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"This house belong to me, now": The "Slumming" and "Gentrification" of Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn as Experienced and Foretold by Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*

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Terrestrial, rather than extraterrestrial, space often marks the “final frontier.” This holds especially true in the case of urban space. Limited by the boundaries of the city, the space within sits awaiting the whims of an economy. When supply exceeds demand, urban wastelands crop up on the landscape, pockmarking it with boarded up buildings, empty lots strewn with trash, and shuttered businesses, large and small; the city suffers from “blight.” When demand exceeds supply, “recovery” ensues: the plywood comes down, empty lots get filled, and new stores and restaurants open. While some areas within the city may remain relatively stable in either state for decades or even centuries, others oscillate between the two, as the economy dictates. As supply and demand wax and wane, many if not most neighborhoods swing from exoduses to influxes, with the time between the two ticking with contest. For so long as the boundaries of the city itself remain intact, the very limitations drawn by its borders necessitate the recreation of the space within as time passes; there is only so much space to go around. Often referred to as “in transition” or, in the more recent parlance of the New York City real estate market, “gentrifying,” it is worth noting that both the emigrants and the immigrants of these neighborhoods leave traces difficult to completely erase. City spaces, therefore, serve as palimpsests—layered over time with various uses, inhabitants, cultures and forms of commerce.

In that regard, years ago, the French philosopher of space, Henri Lefebvre, drew an important distinction between the ways in which space is perceived. And in brownstone Brooklyn, it should be noted, Lefebvre’s second conception of space often takes precedence over the first. Early in this seminal work, *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre distinguishes between “representations of space” and “representational spaces,” also known as “spaces of representation” (41). While he acknowledges, as do I, that representations of space “are objective, though subject to revision,” and “also play a part in social and political practice,” he believes that spaces of representation, “on the other hand, need obey no rule of consistency or cohesiveness. Redolent with imaginary and symbolic elements, they have their source in history—in the history of a people as well as the history of each individual belonging to that people” (41). Of course, as Lefebvre was perhaps the first to notice, actual places in their various presentations and re-presentations generally serve simultaneously as spaces of representation/s, the locus of ideas. In cities, large swaths of land are often cleared by neglect or demolition to make way for other buildings; another representation then fills the space, often quite different in appearance from the one before. It follows that the place, as a space of representation, could and often does change as well. Consider, for instance, a once-empty trash-strewn plot that suddenly becomes a war memorial, or a playground, and how different each is as both—in representations of that space and, in each iteration, as a space of something represented. Trickier, perhaps, are those instances when the representation of a space remains essentially unchanged, but *as a space*

of representation momentous, even drastic changes follow one upon the other in intervals of perhaps no more than fifty years. In these cases, it is not the brick and mortar occupying these spaces that changes, but the people within. Think here of a former convent transformed into condominiums, which in turn eventually become a homeless shelter. Change in Lefebvre's two notions of space may be easier to perceive when the convent is torn down and replaced by other, radically different-looking buildings at each turn, but the change in use is no less layered when the building remains the same and its occupants shift to a new demographic.

Such is the case with large swaths of Brooklyn, New York, also known as "brownstone Brooklyn." Originally constructed for a rising middle and merchant class upon what had before been considered farming "hinterlands," these neighborhoods remain to this day, for the most part, filled with tree-lined streets marked by rows of mid-to-late nineteenth-century brownstone houses. In their heyday, and through the early part of the twentieth century, they showcased marvels of architectural design and craftsmanship, both inside and out. And yet, most of these neighborhoods, as the twentieth century progressed and post-World War II suburban migratory patterns emerged, experienced some degree of disinvestment. The wealthier families who built these tributes to their rise either died out or moved out. Poorer recent immigrants to the area, from either inside or outside of the United States, took their place. Some of these treasures were demolished by neglect, leaving gaping holes like pulled teeth not replaced; others fell into disrepair. A failed attempt at "urban renewal" during 1950s and 1960s included the bulldozing of entire micro-neighborhoods, replacing them with large blocks of public housing "projects." Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn provides an object lesson in this evolutionary pattern, as it is a "storied" neighborhood in three senses of the word: It is "low-rise," filled with blocks of four- or five-story brownstones, which in urban architecture make it "low density," and hence, according to Jane Jacobs, susceptible to "slumming."¹ It is storied in that it is thought of as an important site of Black history in New York City, second, perhaps, only to Harlem. And finally, it is storied in a more literal sense as well, providing as it does the setting for Paule Marshall's evocative novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.

As such, Bedford Stuyvesant remains a repository of a substantial chunk of "the history of a people as well as the history of [some] individual[s] belonging to that people." To relate a part of that history, this essay will trace what Lefebvre

¹ Jacobs, in her still seminal study, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, noted that Bedford Stuyvesant's density, half at 75-124 dwelling units per acre and half at 45-74 dwelling units per acre (statistics gleaned from New York City Planning Commission documents current at her writing) was relatively low in an urban context, and left it vulnerable, therefore, to what she called "slumming." In her formulation, denser neighborhoods are less likely to "slum," though, it should be noted, density above and beyond the optimal can push a neighborhood over the edge into blight as well (203).

called an “architectonics” of space. Lefebvre probably coined the term “architectonics of space” because “archeology of space” did not exactly fit his bill. An architectonics of space requires no literal “digging” into layers of sediment to reveal what came before. Rather, it proposes an unveiling of layers, a peeling back of representations, one superimposed over another. In the more typical case of vastly different built environments inhabiting a space, one after another, an architectonics of the space, and the ramifications of each of its representations, is fairly easily revealed. But I hope to uncover a more atypical kind of architectonics in this essay. In order to accomplish that goal, I will turn to the brownstones of Bedford Stuyvesant and, more importantly, the inhabitants of those brownstones, once built, as they change over the late decades of the nineteenth century to those of the mid-twentieth. Most of this rich history is detailed in Paule Marshall’s novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, an invaluable resource in explaining some of the ways in which the people of a place, as well as their material conditions, define it as a space of representation, for themselves as well as for others. Finally, I will look at Bedford Stuyvesant today, and those who understand, however intuitively, that the history of “a people” is bound up in the history of the individuals who inhabit a particular space. Moreover, I would argue conversely that the history of a particular space is just as intricately woven with the history of the individuals who form a part of “a people.” To put it another way, the people within often define a space of representation just as a space of representation can define the people within—who in turn may come to be defined by people from without, like it or not. When more than one group vie for the same space in the hope of it representing themselves, contest ensues. I will argue that the streets of Bedford Stuyvesant provide an object lesson in the ways in which an architectonics of space, and the political, social, and economic ramifications revealed by such, exposes as much about the people within and how they are perceived by the people without as it does about the space itself.

I

Critics have traditionally read Paule Marshall’s novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, as a rare Black female bildungsroman, but it is also very much a novel about Brooklyn real estate, and about the sedimentary nature of space and place.² The leased brownstone that in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* houses the Boyce family, parents Deighton and Silla and daughters Ina and Selina, stands in “the unbroken line of brownstone houses down the long Brooklyn Street,” resembling “an army massed at attention....[o]nly three or four stories tall—squat—they give the

² For but one example in this vein, see: Geta LeSeur, “One Mother, Two Daughters: The Afro-American and the Afro Caribbean Female ‘Bildungsroman,’” *The Black Scholar* 17.2 (1986): 26–33.

impression of formidable height”; the description is apt (Marshall 3).³ The Boyce family home sits on Chauncey Street, facing Fulton Park, less than a block from Fulton Street, still to this day a somewhat woebegone Business Improvement District. Marshall’s opening militaristic metaphors hint at the grim reality inside many of these brownstones, and especially foreshadow what is to come for the Boyce family. And yet, these brownstones retain much of their lurking beauty:

...[E]ach house had something distinctly its own. Some touch that was Gothic, Romanesque, baroque, or Greek triumphed amid the Victorian clutter. Here Ionic columns framed the windows, while next door gargoyles scowled up at the sun. There, the cornices were hung with carved foliage while Gorgon heads decorated others. Many houses had bay windows or Gothic stonework; a few boasted turrets raised high above the other roofs (Marshall 3).

Despite the distinctive craftsmanship any lover of architectural history can read into this passage today, to Marshall/Selina, as 1939 turns into 1940, the scene screams of “brown monotony...doomed by the confusion of design” (Marshall 4).⁴

³ Kimberly W. Benston does an especially fine job of unpacking the architectural metaphors of the novel in his essay, “Architectural Imagery and Unity in Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.”

⁴ Gavin Jones, in his formidable essay, “‘The Sea Ain’ Got No Back Door’: The Problems of Black Consciousness in Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*,” eschews the allegorical interpretation of this passage, reading it instead as Marshall’s way of “bringing differences together in a prism of meaning” (598). Selina Boyce’s early realization that Barbadian identity is inextricably woven into home ownership would seem to suggest, however, that Selina does see the representation of Chauncey Street as a space of representation amalgamating Barbadian group-think (“brown monotony”) with the assimilationist notion of individualism (“something distinctly its own”).



Chauncey Street, Bedford Stuyvesant, facing Fulton Park (Andrew Clark)

Selina and her family find themselves tenants in the former owners' home-storage space; so abruptly were lives ended there so others' could begin. It could be said that the novel offers an almost literal example of "white flight," which in turn made possible the aspirational dreams of working-class African Americans and Afro-Caribbean immigrants to, in the words of Marshall's protagonist, Silla Boyce, "buy house." By 1939, when the novel opens, the first major population shift of the area is well underway: "First, there had been the Dutch-English and Scots-Irish who had built the houses. There had been tea in the afternoon then and skirts rustling across the parquet floors and mild voices. For a long time, it had been only the whites, each generation unraveling in a quiet skein behind the green shades" (Marshall 4). But now, the last of the Irish are "discreetly dying behind their shades or selling their houses and moving away" (Marshall 4). The haste with which the white gentry of the Boyce rental decamped remains in evidence: the dust motes float amid a parlor "full of ponderous furniture," expensive carpets, potted ferns, chandeliers, and enormous, ornate pier mirrors, all of which were left behind and all of which contribute to young Selina Boyce's experiencing "home" as a stranger (Marshall 5). To add insult to injury, on the top floor of the house in a couple of cramped rent-free rooms, "crowded out by furniture piled under gray

sheets and cracked paintings stacked on the floor” an elderly, blind, and bedridden former servant, Miss Mary, spends her days reminiscing about “the great family” she was so fortunate to have served in her “glory days.” Meanwhile, her (illegitimate) daughter, Maritze, snarls at her bitterly, keenly aware that the object of this misplaced devotion—her beloved “family,” “the daughters fleeing the house as though they hated it, leaving behind the rooms of furniture downstairs, and leaving behind her with her daughter”—has left her mother to die virtually alone and penniless behind the shades among strangers after a lifetime of dedicated service (Marshall 19-20). Her daughter begs her to leave this mausoleum: “Every decent white person’s moving away, getting out. Except us,” she informs her mother, showing her a newspaper clipping, “It says they’re building inexpensive houses on Long Island. Nice little houses...” (Marshall 36). Her mother turns a deaf ear, unable to exit the reverie of her past.

The representational space of Bedford Stuyvesant’s lace-curtain Irish upward mobility, full of ponderous furniture and ferns, thus begins to give way to the representational space of Bedford Stuyvesant’s newly arrived Barbadians, at first forced to superimpose themselves over the furnishings and even the people left behind. As pre- and post-War “white flight” gains momentum, cities exert a magnetic pull luring African Americans and Caribbean-Americans pouring northward through most of the twentieth century. The Boyce family arrives relatively late to the party; their living arrangement as the “renters” of a house still full of the owners’ semiotic detritus hammers home their insider/outsider status, as Seifert Yearwood reminds Deighton Boyce:

But, Boyce, what you waiting for? You might not get the chance again to own such a swell house—with all those good furnitures the white people left....Remember when we first came here in 1920 we was all living in South Brooklyn with the cockroaches lifting us up? The white people thought they was gon keep us there but they din know what Bajan does give. We here now and when they run we gun be right behind them. That’s why, mahn, you got to start buying. Go to the loan shark if you ain got the money. (Marshall 38-9)

On the one hand, Silla, very much an “insider” when the novel opens, maintains close ties to her Barbadian community—cooking in her below-stairs kitchen Caribbean delicacies such as black pudding, souse, and coconut bread to sell as a sideline while her “girlfriends” watch and kibitz (Marshall 67)—on the other hand, however, as her friend Iris reminds her, Silla and her family remain outsiders, in that they are exceptions to the long list of Barbadians Iris painfully totes up who have already “bought house” (Marshall 73-4). And since she ventures beyond the safer shores of her kitchen’s Barbados-in-Brooklyn, going to work as she does in

distant Flatbush as a housekeeper for a white family, Silla comes to understand all too well the perceived inferior status of that “dark sea nudging its way onto a white beach and staining the sand”—a metaphor only a Caribbean immigrant still feeling the tug of “home” could apply to Brooklyn—and its inherent racism. As Martin Japtok acutely points out, it takes Selina some time to come to terms with what her mother readily understands: “the acquisitiveness of the Barbadian community [is] a defense mechanism against racism, the wish to own things [is] an attempt to fight back against exclusion” (311); hence, the intense communal pressure, even to the point of shaming, to own. But as Barbara Christian notices, this acquisitiveness goes far beyond a conformist “keeping up with the Joneses” mentality; rather, it is a unified defense mechanism, “compelling, urging, insisting that every one of its parts bend to the common goal: the owning of a brownstone, the possession of property, as a bulwark against poverty, racism and failure” (82). Susan Willis astutely takes this point a bit further, finding, as she does, the dialectic between simultaneous opposition and assimilation:

Marshall demonstrates deep political understanding in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* by showing that the desire to own property may well have represented an initial contestation of bourgeois white domination, but because property ownership is implicit in capitalist society, the momentum of opposition was immediately absorbed and integrated into the context of American capitalism. (74)

And so it was with the Irish before them as well. One hundred years earlier, when Irish immigrants arrived in New York in droves, only to find “Irish Need Not Apply” signs hung throughout the city, they too faced “an initial contestation of bourgeois white domination.” In time, they managed with the newly arrived Germans to redraw the boundaries of the social division of labor, including themselves in the working class, while assiduously excluding people of color. In the South, African Americans, both freeman and slave, held positions requiring skilled labor; upon arrival North after their great migration, they were surprised to find these positions monopolized by northern European immigrants (who greatly outnumbered those pouring in from the South and the Caribbean).⁵ As many of the Irish rose from skilled labor to the professional class, they too quickly understood that property ownership offered a way out of opposition and into absorption into American capitalism. By the turn of the twentieth century, they had made enormous progress toward that goal, and Bedford Stuyvesant served as the canvas on which to paint a representation of their success. Their handsome houses stood in a neighborhood replete with good schools, libraries, churches, and civic-minded

⁵ A more detailed analysis of this phenomenon and its effect on Brooklyn can be found in Craig Steven Wilder’s chapter, “Irish Over Black,” especially 61-64.

citizens and were advertised in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle as an “excellent investment opportunity” for others of means to purchase. As such, they helped create this representation of Bedford Stuyvesant and, conversely, Bedford Stuyvesant reflected to themselves and to others a representation of their success.

But important differences also obtain. The established Irish purchased the brand-new brownstones of Chauncey Street at the peak of their financial powers; the newly arrived Barbadians who took in their leavings mostly just scraped by. And so, as the affluent Irish left and the financially stressed Barbadians arrived, the social class make-up of Bedford Stuyvesant abruptly shifted. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Irish who purchased monuments to their success in Bedford Stuyvesant today would be considered middle to upper middle class. By contrast, the Barbadians replacing them, as portrayed in Marshall’s novel are, for the most part, at best working-class, at worst, working poor, relegated as they were to the service and unskilled labor positions of the socio-political order.⁶ And of course, though the Irish have often been portrayed as people of color, the Barbadians really were of African descent and faced worse racial discrimination than the Irish a century before. Given their role in the segregation of the labor market, it follows that the Irish were among those northern European immigrants who put up what they hoped would be an impenetrable barrier to racial housing integration in Bedford Stuyvesant in the form of restrictive covenants, but when that dubious wall failed to keep people of color out they not surprisingly refused to integrate the neighborhood. Rather, as the area’s population diversified, most of them fled, often so hastily and with such a sense of desperation, they left much of value behind, as well as a good deal of what no longer held value, such as aged former servant. The residue left behind by the Boyce’s landlord speaks volumes regarding Marshall’s condemnatory yet farcical, near absurdist view of “white flight.”

Silla and Deighton Boyce (by default) may be late adopters, but Silla, at least, ambitious for her family, eager to slip the surly bonds of low-paid service work, gifted with a sense of the many financial and social benefits of homeownership, and intent upon joining the Association of Barbadian Homeowners and Businessmen, resolutely sets her sights on “buying house,” as many of her Barbadian neighbors already have done. They did so in the same way that white veterans of WWII subsidized by the GI Bill did, and as most first-time working class and middle class homeowners still do—with small down payments and large mortgages. Once the restrictive covenants were lifted, Silla Boyce and her neighbors could at last “buy house” in Bedford Stuyvesant, and secure

⁶ A point well taken in Martin Japtok’s essay is that additional conflict ensues in Bedford Stuyvesant during this period as African Americans arriving from the south vie for space with Barbadians and other Caribbean immigrants. Each group then saw themselves as separate, and to an extent, still do. The ways in which the complex dynamic between these two groups functions, however, is beyond the scope of this essay.

mortgages, though, due to the persistence of redlining, mainly from bankers of color, such as Percy Challenor⁷:

Black Brooklynites pooled their money and provided each other with secure loans that banks and realtors denied them. About 1932 Barbadian men in the Bedford section of Brooklyn began addressing the economic hardships of the black community through an informal credit society. On July 18, 1939 they organized the Paragon Progressive Community Association. On January 29, 1941 the Paragon Progressive Federal Credit Union was established with an initial investment of \$225. Garveyite in its structure, the Association employed a practical economic nationalism, taking deposits, providing home and business loans at reasonable rates, and giving black people control over their own resources...By 1945 it counted 1,117 members and extended over \$200,000 in loans...Churches also formed credit associations.⁸ (Wilder 183)

Once again, Marshall's novel portrays an historical accuracy, as Percy Challenor and Seifert Yearwood's Association of Barbadian Homeowners and Businessmen provides a fictional stand-in for the PPFCU, "set[ting] up some Fund to make loans to the members" in order to circumvent the white bankers' reluctance to lend to the Bajans (Marshall 143).

II

⁷ Until the Association begins offering financing, people of color in Bedford Stuyvesant found limited credit elsewhere. Down payments proved equally difficult to muster; after Deighton blows the money from Silla's illicit sale of his two-acre "piece of ground home," she, like others, cobbles together a down payment by, as her friend Florrie Trotman puts it, "working morning noon and night for this big war money" and turning to a loan shark.

⁸ See also, Bert J. Thomas, "Historical Functions of Caribbean-American Benevolent/Progressive Associations," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 12.2 (July 1988): 51.



Bedford Stuyvesant under construction (Andrew Clark)

And so, for a time, despite the limited resources of the new owners a new stability prevailed. After all, up to this point, the neighborhood, regardless of the skin color of its inhabitants, enjoyed much of what Jane Jacobs numbers among the necessary characteristics for “life.” Though its density is less than optimal due to its many single-family homes, it does contain within its boundaries some diversity of use, with warehouses, manufacturing centers, shopping areas (the commercial corridor of Fulton Street sits less than a block from Silla’s brownstone), and schools and churches interspersed with or just outside of its residential areas. The neighborhood denizens at this point may have been less affluent than their predecessors, but at least at first, no less house-proud. One could say that Bedford Stuyvesant in 1939 represented an aspirational rising black middle class.

Nevertheless, for new immigrants to New York, working mostly low-wage service jobs, the monthly payments devoid of government support prove staggering. Hence, the birth of the “rooming house,” or SRO (Single Room Occupancy): “Every West Indian out there ...converting these old houses into rooming houses—making the closets into rooms some them!—and pulling down plenty-plenty money by the week” (Marshall 173). After securing ownership, Silla and her fellow Association members, in a sense, begin a massive Monopoly game.

Land on a lot with a brownstone and buy it; carve up the interior of the purchase into as many rooms as possible; rent those rooms at the most exorbitant rent the market will bear; save the monies in excess of costs; with those savings buy a second brownstone and carve up *its* interior into as many rooms as possible; rent *those* rooms for the most exorbitant rent the market will bear etc. Obviously, Percy Challenor is the novel's master of this game, and a model of success for all. He has played so well his daughter Beryl is off to law school, "because my father says I could help him with the business and with the rooming houses we have *over your way*. He says he's getting tired of yelling at the roomers for their rent" (Marshall 196, emphasis added). But Silla, saddled with a large mortgage and payments to a local loan shark from whom she obtained her down payment, must cram her house to the rafters with borders to meet her repayment schedule and realize a small profit. No sooner does she meet her goal of buying than the realities of the economies of scale begin to dawn on her: "If only I could make upstairs into smaller rooms and charge a little more... But that old woman wun dead and free-bee ain thinking about moving" (Marshall 201). Eventually, Silla cruelly helps old Miss Mary die: "This house belong to me, now," she screams at her, "and I gon get you out yet. Why wun you dead?" (Marshall 202). The confrontation meets its goal; Miss Mary dies and her rooms are emptied, ready to be further partitioned and rented at the highest possible price. Intent on maximizing her occupancy, to Selina's great distress Silla also evicts her first long-term roomer, Suggie Skete, by obtaining affidavits from her new boarders testifying to Suggie's "prostitution," thereby claiming that she gave the house an "unsavory reputation and thus lowered its property value" (Marshall 211). Armed with these testimonies, Silla casts Suggie out of her little paradise of Barbadian custom and salt cod on Chauncey Street, freeing her room to be divided into two, or perhaps three.

But as Percy Challenor has learned, this ruthless business strategy comes at a price; Silla's watchful vigilance exacts its toll. For the people who rent rooms in SROs are generally poor, and often have to be "yelled at for their rent." Bearing witness to her mother's ever more grotesque behavior, Selina confides in her friend and surrogate mother, Miss Thompson,

"You know, now that the house is crawling with roomers she's taken to hiding in the hall to watch them. If they ring the bell too loud, or run down the stairs, she springs out of the dark and shouts, 'Don ring down the bell!' or 'What, you gon break down my stairs!' or 'Turn down that blasted radio, this ain Fulton Street!'" (Marshall 215)

This kind of "density" is not what Jane Jacobs had in mind—large numbers of poor people crammed into small rooms in one geographic area, staring "like prisoners from the windows of their cubicles" (148). Unable to support businesses and local

economic growth, crowding also overwhelms city services such as garbage collection. Hence, the neighborhood takes on the appeal of a trash-strewn wasteland.

Although an unhealthy density of poor residents crammed into a relatively small geographical area surely contributed to Bedford Stuyvesant's change for the worse, it was only one material condition among others responsible. The circumstances set in motion by the Bajans of Marshall's novel maintain their forward trajectory right through the current day. In the 1980s, the purchase prices of some brownstones houses of Bedford Stuyvesant were less than those advertised in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on February 21, 1909, \$12,000-\$16,000; others sold for only slightly more.⁹ Equity, therefore, built slowly, if at all. Although the Fair Housing Act of 1968 outlawed the practice of redlining, it remains to this day in informal full force; mortgages and home equity loans remain stubbornly difficult to obtain for many homeowners of color relegated to disinvested areas, the terms of loans when they can be obtained, far from favorable. Rents remain stubbornly low, tenants hard to find. Landlords often resort to city-sponsored rental programs, such as Section 8, which pay only minimal rents for the poor, homeless, elderly and/or disabled. Stuck with property generating insufficient capital for its maintenance and improvement, dereliction sets in. Unable to keep up with the wear and tear exacted on property when large numbers of people are stuffed into aging houses designed for single-family use, and with a break-even point to one extent or another out of reach, landlords are often forced to let things slide. Basic services such as heat and hot water go lacking for long periods of time. Broken windows remain broken. At best, many houses in these neighborhoods succumb to shabby disrepair; at worst, after a fire or a catastrophic roof leak, they are abandoned and eventually fall into demolition by neglect. Burdened by tax liens, they are often taken over by the City. Never intending to be a landlord, cities board up their charges to discourage squatting (often not successfully), but nothing more. Consequently, the tax base, and by correlation, local schools, suffer. Starved by the meager tax base funding them, local public schools often fail to provide the services needed to educate many poor students well enough to complete high school, let alone college. Consigned by their lack of formal education for the most part to unskilled labor, for most residents of these areas rising out of poverty becomes a distant, dreamy goal. With unemployment rates for people of color stubbornly high, vagrancy blights the streets. Drug trade and murder rates spike. Gangs form. Businesses close and the empty carcasses of shuttered storefronts disfigure

⁹ A recent award-winning long-form, multimedia story in *New York* traces the history of "One Block in Brooklyn: 1880 to the Present" (November 16-22, 2015). The block under scrutiny, the 400-block of McDonough Street, between Patchen and Malcolm X, sits squarely in Bedford Stuyvesant. In one example offered, owner Lynn Bowden, 90, purchased his house in 1983 for \$12,000. The house next door to his sold in 1980 to the current owners for \$10,500 (42).

commercial districts. A vicious circle, drawn by ever-falling property values flowing into further disinvestment, which in turn blends into yet another downward turn in assessed values, and yet more disinvestment, comes to shape such areas. Inevitably, such neighborhoods “die.” Another Jacobsian word comes to mind: “slumming.”

In the years following World War II, therefore, it could be said that much of Bedford Stuyvesant “slummed.” Consequently, the material conditions described above led to high rates of school drop-outs, empty lots filled with trash and rodents, buildings taken over by gangs and homeless squatters, sky-high crime rates, and the placement of large swaths of additional “public housing” on City-owned land and land seized in tax forfeitures. As *Brown Girl, Brownstones* draws to a close at the mid-point of the twentieth century, Selina spies the Bedford Stuyvesant of the next 50 years on the horizon, as she happens upon one such scene: “The song led her to a vast waste—an area where blocks of brownstones had been blasted to make way for a city project. A solitary wall stood perversely amid the rubble, a stoop still imposed its massive grandeur, a curved oak staircase led only to the night sky” (Marshall 254). Since widely acknowledged as an epic failure of urban planning and development, huge “housing projects” brought only further ruin to areas in distress such as Bedford Stuyvesant during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, adding as they did even more density with a damaging corollary, less economic diversity. But not all of the brownstones of Bedford Stuyvesant were converted into SROs. Some remained single, two or three-family homes. The families who owned these brownstones, sometimes in concert with the boarders and/or tenants living in the others did their best to create a community under these straitened circumstances. And, for the most part, they succeeded; an entirely new set of shared customs, memories, familial and social associations, and culture took hold, as happened in Black Bedford Stuyvesant for many decades. These social practices may have been radically different from those shared by the first residents of the area—perhaps partly a function of their vastly different material circumstances—but that does not invalidate them as such. As I know from the personal experience of growing up in a row house on one of the “blighted” streets of the Greenville section of Jersey City during those years, close-knit communities often rise like the proverbial phoenix from the ashes in these areas, as neighbors band together to keep their blocks as safe as they can be under the circumstances, to protest unacceptable conditions, to do what they can to improve schools, and to demand long-delayed or altogether absent services from the city.

Be that as it may, indisputably, the aftermath of the occupancy legerdemain performed by Silla and her Association confederates as well as the racial shift in the demographics of the neighborhood changed the face of this place once again. In New York City from the 1970s through the early 2000s, to outsiders the words “Bedford Stuyvesant” became synonymous with danger and desperation—an

epicenter of African and Caribbean-American “inner-City” poverty and chaos, which returns us to Beryl Challenor’s “*over your way*” when referring to the neighborhood when she speaks to Selina. “Over your way” is Selina’s place, not Beryl’s; her words make clear that she comes from another place, not Selina’s. As usual, her father Percy Challenor runs ahead of the curve. Now that he has filled his Bedford Stuyvesant brownstones to the brim with poor boarders, he loathes the idea of living in the midst of his own creative destruction. As Silla relays to Deighton, they are once again running late: “And now that the place is near overrun with roomers the Bajans getting out. They’re going! Every jack-man buying a swell home in dichty Crown Heights” (Marshall 173). At this point, even Selina, whose new boyfriend lives in a rooming house owned by his family, gets it: “Yes,” she tells him, “no Crown Heights yet! We’re always a little behind. But my mother’s working on it” (Marshall 234). This time, it is the Bajans of Marshall’s novel who facilitate yet another historically accurate demographic turnover, a matter of some debate in the post-War Barbadian community. Acknowledging Silla’s boarder exhaustion, Iris Hurley admits to “feeling sorry” for them at times: “Even though they ain Bajans they’re still our color” (Marshall 223). This rueful observation sets off Florrie Trotman:

Sorry for roomers? Sorry? But Gor-blind yuh, Iris, who did sorry for you? I ain sorry for a blast. I had to get mine too hard. Let the roomers get out and struggle like I did. I sorry for all the long years I din have nothing and my children din have and now I got little something I too fat and old to enjoy it and my only son dead in these people bloody war and he can’t enjoy it. That’s what I sorry for! (Marshall 224)

To this sentiment, a newly chastened Silla admits to some regret herself, and yet—“Iris, if it wasn’t for them you wun be in Crown Heights today.... We would like to do different. That’s what hurt and shame us so. But the way things arrange we can’t” (Marshall 224).

The influx of the African American poor so riles Percy Challenor that rather than return to the neighborhood of “despoiled brownstones” even for a moment, he sends his emissaries (including his daughter) to harass his tenants and collect his rents (Marshall 178). Silla, meanwhile, splices her house in Bedford Stuyvesant into yet more rooms, thereby collecting yet more rent in order to save yet more money to facilitate the next move. At this point, for those adept at playing the game, Bedford Stuyvesant, rife with disinvestment, paradoxically exists for many for the sole purpose of investment. “Dichty” Crown Heights, by contrast, full of “regal brownstone[s] with arched windows and elaborate stonework” lies in wait for those living the good life of the upwardly mobile—the new “Irish,” if you will—the folks

who leave their houses, for the most part, “single family” and who send their children to college and law school, even if, like Silla, no alternative to pushing their daughters in the direction of the then tuition-free University of the City of New York presents itself (Marshall 192). Unfortunately, as the later 1900s pressed on, the Bedford Stuyvesant pattern repeated itself in much of Crown Heights.

III

The sad legacy of the business acumen of Silla and her ilk left Bedford Stuyvesant preserved in an unpalatable aspic until the past ten years or so, but in the last few years, especially, the pace of yet another turnover there races with dizzying speed. Priced out of nearly every other brownstone neighborhood in Brooklyn—the place even famous actors want to be—“gentrifiers,” mainly, but not exclusively white gentrifiers, are pouring into Bedford Stuyvesant. The brownstones that Paule Marshall described in such unflattering if not sinister terms have become one of the most longed-for objects of desire for a generation, one of the clearest signifiers of social status available to young professionals turning their noses up at the suburbs their parents so coveted and in which they first rode their trikes in the driveway. But what brought this latest wave of gentrifiers to Bedford Stuyvesant? A number of factors, braided into a complex weave of desire and manifest destiny, Brooklyn-style.

First, as noted in the opening line of this essay, terrestrial space often does mark the “final frontier.” The need to push east, in other words to ever more distant reaches away from “prime” brownstone Brooklyn closest to Manhattan, proved an inevitable consequence of the market. As brownstones in the areas bought up by white professionals in the ‘70s, ‘80s and ‘90s became increasingly out of reach price-wise, gentrifiers pushed eastward into Fort Greene, Clinton Hill, and Prospect Heights. When the same market conditions began to prevail in those areas as well, the eastward expansion crossed the “border” and poured into Bedford Stuyvesant. But at this point the story, like all good stories, takes some unexpected twists and turns.

Only a few years ago the white “early adopters” of Bedford Stuyvesant easily found brownstones in need of “gut renovations” available for between 350K and 550K, since the owners of the brownstones there, Silla’s “descendants,” for the most part, still thought of their neighborhood as a “slum” and took what they thought was a very good price and ran. It didn’t take some real estate agents, closer to the neighborhood and its demographic, long to see the neighborhood with fresh eyes and intuit just what a goldmine Bedford Stuyvesant had become and to understand the potential for extreme exploitation (in the early days, already underway). They soon jumped in to make sure owners understood what their

properties were worth and to gain sellers fair prices. Still, to return to an earlier point, outside of the renovation that these properties sorely need, on which many new owners now spend upwards of one million dollars, there remains the additional expense of undoing Silla Boyce's handiwork: To take these houses *out* of the SRO status she and her fellow Barbadian homeowners put them in more than half a century ago remains a costly and time-consuming affair. Even if the building has been vacant for decades, even if its windows are boarded up or cemented shut, either the seller or the buyer must locate the last tenant who occupied each and every one of those rooms and convince each to sign a "Letter of No Harassment" testifying that said person was not forced out of his or her space in order for the building to be, in real estate speak, "delivered vacant," with a Certificate of Occupancy that reads "Single Family," "Two Family," or less common, "Three family," i.e., anything but SRO. If tenants are still in place, large sums of money often change hands to facilitate emptying the building. Occasionally, tenants, especially the elderly and those protected by rent stabilization, refuse to leave at any price, aware that they will soon burn through tens of thousands of dollars paying a new, much higher market-rate rent. One recalcitrant tenant can render a property unsalable. Renovation work on properties without a Certificate of No Harassment and a change from SRO status cannot begin until these all-important documents are filed with the City of New York's Department of Buildings. Still, though it may yet take some additional time—at the current rate of change not much more—it becomes more and more likely with every passing day that the neighborhood, as it adds yet another layer to its representation, may soon form a full circle in its history, returning to something akin to what it was just before *Brown Girl, Brownstones* begins.

But with a difference. This latest incarnation of gentrification comes with what I will call for now, a *post post-Fordist Weltanschauung*, i.e., the "new" gentrification springs much more from an evolving political economy than it does from lifestyle choices. Post post-Fordist theory posits real estate "development" as a royal road to wealth accumulation. Where the white back-to-the-garden post-Fordist "early adopters" of the 1970s and '80s saw themselves as "pioneers" restoring an area to become a particular kind of anti-city city "home," the "flippers" of the twenty-first century invest time and money as an investment proposition, often hoping for a quick sale once the property is renovated and a substantial return. In this particular sense, the latest wave of real estate investors to come to Bedford Stuyvesant closely resembles the Barbadians of Marshall's novel. Both Silla Boyce and these latest arrivals see their homes as eventual profit centers, generating income, if not wealth. But that is where the resemblance ends. Silla, for part of the novel a Fordist assembly-line worker in a munitions factory, forms part of a leading edge into the days of post-Fordism, when manufacturing gets eclipsed by an economy predicated upon service jobs. Most service positions, with the exception

of those in the financial, and perhaps technological sector, pay poorly, as Silla well knows from her time scrubbing floors. So, as an alternative, she transforms her house into an occupation and income source by carving it up into as many rooms as possible and renting them out for as much as the market will bear, i.e., “overcharging them,” Single Room Occupancy (Marshall 224). She operates, however, small scale on a very slim margin, almost always cash and credit starved.

To return to the larger scale, when white superimposes itself over black, capital generally flows whiteward. True, now that local people have raised awareness as to rising property values in Bedford Stuyvesant, many African and Caribbean American residents sell their properties for much more “as is.” Few, however, have the financial wherewithal to embark upon the kind of million-dollar “gut renovation” of their properties that garner the greatest return, and so it remains the already-affluent *buyer* who stands to reap the most, longer-term. Others who choose to stay will enjoy at least some of the fruits of gentrification such as cleaner and safer streets and better schools. But how long they will stay, as they become the minority group, often made to feel excluded in their own neighborhood, unable to afford the goods and services on offer just a short walk away, their properties now considered the relative “eyesores” of the block, remains an open question. Palpable tension steadily reveals itself in media coverage, including the City’s newspapers and numerous Brooklyn blogs.

As this story of Bedford Stuyvesant ends, for now, it may be useful to return to Henri Lefebvre. Buttressing his claims, the last century of life in Bedford Stuyvesant provides ample evidence that representations of space “play a part in social and political practice.” Even when the built environment remains stable, as it has in large swaths of Bedford Stuyvesant relatively unchanged to the observant eye, social and political practice intrudes. As a space takes on a representation it draws a people invested in or identifying with that representation. Consequently, the same century has subjected Bedford Stuyvesant’s brownstones and the people within their walls to a range of representations—from a new street grid filled with ornate houses for well-to-do burghers, to a community of up-and-coming Bajans, to a site of SROs packed with poor people created by Caribbean immigrants looking to make a buck, to a “slum” rife with the housing equivalent of Miss Havishams sitting amid the cobwebs of a down-at-the-heels former grandeur, to a Potemkin village of hundred year-old landmarked-protected exteriors behind which sit spare modernist tributes to a Brooklyn lifestyle reserved for affluent professionals, creative and otherwise, and their clients. As this history of Bedford Stuyvesant and its people shows, a single representational space can over the course of time partake of widely disparate imaginary and symbolic elements, all of which have a source in the history of “a people” as well as individuals belonging to “a people.” Spaces of representation are protean, capable of layering consecutive ideas about their environment and ambience vastly inconsistent or incoherent with one another. Still,

as Lefebvre also noted, “Students of representational spaces...frequently ignore social practice,” which returns us to the intersection of space and place (41). Bedford Stuyvesant provides a powerful example of the ways in which the social practice within a space and its consequent representations requires a situated-ness in place to fully tease out all that is in the words of historian Joseph Amato, “subservient, interdependent, mutable, and provisional...swamped by political, social, technological and cultural influences.” Paule Marshall’s novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, remains one of the few representations of that complex chorale in the richness of Barbadian voice.

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