

**Graffiti and Gentrification:**  
**How murals and vandals tell the story of changing neighborhoods**

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Gentrification, as it exists in the public consciousness, consists mainly of invisible and intangible changes a neighborhood undergoes. Rent prices rise, “boutique” businesses move in, ethnographic and class divisions become more prominent. But the visible changes, the alterations of the physical landscape in which both gentrified and gentrifier are embedded, present a more interesting and complex view of the issue.

As Jason Patch writes, “Imagined reality and physical reality collide in gentrification.” (Patch, 2004) But this statement begs the question: Imagined by whom? Native residents, who have seen the before, during, and after of neighborhood change? Newcomers who move into “upcoming” neighborhoods, seeking to satisfy their own imaginations of what it means to reside there? Developers and business attempting to tap into (or generate) the Newcomers imaginaries (and wallets)? Of course, the answer is “all of the above.”

### **Why Graffiti?**

I chose graffiti as the subject of this paper for a number of reasons. First, there exists a diverse selection of data sources on graffiti, both qualitative and quantitative. Second, as we will explore later, graffiti means different things to the different actors involved in gentrification. Third, the different types of graffiti are aesthetically related in a way that illustrates how graffiti as an issue is embedded in the greater power struggles associated with gentrification. Fourth, while graffiti is not a subject void of the contentiousness of gentrification by any means, there are a number of interesting co-occurring phenomena among those whom it affects. These co-occurrences situate the entire question of gentrification within a broader context of capitalism and consumption, in a way that suggests that even though one side is propelled and protected by institutional and economic forces, the gentrified and gentrifier are perhaps not so different after all.

### **Methods**

This paper will focus on Williamsburg, Brooklyn. First, we will explore a dataset about

graffiti complaints provided by the City of New York that will help situate Williamsburg into the broader, citywide graffitiscap. The dataset includes the prevalence of graffiti across NYC neighborhoods. But, importantly, it also includes information about whether property owners opted to keep the reported graffiti, or to have it removed by the city. The data will justify that Williamsburg's relationship to graffiti is unique, and as an extreme outlier by a number of metrics, a place where the phenomena we seek to explore will be most pronounced.

Then we will review interviews with a number of Williamsburg residents. This qualitative discussion will help us arrive at a vocabulary with which to further analyze our findings. It will also serve as crucial data when we discuss the different actors of gentrification, and their relationship with graffiti.

Finally, we will launch a discussion of the points described above. Namely, the power struggles inherent to questions of public art and vandalism, and also the tactical and aesthetic similarities between “organic” graffiti and commissioned murals. Using data we have already discussed, as well as other scholarly writings on the subject, we will extrapolate on the greater meaning of our findings.

### **Graffiti: By the numbers**

New Yorkers can call 311 to report graffiti to the city. The city then sends a crew to the site, asks permission from the property owner to remove the graffiti. The owner then either grants or denies it. These interactions are all recorded in a public dataset. Along with the complaint, addresses are listed, and the locations are categorized into police precinct, Community District, and other such subdivisions.

We break the data down by Community District (CD). This is because the most comprehensive data on gentrification comes in the form of an NYU Furman Center report, which reports on rent changes since 1990 by CD. (NYU Furman Center, 2016) The graffiti data, grouped by CD, can be found in full in the Appendix (1.1).

Here are the key findings in the data:

Of the 16 CDs identified as gentrifying, 14 have above average graffiti density. Half of them have graffiti densities above the 75th percentile. The 5 CDs with the highest graffiti density are all "gentrifying". This tells us that gentrifying neighborhoods are likely to have above average numbers of graffiti complaints. Unfortunately, there's no way to glean from the data how much graffiti drew *no* complaint. One of the limiting assumptions we must make of this data is that graffiti gets reported at equal rates across neighborhoods. We can learn more about a neighborhood's relationship to its graffiti by comparing how many times owners refused to let the city remove the graffiti relative to the total amount of graffiti (Wanted/Unwanted, or kept/cleaned ratio). We must note here that the unparsed dataset tells us whether the "graffiti is intentional." These entries have been omitted from the parsed dataset. We are left with a dataset that describes only the neighborhood's relationship with "organic," unintentional graffiti.

The communities that have the highest kept/cleaned ratio are in non-gentrifying neighborhoods with relatively low graffiti densities. While not specifically material to our discussion, this finding suggests that the symbolic value of graffiti might be greater in neighborhoods where graffiti is less commonplace. This makes a degree of sense, and allows us to apply a sort of "supply/demand" framework to the graffiti "economy".

Communities with the highest graffiti densities tended to have low kept/cleaned graffiti ratios. If our supply/demand hypothesis is correct, then this is to be expected. But there are some notable exceptions, including Williamsburg. The data on the average rent increase in gentrifying neighborhoods shows that Williamsburg's rents increased the most by far. 78% higher rents relative to 1990 rents, compared to a 53% increase in Central Harlem, the next highest change. The average for gentrifying neighborhoods was a 36% jump. That Williamsburg is both the most gentrified (by this metric) *and* an anomaly with respect to cleaned vs kept graffiti makes it a conspicuous candidate for study.

This fact becomes more pronounced when you compare Williamsburg to Bushwick and Bed-Stuy's "Wanted/Unwanted Ratio." Bushwick and Bed-Stuy averaged a rent increase of 40.1%,

a little more than half of Williamsburg. But when it comes to their kept/cleaned graffiti rate, they hover around the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile for the dataset. Williamsburg's is close to the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile. Mapping out the graffiti complaints reveals a stark contrast along the neighborhood boundaries (Appendix 1.2).

Next to Williamsburg, the two CDs with the highest rent increases were LES/Chinatown, and Central Harlem, at 50.3% and 53.2% increases respectively. Both neighborhoods occupy the top five CDs in terms of graffiti density (along with Bushwick, Bed-Stuy, and Williamsburg), so their similarities on that front place them in close proximity on our imagined supply/demand curve. If these neighborhoods showed the same unwillingness to remove graffiti as Williamsburg, we might claim to have found a correlation between degrees of gentrification and the kept/cleaned graffiti ratio. But they show no such thing. Their kept/cleaned ratios lie between the 32<sup>nd</sup> and 35<sup>th</sup> percentile.

The fact that Williamsburg is, on many fronts, an outlier (most gentrified, highest graffiti density, uniquely against cleaning unwanted graffiti among the high graffiti density areas) is enough to justify our using it as a case study. This is not a full, statistical interrogation, and so we will leave our analysis here, although this rich dataset certainly warrants further study.

### **Graffiti According to the Locals**

If you ask residents of Williamsburg what they think about graffiti, you'll find vastly differing opinions. For one thing, they espouse different opinions about tags than they do about murals. It also depends on *who* you ask. Many Brooklynites, especially newcomers (a gentler term for gentrifiers), say that murals help make the neighborhood beautiful, and that "tags" are pointless at best, or, at worst, ugly, selfish acts of ego-boosting. But for the most part, they conceded that even graffiti they considered "ugly" helped add to the character of Brooklyn.

In the bibliography, you'll find a link to the audio files containing the interviews. The first track is three men in their early 20s, who have lived in Williamsburg their whole lives. Two of them were (formerly or currently) graffiti artists themselves, and they talked a lot about what the point of

"ugly" graffiti is. I talked with them for almost 10 minutes, and you can find both an edited down version, as well as the full version of that interview. Then, there's the Belgian ex-pat who's lived in Williamsburg for three months, and his visiting European friend. Finally, there's a young woman who grew up in Williamsburg, and after becoming an artist, found that her opinion of "ugly" graffiti had changed.

Let's break down what they had to say. There's an overwhelming sense that the idea of Brooklyn is inseparable from the visual language of graffiti. The Belgian ex-pat's friend says that "Williamsburg is like a big gallery." (0:44), but whether he's talking about murals only or graffiti generally is unclear. But the ex-pat tells us that graffiti is "part of the city" (0:13), and that even though he thinks tags are ugly, "it's New York, it doesn't matter, it's already ugly. [his friend then mumbles: 'It's *part* of New York.']" (0:01)

The young woman tells us that tags are a visual reminder of "old Brooklyn," and that murals are a sign of "the new, gentrified Williamsburg." (1:12) When I asked her why she thought that Williamsburg property owners often opted not to have graffiti removed by the city (see below for a discussion of this data), she said "If you're from Brooklyn, you're proud of it, so why not keep a bit of the heritage of it there?" (1:50)

When I asked the three young men the same question, one of them said "Just take a look at the people. They like antique shit, they like old shit." By "*they*", he meant gentrifiers. This local has the sense that "old, dirty Brooklyn" is part of what attracts more affluent newcomers. They had a lot more to say, mainly about the art and purpose of tagging, and we will discuss this at length below.

## **What Graffiti Means, and To Whom?**

### **To the artist**

When I first approached the three young men in Williamsburg and asked them to talk about graffiti, one of them replied, "See you wanna talk about graffiti..." He dug around in his pocket. "This [inaudible] right here -" He produced a small blue bottle with a wide, circular tip. He told me his tag was RePe, "Like 'Repeat', but without the 'A-T'". He said he mostly tagged the inside of

bars, presumably in the restrooms. RePe said, "I used to do it back in the day, not so much now. I just got older." When I asked him what he got out of it, back in his prime, he said "It's fun to see somebody else's tag, and then yours right next to it." His friend chimed in, "It's like territory," but RePe said that's not what he was trying to say. He told me, "They call it 'ups'", and described it like a sign-in book at a public landmark (remember "ups," it'll come up again later). The idea is, you tag near someone that's more well known than you. "Somebody comes to see their shit, they see your shit."

This is what many people think of when they think about tags. The earning of reputation and neighborhood fame by plastering your signature in as many visible places as possible. It's what detractors allude to when they claim that tagging is nothing but an ego-boost. And to be sure, this is true to some extent. But RePe also told me that when he first started, "Before, I used to do it just for mischief, to destroy. Do it, leave, never come back. But then you do come back, and it's like, 'Wow, that's still there'. I used to do it just to put it out there, for myself to know that my name is there, my tag is there. He said so-and-so put their shit next to mine, so you know, you get that satisfaction."

Let's unpack that a little. It might seem that RePe is supporting the notion of egoistic reputation building. But it's important not to overlook the pleasure of the tagging act itself. He used to do it "just for mischief," and for a while, that was enough for him. Halsey and Young write, "Fame (attaining the status or identity of a king) is, in many instances, important, but... pleasure (the intensity of feeling which, for instance, accompanies the motioning of the aerosol can), is equally significant." (Halsey & Young, 2006) They caution us that graffiti, "should not be equated to the cultivation or search for identity", but rather that the act of tagging "induces a series of singular moments where identity is put asunder." By this, they mean that the act of tagging engages the body of the tagger "in ways which resist subjective and objective attempts to classify, name, or order events." A tagger transfers their *affect*, their emotion, their reason for tagging, directly into the shared space, where the visual marks index the tagger's actions (including being there, planning the tag, purchasing the materials, and breaking the law). Then, the affect is transferred to those who

consume the tag as an embedded part of the larger landscape (more on this phase below).

Let us return to the idea of territoriality and “fame”. Classical definitions of territory are exclusive; a space is *mine* because it is not *yours*. This is complicated by the notion of “ups,” which elevates the sharing space to a welcome and useful endeavour. RePe celebrates the fact that others tag in his territory, and uses others' territories to get ups. It's where he gets his satisfaction.

While this suggests a lack of territoriality between taggers, it certainly exists between the graffiti community and those who prefer clean walls, or “lifeless spaces.” (Halsey & Young, 2006) My subjects told me about a wall around the corner from them that got freshly painted every summer, “clean slate”. RePe said “But I feel like that's the best part. The Graffiti NYC people come and they clean everything up, but it's like open canvas every time. There's always like a new tag every time you go, every other month.” Scholars have documented similar sentiments among taggers regarding blank walls. One of Halsey and Young's interviewees said, “If there's a big wall there, and it's just like, white, it looks boring. But if it's got a few tags it'll look better.” (Halsey & Young, 2006) The equation of “clean” and “blank” with “boring” gives us insight into the design aesthetic that taggers aspire to. “It is a mode of envisioning which begins on the basis that the surfaces that make up the city are always already marked by signs of deterioration and decay.” (Halsey & Young, 2006) The city is always in a constant state of natural change, and graffiti is a means to participate in that natural change, to direct it in a way that resonates with the tagger, namely, toward something exciting and interesting to look at.

### **To the native local**

Both sets of native Williamsburgians I spoke to alluded to unsanctioned graffiti as a marker of the history of Brooklyn. But the recent history, and certainly that which my subjects can recall, must be contextualized against a city at war with graffiti. The grounds of the war were economic. “Graffiti, as a cultural practice that produces a commons and creates a shared, public, democratic visual space, is particularly troublesome for the project of neoliberalization, which is about radical privatization of the public sphere in the service of capital accumulation.” (Dickinson, 2008) In

1995, Mayor Giuliani took up the fight in the form of “broken windows” policing, “putting a huge emphasis on removing poor people from [symbolically important] areas so that they would seem 'safe' to middle- and upper-class patrons.”

Prior to its gentrification, Williamsburg would not have appeared to City officials as a potential site for the influx of capital. And although the violent ravages of broken windows policing would certainly have afflicted the neighborhood, perhaps when Brooklyn natives talk of the “past” to which unsanctioned graffiti alludes, it is nostalgia for a time when the neighborhood was wholly theirs, and not the subject of urban renewal designed to appeal to “others.”

### **To the newcomers**

The gentlemen I spoke to alluded to the fact that gentrifiers come to Brooklyn seeking “antique shit”, or “old shit”, which suggests that the nostalgic function of illegal graffiti serves newcomers as well as natives. This is problematic. If tags contribute to the “Brooklynness” of Brooklyn, and gentrifiers move in, seeking that Brooklyn aesthetic, then it might be said that they are attempting to shroud themselves in a history they had no part in.

The proliferation of murals further complicates the issue. My subjects identified that as their neighborhood changes, they notice more Graffiti NYC (graffiti cleaners), and more murals. In a gentrifying neighborhood, a new development sticks out like a sore thumb. But, by slapping a mural on the facade, developers can increase a property's appeal, giving hopeful residents the sense that they're not taking part in changing the local landscape, but rather joining a community whose character has been developing on its own.

But, this sense is largely a facade. The graffiti that originally gave Brooklyn its character is rooted in self-expression, rebellion, and a democratization of the public space. Murals are rooted in corporatism, predatory development, and privatization.

### **Aesthetic Appropriation**

Looking at the public art that make up Williamsburg's visual landscape (Appendix 2), you'll find artistic threads that run through everything from tags, to larger “bubble letter” pieces, to

murals. Murals use intentional collage which, to some extent draws upon the accidental collage of surfaces that, through the “ups” paradigm, get covered by many tags with many shapes and colors. Note how the murals use similar techniques to create depth, like the stylized bubble letters do. Across all types of Brooklyn public art, notice the artistic fonts, and the overlapping and geometric characters.

These are the classical elements of graffiti, and it's no accident that the commissioned murals attempt to fit themselves into this visual vocabulary. To completely redefine the aesthetics of Brooklyn murals would be to to erase the history that so many newcomers are seeking.

What we have, then, are actors with capitalistic motivations stealing techniques and aesthetics native to the area that they are exploiting. A brand new development with luxury apartments and boutique storefronts will drive up rents, and cause tangible economic harm to natives. To slap a Brooklynesque mural on the facade is almost like the real estate version of blackface.

### **Delinquents and Developers: The common ground**

Contentious as gentrification undoubtedly is, there are elements of graffiti culture that have resonance with elements of gentrification. For a superficial example, take “empty floaters”. My subjects told me that “empty floaters” are the outlines of a bubble-text “throw up” that never got filled in. When you see an empty floater, it's a sign that “somebody probably got ran down on” by the police before they could finish tagging. It struck me that “empty floater” could also be used as a name for vacant buildings that developers keep unoccupied while a neighborhoods rent's rise, waiting for a property to become profitable. Both are, in a way, moments frozen in time, artifacts of disruption.

Another co-occurrence like this is the notion we have already discussed of “ups”. Just like a tagger gets symbolic value from tagging in proximity to other taggers, developers get symbolic value, or “ups” by plastering murals on their facades. Both are about visual proximity, and piggybacking symbolic value from another with more “street cred”. This is perhaps a disingenuous

comparison, since graffiti “ups” are derived from a democratic, organic use of the space, and developer “ups” are highly designed, commissioned, and artificial.

Perhaps the most potent metaphor is the “dis”. My subjects told me that a “dis” is when someone tags over someone else's graffiti. It's an extreme sign of disrespect. RePe made a point of telling me that when he got “ups”, he made sure never to dis anyone. One of Halsey and Young's subjects told them, “People get full on smashed for that,” and that sometimes people get stabbed over a dis. (Halsey & Young, 2006)

Many of the problems with gentrification can be compared to a dis. In his visual sociology paper on gentrification in Williamsburg, Jason Patch documents how businesses that cater to gentrifiers cohabit, and indeed “threaten to override” the spaces into which they move. He describes how Big Genius Art Supplies manages their storefront. (Patch, 2004) The former occupant, an Italian bakery, had a sign that integrated the apartments above it. Big Genius “covers up the marquee of the former proprietor” and “only covers its own discrete space.” Patch describes a similar obstruction in the development of the Williamsburg Mall. “We have seen new businesses exist in stark indifference to ethnic and industrial landscapes, place themselves on top of ethnic places, and now place themselves in industrial places.”

Without hammering the point home too hard, the trappings of gentrification, the changing of one's neighborhood without consent, the insult of neighbors who move in, drive up prices, and then claim the social value of a space you grew up in, are ultimately macro-disses inflicted upon whole communities. I do not say this to trivialize the harmful impacts of gentrification. But I think this useful metaphor is perhaps more descriptive than the piecemeal descriptors like rent increases and neighborhood composition. As one of my subjects told me, “ If you're from Brooklyn, you're proud of it.” Just like taggers are proud of their work, both their artistic choices, and their “fame”, people feel ownership over their communities. And just like dissing a rival tag, newcomers that opt to replace the existing culture with their own, instead of co-habitate, commit an act of disrespect for the local pride that can only strain neighborly relations.

Gentrifiers would do well to take after RePe, and ensure that when they leave their mark, they're not erasing someone else's. That way, everyone gets "ups." Gentrification doesn't have to be a zero-sum game. Although as long as the game is run by developers, whose sole motive is profit, it's likely to stay that way.

## Works Cited

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## Appendix 1

### NYC OpenData - "DSNY Graffiti Information"

#### 1.1

The City's data contain a list of all graffiti complaints. Below, the complaints are broken down into NYC Community Districts (CD). The number of complaints per acre in the CD is the "Graffiti Density". "Wanted" and "Unwanted" graffiti density split that number between cases where the property owner refused or allowed (respectively) the NYC graffiti crew to clean the reported graffiti. The "Wanted/Unwanted Ratio" is the number of times reported graffiti was "kept" divided by the number of times graffiti was "cleaned".

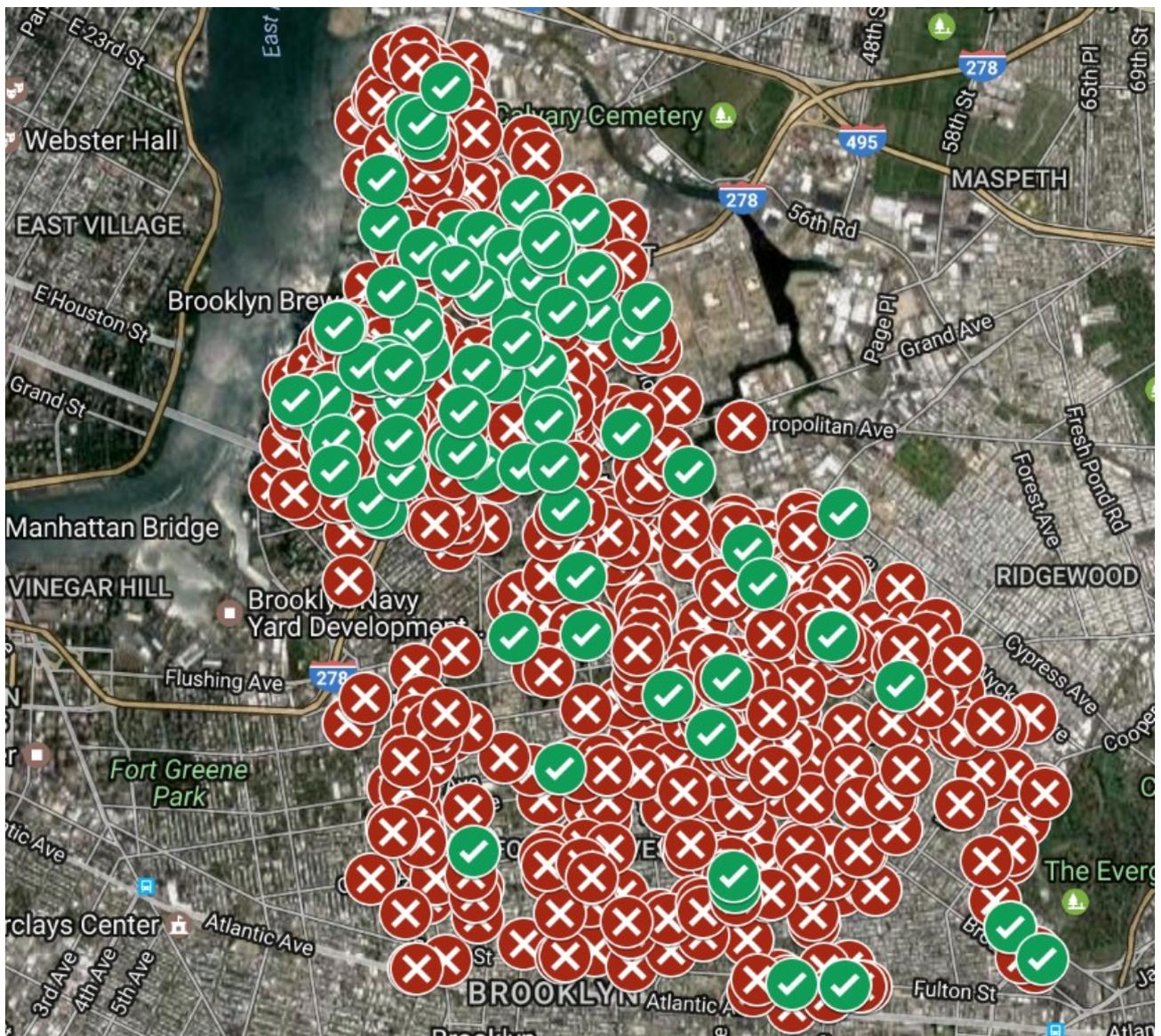
Items marked in red represent the 5 highest values for each column. are the 15th to the 6th highest values. Blue items in the first column are CDs identified as "gentrifying areas" by the *NYU Furman Center's 15th annual State of New York City's Housing and Neighborhoods in 2015*. In the "Wanted/Unwanted Ratio" column, Red represents areas that cleaned a higher share of their graffiti than the median, and green represents those that kept a higher share. The paler the color, the closer it is to the median.

Neighborhoods	Graffiti Density	Wntd Graff. Dens.	Unwnt. Graff. Dens.	Wanted/Unwanted Ratio
<b>Williamsburg, Greenpoint</b>	23.193	2.300	20.631	0.111
<b>Lower East Side, Chinatown</b>	21.356	1.300	19.870	0.065
<b>Bushwick</b>	13.374	0.769	12.606	0.061
<b>Bedford Stuyvesant</b>	10.526	0.439	10.088	0.043
<b>Central Harlem</b>	9.253	0.557	8.696	0.064
Greenwich Village, Soho	8.776	1.386	7.275	0.190
East Tremont, Belmont	8.638	0.711	7.927	0.090
<b>Sunset Park, Windsor Terrace</b>	8.370	0.845	7.525	0.112
Chelsea, Clinton	7.244	0.530	6.625	0.080
<b>Brownsville, Ocean Hill</b>	6.476	0.589	5.887	0.100
Flatbush, Midwood	6.310	0.371	5.938	0.063
Bensonhurst, Bath Beach	5.831	0.378	5.411	0.070
Upper East Side	5.762	0.395	5.288	0.075
<b>Crown Heights North</b>	5.725	0.191	5.534	0.034
Midtown Business District	5.672	0.597	5.075	0.118
Borough Park, Ocean Parkway	5.454	0.742	4.625	0.160
<b>Melrose, Mott Haven, Port Morris</b>	5.126	0.217	4.910	0.044
<b>Crown Heights South, Wingate</b>	4.904	0.192	4.712	0.041
University Hts., Fordham, Mt. Hope	4.412	0.339	4.072	0.083
Brooklyn Heights, Fort Greene	4.334	0.433	3.846	0.113
Elmhurst, South Corona	4.241	0.133	4.109	0.032

Neighborhoods	Graffiti Density	Wntd Graff. Dens.	Unwnt. Graff. Dens.	Wanted/Unwanted Ratio
Park Slope, Carroll Gardens	4.101	0.152	3.949	0.038
Bay Ridge, Dyker Heights	3.443	0.309	3.133	0.099
Sheepshead Bay, Gerritsen Beach	3.308	0.298	2.977	0.100
<b>Astoria, Long Island City</b>	3.249	0.305	2.919	0.104
<b>Morrisania, Crotona Park East</b>	3.207	0.389	2.818	0.138
<b>Manhattanville, Hamilton Heights</b>	3.122	0.416	2.706	0.154
<b>Washington Heights, Inwood</b>	2.903	0.391	2.513	0.156
East Flatbush, Rugby, Farragut	2.880	0.046	2.833	0.016
Soundview, Parkchester	2.853	0.193	2.660	0.072
Woodhaven, Richmond Hill	2.843	0.081	2.762	0.029
Bedford Park, Norwood, Fordham	2.687	0.326	2.362	0.138
Jackson Heights, North Corona	2.677	0.157	2.520	0.063
West Side, Upper West Side	2.453	0.082	2.289	0.036
Stuyvesant Town, Turtle Bay	2.252	0.113	2.140	0.053
<b>Hunts Point, Longwood</b>	2.194	0.212	1.982	0.107
Sunnyside, Woodside	2.177	0.156	2.022	0.077
East New York, Starrett City	2.091	0.084	2.008	0.042
<b>East Harlem</b>	2.039	0.197	1.842	0.107
Highbridge, Concourse Village	1.881	0.078	1.803	0.043
Pelham Pkwy, Morris Park, Laconia	1.780	0.260	1.476	0.176
Wakefield, Williamsbridge	1.775	0.056	1.690	0.033
Canarsie, Flatlands	1.427	0.087	1.322	0.066
Throgs Nk., Co-op City, Pelham Bay	1.322	0.125	1.197	0.104
Ozone Park, Howard Beach	1.299	0.076	1.197	0.064
Battery Park City, Tribeca	1.255	0.523	0.732	0.714
Flushing, Bay Terrace	1.078	0.186	0.892	0.209
Riverdale, Kingsbridge, Marble Hill	1.027	0.140	0.887	0.158
Jamaica, St. Albans, Hollis	0.929	0.033	0.896	0.036
Coney Island, Brighton Beach	0.849	0.000	0.849	0.000
Ridgewood, Glendale, Maspeth	0.849	0.124	0.724	0.171
Forest Hills, Rego Park	0.791	0.158	0.580	0.273
Bayside, Douglaston, Little Neck	0.499	0.050	0.449	0.111

Neighborhoods	Graffiti Density	Wntd Graff. Dens.	Unwnt. Graff. Dens.	Wanted/Unwanted Ratio
Fresh Meadows, Briarwood	0.336	0.021	0.315	0.067
Queens Village, Rosedale	0.299	0.025	0.274	0.091
Stapleton, Port Richmond	0.202	0.022	0.180	0.125
The Rockaways, Broad Channel	0.178	0.022	0.155	0.143
New Springville, South Beach	0.128	0.015	0.113	0.133
Tottenville, Woodrow, Great Kills	0.079	0.007	0.072	0.100

1.2



Appendix 2

Williamsburg Photographs

2.1



2.2



2.3



2.4



