATCH (2013).

“yes.” These colloquial utterances are bolstered by discursive rhetoric. The *New York Times* has produced articles with titles such as, “Bushwick Journal; the Trendy Frontier? Eastward Ho in Brooklyn” (Barnes 2000), and “Brooklyn’s New Gentrification Frontiers” (Higgins 2013). In a 2005 *New York Times* article, Erika Kinetz wrote:

Artists brave the area’s stark postindustrial landscape, and camp out—often illegally—in loft spaces. Soon enough, fabulous little health food stores spring up among the carcasses of burned-out cars, rents rise accordingly, and artists push on to the next frontier, leaving in their wake a neighborhood made safe for commerce but too expensive for artists. It has happened before—think SoHo and the East Village—and it may well be happening again. Artists in search of affordable space have been pushing Williamsburg’s eastern frontier steadily deeper into Bushwick. (Kinetz 2005)



Figure 4. Map of Brooklyn. 18 July 2009. (By Peter Fitzgerald, courtesy of Creative Commons)

In these descriptions, the “frontier” is a de-industrialized low-cost neighborhood understood to be a peripheral urban area with “new” and cheap space, “ripe” for artistic imagination, occupation, and enterprise in the form of early-21st-century experimental performance not committed to economic growth. The experimentation that the avantgarde demands has its own demands: a geographic location in which to experiment.

Unlike Broadway, and even downtown Manhattan—geographic areas laden with their own meanings and economic demands—Williamsburg and Bushwick as frontiers are the peripheries, the deindustrialized zones, perhaps even the no-places where the geo-graphy, the “earth writing,” is always more fully in process, yet to be fully written. But by whom? Attention to the avantgarde in frontier neighborhoods draws attention to questions about who is making meaning and

writing history. What does it mean for avantgarde or experimental performance—performance that makes meanings by breaking boundaries—to take place within a neighborhood called a frontier, a label that suggests that boundaries of space are being broken? What does it mean for performance that breaks boundaries to inhabit a geography conceptualized in terms of unexplored possibilities and evolving borderlines? How does theatre, the space of meaning-making, and the avantgarde, the force of boundary-breaking, sit within geography? In New York City, what does “frontier” signify in terms of aesthetics, time, geography, race, policy, and remembered and forgotten cultures?

In Williamsburg and Bushwick, the language of “frontier” marks entanglements between aesthetic possibilities and racialized low-income space. These entanglements emphasize the ways in which theories of the avantgarde that emphasize aesthetic and economic poverty also involve geographic ways of making meaning. In particular, I suggest three processes at work in the artistic frontier:

First, the label of “frontier” or “artistic frontier” emphasizes that aesthetics participate in developing the political economy of place. Critical geographer Neil Smith has argued that framing gentrifying neighborhoods as frontiers is not innocent; rather it connects urban development to the long history of American frontier-making and space-taking. Smith explains that “the frontier discourse serves to rationalize and legitimate a process of conquest, whether in the

eighteenth-and-nineteenth century West, or in the late-twentieth-century inner city” (1996:xvi). “Frontier” gives meaning to a place that “rationalizes the violence of gentrification and displacement” (22). Smith goes further to show how “frontier” has become a style: “The new urban frontier motif encodes not only the physical transformation of the built environment and the reinscription of urban space in terms of class and race, but also a larger semiotics. Frontier is a style as much as a place” (14). From this vantage point, experimental performance practices can be understood to participate in a notion of urban frontier-making that demands both style and place. Experimental performance practices, especially when produced by white artists, are implicitly, if not explicitly, understood as the edgy yet civilizing forces that tame spaces perceived in a majoritarian view as messy, nonwhite, and underserved. They thus occupy, as Richard Lloyd has argued, a dual-role, “understood in terms of marginality within and in opposition to the capitalist economy [...] emerg[ing] as a source of comparative advantage for new capitalist strategies” (2005:18). Experimental performance practices are the style that makes the place.

In early-21st-century neighborhoods—with publically subsidized for-profit residential buildings, increased income inequality, and increased unaffordable housing—experimental performance practices are also a style that has been appropriated as a neoliberal capitalist strategy, that as David Harvey describes supports “private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2005:2). Thus the “urban frontier” rationalizes forms of contemporary conquest and reveals how the “artistic frontier” also recognizes a relationship between performance practices, urban policy, and place. This relationship has been fostered by deindustrializing (1970s–1990s) and neoliberal (1990s–present) urban policies, the latter including the 2005 Greenpoint-Williamsburg Waterfront Rezoning Policy and the New York City Loft Law of 2010 and 2013. Language within those policies characterizes these neighborhoods as “empty” places, and characterizes artists as necessary newcomers who make neighborhoods vibrant. Thus “frontier” discourses disclose how policy has positioned certain peripheral neighborhoods as underutilized, racially marginalized, and low-cost, and thus ripe for placemaking by the avantgarde who have often staged performances within low-cost unzoned warehouse spaces.

Experimental performance, however, also requires a specific *type* of space. Second, then, the idea of “frontier” geographically resituates theories of experimental and avantgarde performance. This is especially true as the term “avantgarde” has acquired definitional incoherence. As Mike Sell argues “[t]o study the avant-garde, it seems, one must study the death of the avant-garde,” because of “how complicated the cultural terrain of the avant-garde was, is, and will be given the greater and greater intertwining of technology, subjectivity, and cultural production” (Sell 2005:1). And yet, “avantgarde”—and other adjectives carelessly used as synonyms, such as “experimental,” “alternative,” and “progressive”—continue to inundate 21st-century newspaper articles and reviews about boundary-breaking performance practices.

The notion of frontier hints at another way to think about avantgarde performance: As it clusters in frontier neighborhoods, 21st-century avantgarde performance may be described as “geographically poor.” This idea of poverty follows 20th-century Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, who “propose[d] poverty in theatre” to enhance the essential strengths of theatre, “stripped of all that is not essential to it, reveal[ing] to us not only the backbone of the medium, but also the deep riches which lie in the very nature of the art-form” (Grotowski [1968] 2002:21). This strength, he writes, is due to:

the closeness of the living organism. Because of this, each challenge from the actor, each of his magical acts (which the audience is incapable of reproducing) becomes something great, something extraordinary, something close to ecstasy. [...] Let the most drastic scenes happen face to face with the spectator so that he is within arm’s reach of the actor, can feel his breathing and smell the perspiration. ([1968] 2002:41–42)



Figure 5. The exterior of the Bushwick Starr, 207 Starr Street, Brooklyn, NY. April 2014. (Photo by Jasmine Mahmoud)

In that closeness—that aesthetic poverty—there is also an implied economics that has made it difficult for modern theatre to be profitable. Economists William J. Baumol and William G. Bowen have argued that the performing arts suffer from the “cost disease”; economically, theatre is nonscalable and operates always on the peripheries: although costs to produce theatre have increased, theatre has not increased productivity since its inception. They write:

The performers’ labors themselves constitute the end product which the audience purchases. [...] Human ingenuity has devised ways to reduce the labor necessary to produce an automobile, but no one has yet succeeded in decreasing the human effect expended at a live performance. (Baumol and Bowen 1996:164–65)

For many avantgardes, the “cost disease” is even more severe. In fact, all “frontier” venues in Bushwick and Williamsburg—including the Brick with a 75-person capacity, and the Bushwick Starr, which seats 60—have small audience capacities that further the “cost disease” by virtue of minimally productive audience-to-ensemble ratios. Thus, many avantgarde theatres commit to economic poverty in refusing to scale up venue size or scale down cast size and in remaining committed to low-cost ticket prices. These venues are also in “edgy” neighborhoods (although of course they continue to grow less edgy as the neighborhoods continue to gentrify). Thus this



Figure 6. Audience at the small 60-seat venue, the Bushwick Starr in Bushwick, Brooklyn, NY. (Photo by Sue Kessler)

iteration of experimental performance, it seems, demands not just aesthetic poverty and economic poverty, but also geographic poverty in peripheral, deindustrialized neighborhoods.

Richard Schechner and Marvin Carlson remind us that marginal, peripheral areas have long stood as geographic spaces for experimental theatres. Contra to “cultural centers and regional theaters,” which “are examples of corporatism,” Schechner, writing in the mid-’70s, describes alternative spaces:

Environmental theaters—built in cheap hit-and-run spaces, often in out-of-the-way neighborhoods—exemplify a resistance and alternative to the conglomerates. But environmental theaters exist only in the creases of contemporary society, living off the leavings, like cockroaches. ([1988] 2003:164)

Carlson writes of late-19th-century Paris: “When the new experimental theatres at the end of the century began to appear, they sprang up in rather disreputable areas first to the north, then to the south of the city center, far outside the areas familiar to even adventurous theatre goers” (2013:23). He continues, moving on to contemporary spaces:

One could clearly argue that something of this difficult pilgrimage remains for those spectators who brave the still marginal areas where Lugne-Poe presented *Ubu* to attend Peter Brook’s *Bouffes du Nord*, or who seek out the still operating Living Theatre in the depths of New York’s notorious Lower East Side, or who attend London’s Arcola in the middle of a remote and distinctly marginal neighborhood of Turkish immigrants. (24)

Just as the peripheral neighborhoods that Carlson describes were “disreputable” and “difficult,” Williamsburg and Bushwick were, and in some places still are, similarly nonwhite, low-income, and underutilized. The two neighborhoods are geographically poor because they are geographically destabilized by policy and zoning that disenfranchises the poor, by racism that considers nonwhite and ethnically white neighborhoods less valuable, and by deindustrialization and neoliberalism that shuttered industry and increased poverty. Urban destabilization facilitates the breakdown of meaning for those residents who once worked in the shuttered industries and, at the same time, makes available the space for performance practices to remake meaning. While experimental performance may be inconceivable at the geographical center of a city—which is where the big-budget Broadway theatre continues to make meaning—it is integral to the reconception of the poor and minoritarian periphery as the place/space for new meanings to be made.

There is a link between avantgarde performance as a geographic practice that depends on unregulated and “empty” space to break boundaries and make meaning, and as a practice that in doing so implicates itself in the racist, neoliberal development of space that evacuates the lived experience of nonwhite, ethnic white, and low-income residents. Nonwhite neighborhoods are not inherently spaces in flux because they are nonwhite. Rather, during this period of gentrification, especially during the years between 2007 and 2013, Williamsburg and Bushwick, as largely nonwhite neighborhoods in New York City, were spaces where meaning could easily break down for artists *because* of the racism that devalued the nonwhite populations of those neighborhoods. This is evidenced by zoning policy and discourse about neighborhood space that largely avoided the language of race and at the same time championed the illegal spatial occupation by artists and referenced the existing nonwhite population as a population to be changed, as occupants whose meaning was and is in flux, who lived in a “vacant” neighborhood. As it has destabilized those urban edges and obscured the meaning of those neighborhoods, this policy has made room for new meanings of place to be made through artistic practices—and, consequently, has made space for new possibilities of artistic practice.

The third process at work in the formation of artistic frontiers joins together these two ideas—that artistic practices contribute to the political economy of place and that place in turn contributes to artistic possibilities—in a notion of “performance geography.” In 2010, Sonjah

Nadine Stanley-Niaah described performance geography as “an integral and unexplored dimension of cultural studies and cultural geography that expands the definitions of cultural geography and performance studies to include the way people, living in particular locations, give those locations identity through certain acts” (Stanley-Niaah 2010:32). Arts-dense Williamsburg and Bushwick as frontier neighborhoods exemplify Stanley-Niaah’s term “performance geography” by virtue of the performance practices in residence. The proliferation of experimental arts has reconfigured meanings we often assign to other neighborhoods in New York City.

This new signification—Brooklyn as a frontier for arts and culture—has destabilized old ones, especially of Manhattan as the hierarchical center of New York City performance spaces (with the off-off, to off-Broadway, to Broadway hierarchy). Even the word “downtown,” once used to describe experimental artists in downtown Manhattan, now describes experimental artists who have migrated to New York City’s outer boroughs, or who never were in Manhattan. Focusing on performance geography enables us to examine and theorize both how performance makes meaning within theatrical space and also makes meaning that exceeds theatrical space and shapes broader geographic space.

Feelings beyond Frontier

Avantgarde Performance in Williamsburg

Williamsburg, Brooklyn. May 2010. A man and woman make their way down an aisle where an audience of 70 sits. Both are barefoot. He wears a white shirt and brown pants, she a white shirt and white skirt. They walk carrying a trunk towards a wooden stage, 21 by 25 feet. When they reach the stage, they place the trunk in its temporary home, an open 6-foot cube of PVC pipe—a smaller stage within the stage. It’s a temporary home; the performance will only last 10 minutes.

“I imagine a train, not unlike the one her father had outfitted for her when she was young, slowly lurching into a station,” the male performer narrates while assembling a microphone stand. “I imagine a plane descending foot by foot over fields and swamp and animals and landing on a field outside of Marshfield,” he continues as the female performer uses string to attach a white sheet to the PVC. “I imagine a car, a modest steadfast car where she sat in plain sight with a sunhat and a dress,” the man continues, microphone stand now assembled, microphone now turned on, his voice now amplified.³

Travel frames the topic of this performance: the life of Doris Duke, the 20th-century heiress and arts philanthropist. The particular focus is Duke’s “transcendental experiences at the Marshfield, MO, tent revivals” (Brick 2010). When the performers first arrive onstage, they open and stare into the trunk for a few seconds, endowing whatever is inside with a sense of endless possibility. As the performers pull objects from the trunk—the microphone and its stand, the white sheet, a lamp—the meanings of those objects change, and continue to change throughout the performance. For example, initially, the sheet reveals the theatre’s labor as the female performer struggles to attach it to the PVC frame. Once hung, the white sheet evokes the revival tent; the change from sheet to tent echoes the implications of how narratives of life stories change. “Thinking about you now I wonder why so many people once knew about you,” she says. “Your life, your wealth, your excess, your loneliness. But now your stories have vanished and disappeared completely. Why don’t we know who you are? We depend on you for everything important in American art today,” she declares. “And yet for some reason, you’re just another Wikipedia page of bizarre information, another dead patron of the arts, another ghost,” she continues before the pair move behind the sheet to perform a movement duet where the two become shadows who face each other and mime drinking from glasses.

3. Quoted dialogue is from my transcription of a video of the performance (Vimeo 2011).

Towards the end of the performance, the sheet is just a sheet again. “I imagine it all happening in reverse,” he says while both performers remove the sheet from the PVC pipe. “She leaves the car, the plane, and the train,” he continues as the sheet falls to the floor. “They take apart the stage and the pillars and the tents and they get ready to move on to the next town. [...] And maybe there are [...] song sheets that blow around in the wind. [...] Maybe the grass grows back,” he continues while folding the sheet and placing it into the trunk. The two finish packing the trunk and leave the stage.



Figure 7. *revival*, created by Jen Leavitt, Adam Smith, and choreographer Ana Isabel Keilson at the Brick Theater’s 2010 Tiny Theater Festival. (Screenshot courtesy of Jasmine Mahmoud)

This 10-minute performance of *revival*, created by Jen Leavitt, Adam Smith, and choreographer Ana Isabel Keilson, re-imagined the boundaries of theatrical space. It was one of 12 pieces in the Brick Theater’s 2010 Tiny Theater Festival. Festival rules mandated that the “performers and scenic elements must not exist outside” the PVC frame and that each performance last 10 minutes or less (Brick 2010). For *revival*, those rules furthered the intimacy established as the two performers walked among the audience; the rules also necessitated aesthetic poverty, allowing only scant props, and deconstructed the theatrical labor that built and undid the set.

The Tiny Theater Festival, which first ran at the Brick in 2007 and has continued each year (except 2009), connects the Brick to geographies beyond its borough. In 2006, Tiny Theater Festival launched from Ontological-Hysteria Theater, Richard Foreman’s theatre in the East Village of Manhattan. “They invited us to join the second year and then they gave us permission to keep going,” Michael Gardner, cofounder of the Brick Theater, told me (2013). The festival that began in Manhattan was granted permission to move across the river to the Brick. This connection to the Ontological is also part of the Brick’s origin story. Cofounders Gardner and Honeywell, veterans of Manhattan’s downtown theatre scene, were motivated to found the Brick in 2002 so they could perform their own works in a more affordable venue. Honeywell told me, “If we were in Manhattan [our work] would show a lot of commercial pressure. [...] It would have changed our work. Or we would have stuck to our guns and ended up getting kicked out. We all are veterans of the Lower East Side. The downtown theatre scene is no more because [experimental artists] got pushed out” (2013). The Brick’s origin story confirms the commonly held notion that downtown Manhattan experimental theatre contributed to artistic practices in Williamsburg.

The Tiny Theater Festival is in dialogue with the residents and expectations of the neighborhood. “We’re very popular with our festivals,” Gardner told me. “There’s a certain event element that is very attractive to this audience in this neighborhood. [...] There’s something of an experiential audience here that maybe influences our programming.” The Tiny Theater Festival, like much of the Brick’s other programming encourages an ethos of experimentation with the possibility of failure:

It’s a really awesome way of taking chances on people who’ve never done work, who’ve done little work. They don’t know us, we don’t know them. You spend 10 minutes in a box and do whatever the fuck. They pull out the craziest stuff and that’s the spirit that we want to engender anyway. (Gardner 2013)



Figure 8. Exterior of the Brick Theater, 579 Metropolitan Ave, Brooklyn, NY. April 2014. (Photo by Jasmine Mahmoud)

The Brick is housed in a former auto body shop. Gardner and Honeywell started the Brick after hearing that Collapsible Hole, the Williamsburg performance space that opened in 2000 to present work by performance collectives Collapsible Giraffe and Radiohole, was in a post-industrial space. “Robert and I had heard about the theatre company that had created the theatre space out of a garage very inexpensively,” Honeywell told me. “And we thought why don’t we do that?” When I asked Honeywell why Williamsburg,

he replied, “I don’t know. Well, of course rents were more affordable. It was also budding. There was a [...] visual arts scene then and there was a lot of youthful energy and a lot of people we know were moving here and it just made perfect sense” (2013).

In her 2005 *New York Times* article, “Where All the Neighborhood Is a Stage” Ada Calhoun profiled the Brick among other theatres in Williamsburg:

Williamsburg, Brooklyn, has also evolved into [...] a full-fledged theater district. Call it Off Off Off Broadway. [...] A decade ago, there were loft parties and shows by the fledgling Bindlestiff Family Cirkus, a neo-vaudeville troupe that now has a national following, but that was about it. Now, within this ten-block radius of nondescript warehouses, there are more than a dozen spaces devoted to theatrical work, showcasing nearly every type of theater, dance or performance. [...] Williamsburg is having its avant-garde moment, showing off edgy work and barely advertising it, confident that the in-the-know 20- and 30-somethings will still show up. (Calhoun 2005)

Like the Brick, many of these theatre spaces evidenced past industrial lives.

However by October 2013, most of the theatres profiled in Calhoun’s article, including the 45-seat Charlie Pineapple Theater, no longer existed or had moved. Supreme Trading, a 7,500 square-foot, bar, performance venue, and art gallery had, by 2010, closed and become Brooklyn Winery, a small-batch winery and event venue. Galapagos, a standby of experimental theatre, dance, and music performance located on North 6th Street in Williamsburg was forced out of its space in 2008 when its rent increased by \$10,000 per month. Robert Elmes, owner of Galapagos, was able to move that same year to a space in the Brooklyn neighborhood of DUMBO, where private developer David Walentas subsidized rents for arts venues. Monkey Town, which ran from 2003 to 2010, was a performance-venue-meets-restaurant that featured “video art [...] live music, dance and other original performance” alongside “experimental cuisine and classic dishes from a country that doesn’t exist” (Monkey Town 2010). In 2013, Monkey Town had another iteration as a pop-up restaurant in Manhattan’s Chelsea neighborhood. Collapsible Hole, the venue that inspired Gardner and Honeywell to come to Williamsburg, held a funeral to commemorate their closing on 14 September 2013. In fact, of the eight theatres in Calhoun’s article, only the Brick and S.L.A.M. (described below) still existed as of October 2013.

With all these venues closing, I asked Gardner if he still considered Williamsburg to be a frontier. He responded:

Less so. There's more establishment now. I still think the neighborhood is finding itself and the people who live here are still trying to decide who they are and what their relationship to the word "hipster" is and what they're relationship to the word "artist" is, and what kind of neighborhood they want to build. I still feel like, 11 years in, we're making it up as we go and people around us are making it up as we go. (2013)



Figure 9. Commodified street-art-styled advertising on North 11th Street in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, NY, August 2013. (Photo by Jasmine Mahmoud)

Perhaps, then, the label "artistic frontier" attends both to Williamsburg's recent history, as a place where experimental artists could make work in a once geographically poor neighborhood, and to how neoliberal urban policy increased housing prices following artistic place-making. "I don't follow the rents but I've heard it's gotten really expensive," Honeywell later told me. "The developers went nuts" (2013). As *The Wire's* Arit John writes, "Gentrification isn't just a rise in rent prices, but a change in the make-up and culture of the community" (John 2013).



Figure 10. Intersection of Metropolitan Avenue and Union Avenue, near the Brick Theater, July 2008. Many of these older brick buildings are being torn down or "refurbished" and replaced with condos. (Photo by Jasmine Mahmoud)

With rents and condos both rising, and the loss of so many venues, the culture of Williamsburg has changed. When I walked around the neighborhood in 2013, I found that street art—often a sign of neighborhood edginess—had been appropriated by advertisers. There was a swirling almost Seurat-like black-and-white design for a shoe company off Bedford Avenue, Williamsburg's main thoroughfare, and a clunky, colorful full-length wall mural depiction of Trevor, a main character in the *Grand Theft Auto* video game, on North 11th Avenue.

Clearly zoning policies contributed to those increasing rents and neighborhood changes. In 2005, the Greenpoint-Williamsburg Land Use and Waterfront Plan was passed, supposedly to restructure the neighborhood to include affordable housing, with "a voluntary plan that relied on market-based incentives." But in 2013, "Only 19 of the 1,345 'affordable' apartments the city promised in 2005 when it rezoned the North Brooklyn waterfront to residential from manufacturing [had] been built" (*Free Williamsburg* 2013). In 2012, a lawsuit brought by "a diverse coalition of community organizations" found that a 2006 affordable housing policy under the

Bloomberg administration “would create dramatic racial disparities and increase existing segregation” in Williamsburg (NYCLU 2012). Thus the policies in the neighborhood in fact effected change that was the opposite of the intention expressed in the plan, which was to “create opportunities for thousands of new housing units, including affordable housing” (NYC Planning 2005a). This neoliberal rezoning policy used public policy to support privatization, and as a (perhaps unintended) consequence contributed to income inequality. The 2005 rezoning policy also contradictorily describes the neighborhood as “vacant,” yet populated by “a ‘population at risk’ that is potentially subject to indirect displacement under the proposed action” (Greenpoint Williamsburg Rezoning Environmental Impact Statement, 2005:S-2, S-16). This language contributes to how the neighborhood has been positioned as frontier.

“Frontier” has historically referred to Native American lands seized by westward-bound Euro-American settlers: “empty” lands—according to a violent ideology of conquest—waiting to be occupied.⁴ Williamsburg-as-frontier is rhetorically tied to a long history of land-claiming and displacement generated by policy, suggesting that the geography of the neighborhood is the result of and illuminates policy from across various periods. In fact, the word “geography” is derived from the Greek word for “earth writing”; as a frontier, the neighborhood is written by the policies of the past.⁵ In this particular 20th- and 21st-century iteration, conquest of Brooklyn’s physical and imaginary space was facilitated in part by deindustrial and neoliberal urban policy that perpetuated inequality. In the 1960s and 1970s, transportation and zoning policy furthered deindustrialization and divestment in Williamsburg, where, according to researchers at Rutgers, the “Brooklyn Queens Expressway sliced through the communities and waste transfer sites and sewage treatment facilities brought noxious uses to the waterfront. Industrial businesses disappeared [...] and residents and commercial businesses fled” (Apgar et al. 2007).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, artists began to move into the neighborhood; the glut of artists influenced the 2005 Greenpoint-Williamsburg Land Use and Waterfront Plan, which proclaims that artists, rather than other populations, made the neighborhoods of Greenpoint and Williamsburg “vibrant” (NYC Planning 2005b). In fact, the plan specifies that “the proposed action area has become characterized increasingly by young artists and professionals”; table 3-13 of the plan revealed that from 1990 to 2000, there was a 1244% increase in “Arts, Design, Entertainment” professionals (Greenpoint-Williamsburg Rezoning Environmental Impact Statement 3-32).

Artistic movement, celebrated in zoning policy, perpetuated the decreasing visibility of existing often nonwhite residents. Consider my 2007 interview with Benjamin Evans, then director of Nurture Art Gallery in Bushwick:

But I think again there’s something problematic because there’s been a lot of handwringing about “oh the artists are getting kicked out of Williamsburg and gentrification is making it too expensive,” but the artists kicked out a lot of people when they got there. Where did all the Puerto Rican people go? Who whined for them? Who made the stink then? And who is making the stink when artists move to places like this? (Evans 2007)

Thus the neighborhood—a geography accruing evidence of policies written across time periods—may also be investigated according to how some histories are foregrounded while others are occluded. Artistic movement in Brooklyn neighborhoods prompted then New York City Cultural Affairs commissioner Kate D. Levin to exclaim, wrongly: “Artists and arts groups are

4. For example, Frederick Jackson Turner, the turn-of-the-20th-century American historian, argued in his 1893 “frontier thesis” that the conquest of the American frontier promoted “composite [American] nationality”; the development of American legislation, including land-use policy; and the growth of democracy alongside individualism (Turner 1921:22).

5. *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2005, s.v. “geography.”

themselves the first victims of gentrification” (in Pogebrin 2002), a statement that ignores the displacement of the nonwhite residents who were there before the artists. Her statement is, however, similar to language in the 2005 zoning plan that positions artists as pioneers in the “empty” neighborhood. That analogy continues as the plan describes artists as populations that can move elsewhere once the neighborhood becomes too expensive: “Light industrial tenants and artists displaced by the proposed action could most likely find space to relocate elsewhere in the study area or in nearby industrial areas” (Greenpoint-Williamsburg Rezoning Environmental Impact Statement 3–14).

In Williamsburg, as gentrification forced out low-income and nonwhite residents and many small arts venues, the Brick has held on by adopting capitalist practices similar to the neoliberal policies imposed on the area as the neighborhood’s art density increased. As renters of the Brick’s space, Gardner and Honeywell have negotiated “long-term extensions” to avoid “spiking the rent.” “I think part of it is our nonconventional configuration,” Honeywell told me. When I visited Honeywell in August 2013, I commented on how many theatres were dark, but the Brick remained open. He replied, “We’re never dark.” Their economic model shows 50 percent of ticket sales going directly to artists (who pay no fee to present work), and about 75 percent of the theatre’s income coming from ticket sales, something rare for most theatres, where most income often comes from grants and donations. “We really try to run it like a business,” Honeywell said. “We try to cover our costs the best we can” (2013). Yet ticket prices at the 70-seat theatre remain low, rarely exceeding \$18.00. The audience, according to data the Brick collects, has consistently come from the same demographic throughout its decade of existence. “It’s still a very young, arts-hip audience,” Gardner said, “and you know when we look at our data its about half from Brooklyn and half from Manhattan” (2013).

Other Williamsburg experimental performance venues that have persisted have also done so by running the performance space “like a business.” Center for Performance Research (CPR) is a “contemporary performance laboratory” (CPR 2012) founded in 2008 by choreographers Jonah Bokaer of Chez Bushwick and John Jasperse of Thin Man Dance, Inc. Ann Marie Lonsdale, CPR’s general manager, articulated the business mindset required to “keep the space growing and busy”: “The busier we are, the healthier we are. It means that our operating



Figures 11 & 12. The interior and exterior of CPR, the Center for Performance Research, 361 Manhattan Avenue, Brooklyn, NY. April 2014. (Photos by Jasmine Mahmoud)

budget will absolutely grow. It's like any business. If you're not growing, you are doing something wrong" (2013).

The venue is in East Williamsburg, about a five-minute walk from either the Lorimer or the Graham Street stops on the "L" train, a little off the main drag. "So we are not near the Knitting Factory and Bedford Avenue," said Lonsdale:

It's just a really really different part of the neighborhood. There are a lot of older Italian families who are in this part of the neighborhood and businesses that are still here. But what's interesting to me is that so many of these buildings have turned condo. They are full of white families, upper-middle-class young professionals with kids. (2013)

In fact, CPR itself is housed in a condo building. "In the ground floor of a LEED-certified gold mixed-use development community," Lonsdale explained, emphasizing the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design status of the building. "The top four floors are condominiums and the purchase prices of those condominiums helped to subsidize the purchase price of this space" (2013).

Also in Williamsburg, S.L.A.M. (Streb Lab for Action Mechanics) on North 1st Street near Bedford Avenue is "a multipurpose space." Led by MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" fellow Elizabeth Streb, S.L.A.M. is located in a former mustard factory loading dock, and its interior retains the feel of its industrial past; on my visit to the space in August 2013, interior scaffolding had been outfitted with gym mattresses for the company's new work in which dancers fall and flip from two stories up and athletically slam their bodies onto mats on the floor. Williamsburg's industrial past, it seems, influenced Streb's choreographic practices:

I love hardware and I love action and walking into a place like this and seeing these beams where you can basically attach a locomotive to them and they are not going to move. You can put anything on them. And it has no columns. 100 [feet] by 50 [feet] by 30 [feet]. You walk into a space like this, this close to Manhattan, and you are like, are you kidding? But I think it allowed me to do things, and invent things, and craft. (Streb 2013)

The space was bought in 2007 after the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs gave Streb's company \$1 million to buy the space, which was being sold for \$1.3 million. Streb talks about receiving the money in terms of her ability to function as an artist and as "a business person as well, which means somehow making partnerships with the city, with the Department of Cultural Affairs, with councilmen, with the Borough Presidents, and all the philanthropists and all the private and public funders to support the invention." To get the money for the building, she says: "I went right to the city and said, could I have a million dollars. Usually you get finishing funds. [...] If I waited the years I'd have to have waited to raise that money, it would have been gone. Anyway they [gave it to me]. One million dollars and we bought it and that was for me owning the means of production" (2013).

Across these examples, neoliberal zoning policy—in the form of publically subsidized private condo developments and policy language championing artists who make the neighborhood "vibrant" while accepting the displacement of "at-risk" populations who live in "vacant" areas—determined both the success and the failure of avantgarde performance venues in Williamsburg. Increasing rents pushed out some; those who have stayed are run like businesses, and CPR and S.L.A.M. own their space. But those that have stayed are also run in ways that subsidize productivity-poor performance with, for example, stabilized low-rents, or unpaid or low-paid staff whose non-theatre day jobs provide income. Both Honeywell and Gardner, for example, have fulltime jobs that allow them to stay afloat personally while maintaining the Brick.

Perhaps, then, Williamsburg is now post-frontier. "If you had to say there's a frontier now for arts and theatre, it's Bushwick," Honeywell told me (2013). When I asked Ann Marie Lonsdale of CPR if Williamsburg was a frontier she said, "Yes and also no. I think Bushwick is.

[...] But it's also real estate terminology people use to raise people's rents. But in terms of being an underground type of creative space, or where you would go to an artist studio to engage with more peripheral performance practices, I would say no" (2013). A 2012 article about the Bushwick Open Studies art show began, "One real estate frontier at a time, the narrative of artist-led gentrification has become naturalized as something close to an economic law. Williamsburg will surely replace Soho as the textbook example in the next edition, and everyone knows that Bushwick is next" (Cox 2012). And yet Williamsburg's artistic and economic development remains relevant to thinking about frontier neighborhoods because its performance geography reveals how neighborhood space, and the neoliberal policy zoning that space, contributes to how the art practices housed there reimagine artistic possibilities.



Figure 13. The exterior of S.L.A.M. (Streb Lab for Action Mechanics, 51 North 1st Street near Bedford Avenue, Brooklyn, NY. April 2014. (Photo by Jasmine Mahmoud)

The Wild East A Bushwick Story

One Bushwick story goes like this: In 1638, the "Dutch purchase the land from the Native American Canarsie tribe" (NYC Parks 2013). In 1660, the Dutch establish "Boswijck," meaning "heavy woods" (Mooney 2011). In 1834, the area, which had earlier been renamed Bushwick, becomes part of the city of Brooklyn. By the early 20th century, the neighborhood includes "brewer's row," with its many breweries started by German and Austrian immigrants. After World War II, "white residents [leave] in increasing numbers, and [are] replaced by African American and Hispanic residents" (NYC Parks 2013). On 13 and 14 July 1977, New York City suffers an electricity blackout throughout much of the five boroughs; looting follows and is arguably "at its worst in Bushwick, Brooklyn, where fires accompanied widespread looting" (Citynoise.org 2007). Since 1977, Bushwick has carried a reputation as a rough, low-income, underserved industrial neighborhood, with large Latino and black populations.

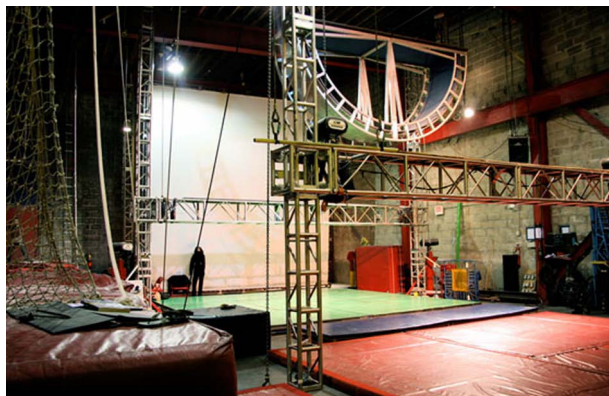


Figure 14. Interior of S.L.A.M. (Photo courtesy of Millie Li and S.L.A.M.)

Sue Kessler's Bushwick story begins with that late-20th-century reputation. Her story also involves necessity and a budget. Kessler moved from Williamsburg to Bushwick in the winter of 2000. "My then boyfriend," Kessler told me, "was also the artistic director of the theatre company. We were in a really crappy apartment in Williamsburg. We were needing to move but we were on a budget. So typical Williamsburg people were starting to move out to Bushwick at that point. Both he and I were adventurous spirits, not afraid of moving to...pioneering...going to a different neighborhood. [...] We found a place that was a newly renovated apartment" (2013).

In 2001, Kessler started looking for space for her theatre company, Fovea Floods, to rehearse Brecht's *Arturo Ui*. "We needed a really big space because the show was so big," Kessler said. After looking all over the city, they found the empty Bushwick warehouse: "We were the first tenants to move in. And we just rented it for the summer to develop and rehearse that show." Although they rehearsed in Bushwick, Fovea Floods debuted their production of *Arturo Ui* in 2002 at the Ontological Theater in Manhattan's East Village; at that time, Bushwick was *not* a neighborhood in which to present avantgarde performance. "After the show closed, we had fallen in love with the space [in Bushwick] and realized how valuable it was to our theatre company and so we decided to hang onto it and in order to hang onto it we decided to move in. There were no bedrooms, no nothing. [...] The theatre company couldn't have paid for it independently; we needed to move there. And then, over the years it was a round-robin of various different company members living there to keep the space" (2013). It would be another two years before the space was used as a theatre, not just a rehearsal space/place to live.

In 2004, Jean Genet's *The Maids*, directed by Kessler, was the first production staged in the Bushwick space. It was "the first public performance that we did there as a company and invited a downtown New York City audience to come out to Bushwick" (2013). From 2001 to 2007, the space was sustained very cheaply by the rent company members paid to live there. During that time, Bushwick went from being a place where it was not possible to produce experimental theatre to a place of avantgarde possibility. In 2007, Kessler, as executive director, and Noel Allain, as artistic director, cofounded the Bushwick Starr in their former warehouse. "Starting with nothing," Allain said, "made it very easy to step into that period of time when everything was really tight with people. We didn't have a budget that needed to be met. We were just seeing what was possible and using what we had, which was the space" (2013). Their additional day jobs—Kessler as a photographer and Allain as an actor—supplemented income for their artistic work at the Bushwick Starr.

Ali Ha has a similar story. Ha is a visual artist and founder of Factory Fresh, an art gallery that opened in Bushwick in 2008 and closed in 2012. A decade earlier, in December 2002, Ha and her then boyfriend, Ad Deville, founded Orchard Street Art Gallery, in a storefront in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. They also lived in the gallery, which became known for hosting exhibitions by street artists, including the duo Skewville (Ad Deville and his brother) who first became known for the two-dimensional wooden sneakers often tossed onto overhead wires.

In April 2007, Orchard Street Art Gallery was forced out of its space. The invitation to the gallery's Grand Closing party hinted at the cause: "Lost Lease. Must Sell Out. The gallery has lost its Lease to yet another Condo-converting Slumlord. The last 8 months in court were as fun as they sound. But don't worry, we ain't going out like that..." (Orchard Street Art Gallery 2007). After being forced out, Ha began looking for spaces in Bushwick, and perhaps because of her experience in the Lower East Side, knew that she and Deville wanted to buy a space. In December 2007, they bought a shuttered bodega (with "old meat" and "water damage") at 1053 Flushing Avenue in Brooklyn, where they also lived. They opened the space in 2008, and for four years curated visual art exhibitions there. Ha and Deville closed the public space in 2012; they still own the building that now houses the locally owned Bushwick Art and Shipping.

The stories of the Bushwick Starr and Factory Fresh illuminate how artistic practice began to define Bushwick in the early 21st century. Kessler and Ha's stories also reveal how artistic practice interacted with 21st-century ideas of space in Bushwick. Both Kessler (and her company members) and Ha at some point lived in their spaces to support the economy of experimental art making after they were "pushed out" of another New York City neighborhood. Both artistic spaces are remarkable for their immense size, the kind of space that is unaffordable and inconceivable in Manhattan. Inside these buildings artists were looking for new ways to practice and present their work, such as Bushwick Open Studios, an annual multiday arts festival founded in 2007, with music performances alongside performance, visual, and video art. The neighborhood was newly conceived as a place for experimental art.

I asked Ha what it is about Bushwick, this industrial mostly nonwhite neighborhood, that makes it attractive to artists. She first referred to the buildings themselves:

It is because they can fit a piano in a freight elevator and these huge canvases in the freight elevator. You could have electrical volts that can handle any machine. It is an artist's dream. They all work with these tools. So we could have an oven. We had a silk screen because we had the 720 volts—you only get those in industrial buildings. You could drive a tractor-trailer into our building and build sculptures that are 10 times [bigger]. (Ha 2013)

After this response, I pushed Ha to address the relationship between art and racially marginal neighborhoods. She answered this time in terms of the economic advantages: “Artists don’t make a lot of money so that comes into play. They always say the first sign of gentrification is the artists because they are going to beautify.” Artists who endeavor to make experimental performance, work that as Peggy Phelan has argued is nonreproducible and “clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital” (1993:148), often live at the poverty level, as do the residents of the neighborhoods they gentrify. Cultural theorist Andrew Ross aligns the political economy of artistic labor with the “development of urban, bohemian quarters in low-income districts.” Ross considers how the dynamic that “[t]he artist cannot afford to be rewarded well” (because “artists in general are expected, and are therefore inclined, to put in time gratis for love of their art in contexts that would require overtime pay for most other workers”) functions as “the special condition of artistic labor,” influencing rhetoric and policies of “urban renewal” (Ross 2000:15).

But with all this talk of precarious artistic labor and low-income neighborhoods, the previous residents of the neighborhoods are not mentioned. Does avantgarde placemaking in Bushwick indicate a broader dynamic than just big cheap industrial spaces attracting avantgarde artists in droves? Does placemaking there illuminate a particular relationship among existing racially and economically marginalized residents, deindustrial venues, and low-cost experimental arts practices?

Descriptions of the neighborhood suggest one answer. Kessler told me that when she moved there in 2001, “Bushwick was still probably the most underserved population. But at the time it was also a pretty dangerous neighborhood. There was a lot of illegal drug activity. The crime rate was one of the highest in the city” (Kessler 2013). When I met Ali Ha near the former Factory Fresh space at a wall full of street art that she named the “Bushwick Art Park,” she told me “in 2007, this was where people would dump tires and set cars on fire to leave them for insurance. You’d find heroin needles. And human crap, like piles” (Ha 2013). Noel Allain of the Bushwick Starr said, “I remember the first time I went to Bushwick in 2000. Now that I know the neighborhood better I can be fair. But I got off on the corner of Jefferson and Wycoff. That block of Jefferson is an industrial block. No one really lived on it. I had a skewed vision. The first block I walked on, the sidewalk was littered with metal. Falling apart. And it literally reminded me of a war zone” (Allain 2013).

A similar refrain recurs in news stories about arts and gentrification in Bushwick. One story from the *Bushwick Banner* detailed a resident’s experience:

Matthew Varvile, 28, employee of the Broadway coffee shop Good Bye Blue Monday, said living in Bushwick “was like living in the West during the western land rush. It was boom time.” Varvil [*sic*] lived in Bushwick for five years prior to moving in 2010. In that time he described the neighborhood as undergoing gentrification, but said the recession slowed the process. “The gentrification would have been more complete if not for the economic collapse,” he said. “After the bottom fell out of the market, the condos stayed empty. I have actually seen condos go up and come down.” (*The Bushwick Banner* 2011)



Figure 15. *RoosevElvis* by the TEAM, premiering October 2013 at the Bushwick Starr in Bushwick, Brooklyn, NY. (Photo by Sue Kessler)

Such narratives of Bushwick reflect the destabilized meaning of the neighborhood during this period of transition. To these artists, Bushwick was “underserved,” a place with “human crap” and “a war zone,” and it remained that way in part because of the economic collapse of the early 21st century. Bushwick was a place where the meaning, the perception of the neighborhood, was in question, and by consequence it was a place where new meanings could be made. The migration of experimental performance into Bushwick suggests an obvious

conclusion: experimentation requires a space for experimentation, a space for meanings to be made. But these narratives of Bushwick contributed to policy that legitimized another narrative: the illegal yet common occupation by artists of space in former commercial buildings. The 2010 and 2013 Loft Laws made legal some of that formerly illegal spatial occupation, and furthered the narrative of Bushwick as a neighborhood where new meanings of space, especially meanings previously impossible and inconceivable, could be made.

Article 7-C of the Multiple Dwelling Law (MDL), or the “Loft Law” was first enacted in 1982 by the New York State legislature; the law “was a way of offering legal residential status to loft residents located mostly in SOHO, Tribeca, & Hells Kitchen” (Neighbors Allied for Good Growth 2014). The 2010 Loft Law expanded the zone for conversions from industrial to residential space but also originally pinned 16 industrial areas for exclusion; when implemented, the law excluded 13 of those areas except for industrial areas in Greenpoint, Williamsburg, and Bushwick in Brooklyn, and Long Island City, Queens. In other words, the industrial North Brooklyn neighborhoods were made exceptions by being included in the 2010 Loft Law while other industrial neighborhoods were excluded. Bushwick, then, was made into an exceptional space for (previously unacceptable) zoning changes to allow residents (including many artists) to live legally in spaces that they formerly occupied illegally.

Confusion also followed the 2010 and 2013 implementation of the Loft Law because development of Williamsburg and Bushwick was often compared to the 1982 Loft Law–led development of SoHo. Penelope Green’s 2013 *New York Times* article describes the difference between buildings in SoHo and buildings in Brooklyn neighborhoods.

The building stock of heavy-manufacturing neighborhoods like Dumbo or Bushwick, said Chuck DeLaney, tenant representative on the Loft Board, is inherently different from what was covered under the original Loft Law. It’s the difference between a 25-foot-wide cast-iron SoHo warehouse with an average of six units and a nearly 200,000-square-foot former machinery factory like 135 Plymouth, which may have 50 to 60 units. “These buildings are immense and complicated,” Mr. Delaney said.

David Walentas, the irascible “mayor” of Dumbo, whose Two Trees development company has brought the neighborhood so much prosperity or so much ruin, depending on your point of view, called them “bastard buildings.”

“Now the residents are the landlord’s partners, and they have an investment in these buildings,” he said. “It’s like the land settlement in the West. You go and you homestead, and you should get the land.” (Green 2013)

Walentas's statement "you should get the land" suggests a major implication of the Loft Law: the division of residents into various interest groups within Bushwick. Prior to the Loft Law—and even though Bushwick was often described as the next Williamsburg—the under-regulation of space allowed the neighborhood to remain a place where existing Latina/o and black residents (some of whom were artists and industrial workers) lived alongside artists and industry. With the implementation of the Loft Law, however, neighborhood descriptions made artists into pioneers, an interest group different from other residents. Consider Aaron Short's 2010 *Brooklyn Paper* article:

Wonton Foods and Greenfield Clothiers are reporting an increase in the number of noise complaints from tenants in nearby converted buildings over their early morning factory shifts.

"Someone moved into a building next to my factory and I have a vacuum pump running which we turn it on when we start work at 7 am," said Vice President Tod Greenfield.

"They were illegal residents, now they could become legal, and I may have to limit my operations to start at a later hour if there are legal residents next door." (Short 2010)

Short continues with the perspective of Leah Archibald, the executive director of the East Williamsburg Valley Industrial Development Corporation, who describes how artists are impacted by the new laws:

Archibald agreed that a change is coming—and not a good one. "The real artists can say goodbye," she said. "They will have to go out and colonize another neighborhood. They're going to lose cheap studio space with the relentless onslaught of gentrification over time." (Short 2010)

The Loft Law, to some, categorized the neighborhood's population as artists, low-income residents, and industry, and then pitted those populations against one another.

In the "artistic frontier" of Bushwick, conceptions of race, destabilized ideas of place, and avantgarde aesthetics entangled and were positioned against one another to create meaning for the neighborhood. Mike Sell has written of these dynamics in relationship to the avantgarde. I quote him at length:

As a tradition peculiar to the West, the avant-garde possesses an uneasy and at times embarrassing proximity to racism. The cultural turn of the avant-garde engineered in the 1840s by the Parisian "bohemians" pivoted on the discursive erasure of the Roma. The birth of modern experimental theater, as another example, was formulated in terms that do not fit well the demands of antiracist struggle. We might recall the metaphoric top-loading of "darkness" by the symbolists [...]

There are deep structural connections between the Euro-American and modernist fascination with "nothingness" and its fascination with dark-skinned peoples. Frederic Jameson, for one, has convincingly argued that modernism developed in response to the failure of European culture to "contain" the cultural, historical, and epistemological challenges of the colonial system.

[...] Just as surely, I don't want to overlook the explicitly antiracist avant-gardes that battled capitalism before World War II; surrealism, for example, which developed explicit, persistent, and theoretically sophisticated strategies to address racism, colonialism, and commodity culture. (In fact, the group's first engagement with practical politics was in response to France's war on anticolonialist insurgents in Morocco). Even so, race and racism remain troubling concerns for any scholars and critics seriously examining the theory and practice of the avant-garde. (2005:278–79)

During our conversation about Bushwick, race, and experimental aesthetics, Noel Allain acknowledged that “the reality is that the downtown theatre world is predominantly white,” unlike the “totally different community of people” in Bushwick. I spoke with Dominican American Modesto “Flako” Jimenez, a long-time Bushwick resident who has made theatre (largely unrecognized by the mainstream press) in Bushwick since the 1990s. I asked him about his thoughts on Bushwick being called a frontier. He told me, “You come here thinking, I’m going to go and create art. Art’s been here. People have been here” (2013). Jimenez points to how the avantgarde aesthetic in Bushwick does not recognize the art or the people who have been in Bushwick all along. It is as if Bushwick’s 10 percent white demographic made the neighborhood into a frontier, an imaginative blank slate on which to stage new work. It is as if the nonwhite population of Bushwick *allowed* white artists to disidentify with other populations in the neighborhood and produce art that does not engage them.

In the catalog for the 2009 Bushwick Biennial, Benjamin Evans, then gallery director at NURTUREart in Bushwick, wrote:

Imagine a vast expanse of warehouses and industrial debris, tens of thousands of square feet of lovable live-work space available for pennies a foot. Imagine the intoxicating sense of being a pioneer, the first into the virgin terrain of a newly desolated industrial landscape. Imagine unlimited space to make vast paintings, build improbably large sculptures, project ninety-foot videos, and throw the sickest, slickest, hippest parties the world has ever seen, complete with indoor half-pipes and cardboard hot-tubs. And then imagine, if the thought doesn’t reduce you to a fainting fit, all this AND the ability to obtain a decent cup of coffee and/or beer any time of day or night, and you have discovered the notional Shangri-La that is the idea of contemporary Bushwick. Drool, right?

Wrong. Naturally, this description of so utopian a space is the description of an idea, not an actual place. It is in the very nature of utopias that they be perpetually only ideas. (Evans 2009)

He describes the utopia of vast industrial buildings that allowed for a conception of Bushwick as empty and cheap, as an ideal no place. But utopias, as he acknowledges, are not reality. Is the reality that he does not name, the reality that darkens his utopic vision, the neighborhood of racial and economic “others”?

I have suggested that the notion of frontier hints at another way to think about avantgarde performance—as geographically poor. Bushwick has been geographically poor because it has been destabilized by racism that considers nonwhite neighborhoods less valuable, and by neo-liberal policies that increase rents, which in turn push residents further into poverty. The destabilization facilitates (for white newcomers) the breakdown of meaning and, as it forces out nonwhite residents, makes available the space for performance practices to *remake* meaning.

The destabilization of the neighborhood, and its poverty, also frame who and what kinds of art are being made therein. I asked Jimenez why work in Bushwick was often called “avantgarde” and “experimental”:

The people in Bushwick have no choice but to call it that type of work. They don’t have the money and funding to call it an actual piece of theatre art. [...] You have to call it that because that’s what’s going to get the crowd in there. You don’t want to call it what it is, rough theatre. It’s rough theatre. You’re working on this shit, it’s still in workshop and you don’t want to wait it out and try to get the funding to actually put it up as a real body of work because you can’t get it, so you are going to put it up how you can and it’s beautiful cause its still theatre and its rough but it is what it is. (Jimenez 2013)

It is in the periphery, the deindustrialized zones, the low-cost districts, the frontier, perhaps even the no-place, those geographically poor areas where we find experimentation because meaning is rough, because the geography, the earth writing, is yet to be fully written.

Kessler and Allain seem conscious of how—with their presence in Bushwick—new histories about mostly white artists have been written:

If you want to take on the responsibility of serving, in some way, all communities in Bushwick, you need to find out what's meaningful to this other community. Running a theatre has educated me on things I never imagined when I first started making theatre. Local politics. I've learned more about city planning and how a city runs from theatre than I ever imagined I would. And also really taking the time to be educated about a totally different community of people. (Allain 2013)

With that insight, the Bushwick Starr began to work with Jimenez in 2011. Now Jimenez meets other local artists and promotes his performances to customers as he drives his taxi, his day job. He writes during his downtime and is involved with the Bushwick Starr in much of their programming: he facilitates playwriting with youth who participate in Puppets & Poets and the Big Green Theater Festival, and hosts regular performance and poetry nights (such as the November 2013 “Ghetto Hors D’Oeuvres” event) aimed at sparking dialogue with those who live in the neighborhood—both newcomers and longtime residents⁶:

I get rappers, poets, actors, graffiti artists, street artists. I get all the new artists and all the old artists and I combine them together to share a space. [...] I like making it a platform where we can communicate. You're going to hear the guy talking about his crack history and you are also going to hear the PhD person talking about “yo its fucking rough out here. I got gentrified out of my Flatbush apartment.” So those words are eye opening on both sides. (Jimenez 2013)

Through performance, Jimenez aligns long-term nonwhite residents with white artists, a collaboration that I have not seen anywhere else in the North Brooklyn performance spaces I have studied. “All this art that is popping out is not starting dialogue, because you can just do art for your artist friends,” Jimenez said. “You are not doing art for the people that are here. [...] So they're not even bridging. We're too disconnected from each other and we live on the same fucking floor now.” There's also urgency to what he curates; a space to use theatre for a “positive message that you are fucking human,” and for much needed dialogue as neoliberal forces have begun to move low-income residents—both longtime and newcomers—from the neighborhood:

They're going to forget us man. We are going to be done. [...] Some of these people stay and manage to uplift themselves and get a house or get an apartment for them and their kids. And what happens? The landlord is like, “I'm selling the building.” You're fucked and you get no notice. (Jimenez 2013)

These narratives also call attention to how the label “artistic frontier” is itself an unstable category. It obscures narratives of place and undoes the role of specificity in describing how the arts and neighborhoods interact. It also predicts its ultimate demise: once a frontier is settled, it is no longer a frontier. Ali Ha still owns the building that housed Factory Fresh; she rents the space to Bushwick Art Supply and Shipping, Inc. When Ha closed Factory Fresh (when she and partner Ad Deville split up) she also grew disaffected with the “scene” in Bushwick. “I realize it wasn't our scene anymore,” Ha told me. “Because I had left the Lower East Side for the same reasons. I had looked for utopia, I had found utopia, but utopias don't last forever. So I feel very fortunate to have been here when I was” (2013).

6. This dialogue is, for many, sorely lacking. Piper Werle reviewed the November 2013 Ghetto Hors d’Oeuvres event, writing, “It's embarrassing to admit, but I lived in Bushwick for eight months in 2012 and 2013 and never held a conversation with anyone who was actually raised in the neighborhood. I was eager to correct my situation, yet too uncomfortable to admit how symbolic it was of gentrification” (Werle 2013).

Avantgarde art makes a “scene,” but not necessarily a place. Allain describes the chronology of this process in Bushwick:

Being an artist in a neighborhood like Bushwick, in 2006 or earlier, you are gentrifying the neighborhood whether you like it or not. You are bringing in arts, you are bringing in performance culture. You are starting a little bit of a scene. You are taking the cheap rents. And the city hasn't started developing yet and you are setting the stage for the development. And that's been something that's definitely been complicated to deal with just to watch and recognize our role in that. There was a sweet spot between 2007 and 2010 where there was a lot of grassroots organizing going on. It felt very cooperative and then the kind of more capitalist side of things really started to take hold. And now its crazy. (2013)

One of the “craziest” things, it seems, is the resonance of the aesthetics of Bushwick, Brooklyn, to a far greater audience beyond Bushwick. “I mean one of the weirdest things to me was a Twitter picture—they took a picture at a party on a rooftop next to our theatre and they were like ‘it’s just like *Girls*,’” Allain said, referring to the HBO series about four 20-something white women who live and work in New York City. “This person just came to the Bushwick Starr and took a picture at our theatre and referenced *Girls*. It blew my mind. Because when we were first out there, you did feel as if you were on the periphery. No one knew. Half the people didn't know where Bushwick was” (2013).

Another change is the very discourse used to make sense of Bushwick. In 2012, St. Francis College and the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce hosted a symposium, “Bushwick: North Brooklyn's Final Frontier” (Lent 2012). Avantgarde art may have made a “scene” in the neighborhood, but the neighborhood's location, as the last Brooklyn neighborhood on the eastward-bound “L” train, is used here to reinforce its frontier end-of-the-line identity.

Brooklyn *qua* Brooklyn

Intermittent Performance across the Borough

In the 2009 catalog for the Bushwick Biennial, scrapworm, a pseudonym for a Brooklyn-based artist, wrote:

If the root of rivalry is in the staking of claims, the classic Williamsburg vs. Bushwick antagonism is a battle not only for defined blocks, but also for the title of true vanguardism. Problem being, as soon as any conforming boundaries are set (whether physical, classist, academic, or scenist), the spirit of the Avant-Garde immediately vanishes. A freedom that cannot exist within parameters, the glamorized aura of the cutting-edge Artist “ahead of the times” has less to do with specific artists and more to do with the phenomena of visions without categories: creative insights that are ever-morphing, both as subtle and alive as aesthetic experience in itself. (scrapworm 2009)

One of her points is that boundary-breaking arts feed off of a lack of boundaries and parameters, and yet a neighborhood is contained by the parameters that geographic place imposes. Existing descriptions of Williamsburg and Brooklyn as “frontiers” have contributed, especially in the post-collapse economy, to a new direction in experimental performance geography. This direction evidences a tension between concrete artistic practices within Williamsburg and Bushwick and how those practices have been used to develop a sense of Brooklyn *qua* Brooklyn, that is, not as a geographic borough but as an abstract idea about how space and experimental aesthetic edginess interact.

The Brooklyn International Performance Art Festival (BIPAF) debuted in July 2013. Hector Canonge, an experimental visual and performance artist, curated a BIPAF event called Nexus Sur Nexus that was held at the Fitness Center for Arts and Tactics in Bushwick with live-streamed performance art from Bolivia. Canonge told me:

The idea was why don't we connect artists from Latin American with artists in the US. [...] It's very hard for Latin American artists and I'm sure for other artists to get a visa to the United States. Now it's even more so because they require all of these papers, and all of this money, all these things, all these affidavits, etc., etc. We can't have them physically. We'll have them virtually. (Canonge 2013)

The entire three-week festival was curated through a collaborative process between artists and venue owners, and it featured local, non-local US, and international performance artists. This process was an essential part of the festival:

The idea was to create this festival in a way that would not have this hierarchical sense of director, coordinator. So it was more of a communal open source idea for a festival. We didn't know exactly where it was going to go, how it was going to go. That was the experiment. There was this idea of creating an open platform where galleries would come, spaces would come, artists would come, curators would come, and artists would actually curate shows and curators would participate in finding venues. So it was very participatory. [...] It created this incredible environment for creativity, for expression, for sharing resources and talking about performance art, for having international artists and having the program in Bolivia being transmitted to the United States. It was reaching beyond the scope of just Brooklyn. (Canonge 2013)

Named in the title of BIPAF, Brooklyn was not for this festival just a place but also an idea that made sense of the kind of performance art it presented. And yet, experimental theatre and performance does not spread itself out evenly across the borough. Rather when used in conversation about avantgarde practice, "Brooklyn" most often references experimental works produced in Williamsburg and Bushwick. In fact, although the thirteen venues for BIPAF were across the borough, nine—Brooklyn Fire Proof, CAVE, Fitness Center for Arts and Tactics, Glasshouse, Goodbye Blue Monday, Grace Exhibition Space, IV Soldiers, Panoply Performance Laboratory, and Silent Barn—were in Williamsburg and Bushwick.⁷

In the post-collapse economy, "Brooklyn" is championed as a nonspecific space for experimental arts. Media representations, such as the *New York Times* articles "How I Became a Hipster" (Alford 2013) and "Before Everything Artisanal Arrived in Brooklyn, There Was This" (Sifton 2013) refer to Brooklyn as one big hip, artisanal, and experimental place but find the evidence of specific practices in Williamsburg and Bushwick, avoiding altogether the rest of the borough. "Artistic frontier" has shifted from a way to narrativize particular neighborhoods to a way to describe Brooklyn in general as a placeless style. One reason for this shift is rooted in the fact that after 2010, many experimental artists living in Williamsburg and Bushwick began to move to various other neighborhoods.

I interviewed Andrew Dinwiddie and Caleb Hammons, two of the curators for CATCH, a multidisciplinary (though largely movement performance) showcase that began in 2003 at Galapagos Art Space in Williamsburg. Every CATCH show features 5 to 30, short, often eight-minute, performances. Brooklyn as an idea and not a geographic place resonates with CATCH, which now runs every few months at various venues such as the Bushwick Starr, and the Invisible Dog in Cobble Hill, another Brooklyn neighborhood southwest of Williamsburg. Consider this exchange between Hammons and Dinwiddie:

HAMMONS: I think that when I moved here [in 2003] the first very just simple understanding of geography in relation to art is that things were made in Brooklyn and shown in Manhattan. But I think that that has actually changed a lot. I think that if you are a young artist, there's actually more opportunities to show your work in Brooklyn

7. The others were Gowanus Ballroom (in Gowanus, Brooklyn); JACK (in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn); The Invisible Dog Art Center (in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn); and The Woods (in Ridgewood, Queens).

than there are in Manhattan. [...] Even when people want to put up a whole piece. You look at the Bushwick Starr, you look at the Chocolate Factory, you look at the Invisible Dog.

DINWIDDIE: The Chocolate Factory, we just call that Brooklyn.

HAMMONS: It's in Long Island City [Queens], just outside of Manhattan. People are really starting to make and perform in Brooklyn. I previously worked for a theatre company in Manhattan and we started getting requests from actors, and directors, and playwrights that we rehearse in Brooklyn. Because it is more convenient for everyone and cheaper. (Dinwiddie and Hammons 2013)

CATCH functions in accord with how Dinwiddie and Hammons talk about Brooklyn qua Brooklyn, even if that Brooklyn (such as the Chocolate Factory in Queens) is not *in* Brooklyn. Operationally, CATCH is “not an official entity in any way,” Hammons told me, meaning that they are not an official nonprofit organization (a 501(c)(3) or legally recognized public charity), nor are they “umbrellaed,” that is fiscally sponsored by an umbrella nonprofit arts sponsorship organization such as Fractured Atlas.⁸

Because of that, CATCH produces shows that derive income from ticket sales and then passes that along to performers. “We operate financially on a zero to zero budget,” Dinwiddie described, “so that we really take in box office income. We rent the space. We pay a handful of people. We pay for our website fees. And then we split the difference among artists and ourselves.” For CATCH, there is no economic growth or long-term budget. “And I think *that* for me is where ‘alternative’ comes in,” Hammons said:

The idea of an alternative economy, in a strange way, is incredibly sustainable. The institution of CATCH [...] exists only because we say it does, and is sustainable because it never attempts to go beyond its means, because our means is all we have. And there's an equal cut amongst everyone. There's not a disparity between what we as the administrators of the thing are getting out of it versus what the artists are getting out of it. (Dinwiddie and Hammons 2013)

What they call an alternative economy is in fact a subsistence economy that is non-scalable, and eschews capital or the accumulation of wealth in its operations in Brooklyn venues.

BIPAF and CATCH hint that New York City's next iteration of avantgarde performance may not be bound to a particular location. Perhaps it no longer can function in one particular place. “Actually now I feel way more spread out than 10 years ago,” said Hammons, indicating that experimental artists in New York City are no longer clustered in one neighborhood: “There was a time when you lived in Bushwick or Williamsburg.” On where to locate experimental performance now, Jimenez concurs: “right now that's happening everywhere” (2013).

The label of “frontier” reflects the boundary-breaking aesthetics of the art that creates the geography of the “artistic frontier”—an aesthetics that demands risk and allows for failure; that privileges intimacy; and that demands a geographically poor place where it can participate in developing the political economy of place. For Ann Marie Lonsdale of CPR, “experimental” demands failure:

If you are producing and presenting experimental work and it's all really good and everything sells out, then the work is by definition in my opinion not experimental. We should

8. Founded in 1998, Fractured Atlas is a national organization that provides artists and cultural organizations with services including fiscal sponsorship, that is sponsorship that allows artists and cultural organizations who lack 501(c)(3) status to “solicit tax-deductible donations and apply for grants without going through the onerous process of launching a 501(c)(3)” (Fractured Atlas 2014).

be, we the community should be failing on a lot of levels. Not necessarily failing administratively or operationally—we shouldn't be failing in those ways. We should be doing lots of weird work and some of it should be the worst. And some of it should be the best. Because otherwise we are not pushing boundaries. (Lonsdale 2013)

Lonsdale hints that experimental performance is able to fail, while not failing administratively, because of the places where it often lands, neighborhoods that are destabilized by policy and racist conceptions of nonwhite residents. This 2013 iteration of “artistic frontier” within a logic of Brooklyn qua Brooklyn, then still represents geographic poverty, but does so multiply: as an aesthetic style that makes an idea of place without needing specific neighborhoods.

Stanley-Niaah's notion of performance geography might be of use in considering these multiple geographic poverties. Performance geography expands how, in the last two decades, cultural geography scholars have attended to performativity. Performativity, as geographer Nigel Thrift argues, permits a “revivified cultural geography” that allows for ideas of embodiment (2004:121). My attention to performance geography suggests that practices within theatrical spaces influence the racial, economic, and discursive practices of geographic space, and that geographic space (in this case peripheral and low-cost) defines performance practices.

Our vision of the artistic frontier of the early 21st century reflects the idea of the American frontier of centuries past where a violent ideology considered certain lands “empty,” allowing for imaginative and material conquest. But neoliberalism makes a critical difference in the current iteration; privatization supported by policy has monetized physical space and the space for imagination. Experimental performance, often acting as a catalyst for neoliberal urban policy that works in concert with the privatization of space and imagination, is also perhaps more insurgently a catalyst for the nonreproducible, the noncapitalist, the poor. Geographically poor areas are fertile for performance because they do not cohere, totally, to a neoliberal capitalist logic of space; but they are also poor because of racist and neoliberal policy that has destabilized the meaning of space. Perhaps the recognition of how policy and performance have contributed to this dual role within space could somehow position policy- and performance-makers to support communities without destabilization and cultivate imagination without conquest.

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