

Old School Rules: Generative Openness in the Texts of Historical Brooklyn Retail Signage

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“I have a saying, ‘A shop with no sign is a sign of no business!’”

— F R A N K S A N T O
Owner of Aunt Butchie’s Desserts and Aunt Butchie’s
of Brooklyn restaurant¹

INTRODUCTION:

A new type of signage is appearing on shops in Brooklyn. It is cryptic and mostly ambiguous. It is also ironic, and maybe funny. Interestingly, this sort of signage uses very few words. We argue elsewhere (Trinch & Snajdr, 2017) that this type of retail sign, which we call New School Distinction-making signage (or New School), indicates gentrification and displacement of the multi-cultural, largely immigrant and African American communities that have made this borough a home (Figures 1 and 2). As sociolinguistic texts, New School signs publicly “narrowcast” to a largely upscale, certainly highly-educated, gentrified public.² In doing so, they also project an exclusiveness of space to others.

Preceding and often co-existing with New School signage in neighborhoods all over Brooklyn are what we call Old School Brooklyn Vernacular (or Old School) signs. The most salient feature of these signs is their wordiness, or perhaps more objectively, their text-rich format (Figures 3 and 4).³

In this paper, we discuss these Old School signs and the semiotic and sociolinguistic rules they follow that made them ubiquitous and effective public texts. In addition to being text-rich, they tend to be literal and explicit. We detail how Old School signs commonly use non-standard English, a feature that contributes to their inclusiveness. We then consider how, in the face of

Abstract /

This article considers the unique features of what we call Old School storefront signs in Brooklyn, NY. These signs, which were often hand-painted and notably text-rich with large-size fonts, signaled an openness to all in a highly diverse, multi-cultural urban area. At the same time, very laconic, ambiguous and ironic gentrifying (or what we call New School) signage is replacing these Old School storefront signs at a rapid pace. Using sociolinguistic, semiotic and aesthetic analysis, we show how Old School shop signage acts as a “register of place.” The openness of this register allows it to adopt and incorporate elements preferred by Brooklyn’s gentrifying population. Also, we show how New School businesses begin to take on certain semiotic and textual features of Old School shops in order to survive in the face of corporate development. This appropriation of form/format, we argue, further demonstrates the effectiveness of Old School “rules,” which allow these signs to remain despite accelerating gentrification and the relentless march of corporate capitalism. Old School, as a marker of history and as an iconic form of place, is a living style that represents the past, has been transformed by the present, and perhaps has the power to change the future.

Keywords /

storefronts, place register, aesthetic, Brooklyn, gentrification, diversity, openness.

semiotic pressure from both New School gentrification and larger-scale corporate redevelopment, Old School signs both persist and are still newly produced. These “new” Old School signs incorporate features of both New School style and corporate signage that threaten to replace them. By continuing to operate under Old School rules, these signs promote a generative openness that allows for the adoption of new textual ideas and adapts to a changing urban context.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

METHODOLOGY AND BACKGROUND

We first noticed that there were two salient types of signs in Brooklyn’s dense textual landscape in 2003 when we moved to Brooklyn to an apartment in the Flatbush neighborhood. Since then, we have conducted multi-method ethnographic research on Brooklyn’s gentrification process. We also photographed and collected over 2,000 images of storefront signs in 14 different Brooklyn neighborhoods.⁴

This broad spectrum approach incorporated participant-observation, observation, ethnographic mapping, archival research (both digital and analog), and a survey of sign types.⁵ In a series of in-depth and semi-structured interviews, we talked with local resident/consumers, developers, sign makers, small business owners, as well as college students and government officials. As part of participant observation we have engaged in, overheard, and noted conversations about changing commercial districts in the borough. These conversations occurred in a range of diverse settings including ball games, schoolyards, work functions, birthday parties and encounters on the street. Finally, we gathered and analyzed U.S. Census data from 1970 to 2010 for the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Fort Greene and Prospect Heights, both areas that have undergone rapid change because of redevelopment and gentrification.

Our ethnographic and sociolinguistic approach seeks to build on current research on commercial signage and public language on landscapes, both urban and elsewhere. This work represents a wide range of

approaches to analysis and theory. Some scholars have focused in particular on semiotic or design features of signage (Bestley & Noble, 2016), while others have incorporated historical frameworks to address changes in design (Drucker & McVarish, 2009). Still others have highlighted the materiality of signage and the relationship between form and function. Some scholarship has addressed what has been termed the linguistic landscape, which has until recently privileged texts over symbols, and language codes and semantics over semiotics. The range of scholarship on signage is thus very diverse and a bit disparate, ranging from historical analyses of icons and texts of 18th century American trade signs (Arpak, 2017), to the preservation of 20th century neon retail signage as monumental public architecture (Palmer, 2017). Signage as icon can mark a place and be considered generative of place identity. An example is the widely recognized “Welcome to Las Vegas” sign on Las Vegas Boulevard. This sign in particular has also been rendered both to reinforce businesses in place and to invoke the status of Vegas when duplicated or adapted on signage well outside of the city, even thousands of miles away (Nowak, 2017). Other research shows how retail sign design often emerges organically, from the grassroots of local communities, utilizing materials of once-robust industries. For example, Porter (2017) describes how mom-and-pop tire shops have used resourceful hand-painted design and an amateur aesthetic to create sustainable public texts within the landscape of rural counties and small towns. Finally, Rahman and Mehta (2017) focus on how even letter forms and typography of signage can build on and reinforce cultural notions of personality, situated-

ness and emotion, and function as urban artifacts of social narratives in place. Signs are no doubt reflective of and constituted by place and people in place.

Our case study of Brooklyn signage situates retail signage within the context of a transforming Brooklyn, which has experienced several decades of disinvestment, followed by steady and sometimes rapid gentrification and urban redevelopment. Our approach, although incorporating semiotics, materials, and aesthetics, primarily takes a sociolinguistic and anthropological lens to these commercial storefronts. We consider them as public texts that, as Warner (2002) argues, pick out their publics. Signs function as vocative linguistic devices that call to particular audiences by design (Blommaert, 2013). Sociolinguists consider shop signs as a specific genre of public text. Shop signs communicate not only what stores sell but also who is perceived to be on the street and what their commercial desires are thought to be (Lou, 2007; Leeman & Modan, 2010; Papen, 2012). These texts are read by anonymous people on the street who would generally not ask shopkeepers what their or a sign maker's intentions were (cf. Duranti, 2006). Therefore, we are not concerned with whether shops signs reflect the personalities or personal ideologies of shop owners. Instead, we consider how signs work within an area's linguistic landscape to mark and represent the social context in which people find themselves (Gorter, 2006; Shohamy, Ben-Rafael & Barni, 2010).

The cultural geographer George Stewart (1982) in his classic history of place names in the U.S. suggested that "names on the land" were the result of either conquest or custom and use. If that suggestion holds true, then the manner in which capital inscribes itself on the land should correspond to the way that people actually imagine place and make community (Anderson, 1991). Brooklyn is extremely diverse, with no racial or ethnic group emerging as a majority from its 2.5 million residents. Yet in the wake of deindustrialization and disinvestment, over the past few decades the borough has witnessed accelerating gentrification (Kasinitz, 1988; Lees, 2003; Osman, 2012; Smith, 1979; Susser 2012) in part because of Bloomberg's neoliberalizing New York through substantial state- and city-supported redevelopment

(Brash, 2011). In fact, Brooklyn is now considered the second most expensive city in the U.S. (Brown, 2013), which presents a real and increasing threat of displacement to working-class and poor residents. It is in this cultural, communicative and conflicting context of substantial change that we consider the textually rich signs on Old School storefronts as placemaking tools.

SIGNS OF THE HOOD (OR NABE)⁶

Elsewhere, we have identified and described the features of the two distinct and salient styles of storefront signage (Trinch & Snajdr, 2017). Old School Brooklyn Vernacular, which represents pre-gentrified Brooklyn, is everywhere throughout the borough and is most prevalent in our data. Old School signs have many words or words that are large and take up most of the field of the sign. They also share other linguistic and semiotic features, such as additional or ancillary signs; store names that literally refer to location, the owner's first name or surname, type of business and/or products or services; reiterations or repetitions; languages other than English; and complementary symbols or pictures.⁷

In contrast to these signs, laconic, newer signs for gentrifying and upscale businesses are appearing with more frequency in the borough. We find that New School Brooklyn signage typically uses one word or a short phrase, often written in a reduced font size. We observe a widespread and systematic use of all lowercase letters, although not on every sign. The architect and radical public artist and designer, James Wines, calls these types of small, short-on-text signs "if-you-please" signage. They seem to him polite and uninspired in their diminutiveness. Wines noticed this sign style in many new-urbanist shopping streets and upscale malls around the country, invoking a timid conformity to a commercial experience of place (Wines, 2017). We have found that this type of sign in its Brooklyn New School manifestation is actually not so pleasing to some residents and consumers in the neighborhood. In addition to textual brevity (and arguably wit), these New School signs contain sociolinguistic features that indicate, following the work of Bourdieu (1990), a distinction-

Figure 5



Figure 6



making exclusivity and the exclusion and gating of certain publics (Trinch & Snajdr, 2017). The features of New School signage include polysemic or cryptic names, languages other than English (that index sophistication and worldliness, but not native speech communities), erudite historical and literary references, and ironic word play. For example, Figure 6 shows a sign for an upscale restaurant and café in Park Slope. Notice that there is simply one word on the storefront: “seed.” This word, of course, could mean many things to any passerby and does not explicitly indicate a restaurant.⁹

Linguistically, the features of both Old School and New School signage thus represent two different registers of place (cf. Agha, 2001 and Agha, 2011). The Old School signs found in what has historically been a multi-ethnic, multi-class, multi-lingual Brooklyn

suggest an openness to doing business with others that is straightforward and plain spoken. We often see explicit references to religion, ethnicity, national origin, or race in Old School storefronts. In Figure 7 we see the words “soul food” on a restaurant, and “hair weaving” and an image of a woman with an Afro hairstyle on a sign for a beauty salon. In Figure 8 there are explicit references to Christianity (specifically Catholicism with “Baptisms”) on a bridal shop, and a syncretic (or blended), but open and prominent, reference to Protestantism and Islam on an eatery. We theorize that because of the widespread diversity, the language on Old School storefronts appears as it does because signage in this context needs to do more work than the language of signs found in other places, such as the monocultural suburbs or in small town America, arguably more homogeneous places. The Old School signs incorporate difference but seem to



Figure 7



Figure 8

say that for the purposes of doing business, the shops will not discriminate. In other words, not only are strangers allowed in, but strangers who are of other races, ethnicities, classes, nationalities and language groups (i.e., Others) are welcome as well, as indicated by the pictures or the English text on the signage.

Brooklyn's uniqueness, where a very multi-racial, multi-class, multi-cultural community is being displaced by a gentrifying community that is mostly white, upper-middle class, college-educated and English-speaking, gives us the opportunity to see how language operates to serve in the creation of first, an open-to-everyone market place and then, an exclusive market place that suggests that not everyone belongs.

Some argue that New School signs harken back to a simpler time, with more aesthetically tasteful landscapes of text. In fact, we found this sentiment echoed in the policies and practices of New York City's Landmarks Preservation Commission, which sets rules for commercial signage for certain areas of the city. A couple of prominent Brooklyn-based sign makers, who have both been in business for over thirty years, noted that the aesthetic of a lot of New School Brooklyn signage is based on a 1920s design. One of them remarked: "That's what the city loves. 1920s, 1910s, you know... Especially landmarked zones!"¹⁰ We also learned from them that, aside from landmarked areas (and there are many), there are no rules about what wording can go on shop signs. However,

in numerous cases in our data set, we found that shopowners forgo “signs” and put up awnings that act as shop signs. According to our sign-makers, the “awnings-as-shop-signs” that we collected are almost all in violation of the city’s signage rules. When we showed the sign makers our multi-word “awning-as-shop-sign” examples, they responded:

Interview Subject 1: *That’s on an awning. Awnings are NOT signs. Awnings are decorative objects.*

Interview Subject 2: *Decorative objects, the city said! They’re to block out the sun.*

Author: *So it means that it can’t be longer than 12 square feet?*

Interview Subject 2: *...Of lettering! Name of the business only!*

Interview Subject 1: *Name and address of business. So, “John’s Hardware Store,” right? “John’s Hardware Store” is twelve inches high, twelve feet long. You can’t put hammers on it. That stuff’s illegal.*

Our interview subjects clarified that many of our examples are technically illegal signage in the form of overly wordy fixed awnings, which, according to the New York City Department of Buildings, are subject to fines. In fact, in 2003, the city suddenly penalized businesses for sign violations (and for many other violations of public and commercial ordinances). Fines ranged from \$500 to \$5,000. One city planner, in the wake of the outrage that followed in the retail business community, noted that then City Council Speaker Gifford Miller estimated “that over 90 percent of [New York City] awnings [were] in violation of the code” (Gerend, 2003).¹¹ In general, the city does not enforce this ordinance and as one can see from our data, Old School shop owners have largely ignored the rule.

Regardless of Landmarks Commissions or constructed ideologies of historical genuineness, Old School signage is evidence that shop owners have been doing what they want for many decades. Figure 9, from the 1940s, clearly shows the prevalence and persistence of Old School signage. In Figure 10 we see another image of a Brooklyn street in the 1970s. One might consider the Landmarks policy as prescriptive at best, and discriminatory at worst. The salient question is: Which history is the one worthy of preservation?



Figure 9

Photo by Andreas Feininger (1940s)



Figure 10
Photo by Anthony Catalano (1970s)

Sign painting was a more widespread craft in the past than it is now, cultivated through sustained and numerous apprenticeship opportunities in print shops and graphic commercial design companies. Therefore, a lot of Old School signs are hand-painted. However, materials have changed with the times and include vinyl sheeting, canvas, and plastic.

In the next section, we will consider how key features of Old School signage operate within the broader cultural context of a multicultural Brooklyn.

“DELI BEER FLOWER JUICE”

A close examination of the storefront in Figure 11 reveals something odd about the list of words on this Brooklyn deli. White asterisks separate large, white lettering on an orange field. The sign follows the form of what we identified as key features of Old School: lots of words, large lettering, and literalness. This shop is a convenience store and market. It does not have fresh fruit or an extensive range of grocery items, but it does sell lottery tickets, a service not found at every market. As the sign indicates, it has a deli counter where customers can purchase a custom-ordered, carefully-made sandwich; a cold case with a wide variety of beer selections; several types of freshly-made juices; and fresh-cut flowers. Notably to native English speakers, the sign does not say “flowers” but instead “flower.”

In standard written English, the word “flower” as it is used in this context should be plural. This non-standard English form has been on the sign since the business opened and seems deliberate. Our ethnographic research has confirmed that the establishment sells a lot of flowers, so from the perspective of sociolinguistics, this use of non-standard “flower” has in no way hindered business. In fact, in Old School Brooklyn signage, widespread misspellings and non-standard word forms are the norm.

For example, on a sign that hangs perpendicular to the façade of a clothing store, we find “Courtney Washington Men and Women’s Clouthier.” On this signpost, the word, “clouthier,” appears to be a misspelling of the term “clothier,” meaning “a person or a business that makes or sells clothing.” Old School signage also includes curious non-standard or archaic abbreviations. For example, on a small grocer’s sign for the business called “Friend Mini Market Corp.” one finds abbreviations for “produce” and “products” appearing as “Prod” in the phrases “Organic Prod” and “Dairy Prod” respectively. In other examples, we find non-standard punctuation and syntax, as is the case in the sign for a Chinese Restaurant in Fort Greene. . The phrase, on its awning in large lettering, “Chinese Food Eat In & Take Out,” would require, if one followed standard English punctuation rules, a colon between the type of food served and the places

where it can be eaten. While the writing on the sign is obviously not an essay, its lack of punctuation might be notably incorrect to some educated readers. Below this phrase is “We Delivery” with the noun “delivery” following the subject pronoun “we” instead of the standard verb “deliver” to form the phrase commonly found in restaurant parlance, “We deliver.”

Another example of non-standard English can be found in the non-native phrasing or non-parallel construction appearing in a sign for 168 Cleaning and Laundromat. It reads “DRY-CLEANING*DROP OFF & PICK UP*IRON SHIRT*ALTERATION.” Prescriptive rules of writing Standard English require that the list be either all nouns or all verbs, but here we have a mixture of the two parts of speech. A list of all verbs would read: “Dry-clean*Drop Off & Pick Up*Iron Shirt*Alter.” However, the subjects of the verb vary in this configuration. The business does the dry-cleaning, the shirt-ironing and the altering, but the customer does the dropping off and the picking up. This phrase, then, is also problematic in terms of prescriptive English grammar rules of parallel construction. In a list configured of nouns, a standard English sign might read, “Dry-cleaning*Drop off & Pick up*Shirt-ironing*Alterations.”

These are only a small sample of the vast range and variety of instances of unsystematic, non-standard written English forms and/or violations of prescriptive rules of written grammar of English. As one might think, these Old School non-standard forms represent non-native usages or mistakes. After all, these signs are largely located in immigrant and in working-class communities in Brooklyn. What is interesting to us is that the commercial market place allows for and permits such usages. Small businesses seem unaffected by the standard language ideologies touted in schools as being more communicative and professional, and therefore more suited to commerce.



Figure 11

Figure 12



New School signs share a feature of non-standard English language usage with Old School shops in the form of deviation from standardized texts. However, the sort of non-standard usage that one sees in each sign type is very different. Along with grammar, syntax, constructions and spelling deviations, we see widespread, creative, and unsystematic use of type and font in Old School signs. In contrast, New School shop signs systematically incorporate a widespread use of all lowercase letters and ambiguous and polysemous word play. Thus, New School signs are brief, and they are also cryptic. Old School signs are clear, and they are also unsystematic and not uniform. In concert with the other features, we argue that although these features unique to each type of sign both show a departure from the standard, they are qualitatively different manifestations of non-standard forms that function very differently to give a certain meaning to place. If New School Shops code exclusive and upscale, perhaps targeting highly educated customers (read “gentrifiers”), then Old School shops use signage that performs inclusivity and a non-hegemonic stance towards communication as a public text. The fact that both types of texts are public is an important one. A narrowcasted message, perhaps funny or ironic, may only play with a certain audience. The literal, albeit non-standard and wordy messages of Old School make no risky moves with their intended meanings.

WELCOMING GENTRIFIERS WHILE RESISTING THE CORPORATE: LESSONS FROM THE OLD SCHOOL

All of the features of Old School signage encourage a generative openness that allows for the incorporation of new ideas, beliefs and practices and thus new messaging. This openness is evident on our Old School examples. For instance, on the side of the awning listing “Deli*Beer*Flower*Juice” is the name of the company: “Ridge Organic Inc.” (Figure 12). “Organic” is

Figure 13



a common term appearing on the signage of delis, groceries and markets throughout our data. The word is a call to newly arriving residents from Manhattan or other more gentrified areas of Brooklyn who are searching for housing in neighborhoods that they believe will cater to their upscale needs and tastes. When we first moved to Brooklyn, a realtor driving us around the neighborhood of Kensington noted on more than one occasion that local storefronts had “organic produce,” or some other “organic” merchandise. He knew this selling point because this information was displayed on the shops’ signs.

However, store owners with Old School signage sometimes do not pay careful attention to the details of how their storefronts appeal to gentrifiers. In Figure 13, a sign advertises that a shop sells “organic candy.” When one of us popped in to the store to ask the clerk for organic candy, he replied “We ran out. Maybe soon we’ll get more.”

“Organic” is just one Old School upscale vocative that seems to target newer residents in many gentrifying neighborhoods. For example, a storefront on 3rd Avenue in Bay Ridge displays the words “Gourmet Grocery” with large white lettering on a deep green background. Aside from this name, however, the shop has all the other features of Old School Vernacular signage. We have observed many handmade ancillary signs, usually simply taped onto the glass of either a store’s door or window, reading “Credit cards accepted here.” Until very recently, most Old School delis and markets operated on cash only basis in many Brooklyn neighborhoods. The acceptance of credit cards is accelerating, and this change is depicted on Old School signage.¹³

Brooklyn’s retail landscape is experiencing gentrification from a force in addition to small, upscale businesses: corporate development. Fast food chains, national retailers (e.g., Gap, Banana Republic, Trader Joe’s, Whole Foods, and Victoria’s Secret), and big box stores like Target and Costco are encroaching on more localized, mom-and-pop commercial areas (Figure 14). As we previously noted, many New School shops opened with minimal signage in the “if-you-please” textual politeness style described by Wines



Figure 14



Figure 15

(2017). In the wake of corporate encroachment, these New School businesses have begun to adopt Old School strategies of communicating “on the street.” The most common of these strategies is the appearance of ancillary signage in front of stores, namely sidewalk sandwich boards. These extra signs advertise additional information about a business—perhaps a sale of the day or a specific item that is only temporarily available. Figures 15 and 16 show this strategy for two New School establishments. Notice that in Figure 15, the restaurant plan b has also added other Old School touches to its storefront: a plastic “grand-opening” or “used car lot” flag banner, and posted announcements on the store’s plate glass window. The “if-you-please” of the original signage now seems a little more desperate, and clearly semiotically more assertive.

The competition with corporate encroachment can be fierce, and so these newer stores begin to employ the proven textual conventions of place. They often do so with gentrifying style. In the window of an independently owned

Figure 16



bookstore shop in Bay Ridge, The Book Mark Shoppe, is a smaller sign that reads: “Friends don’t let friends shop at chain stores.”

Equally interesting is how Old School stores have responded to the invasion of corporate retail. Figure 17 shows two images. The first is the corporate logo for Brooklyn Brewery, a local business that has grown significantly, and now distributes its products nationally and internationally, and invests in other breweries around the globe. Appearing next to it is a graphic from the awning of the storefront advertising “organic candy.” The second image is not exactly the same as the Brooklyn Brewery logo, but the resemblance is unmistakably deliberate. The store advertising “organic candy” clearly mimics Brooklyn Brewery’s logo in terms of font, design and style. Here, the Old School business appropriates, in its own way, a corporate icon. The sign makers whom we interviewed told us that placing corporate logos on signage is illegal.

A brochure published by New York City’s Department of Small Business (2008) about sign rules and recommended practices for retailers reiterates this idea and more. It reads “Not only are corporate logos illegal, but they also mean that customers won’t notice the name of your business-which can severely hamper your ability to be remembered” (New York City Department of Small Business, 2008, p. 7).¹⁴

The image on the right that copies the Brooklyn Brewery logo is legal but



Figure 17

probably not allowed by New York City awning rules. Could the “n” in the pseudo-corporate icon in the right side image of Figure 17 be a non-standard typo? In a way, this rendering is an homage to a known brand, and certainly, from a sociolinguistic perspective, an invitation to “come in and see.”

CONCLUSION

While each storefront and each block are unique places, taken together, the collective textual landscape created by neighborhood retail shops reveals how language itself can participate in the making and remaking of place. The different sign types we have discussed-- Old School, New School, and Corporate—exist in a larger field of urban transformation that includes corporate development and gentrification, or what Hackworth (2002) defines as “the production of space for progressively more affluent users” (p. 815). Understanding this larger setting is critical to considering what it is that Brooklyn signs communicate about place. Considering signs as clearly more than just features of architecture helps us to think about them in a geographic, social and cultural sense as publicly and collectively marking place with aspects of language that have ideologies attached to them, which serve in the larger process of changing place. While signs appear in the landscape in a seemingly innocuous way, they are more than simply cultural artifacts. As social acts, and thus place-making tools, they can be profoundly political devices that regulate social interaction of users and usages of space.

We have shown how Old School shop signs

materialize a particular form of communication, providing messages of openness to others and calling out to passers-by to “come in.” These messages rely on specific textual, semiotic and linguistic features, which we have shown have also been adopted in some cases by storefronts with the more exclusionary New School sign type. This appropriation of form/format, we argue, further demonstrates the effectiveness of Old School “rules,” which allow these signs to remain despite accelerating gentrification and the increasing presence of corporate capitalism. Old School, as a marker of history and as an iconic form of place, is a living style that represents the past, has been transformed by the present, and perhaps, if we pay attention to its value, has the power to make a place for everyone in the future as well.

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ENDNOTES

1 / This aphorism is actually of unknown origin. It is commonly used in advertisements for sign makers from Brooklyn to Australia (see for example <http://www.globalsigns.net.au/office-signs-corporate-signs-signag> advertisers). Santo used it in an interview with us to emphasize his own business philosophy that embraces Old School signage.

2 / Narrowcasting is a growing trend in political campaign direct-mail advertising, cable television programming, and online social media that targets specific demographic groups (Goodman & Rushkoff, 2004). These strategies of communication, however, attempt to maintain the integrity of a private, perhaps even “personalized” message through the medium of the communication itself. In other words, they pick out specific “publics” (Warner, 2002).

3 / Signs could be described, compared and analyzed from a variety of perspectives. For example, one could analyze the materials used (texture, quality, manufacture), their aesthetics or style, or their level of technological formation or function, to name only a few options. Here we focus primarily on the semiotic, textual and sociolinguistic features of Brooklyn signage.

4 / The complete list of neighborhoods in our data set is: Bay Ridge, Bedford Stuyesant (Bed-Stuy), Bensonhurst, Boerum Hill, Brooklyn Heights, Carroll Gardens, Clinton Hill, Crown Heights, Ditmas Park, Flatbush, Fort Greene , Gowanus, Kensington, Midwood, Park Slope, Prospect Heights, Sunset Park, and Windsor Terrace.

5 / We asked a sample of informants (including both long-time residents and gentrifying newcomers) to look at three examples of each of the two salient sign-types that we discovered and to tell us what the signs communicated to them and what they communicated about the stores. The survey included three Old School signs and three New School signs from our photo archive (see Trinch & Snajdr, 2017)

6 / “Hood” is a colloquial term for neighborhood. “Nabe” is a newer term, often used by and associated with gentrifiers. The linguistic differences are interesting, as “hood” has semantically negative connotations (a local tough, a criminal). Both use a fragment from the original compound word “neighbor” plus “hood.” Nabe, by contrast, is a neologism and has no other meaning. See for example Grabar, 2012.

7 / When languages other than English appear on signage, they often do so in Roman transliteration and/or non-Roman scripts.

8 / For example, in 2011, out of the 95 storefront addresses on Flatbush Avenue, a major commercial district in the neighborhood of Prospect Heights that runs seven long-blocks from Atlantic Avenue to Prospect Park, there were 39 New School signs, representing more than a third of the storefronts that we mapped. Notably, there were also eight corporate signs.

9 / There is also a curious diacritical mark above the name. This type of mark is currently trendy in commercial retail texts. Jaworski (2015) makes the claim that corporate signage uses otherwise meaningless diacritics and punctuation marks to create globalese, a register that transcends ethno-national language and script boundaries.

10 / Interview with authors (2017).

11 / Other crackdowns included one in Queens in 1999, and again in 2017. Another occurred in East New York, Brooklyn, also in 2017.

12 / The documentary film *Sign Painters* (Levine & Macon, 2013) presents personal narratives from current practitioners of this dying craft and the struggles and successes of this art form in the wake of 21st century digital graphics. Sign painting was widespread in the mid-20th century and print shops had skilled graphic designers doing all sorts of signage and advertising. The Brooklyn sign makers we interviewed apprenticed in the 1980s with “master” sign painters, who themselves had been in the business for decades. One painter got his start while working for a sign shop in Borough Park that specialized in Hebrew signage, catering to the Hassidic community in that neighborhood, but who also did business all over the borough. The business of sign making has integrated some technology, but we also learned that the manufacture of older forms, such as neon and metal-crafting still occur. They are, of course, quite expensive.

13 / Interestingly, many New Brooklyn shops do not display the small Visa or Mastercard signs on their storefront windows. Instead, these are placed discreetly on cash registers further inside the store.

14 / This brochure appeared as a resource for businesses on a couple of Business Improvement District (BIDs) websites at the height of the housing boom in the late 2000s.

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