# "People of Color are Not Props": Black Branding and Community Resistance in Gentrifying Brooklyn

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When a new white-owned upscale bar-restaurant in the gentrifying Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights advertised rosé wine served in 40-ounce bottles and a purported "bullet-hole-ridden" wall, the neighborhood erupted with protest. In her analysis of the "bullet-hole bar" controversy, Maura McGee probes the intersection of race, gentrification, and community in a changing commercial landscape.

Figure 1. Protesters gather outside Summerhill as part of the Brooklyn Anti-Gentrification Network's "March Against Gentrification, Racism, and Police Violence" on September 11, 2017
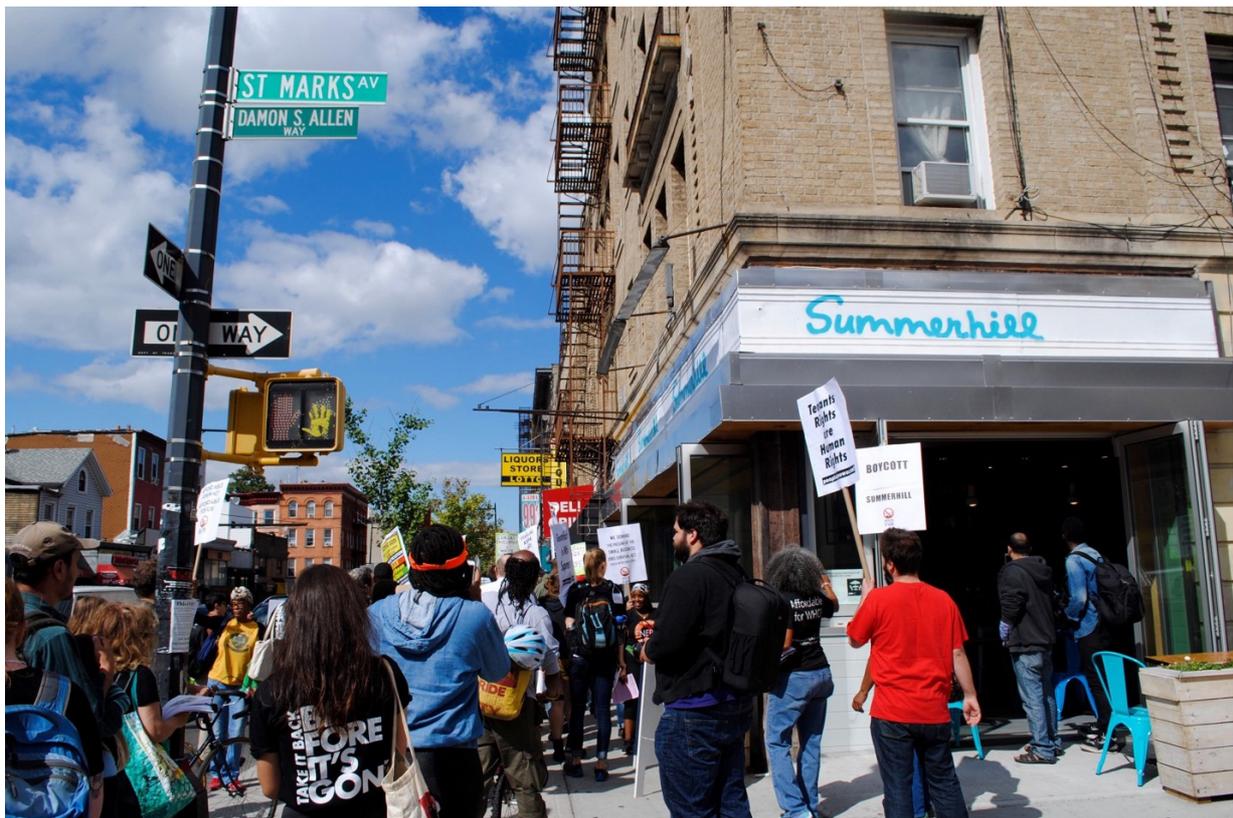
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Summerhill—a "boozy sandwich shop"—opened in the gentrifying historically low-income black neighborhood of Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in June of 2017. In a press release, the restaurant's owner, a white woman named Becca Brennan, described Summerhill as an "oasis," located in "a long-vacant corner bodega (with a rumored backroom illegal gun shop to boot)." She advertised a $12 cocktail framed by a wall covered in holes, stating: "Yes, that bullet-hole-ridden wall was originally there and yes, we're keeping it." She later admitted that the holes are from refrigerator

anchors, which she used to make a "cheeky" joke. Early on, the bar offered "Forty-Ounce Rosé" (rosé wine served in 40-ounce [1.2-liter] glass bottles), which Brennan said[1] she would serve in brown paper bags, a nod to the packaging of malt liquor associated with negative stereotypes of black urban culture.

Community members took offense at what they understood to be Summerhill's attempt to profit from racial stereotypes and their struggle with gun violence in the context of a gentrifying neighborhood where low-income black residents face increasing displacement pressures. At an "open forum" on July 22, 2017, community members gathered outside the establishment. "You're making money off black people's pain," said Natherlene Bolden, a black woman who has lived in Crown Heights since 1979. "Do you know how many mothers have lost children to gun violence?" For Bolden and others, the bar is also symbolic of the neighborhood's gentrification: "I'm tired of seeing my friends, my neighbors being displaced and harassed." The open forum was followed by several protests outside the establishment, petitions to boycott and close the restaurant, and an "emergency town-hall" meeting called by the district leader to facilitate discussion between Summerhill's owner and the community.[2] That discussion, however, incited more anger. When asked if she felt remorse for how she marketed Summerhill, Brennan replied, "I'm sorry I have a sense of humor." But for the neighborhood's longtime black residents, poverty and violence are no joke.

By serving "forties" of rosé and passing off wall punctures as bullet holes, Summerhill appropriated ghetto stereotypes to promote its business. This is what Derek Hyra (2017) refers to as "black branding": incorporating expressions of black identity into a community's environment, which today often involves the commodification of aspects of blackness to facilitate neighborhood revitalization and development (pp. 75–76). While black branding includes a broad range of strategies, some of which are positive, the tactic used by Summerhill involves a white entrepreneur extracting value from black stereotypes to attract an upscale clientele.[3] Controversy at Summerhill, which became known as "the bullet-hole bar," catalyzed longtime Crown Heights residents' resistance to gentrification, illustrating black branding's potential to spur community mobilization.

Figure 2. Inside Summerhill: A cocktail in front of the "bullet-hole-ridden wall" and Forty-Ounce Rosé in a cage above the bar

Source: Summerhill press release.

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[1] See: http://gothamist.com/2017/07/18/new_crown_heights_eatery_advertises.php.

[2] District leaders are unpaid volunteer party officials that are elected by voters from within the assembly district in the Democratic primary. They work on local issues and bring their community's needs before elected officials and government agencies.

[3] Other black-branding strategies include cultural heritage efforts, such as the creation of the Weeksville Heritage Center in Crown Heights, Brooklyn's largest African-American cultural institution, which preserves the history of the area's 19th-century settlement of free blacks, and the recent designation of parts of Flatbush, Brooklyn, as New York's "Little Caribbean" (see: http://littlecaribbean.nyc/faq.php). For more on the role of cultural heritage in black branding, see Michelle Boyd. 2008. *Jim Crow Nostalgia: Reconstructing Race in Bronzeville*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. It is important to note that these efforts may benefit longtime black residents, but may also contribute to the area's gentrification and induce displacement pressures (Hyra 2017).

Crown Heights: iconic ghetto, iconic gentrification

Located in central Brooklyn, Crown Heights is a historically black—African-American and Caribbean—neighborhood with a sizeable Jewish minority.[4] Like many neighborhoods in northern metropolises that received African Americans from the South and black immigrants in the 19th and 20th centuries, Crown Heights became a racially segregated but socioeconomically and ethnically diverse ghetto as a result of discriminatory housing practices that excluded blacks from most neighborhoods (Massey and Denton 1993). In addition to suffering the economic effects of racism, Crown Heights residents have felt stigmatized by the media's negative and sensational depictions of life in America's black neighborhoods.[5] These portrayals, according to Anderson (2012), are "effectively racializing [blacks'] efforts to cope with the effects of economic distress," and inscribing the conceptual fusion of blackness, poverty, and violence into many whites' perceptions of blacks and where they live (p. 68).

In the 1980s and 1990s, Crown Heights was besieged by poverty, drugs, gangs, violence, and stigma. Many who lived in the neighborhood during those years carry traumatic memories. One lifelong resident recalled at the town-hall meeting, "I remember when I was afraid to come to Nostrand Avenue. My mother would send me to the store… and I would run because of crackheads, because of crime, because of guns, because of bullets." At the same time, many residents retain a sense of connection to and engagement in a community that they have worked to improve through community-based organizations. Since the 1980s, the Crow Hill Community Association[6] has mobilized residents and merchants to "turn around the devastation." Save Our Streets (SOS) Crown Heights[7] works to prevent gun violence. Such organizations may have contributed to the significant decrease in neighborhood crime (Sharkey *et al.* 2017). In Crown Heights (North), crime dropped 85.8% between 1990 and 2017 (City of New York Police Department 2018). There were 82 murders, 2,202 robberies, and 1,190 felonious assaults in 1993, compared to five, 207, and 291 in 2017 (*ibid.*).

This reduction in crime was instrumental in the neighborhood's trajectory. Across the country, cities where violence has fallen the most have seen the largest declines in concentrated poverty (Sharkey 2018, p. 105). One expression of this trend is gentrification, the process by which poor and working-class neighborhoods that had previously experienced disinvestment and a middle-class exodus are refurbished through an influx of private capital and middle-class homebuyers and renters (Smith 1996, p. 32). Crown Heights has been steadily gentrifying for at least the past decade. Average rent in the northern part of the neighborhood increased by 29.9% between 1990 and 2010–2014 (Furman Center 2015). The burgeoning bar, café and restaurant scene has earned the neighborhood articles in the *New York Times* and lifestyle publications praising its "urban renaissance."[8] At the same time, longtime black businesses are closing or moving. Black faces are disappearing as white ones take their place. The black population in Crown Heights (North) decreased by 16.1% between 2000 and 2010–2014, while the white population more than tripled (see Table 1).

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4   Along with Flatbush to the south, Crown Heights is the symbolic center of Caribbean life in New York. The world headquarters of the Lubavitcher sect of Hasidic Jews is located in Crown Heights, and therefore Jews continue to make up a significant minority of the population.

5   In the latter half of the 20th century, the combination of white flight and middle-class black exodus with deindustrialization and the dismantling of the social welfare system left many black neighborhoods starved for services, resources, and investment, and created areas of concentrated structural poverty with few job opportunities (Anderson 2012; Wilson 1987). In response, the informal economy—with the drug trade as a key industry—grew to fill the void left by the wider economy's failures, and violent crime was its fallout (Anderson 2012, p. 74).

6   Website: http://crowhillcommunity.org.

7   Website: http://crownheights.org/sos/crown-heights.

8   See: www.nytimes.com/2014/07/06/realestate/crown-heights-brooklyn-gets-its-turn.html.

Table 1. Crown Heights (North) population by race (non-Hispanic black and white)

	2000		2010		2014[a]		2000 to 2010–2014
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	% change[b]
Black[c]	86,465	83.6	76,358	74.0	72,554	69.9	−16.1
White[d]	3,581	3.5	10,237	9.9	13,270	12.8	270.6
Total population	103,462		103,169		103,735		0.3

[a] 2010–2014 American Community Survey (ACS) estimates.
[b] Author's calculation.
[c] Black or African American alone, not Hispanic.
[d] White alone, not Hispanic.
Source: NYC Planning, using US Census Bureau and American Community Survey (ACS) data.

Black branding and cultural displacement

Summerhill, then, comes at a moment when longtime residents are working to overcome the neighborhood's difficult past and minimize its stigma, while fighting to remain in their community as it gentrifies. The bar's black-branding strategy offends longtime residents for three reasons: (1) it trivializes their pain for profit; (2) it undermines their efforts to counter harmful stereotypes; and (3) it threatens their moral ownership of neighborhood space.

While poverty and violence have had real consequences for longtime black residents, Summerhill aestheticized those conditions and traded on stereotypes of the iconic ghetto to create a hip and "authentic" ambiance. For outsiders, the ghetto is rarely experienced, but easily imagined: "as impoverished, chaotic, lawless, drug-infested, and ruled by violence" (Anderson 2012, p. 67). These cognitive symbols are then packaged for cultural consumption. The cultural work of hip-hop artists like Jay-Z and filmmakers like Spike Lee that recast Brooklyn's gritty black neighborhoods as cool hinged on their authenticity (Zukin 2010). By consuming the ghetto's cultural images, owners and patrons can achieve aesthetic proximity to aspects of blackness currently equated with authenticity while maintaining distance from the lived reality and ignoring their complicity in producing that reality. Indeed, Summerhill opened in Crown Heights precisely because the violence and poverty it plays with no longer dominate life in the neighborhood. For those who lived with crime and violence, however, the black-branding strategies are salt in wounds that are barely healed, and an affront to their ongoing efforts to counter the portrayal of blacks' poverty as self-inflicted and pathological. The irony of whites reveling in tropes previously used to suppress blacks is not lost on them.

One of the social consequences of gentrification is cultural displacement. It occurs as more affluent—and, often, white—people move in, the neighborhood improves economically, and public and commercial spaces are upscaled to cater to the tastes and desires of newcomers. Such changes are often met with a combination of ambivalence, resentment, and alienation, depending on one's position. Many longtime residents are willing to concede that gentrification has brought improvements to the neighborhood: homeowners like that their housing values have increased, and no one complains that crime has decreased. Yet many are also resentful that these changes come as wealthier whites move in. And as residents find themselves reflected less in their surroundings as the commercial landscape transforms, they may feel like strangers in neighborhoods they've been anchored in for years. For black communities in particular, public and commercial spaces are

especially important because blacks have historically been excluded from those spaces in other parts of the city (Gold 2010). Therefore, moral ownership—a "deep identification with the culture of the space"—(and the sense of inclusion that accompanies it) takes on an amplified significance in black neighborhoods (Zukin *et al.* 2016, p. 24).

As a new, upscale, white-owned establishment, Summerhill already represented to some longtime residents—though certainly not all—another step in diminished moral ownership of neighborhood space. But that alone was insufficient to provoke outrage—dozens of bars have opened in the neighborhood in the past several years. It was an entrepreneur's unapologetic use of racial stereotypes to promote her establishment that prompted the community to take action.

"You don't want an uprising from this community, my love"

At the town-hall meeting, Brennan said that she "wanted to be a neighborhood place, for the community." She left the wall untouched because she did not want to "cover up the history of my neighborhood, and that corner." But this strategy, with its fabricated account of gun violence, can be read as an attempt to exert control over contested terrain by crudely drawing on the past—and by playing on patrons' desire to be close to the thrilling dangers of ghetto violence—without thinking about the people who experienced that violence and without thinking about longtime residents' struggle to remain (symbolically and literally) in their community. In Summerhill's evocation of community, Crown Heights' gritty past serves as a backdrop to its upscale future. And this is what sparked resistance. "People of color are not props or backdrops," one protester said.

Toward the end of the town-hall meeting, Assemblywoman Diana Richardson took the floor and directed her comments to Brennan: "You're underestimating the power of this community. You don't want an uprising from this community, my love. So as you come into this room, humble yourself before us… If you think we don't have the power to shut you down you're very wrong… You don't want it with… the Crown Heights community." Indeed, the community made life challenging for Summerhill. Brooklyn Community Board 8 (North Crown Heights and Prospect Heights) rejected Brennan's application for a sidewalk café and extended hours of operation—an action that is incredibly rare.[9] An online community was also born from the protests. A Facebook group, now with several hundred members, provides a place to share upcoming community events, report instances of racism, and organize protests. It also provides a list of businesses, many black-owned, to patronize instead of Summerhill.

The Summerhill controversy illuminates a struggle for control over the narrative of the neighborhood's past, and for control over the future of the community. One entrepreneur's black-branding strategy trivialized longtime residents' pain, undermined their efforts to mitigate racial stereotypes, and threatened their moral ownership of the neighborhood. Their powerful response suggests a reaction to cultural displacement that has not been anticipated by the literature on gentrification: resistance and the reaffirmation of community ties.

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[9] Community boards are local representative bodies whose members are unsalaried and appointed by the borough president. They deal with community needs and land-use and zoning issues, and serve in an advisory capacity. After Summerhill's request was denied by the community board, it went to the New York State Liquor Authority, which approved it.

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