

Bye Bye, Brooklyn

"Brooklyn was a place to get out of."
-Johnathan Lethem

A strange, open secret: These days, if an author byline reads "lives in Brooklyn," it means they moved there after attending a fancy private college. "...is a native of Brooklyn" means that they went to a private high school (like Brooklyn Friends) and *then* to a fancy private college (like Harvard). Now, upon their return, they seek to claim their rightful place in the pecking order, a true representer amongst pretenders.

It's a borough of 2.6 million people, with a storied history. How did this happen?

Over the last thirty years Brooklyn has transformed from a place people wanted *out-of* to one everyone wants *in-to*. Banks have turned old working-class neighborhoods with large pockets of African American, West Indian and Puerto Rican folks into edgy food destinations, petri dishes for real-estate speculators. The developers assume (correctly) that Midwestern transplants and international investors will pay a high price for century-old Dutch architecture mixed with the cache and ambience of Black Diaspora (Spike Lee! Biggie Smalls!)--as long as the curve showing numbers of Black residents decreasing over time is accurate.

In the last decade, this renovation has profoundly altered the New York literary scene. Thousands of (mostly white) MFAs and undergraduates from the Ivy League and the Seven Sisters have descended upon Brooklyn, chasing a fistful of their favorite authors and literary journals, who set up shop in places like Brooklyn Heights, Park Slope and Gowanus.

A number of African American and Asian American writers, journalists and editors are a part of this group. Their politics are liberal, but they fetishize certain issues: police violence, mass incarceration, undocumented labor, LGBT rights, and the omnipresence of anti-blackness, for example. American warmongering--in Latin America, in East Africa, in North Africa, in Western Asia--rarely comes up. Class is not discussed seriously. The South Asian contingent avoids caste.

This more diverse group prefers Bedford-Stuyvesant, Bushwick, Crown Heights, and Fort Greene for housing. The overall effect has been strange. Writers who came to Brooklyn dreaming of writing sympathetically about struggling Black and Brown people have, in fact, helped to displace whole, long-standing communities of struggling Black and Brown people.

This new coterie, anxious to get ahead in a shrinking, competitive market, put a premium on fashion and taste. A handful of institutions decide the cues. If The New York Times or The New Yorker reviews a Black British, West African, or West Indian writer (favorably) their books fly off of the shelves. Numerous, equally-interesting writers (of similar backgrounds) published by Peepal Tree Press in the United Kingdom or Arsenal Pulp Press in Canada go unread.

Newcomers soon learn the importance of the Brooklyn Museum, with its Saturday mixers (free), and its exhibitions of Yale-trained contemporary Black artists (not free). Lost into obscurity (and sometimes homelessness) are the hundreds of Black and Latinx graffiti artists from the 1970s and 80s, who invented contemporary New York-style aesthetics. When some of these old graffitists get lucky and score invitations to Barcelona, Berlin, Florence or Rio, they are feted for their ground-breaking creativity, and often don't come back.

Aspiring writers or critics in New York must now have a law school-length vitae. Without? Good luck. Over the last two years, seven of thirteen recipients of a fellowship for writers-of-color from one progressive New York arts organization had Ivy League degrees. Three others had MFAs. One didn't list any academic credentials (which probably means they attended Harvard).

Is this the new, professional, Brooklyn, neo-liberal approach to art? The effect is amnesiac.

Toni Morrison went to Howard. Don DeLillo went to Fordham; Junot Diaz to Rutgers. Chester Himes never finished college. Legendary street painters like Lonny "Phase 2" Woods and the late Wayne "Stay High 149" Roberts developed their styles in Bronx train yards, not at private schools. Yet beyond issues of access and representation, a deeper question bubbles:

Can you challenge the moneyed art establishment when you moved to Brooklyn to join it?

After more than a decade of this cultural atrophy, a change is near. Only a small percentage of these professionalized aspirants will get jobs with The New York Times Book Review or Riverhead. The pressure is high. Endless numbers of less-artistic, wealthy apartment-seekers wait in the wings to snap anything up, at any price. If white Ivy Leaguers, unable to hang on with the rising rents, are leaving Brooklyn, how will others manage?

The far-out, sleepy South Brooklyn neighborhoods on the 2,3 and J trains may live on. Too far out for most developers, the subway service at night confounds recent arrivals. Bed-Stuy, Bushwick, Crown Heights and Fort Greene, however, face an ongoing catastrophe. Their fate will be Harlem's, described by writer Abdi Latif Ega in the 2014 article *Zombie Harlem*: "anywhere USA, the Same."

Our thwarted Ivy Leaguers will survive. Philadelphia, New Orleans, and Baltimore beckon. I'm hearing Providence is interesting. Perhaps there, outside of the hypnotic influence of invite-only launches, fundraisers with famed authors, and alumni lunches, unusual novels can be read, new literary magazines can be started, experiments made, paradigms stretched.

And if not? There are other ways for such highly-trained people to be useful.

Tutoring neighborhood children, for example.

