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“CLASS STRUGGLE ON AVENUE B”

The Lower East Side as Wild Wild West

On the evening of August 6, 1988, a riot erupted along the edges of Tompkins Square Park, a small green in New York City's Lower East Side. It raged through the night with police on one side and a diverse mix of anti-gentrification protestors, punks, housing activists, park inhabitants, artists, Saturday night revelers and Lower East Side residents on the other. The battle followed the city's attempt to enforce a 1:00 A.M. curfew in the Park on the pretext of clearing out the growing numbers of homeless people living or sleeping there, kids playing boom boxes late into the night, buyers and sellers of drugs using it for business. But many local residents and park users saw the action differently. The City was seeking to tame and domesticate the park to facilitate the already rampant gentrification on the Lower East Side. “GENTRIFICATION IS CLASS WAR!” read the largest banner at the Saturday night demonstration aimed at keeping the park open. “Class war, class war, die yuppie scum!” went the chant. “Yuppies and real estate magnates have declared war on the people of Tompkins Square Park,” announced one speaker. “Whose fucking park? It's our fucking park,” became the recurrent slogan. Even the habitually restrained *New York Times* echoed the theme in its August 10 headline: “Class War Erupts along Avenue B” (Wines 1988).

In fact it was a *police* riot that ignited the park on August 6, 1988. Clad in space-alien riot gear and concealing their badge numbers, the police forcibly evicted everyone from the park before midnight, then mounted repeated baton charges and “Cossacklike” rampages against demonstrators and locals along the park's edge:

The cops seemed bizarrely out of control, levitating with some hatred I didn't understand. They'd taken a relatively small protest and fanned it out over the neighborhood, inflaming hundreds of people who'd never gone near the park to begin with. They'd called in a chopper. And they would eventually call 450 officers.... The policemen were radiating hysteria. One galloped up to a taxi stopped at a traffic light and screamed, “Get the fuck out of here, fuckface....” [There were] cavalry charges down East Village streets, a chopper circling overhead, people out for a Sunday paper running in terror down First Avenue.

(Carr 1988:10)



Plate 1.1 New York City police retake Avenue A on the edge of Tompkins Square Park. 1988 (© Andrew Lichtenstein)

Finally, a little after 4:00 A.M. the police withdrew in “ignominious retreat,” and jubilant demonstrators reentered the park, dancing, shouting and celebrating their victory. Several protestors used a police barricade to ram the glass-and-brass doors of the Christodora condominium, which borders on the park on Avenue B and which became a hated symbol of the neighborhood’s gentrification (Ferguson 1988; Gevirtz 1988).¹

In the days following the riot, the protestors quickly adopted a much more ambitious political geography of revolt. Their slogan became “Tompkins Square everywhere” as they taunted the police and celebrated their liberation of the park. Mayor Edward Koch, meanwhile, took to describing Tompkins Square Park as a “cesspool” and blamed the riot on “anarchists.” Defending his police clients, the president of the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association enthusiastically elaborated: “social parasites, druggies, skinheads and communists”—an “insipid conglomeration of human misfits”—were the cause of the riot, he said. In the following days, the city’s Civilian Complaint Review Board received 121 complaints of police brutality, and, largely on the evidence of a four-hour videotape made by local video artist Clayton Patterson, seventeen officers were cited for “misconduct.” Six officers were eventually indicted but none was ever convicted. The police commissioner only ever conceded that a few officers may have become a little “overenthusiastic” owing to “inexperience,” but he clung to the official policy of blaming the victims (Gevirtz 1988; Pitt 1989).

Prior to the riot of August 1988, more than fifty homeless people, evictees from the private and public spaces of the official housing market, had begun to use the park regularly as a place to sleep. In the months following, the number of evictees settling in

the park grew, as the loosely organized antigentrification and squatters’ movements began to connect with other local housing groups. And some of the evictees attracted to the newly “liberated space” of Tompkins Square Park also began to organize. But the City also slowly regrouped. Citywide park curfews (abandoned after the riot) were gradually reinstated; new regulations governing the use of Tompkins Square Park were slowly implemented; several Lower East Side buildings occupied by squatters were demolished in May 1989, and in July a police raid destroyed tents, shanties and the belongings of park residents. By now there were on average some 300 evictees in the park on any given night, at least three-quarters men, the majority African-American, many white, some Latino, Native Americans, Caribbean. On December 14, 1989, on the coldest day of the winter, the park’s entire homeless population was evicted from the park, their belongings and fifty shanties hauled away into a queue of Sanitation Department garbage trucks.

It would be “irresponsible to allow the homeless to sleep outdoors” in such cold weather, explained a disingenuous parks commissioner, Henry J. Stern, who did not mention that the city shelter system had beds for only a quarter of the city’s homeless people. In fact, the city’s provision for the evicted ran only to a “help center” that, by one account, “proved to be little more than a dispensary for baloney sandwiches” (Weinberg 1990). Many evictees from the park were taken in by local squats, others set up encampments in the neighborhood, but quickly they filtered back to Tompkins Square. In January 1990 the administration of supposedly progressive mayor David Dinkins felt sufficiently confident of the park’s eventual recapture that it announced a “reconstruction plan.” In the next summer the basketball courts at the north end were dismantled and rebuilt with tighter control of access; wire fences closed off newly constructed children’s playgrounds; and park regulations began to be more strictly enforced. In an effort to force evictions, City agencies also heightened their harassment of squatters who now spearheaded the anti-gentrification movement. As the next winter closed in, though, more and more of the city’s evictees came back to the park and began again to construct semipermanent structures.

In May 1991, the park hosted a Memorial Day concert organized under the slogan “Housing is a human right” and, in what was becoming an annual May ritual, a further clash with park users ensued. It was now nearly three years since protestors had taken the park, and, with almost a hundred shanties, tents and other structures now in Tompkins Square, the Dinkins administration decided to move. The authorities finally closed the park at 5:00 A.M. on June 3, 1991, evicting between 200 and 300 park dwellers. Alleging that Tompkins Square had been “stolen” from the community by “the homeless,” Mayor Dinkins declared: “The park is a park. It is not a place to live” (quoted in Kifner 1991). An eight-foot-high chain-link fence was erected, a posse of more than fifty uniformed and plainclothes police was delegated to guard the park permanently—its numbers augmented to several hundred in the first days and during demonstrations—and a \$2.3 million reconstruction was begun almost immediately. In fact, three park entrances were kept open and heavily guarded: two provided access to the playgrounds for children only (and accompanying adults); the other, opposite the Christodora condominium, provided access to the dog run. The closure of the park, commented Village Voice reporter Sarah Ferguson, marked the “death knell” of an occupation that “had come to symbolize the failure of the city to cope with its homeless population” (Ferguson 1991b). No alternative

housing was offered evictees from the park; people again moved into local squats, or filtered out into the city. On vacant lots to the east of the park, a series of shantytown communities were erected and they quickly took the name “Dinkinsville,” linking the present mayor with the “Hoovervilles” of the Depression. Dinkinsville was less a single place than a collection of communities, with a similar impossible geography to that of Bophuthatswana. Existing collections of shanties under the Brooklyn, Manhattan and Williamsburg Bridges expanded.

As the site of the most militant antigentrification struggle in the United States (but see Mitchell 1995a), the ten acres of Tompkins Square Park quickly became a symbol of a new urbanism being etched on the urban “frontier.” Largely abandoned to the working class amid postwar suburban expansion, relinquished to the poor and unemployed as reservations for racial and ethnic minorities, the terrain of the inner city is suddenly valuable again, perversely profitable. This new urbanism embodies a widespread and drastic repolarization of the city along political, economic, cultural and geographical lines since the 1970s, and is integral with larger global shifts. Systematic gentrification since the 1960s and 1970s is simultaneously a response and contributor to a series of wider global transformations: global economic expansion in the



Plate 1.2 The closing of Tompkins Square Park, June 3, 1991 (© Andrew Lichtenstein)



Plate 1.3 Tompkins Square Park fenced off, 1992 (© Andrew Lichtenstein)

1980s; the restructuring of national and urban economies in advanced capitalist countries toward services, recreation and consumption; and the emergence of a global hierarchy of world, national and regional cities (Sassen 1991). These shifts have propelled gentrification from a comparatively marginal preoccupation in a certain niche of the real estate industry to the cutting edge of urban change.

Nowhere are these forces more evident than in the Lower East Side. Even the neighborhood’s different names radiate the conflicts. Referred to as *Loisaida* in local Puerto Rican Spanish, the Lower East Side name is dropped altogether by real estate agents and art world gentrifiers who, anxious to distance themselves from the historical association with the poor immigrants who dominated this community at the turn of the century, prefer “East Village” as the name for the neighborhood above Houston Street. Squeezed between the Wall Street financial district and Chinatown to the south, the Village and SoHo to the west, Gramercy Park to the north and the East River to the east (Figure 1.1), the Lower East Side feels the pressure of this political polarization more acutely than anywhere else in the city.

Highly diverse but increasingly Latino since the 1950s, the neighborhood was routinely described in the 1980s as a “new frontier” (Levin 1983). It mixes spectacular opportunity for real estate investors with an edge of daily danger on the streets. In the words of local writers, the Lower East Side is variously a “frontier where the urban fabric is wearing thin and splitting open” (Rose and Texier 1988:xi) or else “Indian country, the land of murder and cocaine” (Charyn 1985:7). Not just supporters but antagonists have found this frontier imagery irresistible. “As the neighborhood slowly, inexorably

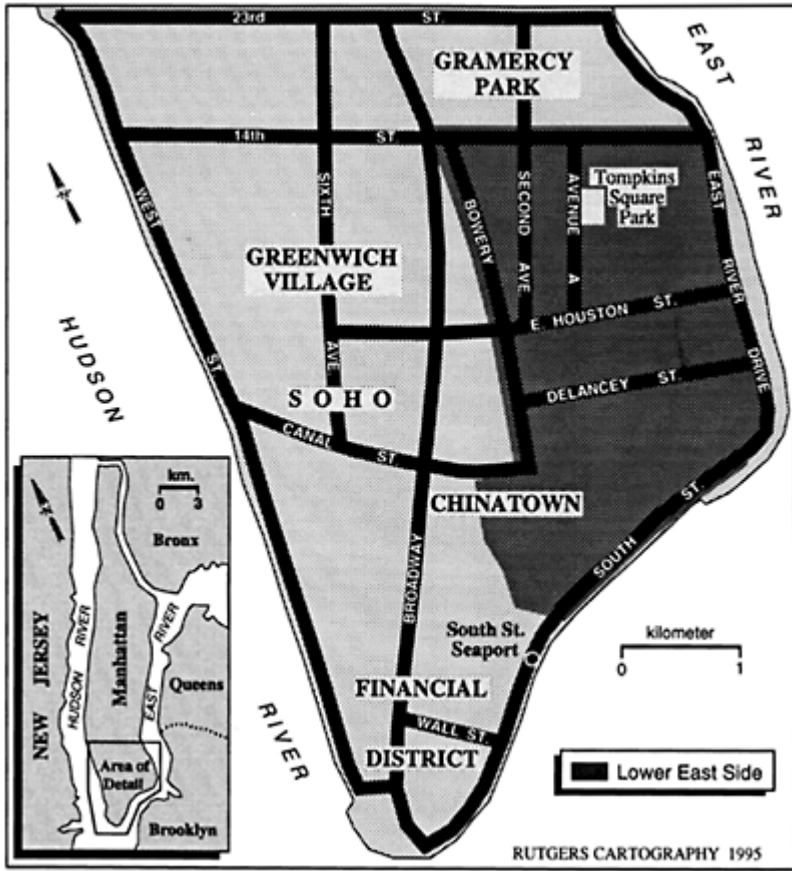


Figure 1.1 New York’s Lower East Side

gentrifies,” wrote one reporter, in the wake of the 1988 police riot, “the park is a holdout, the place for one last metaphorical stand” (Carr 1988:17). Several weeks later, “Saturday Night Live” made this Custer imagery explicit in a skit cast in a frontier fort. Custer (as Mayor Koch) welcomes the belligerent warrior Chief Soaring Eagle into his office and inquires: “So how are things down on the Lower East Side?”

The social, political and economic polarization of “Indian country” is drastic and fast becoming more so. Apartment rents soared throughout the 1980s and with them the numbers of homeless; record levels of luxury condo construction are matched by a retrenchment in public housing provisions; a nearby Wall Street boom generated seven- and eight-figure salaries while unemployment rose among the unskilled; poverty is increasingly concentrated among women, Latinos and African-Americans while social services are axed; and the conservatism of the 1980s spewed a recrudescence of racist violence throughout the city. With the emergence of deep recession in the early 1990s,

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rents have stabilized, but unemployment has soared. In the late 1990s the resurgence of gentrification and development is destined to magnify the polarization of the 1980s.

Tompkins Square lies deep in the heart of the Lower East Side. On its southern edge along Seventh Street a long slab of residential buildings overlooks the park, mostly late-nineteenth-century five- and six-storey walk-up tenements adorned with precariously affixed fire escapes, but also including a larger building with a dreary, modern, off-white facade. To the west, the tenements along Avenue A are barely more interesting, but many cross streets and the mix of smoke shops, Ukrainian and Polish restaurants, upscale cafes and hip bars, groceries, candy stores and night clubs make this the liveliest side of the park. Along Tenth Street on the northern edge stands a stately row of 1840s and 1850s townhouses, gentrified as far back as the early 1970s. To the east, Avenue B presents a more broken frontage: tenements, St. Brigid’s Church from the mid-nineteenth century, and the infamous Christodora building—a sixteen-storey brick monolith built in 1928 that dominates the local skyline.

“One day,” laments the tony, habitually understated AIA guide to New York architecture, “when this area is rebuilt, the mature park will be a god-send” (Willensky and White 1988:163). Actually, the park itself is rather unexceptional. An oval rosette of curving, crisscross walkways, it is shaded by large plane trees and a few surviving elms. The walkways were lined by long rows of cement benches, replaced in the park reconstruction by wooden benches sectioned into individual seats by wrought iron bars designed to prevent homeless people from sleeping. Wide grassy patches, often bare, made up the body of the park and these were fenced off in the reconstruction. At the north end of the park are handball and basketball courts, playgrounds and the dog run, and at the south end a bandshell, which hosted everyone from the Fugs to the Grateful Dead in the 1960s to May Day demonstrations and the annual Wigstock Parade in the late 1980s. By day, before its reconstruction, the park would be filled with Ukrainian men playing chess, young guys selling drugs, yuppies walking to and from work, a few remaining punks with boom boxes, Puerto Rican women strolling babies, residents walking dogs, kids in the playgrounds. After 1988, there were also cops in cruisers, and photographers, and a growing population of evictees attracted to the relative safety of this “liberated” if still contested space. The encampments burgeoned before June 1991, and were made from tents, cardboard, wood, bright blue tarpaulins, and all sorts of scavenged material that could provide shelter. Hard drug users traditionally congregated in “crack alley” on the southern edge; a group of mostly working people clustered to the east, and Jamaican Rastafarians hung out by the temperance fountain closer to Avenue A. Political activists and squatters congregated closer to the bandshell, which also provided shelter during the rain. The bandshell was demolished in the reconstruction.

Variouly scruffy and relaxing, free-flowing and energetic, but rarely dangerous unless the police are on maneuvers, Tompkins Square exemplifies the kind of neighborhood park that Jane Jacobs adopted as a *cause célèbre* in her famous antimodernist tract, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). If it hardly has the physical features of a frontier, neither class conflict nor police riots are new to Tompkins Square Park. Originally a swampy “wilderness,” its first evictees may have been the Manhattoes whose acceptance of some rags and beads in 1626 led to their loss of Manhattan Island. Donated to the city by the fur trader and capitalist John Jacob Astor, the swamp was drained, a park was constructed in 1834, and it was named after Daniel

Tompkins, an ex-governor of New York State and US vice-president from 1817 to 1825. Immediately the park became a traditional venue for mass meetings of workers and the unemployed, although, to the apparent consternation of the populace, it was commandeered for use as a military parade ground in the 1850s and throughout the Civil War.

The symbolic power of the park as a space of resistance crystallized after 1873 when a catastrophic financial collapse threw unprecedented numbers of workers and families out of job and home. The city's charitable institutions were overwhelmed and at the urging of the business classes the city government refused to provide relief. "There was in any case a strong ideological objection to the concept of relief itself and a belief that the rigors of unemployment were a necessary and salutary discipline for the working classes" (Slotkin 1985:338). A protest march was organized for January 13, 1874 in Tompkins Square, and the following account is reconstructed by labor historian Philip Foner:

By the time the first marchers entered the Square, New Yorkers were witnessing the largest labor demonstration ever held in the city. The Mayor, who was expected to address the demonstration, changed his mind and, at the last minute, the police prohibited the meeting. No warning, however, had been given to the workers, and the men, women and children marched to Tompkins Square expecting to hear mayor Havemeyer present a program for the relief of the unemployed. When the demonstrators had filled the Square, they were attacked by the police. "Police clubs," went one account, "rose and fell. Women and children went screaming in all directions. Many of them were trampled underfoot in the stampede for the gates. In the street bystanders were ridden down and mercilessly clubbed by mounted officers."

(Foner 1978:448)

Within an hour of the first baton charges, a special edition of the *New York Graphic* appeared in the streets with the headline: "A Riot Is Now in Progress in Tompkins Square Park" (Gutman 1965:55).

Following the police riot the New York press provided a script that would have gratified the 1988 mayor. Decrying the marchers as "communists," and evoking the "red spectre of the commune," the *New York World* consistently built an analogy between the repression of the urban hordes in Tompkins Square and Colonel Custer's heroic Black Hills expedition against the savage Sioux of South Dakota. What began in 1874 as an outlandish juxtaposition between the park and the frontier (Slotkin 1985) had by the 1980s become an evocative but seemingly natural description.

The destiny of the Lower East Side has always been bound up with international events. The immigration of hundreds of thousands of European workers and peasants in the following decades only intensified the political struggles in the Lower East Side and its depiction in the press as a depraved environment. By 1910, some 540,000 people were crammed into the area's tenements, all competing for work and homes: garment workers, dockers, printers, laborers, craftsmen, shopkeepers, servants, public workers, writers, and a vital ferment of communists, Trotskyists, anarchists, suffragists and activist intellectuals devoted to politics and struggle. Successive economic recessions forced

many into unemployment; tyrannical bosses, dangerous work conditions and a lack of workers’ rights elicited large-scale union organizing. And landlords proved ever adept at rent gouging. The decade that began with the Triangle fire of 1911—the fire engulfed 146 women garment workers from the Lower East Side, imprisoned behind locked sweatshop doors, forcing them to jump to their death in the street below—ended with the Palmer Raids of 1919 in which a wave of state-sponsored political terror was unleashed against the now notorious Lower East Side. In the 1920s as the suburbs burgeoned, landlords throughout the neighborhood allowed their buildings to fall into dilapidation, and many residents who could were following capital out to the suburbs.

Like other parks, Tompkins Square came to be viewed by middle-class reformers as a necessary “escape valve” for this dense settlement and volatile social environment. Following the 1874 riot, it was redesigned explicitly to create a more easily controllable space, and in the last decade of the century the reform and temperance movements constructed a playground and a fountain. The contest for the park ebbed and flowed, but took another surge during the Depression when Robert Moses redesigned the park, and again two decades later when the Parks Department tried unsuccessfully to usurp park land with a baseball diamond. Local demonstrations diverted this redesign (Reaven and Houck 1994). A hangout for Beat poets in the 1950s and the so-called counterculture in the 1960s, the park and its surroundings were again the scene of battles in 1967 when police waded into hippies sprawled out in the park in defiance of the “Keep off the Grass” signs.

This explosive history of the park belies its unremarkable form, making it a fitting locale for a “last stand” against gentrification.

BUILDING THE FRONTIER MYTH

Roland Barthes once proposed that “myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things” (Barthes 1972:129). Richard Slotkin elaborates that in addition to wrenching meaning from its historical context, myth has a reciprocal effect on history: “history becomes a cliché” (Slotkin 1985:16, 21–32). We should add the corollary that myth is constituted by the loss of the *geographical* quality of things as well. Deterritorialization is equally central to mythmaking, and the more events are wrenched from their constitutive geographies, the more powerful the mythology. Geography too becomes a cliché.

The social meaning of gentrification is increasingly constructed through the vocabulary of the frontier myth, and at first glance this appropriation of language and landscape might seem simply playful, innocent. Newspapers habitually extol the courage of urban “homesteaders,” the adventurous spirit and rugged individualism of the new settlers, brave “urban pioneers,” presumably going where, in the words of *Star Trek*, no (white) man has ever gone before. “We find a place on the lower [*sic*] East Side,” confesses one suburban couple in the genteel pages of the *New Yorker*:

Ludlow Street. No one we know would think of living here. No one we know has ever heard of Ludlow Street. Maybe someday this neighborhood will be the way the Village was before we knew anything about New

York.... We explain that moving down here is a kind of urban pioneering, and tell [Mother] she should be proud. We liken our crossing Houston Street to pioneers crossing the Rockies.

("Ludlow Street" 1988)

In its real estate section, the *New York Times* (March 27, 1983) announces "The Taming of the Wild Wild West," pursuant to the construction of the "Armory Condominium" two blocks west of Times Square:

The trailblazers have done their work: West 42nd Street has been tamed, domesticated and polished into the most exciting, freshest, most energetic new neighborhood in all of New York...for really savvy buyers, there's the rapid escalation of land prices along the western corridor of 42nd Street. (After all, if the real estate people don't know when a neighborhood is about to bust loose, who does?)

As new frontier, the gentrifying city since the 1980s has been oozing with optimism. Hostile landscapes are regenerated, cleansed, reinfused with middle-class sensibility; real estate values soar; yuppies consume; elite gentility is democratized in mass-produced styles of distinction. So what's not to like? The contradictions of the actual frontier are not entirely eradicated in this imagery but they are smoothed into an acceptable groove. As with the Old West, the frontier is idyllic yet also dangerous, romantic but also ruthless. From *Crocodile Dundee* to *Bright Lights, Big City*, there is an entire cinematic genre that makes of urban life a cowboy fable replete with dangerous environment, hostile natives and self-discovery at the margins of civilization. In taming the urban wilderness, the cowboy gets the girl but also finds and tames his inner self for the first time. In the final scene of *Crocodile Dundee*, Paul Hogan accepts New York—and New York him—as he clammers like an Aussie sheepdog over the heads and shoulders of a subway crowd. Michael J.Fox can hardly end his fable by riding off into a reassuring western sunset since in the big city the bright lights are everywhere, but he does see a bright new day rise over the Hudson River and Manhattan's reconstructed financial district. The manifest destiny of the earlier frontier rains a reciprocal Valhalla on the big city.

The frontier myth of the new city is here so clichéd, the geographical and historical quality of things so lost, that we may not even see the blend of myth in the landscape. This merely testifies to the power of the myth, but it was not

conceptual distance between New York and the Wild Wild West has been continually eroded; perhaps the most iconoclastic evocation of a frontier in the early city came only a few years after Custer's Black Hills campaign when a stark, elegant but isolated residential building rose in the boonies of Central Park West and was named "The Dakota Apartments." By contrast, in the condomania that has engulfed Manhattan a century later—an environment in which any social, physical or geographical connection with the earlier frontier is obliterated—the "Montana," "Colorado," "Savannah" and "New West" have been shoehorned into already overbuilt sites with ne'er a comment about any iconographic inconsistency. As history and geography went west, the myth settled east, but it took time for the myth itself to be domesticated into the urban environment.

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, and the 1980s saw the faddishness of Tex-Mex restaurants, the ubiquity of desert decor, and a rage for cowboy chic, all woven into the same urban landscapes of consumption. A *New York Times* Sunday Magazine clothing advertisement (August 6, 1989) gives the full effect:

For urban cowboys a little frontier goes a long way. From bandannas to boots, flourishes are what counts.... The Western imprint on fashion is now much like a cattle brand—not too striking, but obvious enough to catch the eye. For city dudes, that means accents: a fringed jacket with black leggings; a shearling coat with a pin-stripe suit; a pair of lizard boots with almost anything. When in doubt about the mix stride up to the mirror. If you're inclined to say "Yup," you've gone too far.

New York's upmarket boutiques dispensing fashionable frontier kitsch are concentrated in SoHo, an area of artists' lofts and effete galleries, gentrified in the late 1960s and 1970s, and enjoying an unprecedented boom in the 1980s. SoHo borders the Lower East Side to the west and southwest. Here, "frontier" aspires on occasion to philosophy. Zona, on Greene Street, sells Navajo rugs, "Otomi Indian natural bark notepaper," Santa Fe jewelry, terra-cotta pottery, "Lombok baskets in rich harvest colors," bola ties. Zona oozes authenticity. All the "pieces" are numbered and a catalogue of the "collection" has been produced. On a small, plain, deliberately understated sign, with writing embossed on gold paper, the store offers its "personal" philosophy of craft-friendliness suffused with more than a whiff of New Age spiritualism:

At a time when the ever expanding presence of electronic tools and high technology is so pervasive the need to balance our lives with products that celebrate the textual and sensorial become essential. We think of our customers as resources and not simply as consumers. We are guided by the belief that information is energy and change is the constant.

Thank you for visiting our space.

Americana West, on Wooster Street, strives for a purer desert look. On the sidewalk outside the front door, a patrician Indian chief complete with tomahawk and feathered headgear stands guard. The window display features a bleached buffalo skull for \$500

while inside the store are sofas and chairs made from longhorns and cattle skin. A gallery as much as a store, Americana West purveys diverse images of noble savages, desert scenes à la Georgia O’Keeffe, petroglyphs and pictographs, whips and spurs. Cacti and coyotes are everywhere (none real); a neon prickly pear is available for \$350. In lettering on the front window, Americana West announces its own theme, a crossover cultural geography between city and desert: “The Evolving Look of the Southwest. Designers Welcome... Not for City Slickers Only.”

The frontier is not always American nor indeed male. At La Rue des Rêves the theme is jungle eclectic. Leopard coats (faux of course), antelope leather skirts, and chamois blouses seem still alive, slinking off their hangers toward the cash registers. Fashion accessories dangle like lianas from the jungle canopy. A stuffed gorilla and several live parrots round out the ambience. La Rue des Rêves may have been “too, too”—it was a casualty of the late 1980s stock market crash—but the theme has survived in clothing chains as well as boutiques. At the Banana Republic customers have their safari purchases packed in brown paper bags sporting a rhinoceros. On the silver screen, meanwhile, movies such as *Out of Africa* and *Gorillas in the Mist* reinforce the vision of pioneering whites in darkest Africa, but with heroines for heroes. As middle-class white women come to play a significant role in gentrification their prominence on earlier frontiers is rediscovered and reinvented. Thus designer Ralph Lauren began the 1990s with a collection centered on “the Safari woman.” He explains thus the romantic and nostalgic ur-environmentalism that drove him to it: “I believe that a lot of wonderful things are disappearing from the present, and we have to take care of them.” A mahogany four-poster draped in embroidered mosquito netting, jodhpurs, faux ivory, and a “Zanzibar” bedroom set patterned with Zebra stripes surround Lauren’s “Safari Woman,” herself presumably an endangered species. Originally Ralph Lifschitz born in the Bronx, but now ensconced on a Colorado ranch half the size of that borough, “Lauren” has never been to Africa—“sometimes it’s better if you haven’t been there”—but feels well able to represent it in and for our urban fantasies. “I’m trying to evoke a world in which there was this graciousness we could touch. Don’t look at yesterday. We can have it. Do you want to make the movie you saw a reality? Here it is” (Brown 1990).

Even as Africa is underdeveloped by international capital, engulfed by famine and wars, it is remarketed in Western consumer fantasies—but as the preserve of privileged and endangered whites. As one reviewer put it, the safari collection “smacks of bwana style, of Rhodesia rather than Zimbabwe” (Brown 1990). Lauren’s Africa is a country retreat for and from the gentrified city. It provides the decorative utensils by which the city is reclaimed from wilderness and remapped for white upper-class settlers with global fantasies of again owning the world—recolonizing it from the neighborhood out.

Nature too is rescripted on the urban frontier. The frontier myth—originally engendered as an historicization of nature—is now reapplied as a naturalization of urban history. Even as rapacious economic expansion destroys deserts and rain forests, the new urban frontier is nature-friendly: “All woods used in [Lauren’s Safari] collection are grown in the Philippines and are not endangered” (Brown 1990). The Nature Company, a chain store with a branch in South Street Seaport at the south end of the Lower East Side, is the apotheosis of this naturalized urban history, selling maps and globes, whaling anthologies and telescopes, books on dangerous reptiles, and stories of exploration and conquest. The store’s unabashed nature idolatry and studied avoidance of anything urban

are the perfect disappearing mirror in which contested urban histories are refracted (N.Smith 1996b). In affirming the connection with nature, the new urban frontier erases the social histories, struggles and geographies that made it.

The nineteenth century and its associated ideology were “generated by the social conflicts that attended the ‘modernization’ of the Western nations,” according to Slotkin. They are “founded on the desire to avoid recognition of the perilous consequences of capitalist development in the New World, and they represent a displacement or deflection of social conflict into the world of myth” (Slotkin 1985:33, 47). The frontier was conveyed in the city as a safety valve for the urban class warfare brewing in such events as the 1863 New York draft riot, the 1877 railway strike, and indeed the Tompkins Square riot of 1874. “Spectacular violence” on the frontier, Slotkin concludes, had a redemptive effect on the city; it was “the alternative to some form of civil class war which, if allowed to break out within the metropolis, would bring about a secular *Götterdämmerung*” (Slotkin 1985:375). Projected in press accounts as extreme but comparable versions of events in the city, a magnifying mirror to the most ungodly depravity of the urban masses, reportage of the frontier posited eastern cities as a paradigm of social unity and harmony in the face of external threat. Urban social conflict was not so much denied as externalized, and whosoever disrupted this reigning urban harmony committed unnatural acts inviting comparison with the external enemy.

Today the frontier ideology continues to displace social conflict into the realm of myth, and at the same time to reaffirm a set of class-specific and race-specific social norms. As one respected academic has proposed, unwittingly replicating Turner’s vision (to not a murmur of dissent), gentrifying neighborhoods should be seen as combining a “civil class” who recognize that “the neighborhood good is enhanced by submitting to social norms,” and an “uncivil class” whose behavior and attitudes reflect “no acceptance of norms beyond those imperfectly specified by civil and criminal law.” Neighborhoods might then be classified “by the extent to which civil or uncivil behavior dominates” (Clay 1979a:37–38).

The frontier imagery is neither merely decorative nor innocent, therefore, but carries considerable ideological weight. Insofar as gentrification infects working-class communities, displaces poor households, and converts whole neighborhoods into bourgeois enclaves, the frontier ideology rationalizes social differentiation and exclusion as natural, inevitable. The poor and working class are all too easily defined as “uncivil,” on the wrong side of a heroic dividing line, as savages and communists. The substance and consequence of the frontier imagery is to tame the wild city, to socialize a wholly new and therefore challenging set of processes into safe ideological focus. As such, the frontier ideology justifies monstrous incivility in the heart of the city.

SELLING LOISAIDA

The frontier takes different forms in different places; it adapts to place as it makes place. But everywhere the frontier line is variously present. A *Wall Street Journal* reporter describes dining possibilities in “Indian Country” at the end of the 1980s: “For dining a new restaurant on Avenue C called ‘Bernard’ offers ‘organic French cuisine.’ Frosted glass windows protect diners from the sight of the burned out tenements across the street

as they nibble their \$18 loins of veal” (Rickelfs 1988). Shades of Baudelaire in Haussmann’s Paris, as we shall see. Notice that the poor, abandoned and homeless of the neighborhood were already invisible without the frosted window; only the burned out shells from which they were evicted threaten to intrude.

On the Lower East Side two industries defined the new urban frontier that emerged in the 1980s. Indispensable, of course, is the real estate industry which christened the northern part of the Lower East Side the “East Village” in order to capitalize on its geographical proximity to the respectability, security, culture and high rents of Greenwich Village. Then there is the culture industry—art dealers and patrons, gallery owners and artists, designers and critics, writers and performers—which has converted urban dilapidation into ultra chic. Together in the 1980s the culture and real estate industries invaded this rump of Manhattan from the west. Gentrification and art came hand in hand, “slouching toward Avenue D,” as art critics Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick (1984) put it. Block by block, building by building, the area was converted to a landscape of glamour and chic spiced with just a hint of danger.

The rawness of the neighborhood has in fact been part of the appeal. Only in the Lower East Side have art critics celebrated “minifestivals of the slum arts”; only here have artists cherished “a basic ghetto material—the ubiquitous brick”; and only here would the art entourage blithely admit to being “captivated by the liveliness of ghetto culture” (Moufarrege 1982, 1984). Alongside the gallery called “Fun,” the knickknack boutique named “Love Saves the Day,” and the bar called “Beulah Land” (Bunyan’s land of rest and quiet) came “Civilian Warfare” and “Virtual Garrison” (both galleries), “Downtown Beirut” (a bar) and an art showing called “The Twilight Zone.” Frontier danger permeated the very art itself, whatever the nostalgic eclecticism of the Lower East Side scene. The “law of the jungle” ruled the new art scene, an art scene driven by “savage energy,” gushed Robinson and McCormick (1984:138, 156). Neoprimitivist art, in fact, depicting black-figured urban “natives,” often running wild in the streets, was a central theme of this “savage energy.”

The most insightful critique of this connection between art and real estate remains that by Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Ryan in a classic article, “The fine art of gentrification” (Deutsche and Ryan 1984). The complicity of art with gentrification is no mere serendipity, they show, but “has been constructed with the aid of the entire apparatus of the art establishment.” Linking the rise of the “East Village” with the triumph of neo-Expressionism in art, they argue that however countercultural its pose, the broad abstention from political self-reflection condemned Lower East Side art to reproducing the dominant culture. The unprecedented commodification of art in the 1980s engendered an equally ubiquitous aestheticization of culture and politics: graffiti came off the trains and into the galleries, while the most outrageous punk and new-wave styles moved rapidly from the streets to full-page advertisements in the *New York Times*. The press began sporting stories about the opulence of the new art scene—at least for some: Don’t let the poverty of the Lower East Side fool you, was the message; this generation of young artists gets by with American Express Goldcards (Bernstein 1990).

The simultaneous disavowal of social and political context and dependence on the culture establishment placed avant-garde artists in a sharply contradictory position. They came to function as “broker” between the culture industry and the majority of still-aspiring artists. Lower East Side galleries played the pivotal role: they provided the

meeting place for grassroots ambition and talent and establishment money (Owens 1984:162–163).² Representing and patronizing the neighborhood as a cultural mecca, the culture industry attracted tourists, consumers, gallery gazers, art patrons, potential immigrants—all fueling gentrification. Not all artists so readily attach themselves to the culture establishment, of course, and a significant artists' opposition survived the commodification and price escalation that boosted the neighborhood's twin industries in the 1980s. Following the Tompkins Square riot, in fact, there was a flourishing of political art aimed squarely at gentrification, the police and the art industry. Some artists were also squatters and housing activists, and a lot of subversive art was displayed as posters, sculpture and graffiti in the streets or in more marginal gallery spaces (see for example Castrucci *et al.* 1992).

For the real estate industry, art tamed the neighborhood, refracting back a mock pretense of exotic but benign danger. It depicted the East Village as rising from low life to high brow. Art donates a salable neighborhood “personality,” packaged the area as a real estate commodity and established demand. Indeed, “the story of the East Village’s newest bohemian efflorescence,” it has been suggested, “can also be read as an episode in New York’s real estate history—that is, as the deployment of a force of gentrifying artists in lower Manhattan’s last slum” (Robinson and McCormick 1984:135).

By 1987, however, the marriage of convenience between art and real estate started to sour, and a wave of gallery closures was precipitated by massive rent increases demanded by landlords unconstrained by rent control. It is widely speculated that these landlords—many of them anonymous management companies operating out of post office boxes—offered artificially low rents in the early 1980s in order to attract galleries and artists whose presence would hype the area and hike rents. Handsomely successful, they demanded sharp increases as the first five-year leases came due. The neighborhood was now saturated with as many as seventy galleries, artistic and economic competition was cutthroat, and a financial shakeout, synchronized with the 1987 stock market crash, ensued. First Avenue was manifestly not “downtown Beirut” and a host of artistic and financial fantasies plummeted to earth. Many galleries closed. The most successful decamped to SoHo where gentrification capital also regrouped; the less successful (financially) often went across the bridge to Williamsburg in Brooklyn. Left in the lurch by the real estate industry, many Lower East Side artists were also summarily dropped by a cultural elite that had found other dalliances (Bernstein 1990)—but not before the culture industry as a whole had spearheaded a fundamental shift in the neighborhood’s image and real estate market.

That some artists became victims of the very gentrification process they helped precipitate, and that others actively opposed the process, has touched off a debate in the art press (Owens 1984:162–163; Deutsche and Ryan 1984:104; Bowler and McBurney 1989). However wittingly or otherwise, the culture and real estate industries worked together to transform the Lower East Side into a new place—different, unique, a phenomenon, the pinnacle of avant-garde fashion. Fashion and faddishness created cultural scarcity much as the real estate industry’s demarcation of the “East Village” instantaneously establishes a scarcity of privileged addresses. Good art and good locations become fused. And good location means money.

PIONEERING FOR PROFIT

The Lower East Side has experienced several phases of rapid building associated with larger economic cycles, and the present-day built environment results from this history. A few early buildings remain from the 1820s to 1840s, but rectangular “railroad” tenements are more common, built in the 1850s through the Civil War to house the largely immigrant working class. These are the tenements that figured so vividly in Jacob Riis’s 1901 *How the Other Half Lives* (Riis 1971 edn.). In the decade and a half after 1877, with the economy expanding and immigration growing, the area experienced its most intense building boom. Virtually all vacant land was developed with “dumbbell” tenements, so named because the rectangular form of the traditional railway tenements were now forced by law to include dumbbell-shaped airshafts between structures. By the 1893 economic crash, which effectively ended this building boom, almost 60 percent of all New York City housing comprised dumbbell tenements; at least 30,000 such buildings throughout the city are still inhabited, with the largest concentration in the Lower East Side (G.Wright 1981:123). The next building boom, beginning in 1898, was concentrated at the urban edge; the Lower East Side did receive some “new law” tenements (post-1901, when a new law required improved design standards), but many landlords in the area had already begun disinvesting, neglecting maintenance and repairs on their grossly overcrowded buildings.

New York’s ruling class has long sought to tame and reclaim the Lower East Side from its unruly working-class hordes. Only five years after the federal government severely curtailed European immigration, the Rockefeller-sponsored Regional Plan Association offered an extraordinary vision for the Lower East Side. The 1929 New York Regional Plan explicitly envisaged the removal of the existing population, the reconstruction of “high-class residences,” modern shops, a yacht marina on the East River, and the physical redevelopment of the Lower East Side highway system in such a way as to strengthen the connection with neighboring Wall Street:

The moment an operation of this magnitude and character was started in a district, no matter how squalid it was, an improvement in quality would immediately begin in adjacent property and would spread in all directions. New stores would start up prepared to cater to a new class of customers. The streets thereabouts would be made cleaner. Property values would rise.... After a while, other apartment units would appear and in the course of time the character of the East Side would be entirely changed.

(quoted in Gottlieb 1982; see also Fitch 1993)

The stock market crash of 1929, the ensuing Depression and World War II, the unprecedented wave of postwar suburban expansion, and eventually the New York City fiscal crisis all mitigated against the planned reinvestment and reconstruction of the Lower East Side as a high-class haven. Various slum clearance and low-income residential projects were initiated between the late 1930s and early 1960s, but, combined with the withdrawal of capital, these policies often intensified the long-term economic and social processes laying waste to the Lower East Side and other such neighborhoods. In the postwar period, disinvestment and abandonment, demolition and public

warehousing, were the major tactics of a virulent antiurbanism that converted the Lower East Side into something of a free-fire zone. Especially hard hit was the area south of Houston Street and the Alphabet City area to the east between Avenue A and Avenue D. Urban renewal here simply reinforced the ghettoization of poor residents, especially Latinos, amid the rubble of disinvestment.

Not until a further half-century of disinvestment, dilapidation and decline did the 1929 vision begin to be implemented. Even as yuppies and artists began to pick over the wreckage in the late 1970s, everyone else was moving out. From the 1910 peak population of over half a million, the Lower East Side lost almost 400,000 inhabitants over the next seven decades; in the 1970s it lost 30,000, giving it a 1980 population of nearly 155,000. In the heart of Loissaida between Houston and Tenth Streets, Avenue B to Avenue D have been most intense, the population declined by an extraordinary 67.3—so-called Alphabet City—where abandonment and property disinvestment percent. The median household income of \$8,782 was only 63 percent of the 1980 citywide figure, and twenty-three of twenty-nine census tracts in the area experienced an increase in the number of families living below the poverty level. In Alphabet City it was the poor who were left behind; 59 percent of the remaining population survived below the poverty level. The neighborhood so deliberately colonized by yuppies and artists at the end of the 1970s was the poorest in Manhattan outside Harlem. In the 1980s, the neighborhood actually experienced a population reversal with 161,617 recorded in the 1990 census.

Declining property values accompanied declining populations in the 1970s and much of the 1980s. Consider the case of 270 East 10th Street, a run-down but occupied five-storey dumbbell tenement between First Avenue and Avenue A, half a block west of Tompkins Square Park. In 1976, at the time of peak disinvestment, it was sold by a landlord who simply wanted out; the price was a mere \$5,706 plus the assumption of unpaid property taxes. By the beginning of 1980 it was resold for \$40,000. Eighteen months later it went for \$130,000. In September 1981 the building was sold again, this time to a New Jersey real estate concern for \$202,600. In less than two years the building's price multiplied five times—without any renovation (Gottlieb 1982).

This is not an unusual case. On Tompkins Square Park the sixteen-storey Christodora Building, now a symbol of antigentrification struggle, experienced a similar cycle of disinvestment and reinvestment. Built in 1928 as a settlement house, the Christodora was sold to the City of New York in 1947 for \$1.3 million. It was used for various City functions and eventually as a community center and hostel, housing among others the Black Panthers and the Young Lords. Run down and dilapidated by the late 1960s, the building attracted no bids at a 1975 auction. It was later sold for \$62,500 to a Brooklyn developer, George Jaffee. The doors of the deserted building had been welded shut and remained that way for five years while Jaffee unsuccessfully sought federal funds for rehabilitating the Christodora as low-income housing. In 1980 Jaffee began to get inquiries about the building. The welder was called to provide entry, the building was inspected, and offers of \$200,000 to \$800,000 began to materialize. Jaffee eventually sold the building in 1983 for \$1.3 million to another developer, Harry Skydell, who in turn “flipped” the building a year later for \$3 million, only to recoup it later in a joint venture with developer Samuel Glasser. Skydell and Glasser renovated the Christodora and in 1986 marketed its eighty-six condominium apartments. The quadruplex penthouse, with

private elevator, three terraces and two fireplaces, was offered for sale in 1987 for \$1.2 million (Unger 1984; DePalma 1988).

At 270 East Tenth, at the Christodora, and at hundreds of other buildings in the Lower East Side, it is real estate profits, first and foremost, that are revitalized. The Tompkins Court, a 1988 rehabilitation, offered one-bedroom units at the “post-87 crash bargain price” of \$139,000–\$209,000, two-bedroom units for \$239,000–\$329,000. For the least expensive of these an estimated annual household income of \$65,000 was required; for the most expensive an income of \$160,000. Even the small studios were inaccessible to those earning less than \$40,000. Several blocks away at another tenement rehab, seventeen co-ops were sold, with two-bedroom units ranging from \$235,000 to \$497,800 (Shaman 1988). Mortgage and maintenance costs on the latter amounted to almost \$5,000 per month. Two months’ payment on this apartment exceeded the neighborhood’s median annual income. Only by the early 1990s did sale prices begin to drop appreciably—as much as 15–25 percent at the top end of the market but less at lower rental levels.

Unrestrained by rent control of any sort, commercial rents and sales rose even faster. Long-time small businesses were forced out as landlords indiscriminately raised rents. Maria Pidhorodecky’s Italian-Ukrainian restaurant, the Orchidia, a fixture on Second Avenue since 1957, closed in the mid-1980s when the landlord was able to raise the rent for the 700-square-foot space from \$950 to \$5,000 (Unger 1984).

In his investigation of the workings of the Lower East Side real estate market, journalist Martin Gottlieb uncovered the results of the rent gap (see chapter 3) first hand. At 270 East Tenth Street, for example, while the combined sale price of building and land soared from \$5,706 to \$202,600 in five and a half years, the value of the building alone, according to city property tax assessors, actually fell from \$26,000 to \$18,000. And this is a typical result; even taking into account the structured undervaluation of buildings *vis-à-vis* the market, the land is much more valuable than the building. The perverse rationality of real estate capitalism means that building owners and developers garner a double reward for milking properties and destroying buildings. First, they pocket the money that should have gone to repairs and upkeep; second, having effectively destroyed the building and established a rent gap, they have produced for themselves the conditions and opportunity for a whole new round of capital reinvestment. Having produced a scarcity of capital in the name of profit they now flood the neighborhood for the same purpose, portraying themselves all along as civic-minded heroes, pioneers taking a risk where no one else would venture, builders of a new city for the worthy populace. In Gottlieb’s words, this self-induced reversal in the market means that a “Lower East Side landlord can drink his milk and have it too” (Gottlieb 1982).

The economic geography of gentrification is not random; developers do not just plunge into the heart of slum opportunity, but tend to take it piece by piece. Rugged pioneersmanship is tempered by financial caution. Developers have a vivid block-by-block sense of where the frontier lies. They move in from the outskirts, building “a few strategically placed outposts of luxury,” as Henwood (1988:10) has put it. They “pioneer” first on the gold coast between safe neighborhoods on one side where property values are high and the disinvested slums on the other where opportunity is higher. Successive beachheads and defensible borders are established on the frontier. In this way economic geography charts the strategy of urban pioneering.

Whereas the myth of the frontier is an invention that rationalizes the violence of gentrification and displacement, the everyday frontier on which the myth is hung is the stark product of entrepreneurial exploitation. Thus whatever its visceral social and cultural reality, the frontier language camouflages a raw economic reality. Areas that were once sharply redlined by banks and other financial institutions were sharply “greenlined” in the 1980s. Loan officers are instructed to take down their old maps with red lines around working-class and minority neighborhoods and replace them with new maps sporting green lines: make every possible loan within the greenlined neighborhood. In the Lower East Side as elsewhere, the new urban frontier is a frontier of profitability. Whatever else is revitalized, the profit rate in gentrifying neighborhoods is revitalized; indeed many working class neighborhoods experience a dramatic “devitalization” as incoming yuppies erect metal bars on their doors and windows, disavow the streets for parlor living, fence off their stoops, and evict undesirables from “their” parks.

If the real estate cowboys invading the Lower East Side in the 1980s used art to paint their economic quest in romantic hues, they also enlisted the cavalry of city government for more prosaic tasks: reclaiming the land and quelling the natives. In its housing policy, drug crackdowns, and especially in its parks strategy, the City devoted its efforts not toward providing basic services and living opportunities for existing residents but toward routing many of the locals and subsidizing opportunities for real estate development. A 1982 consultants’ report entitled *An Analysis of Investment Opportunities in the East Village* captured the City’s strategy precisely: “The city has now given clear signals that it is prepared to aid the return of the middle class by auctioning city-owned properties and sponsoring projects in gentrifying areas to bolster its tax base and aid the revitalization process” (Oreo Construction Services 1982).

The City’s major resource was its stock of “*in rem*” properties, mostly foreclosed from private landlords for nonpayment of property taxes. By the early 1980s the Department of Housing, Preservation and Development held over 200 such *in rem* buildings in the Lower East Side and a similar number of vacant lots. With sixteen of these properties, the Koch administration made its first significant foray into the real estate frenzy of gentrification; artists were to be the vehicle. In August 1981 HPD solicited proposals for an Artist Homeownership Program (AHOP) and the next year announced a renovation project that was to yield 120 housing units in sixteen buildings, each costing an estimated \$50,000, aimed at artists earning at least \$24,000. Their purpose, the Mayor proclaimed, was “to renew the strength and vitality of the community,” and five artists’ groups and two developers were selected to execute the \$7 million program (Bennetts 1982).

But many in the community disagreed vigorously enough to oppose the AHOP plan. The Joint Planning Council, a coalition of more than thirty Loisaida housing and community organizations, demanded that so valuable a resource as abandoned buildings should be renovated for local consumption; city councilwoman Miriam Friedlander saw the plan as “just a front for gentrification”; “the real people who will profit from this housing are the developers who renovate it.” And indeed, the HPD Commissioner expressed the fervent hope that the project would be “a stimulus for overall neighborhood revitalization.” While supporting artists portrayed themselves as normal folks, just part of the working class, a population already largely displaced from Manhattan who deserved housing as much as anyone else, an artists’ opposition emerged—“Artists for Social

Responsibility”—who opposed the use of artists to gentrify the neighborhood. HPD, the mayor and AHOP were ultimately defeated by the City Board of Estimates, which refused to provide the initial \$2.4 million of public funds (Carroll 1983).

But AHOP was a warm-up for a larger auction program, as HPD prepared to leverage gentrification citywide using *in rem* properties. The Joint Planning Council decided to grab the initiative by proposing its own community-based plan, and in 1984 it proposed that all City-owned vacant lots and properties be used for low- and moderate-income housing and that the speculation responsible for eliminating existing low-income units be controlled. The City ignored the community plan and came back with a “cross-subsidy” program. HPD would sell City-owned properties to developers, either by auction or at appraised value, in return for an agreement by developers that a vaguely specified 20 percent of rehabilitated or newly built units would be reserved for tenants unable to afford market rates. Developers would receive a tax subsidy in return. Initially some community groups gave the program tentative support; others sought to adjust the ratio of market-rate to subsidized housing to 50:50, while others rejected the entire idea as a backdoor route to building minimal public housing.

But opposition mounted as the actual intent of the program became clear. In 1988 the City announced that the Lefrak Organization—a major national developer—would build on the Seward Park site where, in 1967, 1,800 poor people, mostly African-American and Latino, were displaced when their homes were urban renewed. They were promised the new apartments scheduled for the site, but twenty years later the renewal was yet to happen. The fee for the site was \$1, and Lefrak would pay a further \$1 per year for the ninety-nine-year lease. Under the plan, Lefrak would build 1,200 apartments, 400 of which would be market-rate condominiums, 640 would be rented at \$800–\$1,200 to “middle-income” households earning \$25,000–\$48,000, and the remaining 160 units would go as “moderate-income” units to those earning \$15,000–\$25,000. No apartments were actually earmarked for low-income people. Further, all rental units would revert to Lefrak as luxury co-ops on the open market after twenty years; Lefrak would get a thirty-two-year tax abatement, and an overall City subsidy of \$20 million. Lawyers representing several of the 1967 tenants filed a class action suit against the Lefrak condo. “Yupper-income housing in low income neighborhoods” is how one housing advocate described the plan, “and the purpose is creating hot new real-estate markets” (Glazer 1988; Reiss 1988). The project got as far as a “Memorandum of Understanding” with the City, but as the depression closed in, the folly of attaching any subsidized housing to market development became clear. Lefrak abandoned the project—but not before it became clear that the City had no intention of mandating Lefrak to build the 20 percent of subsidized units in the same neighborhood. The geographical mobility of the subsidized housing of course opened up the specter of gentrification again for those who had not already seen through the “double-cross subsidy” program, as it came to be known by community activists.

With AHOP and the cross-subsidy proposal, the City led the economic cavalry charge into the Lower East Side, but it also resorted to a little mood creation. In an effort to clear the streets of “natives” who might hinder the gentrification frontier, Operation Pressure Point was launched in January 1984. An estimated 14,000 drug busts were made in eighteen months throughout the Lower East Side, and the *New York Times* gloated that “thanks to operation pressure point, art galleries are replacing shooting galleries.” But the

petty offenders were quickly released, the kingpins never apprehended, and when the pressure eased the street sellers returned.

Along with Operation Pressure Point, the City organized an assault on the parks as part of its wider gentrification strategy. As developer William Zeckendorf Jr. secured massive tax abatements and zoning variations for his twenty-eight-storey luxury Zeckendorf Tower at Fourteenth Street and Broadway—a “fortress” development intended to anchor future forays into the Lower East Side—the City had already weighed in with tactical support.³ The plan evicted the homeless and others of the “socially undesirable population” from adjacent Union Square Park, and began a two-year, \$3.6 million renovation. Inaugurating the renovation in the spring of 1984, Mayor Koch justified the Zeckendorf subsidy by blaming the victims: “First the thugs took over, then the muggers took over, then the drug people took over, and now we are driving them out” (quoted in Carmody 1984). In its initial sparkling antiseptic, the new park complemented the facade of the Zeckendorf condo. Some trees have been thinned out, walls knocked down, paths widened and an open plaza constructed at the south end, all offering long-range visibility for surveillance and control. Sharp-edged, bright new stonework replaced slabs worn gray by weather and footsteps, the farmers’ market was spruced up but retained, and the park’s monuments cleaned and polished in a nostalgic “restoration” of a nonexistent past. The same strokes that deoxidized the park’s green statues back to their gleaming bronze splendor attempted to wipe away the city’s history of homelessness and poverty. As Rosalyn Deutsche concluded, “the aesthetic presentation of the physical site of development is indissolubly linked to the profit motives impelling Union Square’s “revitalization” (Deutsche 1986:80, 85–86).

If the gentrification of Union Square Park hardly lived up to expectations, with patrolling cops and returning evictees very much restoring the park to the frontier edge, the City nonetheless persevered. The City’s efforts moved south to Washington Square Park in the Village, where, as in Union Square Park, boundary fences were erected, a curfew imposed, police patrols stepped up. Then in 1988 they moved east into Tompkins Square Park. Rebuffed by the summer demonstrations culminating in the August police riot, the City’s traditional park gentrification strategy of curfews and closures followed by “restoration” was defeated—for a time—by the August riot.

“ANOTHER WAVE MORE SAVAGELY THAN THE FIRST”:⁴ THE NEW (GLOBAL) INDIAN WARS?

“A sort of wartime mentality seems to be settling onto New Yorkers affected by the housing squeeze,” commented *New York* magazine as the gentrification boom got under way in the early 1980s (Wiseman 1983). Especially in the Lower East Side, the geography of recent urban change reveals the future gentrified city, a city sparkling with the neon of elite consumption anxiously cordoned off from homeless deprivation. As the gentrification frontier came to course through neighborhood after neighborhood, most rapidly during economic expansions, but rarely at a slouch, previously working class sections of the city were dragged into the international circuits of capital. While Lower East Side art was shown in London or Paris, the neighborhood’s fanciest condos were advertised in *The Times* and *Le Monde*.

Gentrification portends a class conquest of the city. The new urban pioneers seek to scrub the city clean of its working-class geography and history. By remaking the geography of the city they simultaneously rewrite its social history as a preemptive justification for a new urban future. Slum tenements become historic brownstones, and exterior facades are sandblasted to reveal a future past. Likewise with interior renovation. “Inner worldly asceticism becomes public display” as “bare brick walls and exposed timbers come to signify cultural discernment, not the poverty of slums without plaster” (Jager 1986:79–80, 83, 85). Physical effacement of original structures effaces social history and geography; if the past is not entirely demolished it is at least reinvented—its class and race contours rubbed smooth—in the refurbishment of a palatable past.

Where the militance or persistence of working-class communities or the extent of disinvestment and dilapidation would seem to render such genteel reconstruction a Sisyphean task, the classes can be juxtaposed by other means. Squalor, poverty and the violence of eviction are constituted as exquisite ambience. The rapid polarization of new classes in the making is glorified for its excitement rather than condemned for its violence or understood for the rage it threatens.

The effort to recolonize the city involves systematic eviction. In its various plans and task force reports for gentrifying what remains of the inner city, New York City government has never proposed a plan for relocating evictees. This is stunning testimony to the real program. Denying any connection between gentrification and displacement, City officials refuse to admit the possibility that gentrification causes homelessness. Public policy is geared to allow the housed to “see no homeless,” in the words of one Lower East Side stencil artist. The 1929 Regional Plan for the Lower East Side was at least more honest:

Each replacement will mean the disappearance of many of the old tenants and the coming in of other people who can afford the higher rentals required by modern construction on high-priced land. Thus in time economic forces alone will bring about a change in the character of much of the East Side population.

(quoted in Gottlieb 1982:16)

One developer justifies the violence of the new frontier: “To hold us accountable for it is like blaming the developer of a high-rise building in Houston for the displacement of the Indians a hundred years before” (quoted in Unger 1984:41). In Burlington, Vermont, one restaurateur has taken seriously the mission of getting “those people” out of sight. The owner of Leunig’s Old World Cafe, in the gentrified, cobblestone, boutique-filled Church Street Marketplace, became incensed at the homeless people who, he said, were “terrorizing” his restaurant’s clients. Funded by donations from restaurateurs and other local businessmen in the town, he began an organization called “Westward Ho!” to provide homeless people with one-way tickets out of town—to Portland, Oregon.

Some have gone further in the effort to see no homeless, hoping in fact to illegalize homelessness altogether:

If it is illegal to litter the streets, frankly it ought to be illegal...to sleep in the streets. Therefore, there is a simple matter of public order and hygiene

in getting these people somewhere else. Not arrest them, but move them off somewhere where they are simply out of sight.

(George Will, quoted in Marcuse 1988:70)

This kind of vengeful outburst only lends more weight to Friedrich Engels' famous admonition of more than a century ago:

the bourgeoisie has only one method of settling the housing question.... The breeding places of disease, the infamous holes and cellars in which the capitalist mode of production confines our workers night after night are not abolished; they are merely *shifted elsewhere*.

(Engels, 1975 edn., 71, 73–4; emphasis in original)

Evicted from the public as well as the private spaces of what is fast becoming a downtown bourgeois playground, minorities, the unemployed and the poorest of the working class are destined for large-scale displacement. Once isolated in central city enclaves, they are increasingly herded to reservations on the urban edge. New York's HPD becomes the new Department of the Interior; the Social Security Administration the new Bureau of Indian Affairs; and Latino, African-American and other minorities the new Indians. At the beginning of the onslaught, one especially prescient East Village developer was cynically blunt about what the new gentrification frontier would mean for evictees as gentrification raced toward Avenue D: "They'll all be forced out. They'll be pushed east to the river and given life preservers" (quoted in Gottlieb 1982:13).

The dramatic shifts affecting gentrifying neighborhoods are experienced as intensely local. The Lower East Side is a world away from the upper-crust *noblesse* of the Upper East Side three miles north; and within the neighborhood, Avenue C is still a very different place from First Avenue. Yet the processes and forces shaping the new urbanism are global as much as local. Gentrification and homelessness in the new city are a particular microcosm of a new global order etched first and foremost by the rapacity of capital. Not only are broadly similar processes remaking cities around the world, but the world itself impinges dramatically on these localities. The gentrification frontier is also an "imperial frontier," says Kristin Koptiuch (1991:87–89). Not only does international capital flood the real estate markets that fuel the process, but international migration provides a workforce for many of the professional and managerial jobs associated with the new urban economy—a workforce that needs a place to stay. Even more does international migration provide the service workers for the new economy: in New York, greengrocers are now mainly Korean; the plumbers fitting gentrified buildings are often Italian, the carpenters Polish; the domestic workers and nannies looking after the houses and children of gentrifiers come from El Salvador, Barbados or elsewhere in the Caribbean.

Immigrants come to the city from every country where US capital has opened markets, disrupted local economies, extracted resources, removed people from the land, or sent the marines as a "peace-keeping force" (Sassen 1988). This global dislocation comes home to roost in the "Third-Worlding" of the US city (Franco 1985; Koptiuch 1991), which, combined with the threat of increasing crime and repressive policing of the streets, invites visions of a predaceous assault on the very gentrification that it helped to stimulate. In her

research on the disruption of the ways in which children are socialized, Cindi Katz (1991a, 1991b) finds a clear parallel between the streets of New York and the fields of Sudan where an agricultural project has come to town. The “primitive” conditions of the core are at once exported to the periphery while those of the periphery are reestablished at the core. “As if straight out of some sci-fi plot,” writes Koptiuch (1991), “the wild frontiers dramatized in early travel accounts have been moved so far out and away that, to our unprepared astonishment, they have imploded right back in our midst.” It is not just the Indian wars of the Old West that have come home to the cities of the East, but the new global wars of the New American World Order.

A new social geography of the city is being born but it would be foolish to expect that it will be a peaceful process. The attempt to reclaim Washington, DC (probably the most segregated city in the US), through white gentrification is widely known by the African-American majority as “the Plan.” In London’s gentrifying Docklands and East End, an anarchist gang of unemployed working-class kids justify mugging as their “yuppie tax,” giving a British twist to the Tompkins Square slogan, “Mug a yuppie.” As homes and communities are converted into a new frontier, there is an often clear perception of what is coming as the wagons are circled around. Frontier violence comes with cavalry charges down city streets, rising official crime rates, police racism and assaults on the “natives.” And it comes with the periodic torching of homeless people as they sleep, presumably to get them “out of sight.” And it comes with the murder of Bruce Bailey, a Manhattan tenant activist, in 1989: his dismembered body was found in garbage bags in the Bronx, and, although police openly suspected angry landlords of the crime, no one was ever charged. It is difficult to be optimistic that the next wave of gentrification will bring a new urban order more civilized than the first.