ETHNIC AFFINITY AS A STRATEGY OF BOUNDARY MAKING AND IMMIGRANT INCORPORATION: A CASE STUDY IN THE BRONX.

by

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Abstract

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AND IMMIGRANT INCORPORATION: A CASE STUDY IN THE BRONX.

by

Ervin Kosta

Adviser: Professor Cynthia Epstein

This dissertation explores the historical development of the 'ethnic affinity' between Albanians and Italians within the Italian food trade in New York City. Relying on fieldwork on Arthur Avenue in the Bronx, it examines the current ethno-racial makeup of the former Italian neighborhood, focusing on two related aspects of change: the influx of incoming Albanian immigrants and the transition from a resident neighborhood to a commodified urban space. Engaging recent efforts towards a unified theory of ethnic boundary formation and transformation, this study looks at the group formation strategies of incoming Albanian immigrants, traces the shifting ethnic boundary between them and Italian ethnics from the late 1960s onwards, and argues that Albanian occupational and cultural incorporation constitutes a new strategy of boundary making and immigrant incorporation. Further, this study examines the role of this boundary work on the transformation of Arthur Avenue from an old immigrant neighborhood to an 'authentic' shopping enclave of Italian food. Outlining the changes in the

neighborhood institutional setup that culminated in the formation of a business improvement district, as well as the transformation of street *feste*, it outlines the shifting strategy from a residential to a commercial definition of the neighborhood ethnicity, ensuring the remaking of Belmont as a Little Italy despite the residential succession of Italian ethnics by African Americans and Latino immigrant groups in the blocks surrounding the commercial strip.

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Lastly and perhaps mostly, I express my gratitude to Elizabeth R. Johnson, my love and dear wife. From helping me realize the fieldwork was over, to rushing Bronx maps for the final draft, her presence, love, and strength might well account for making it to the finish line.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Belmont Small Business Association (BSBA)

Bronx Community Board Number 6 (CB-Six)

Business Improvement Area (BIA)

Business Improvement District (BID)

Council of Belmont Organizations (C.O.B.O.)

Cross-Bronx Expressway (CBE)

Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC)

Local Development Corporation (LDC)

Master of Ceremony (MC)

Suburban Rapid Transit Company (SRT)

Third Avenue Elevated Train (Third Avenue El)

CHAPTER 1

Of Ethnic Boundaries and Places

"*Junior's right, we go on the lam now, it's open season.*
Albanians will be living in our houses. [Expletive]."

Tony Soprano, strategizing about the impending FBI indictments, *The Sopranos*.[1]

If you dine at an Italian restaurant in Manhattan or wander into a pizza parlor for a quick slice, there is a good chance you will be served by an Albanian. This study traces the beginning of that relationship to a neighborhood in the Bronx, and tells two interconnected stories. The first is about the developing 'ethnic affinity' between Albanian immigrants in the US and Italian ethnics. The second is about a Little Italy in the mid-Bronx, whose unlikely history began in the late 1960s. As later generation descendants of late nineteenth century European immigrants experienced upward mobility amidst post-WWII affluence, the central city neighborhoods that served as archetypal sites of community for half a century lost their significance as primary anchors of ethnic life. The literature has documented the assimilation trajectory of Italian immigrants and their descendants, resulting in the slow dismantling of the inner city immigrant enclaves and community structures typical of an earlier era. Therefore the considerable commitment and patronage required by the formation and flourishing of Belmont's Little Italy in the mid-Bronx presents a case that requires explanation. This dissertation tells the story of how Belmont's Arthur Avenue became a Little Italy, and the role that the boundary work between Albanians and Italians had on the subsequent neighborhood trajectory, on fostering an Albanian group identity, and creating new forms of expression of the Italian ethnicity in the neighborhood.

[1] "The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti," *The Sopranos*, Season 1, Episode 8. HBO. Directed by Tim Van Patten, 28 Feb. 1999.

Arthur Avenue as Little Italy in the Bronx

It would be convenient to assume a straightforward continuity between Arthur Avenue's successful Italian restaurants of recent decades and its past as the shopping street of an Italian ethnic enclave. Two discontinuities come readily to mind, however. First, as the commercial artery of an established immigrant neighborhood in its heyday, Arthur Avenue nonetheless remained a relatively local affair. It does not appear to have had any Bronx-wide significance as a commercial entity, nor did it attract significant consumption outside the neighborhood. The focal point of the 'Fordham colony' identified one neighborhood within 'a mosaic of neighborhoods,' and little else beyond that. Second, the business mix of the immigrant enclave was defined by the pushcarts and the specialty stores, with the occasional social club and benevolent society – typical establishments of a bygone era. The defining feature of today's "Little Italy" is its reliance on the centrality of cafés and restaurants, as well as the recreation of specialty food stores as destinations of 'authentic' ethnic shopping.

The first discontinuity appears when tracing the appearance of Arthur Avenue and Belmont in a series of books about the Bronx history by Lloyd Ultan, the borough historian, sponsored by and written in collaboration with the Bronx County Historical Society. *The Beautiful Bronx (1920-1950)* appeared in 1979 and portrayed the borough as a mosaic of ethnic neighborhoods. After celebrating the variety of backgrounds and customs of the immigrants that made the Bronx their new home, he notes in the prologue: "Yet, in the midst of this growing cosmopolitanism, each family lived in a little village called a neighborhood, and each neighborhood usually was dominated by one ethnic group which helped determine the flavor of life for each of the thousands of us growing up in the beautiful Bronx (1979, p. 11). Belmont is

discussed in one paragraph, alongside other neighborhoods, and Arthur Avenue is described through its specialty stores and social life of the market:

> The flavor of the neighborhood was set by the market strung along Arthur Avenue. Here, produce was not only in the store, but it could be purchased right off the sidewalks. The fresh fruit and vegetables, the salami and sausages, and the pastries gave the street a pungent aroma… All along the street, shoppers would be haggling with the proprietors of the stands, sometimes speaking in the accents of their native Sicily or Calabria (pp. 14-15).

Published in 1992, *The Bronx: It Was Only Yesterday, 1935-1965*, offers a similar account of a borough of ethnic neighborhoods: "Even during the war, with all its shortages of food and other goods, the neighborhood groceries, restaurants, cafeterias, and specialty shops still catered to the immediate family needs. Each neighborhood in the Bronx had its own character" (1992, p. 4). Arthur Avenue is *never* mentioned in the entire book, and in a 16-page long chapter titled 'Gone Shopping,' which consists of 22 captioned photographs of Bronx shopping scenes, one shows the nearby quiet intersection of Prospect Avenue and 187th Street, noting a *pasticceria* (pastry shop) and a drug store – testament to the neighborhood's Italianness (pp. 46-61). Throughout two other sections, titled "An Ethnic Feast" and "Neighborhood Life," there is a single photo of another intersection in Belmont, with a caption noting the visible neighborhood businesses, apartment buildings, and Fordham University campus some distance away. The index of *The Northern Borough: A History of the Bronx*, Ultan's latest book that appeared in 2009, list a single reference to Arthur Avenue and six references of the 'Belmont neighborhood.'

In other words, while the Belmont neighborhood has always been mentioned as a colorful example of Bronx neighborhood life, it was not until the 1990s that Belmont's Arthur Avenue began to be singled out for its restaurants and good food, alongside its traditional specialty stores, often retrospectively extending that assessment to earlier decades. The trend persists even with authors who were arguably more knowledgeable, or at least invested, in Arthur Avenue due

to their local upbringings. Consider, for example, the difference between Foglia's (1977) piece on the beginnings of Belmont with Christiano's (2002) memoirs about growing up in Belmont in the 1950s and 1960s, published 25 years apart. Foglia's piece doesn't mention the stores, market, or any restaurant in Belmont, even though his account covers a time period at least up until the 1940s. By comparison, Christiano's short piece notes on the first page that "Belmont came to be known as the Little Italy of The Bronx, with Arthur Avenue as the focal point of many quality shops and stores" (p. 87). Likewise, while the Bronx history books by Lloyd Ultan rarely acknowledge the commercial scene of Arthur Avenue, a 1999 publication by Stephen Samtur and Martin Jackson (1999) on The Bronx history devotes attention to Arthur Avenue and its restaurants in some detail in several portions of the book. Titled *The Bronx: Lost, Found, and Remembered (1935-1975)*, their book has separate sections about 'Eating in & Out' and 'Shopping in the Bronx,' and singles out Arthur Avenue for "avidly holding on to its special flavor," unlike the rest of "the other ethnic enclaves [that] have long vanished or been transformed since the '50s" (p. 38). A discussion of the Arthur Avenue market and several "famous restaurants" of the area follows.

Many urban ethnic places associated with turn of the twentieth century immigrant groups do survive, of course. Some thrive as downtown Little Italies and Greektowns in numerous metropolitan areas in the US and Canada. They typically owe their presence to the commercialization of the shopping street that was once the thoroughfare of the immigrant neighborhood, turning into 'urban ethnic parks' for wider cultural consumption (Krase, 1995; Badillo, 2007). Further, commercial ethnic places, like the Little Italy on Manhattan's Mulberry Street can serve as sites for heritage tourism. As Marilyn Halter has shown, consumption of

ethnic goods or attendance in ethnic festivals can provide "a temporary sense of community [that] replac[e] traditional neighborhood and community affiliations as the connective tissue of postmodern life" (2000: 13). But such ethnic shopping districts represent investment strategies that mobilize ethnicity to satisfy urban growth imperatives. The particularity of the Belmont case stems from its location in the mid-Bronx. Given the severity of decline of the South Bronx during the 1970s, and Belmont's proximity to the area, the creation of its Little Italy occurred *despite* lack of investment capital in an area that was 'redlined' and largely denied improvement loans and mortgages by public and private financial institutions. How?

Ethnic Boundaries

In this study I present the story of Arthur Avenue, Belmont's main commercial strip known as 'The Real Little Italy in the Bronx,' as first and foremost a story about ethnic boundaries. Belmont offers a unique opportunity to approach the study of ethnicity through the lens of boundary formation and maintenance. The story begins in the late 1960s, a decade that witnessed urban disinvestment, deterioration, and dissolution of an unprecedented degree in deindustrializing metropolitan centers. The South Bronx 'was burning,' as one commentator[2] famously put it, and the neighborhood experienced strong pressures to 'pack up and leave,' as a respondent I interviewed for this study characterized the general feeling of the times. Like other urban centers in large metropolitan areas in the United States, Belmont was experiencing increasing ethnic and racial turnover, creating conflict between old-time Italian residents and

[2] Howard Cosell, the commentator of Game 2 of the 1977 Baseball World Series, held at the Yankee Stadium between the New York Yankees and the Los Angeles Dodgers, referred to a blaze at an abandoned elementary public school a few blocks west of the stadium, reportedly saying "There it is ladies and gentlemen, the Bronx is burning." The phrase came to symbolize the deterioration of South Bronx during the 1970s

newcomers, which at that point included large numbers of Puerto Ricans and a smaller group of African Americans. A relatively small number of newly arriving Albanian immigrants from the Yugoslav republics of Montenegro, Macedonia, and to a lesser extent, Kosovo, constituted an additional incoming constituency. In a traditional scenario, arriving immigrant and minority groups would have 'succeeded' Italians by taking over their businesses, while Italian storeowners would have followed their clientele into suburban Westchester, New Jersey, or Long Island. What happened instead is the subject of this study. Italians opened their ethnic boundary selectively, allowing the incoming Albanian immigrants to join their commercial ranks. The arrangement allowed Albanians to enter an occupational niche appropriate to their skills, while negotiating the ethnic and racial relations of what had become the inner city to their advantage. It allowed Italians to recruit an ethnically appropriate workforce to staff their businesses, while utilizing the purchasing power of this new ethnic clientele. It also helped them to maintain control of the commercial strip from being succeeded by arriving immigrant groups from Latin America or other minorities.

The project of exploring the historical boundary work within this Bronx neighborhood undergoing social change is important on several accounts. For one, it provides evidence to what Nagel has summarized as social constructionist models of ethnicity, which in contrast with primordialist views, stress "the fluid, situational, volitional, and dynamic character of ethnic identification, organization, and action" (1994: 152). Ethnic group formation processes remain dynamic for the post-1965 immigration wave, as its structural characteristics make its ethnic composition more likely to be fragmented (Massey, 1995; 2012). Arthur Avenue represents a site where several groups interact: an ethnic group with now secure credentials of racial whiteness; a new immigrant group with claims to racial whiteness that underlie its boundary work; and other

immigrant and minority groups that are often seen as falling on the other side of racial boundary, whether they have claims to whiteness or not. Observing ethnicity at the stage of group formation also presents a unique opportunity to avoid what Brubaker (2004) has called 'groupism,' or the tendency to treat ethnic groups as bounded units of analysis. On the other side of the spectrum, boundary work processes present a methodological advantage by not sharing the individualistic conception of ethnic change typical of 'assimilationist' frames, as Alba (1985) has shown. For example, assessing the history of Italian-Americans in the United States, Alba identifies the Second World War and its immediate aftermath "as a watershed for European ethnics, partly because it lies at a fortuitous conjunction of forces – structural transformation of the labor force, demographic transition from the immigrant to the second generation … and a cultural relaxation of the attitudes towards ethnics – that served to fluidify the boundaries separating ethnics from old stock groups" (p. 143). Consequently, tracing boundary shifting processes "require[s] … the invocation of historical contingencies, rooted in structural changes external to the group" (p. 134.) For these reasons, Arthur Avenue offers unique opportunities to approach the study of ethnicity through the lens of boundary formation and maintenance. It focuses on the reworking and repositioning of ethnicity by both Albanians and Italians in the context of a largely non-white surrounding neighborhood. Expanding their ethnic boundary to include newly arriving Albanians helped Italians retain their ethnic association with a place no longer residentially theirs.

The case of the developing 'ethnic affinity' between Albanians and Italians on Arthur Avenue presents a special opportunity for the study of boundary making. The existence of any ethnic boundary between two groups reflects a relationship that is asymmetrical in some fundamental way (Barth, 1969). Boundary work becomes a group strategy of mitigating or

amplifying that difference. As a result, most studies focus on mechanisms of boundary crossing, shifting, or blurring (see Zolberg & Woon, 1999, Alba, 2005, Wimmer, 2008). The particularity of Arthur Avenue stems from the fact that one group, Albanians, strengthens and confirms the boundary between Italians and the other immigrant and minority groups in the neighborhood. In other words, instead of simply attempting to cross, shift, or blur the Italian boundary, Albanians work to prop that boundary vis-à-vis the rest of the minorities in the neighborhood. As such, Arthur Avenue presents a case where multiple boundaries are embedded within each other: Albanians negotiate differences within themselves, between them and Italians, and the racial difference between Italians and themselves on one hand, and the non-white residents of the surrounding area on the other. Understanding the mechanisms of multiple boundary work suggests new avenues of research in the field of boundaries.

Another advantage of focusing on a particular site is the ability to contextualize boundary-work within specific limits and opportunities presented by analysis at the neighborhood level. Scholars of immigration and ethnicity have typically followed macro boundary movement based on (assimilatory) structural data, or traced shifts in accommodation of cultural difference in receiving societies such as language use – Spanish in the American context – or religious freedom in institutional settings – Islam in the US and Europe (Zolberg & Woon, 1999). By looking at the successful creation of a "Little Italy" that recasts an essentially multi-ethnic, multi-racial area in the image of an idealized mono-ethnic immigrant past, this study contextualizes and embeds boundary-work in place.

Ethnic neighborhoods

The second objective of this study is to show how boundary-work within this global city microcosm – specifically the forging of the 'ethnic affinity' between Albanians and Italians – provided the backdrop to a more general effort to marshal the cultural resources of ethnicity in order to create a successful Little Italy. My research cannot examine the multiple factors and their respective weight responsible for the success of the Little Italy.[3] It will nonetheless demonstrate in detail the considerable impact that the arrival of Albanians had on the commercial trajectory of the neighborhood, as it transformed from an immigrant enclave into a shopping district of ethnic stores and restaurants. This impact will come into sharper focus given the location of Belmont in an area that that bore the brunt of the urban problems of American inner cities, lacking the position advantages that helped transform central urban spaces like its Manhattan counterpart for middle class and touristic consumption. Broadly speaking, my aim is to show that just as the neighborhood setting informed the boundary work taking place in it, its trajectory was informed by the ethnic negotiation that took place within it. Despite the residential de-Italianization of Belmont, I show how the creation of the Little Italy hinged upon creating symbolic links between the old immigrant culture and a new sense of ethnicity represented and performed through the marketplace (Halter, 2000). This claim raises important questions regarding the relationship of ethnic participation through ritualistic consumption and the sites that become successful anchors of such consumerist identities. The boundary work described here, and its effect on the trajectory of the neighborhood, suggests a potential redefinition of old

[3] Gamm (1999) noted the higher percentages of Jewish renters, as opposed to Catholic homeowners, as an explanation of for higher rates of flight of the former group from Boston. Others have noted the more sedentary nature of the parish organization of the Catholic Church as less conducive to moving when compared to the more mobile synagogues.

immigrant urban areas into ‘symbolic neighborhoods’ that become sites of ‘symbolic ethnicity’ or ‘ethnicity without groups’ (Gans, 1979, Brubaker, 2004).

The ethnic enclaves of large American cities that historically accommodated significant numbers of incoming immigrants during the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century have provided the archetypal anchor of ethnic identity in the public imaginary, ethnic lore, and academic research has been Typically located close to emerging employment opportunities, such as factories, in rapidly industrializing metropolitan centers, enclaves emerged both due to “push” factors, such as discrimination from other areas of the city, as well as “pull” factors, such as proximity to people with a shared way of life and the additional benefits that congregation would bring, such as the ability to sustain ethnic businesses that served ethnic food, newspapers in the mother tongue, and working for co-ethnics. Ethnic enclaves and the ethnic social structures they entailed became one of the most visible settings of the perpetuation of ethnic difference in America. Consequently, the decline of ethnic neighborhoods and the dismantling of their social structures, such as school and church, led to the decline of communal ethnic life. One important reason for that decline was that the housing stock of ethnic enclaves, typically built hurriedly to serve incoming poor immigrants and consisting of low, run-down tenement buildings, no longer provided suitable accommodation to match the occupational and residential mobility of later generation ethnic descendants, who moved to better quarters within the city or the suburbia. Often such enclaves fell prey to urban renewal programs and were simply razed, such as Boston’s West End, documented in Gans’ classic work, *The Urban Villagers* (1962). The more individualized lifestyles of suburbia precluded the formation or

transplantation of the ethnic communities they left behind, and created the conditions for what Gans (1979) would later term "symbolic ethnicity."

Although we tend to associate ethnic enclaves with the image of stable, working class neighborhoods of the past, they were hardly ever static, of course. First, the upward mobility of each successive generation of immigrants in America would translate into a fairly regular turnover of such neighborhoods from one wave of immigration to the next. Lower Manhattan's East Village offers a typical example. It was known as *Kleine Deutschland*, or "Little Germany," for much of the second half of the nineteenth century, until it received sizable numbers of Polish and Ukrainian immigrants, whose cultural heritage can still be traced in some of the area stores (Zukin and Kosta, 2004). The area also included Jewish and Italian immigrants. And throughout the 1950s and 1960s, a new wave of immigrants from Puerto Rico settled in the area, lending it one of its names as *Loisaida* (Smith, 1996; Mele, 2000). Second, the turnover of such neighborhoods was never thorough, which contributed to continuing internal diversity. Massey and Denton (1993) have shown that immigrant enclaves were rarely homogeneous, containing a wide variety of nationalities even at the height of the 'new' immigration at the beginning of the twentieth century. They may have been 'predominantly' populated with residents from a particular nationality, but they never even approached the segregation levels of the emerging black ghettos.[4] Finally, immigrant enclaves were also diverse in a 'regional' and 'generational' perspective. Their residents had to learn to identify with national origin, which may have been a rather irrelevant identifier in their daily lives prior to immigration, as has been shown in the case

[4] Relying on the index of dissimilarity, Massey and Denton (1999 [1993]) showed that in turn of the twentieth century Chicago immigrant enclaves, the predominant group of eastern of southern Europeans that was associated with the enclave typically comprised a bare majority of somewhere between 25 to 35 percent of the neighborhood population, "with the sole exception of the Poles who comprised 54 percent of their enclave" (p 187).

of Sicilians. Moreover, even though the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 brought immigration to a trickle compared to the millions that arrived in previous decades, it did not stop it altogether. Immigrants from Italy kept arriving well into the 1950s, often joining predominantly Italian neighborhoods. This ensured generational variety, where an image of ethnic enclave masked differences of social class, status, and outlook.

Despite this diversity, however, it was only during the 1970s that homogeneous ethnic enclaves began to dismantle in the public imaginary, especially in the aftermath of urban crises that redefined American cities. Many factors coalesced to transform the urban setting, including economic restructuring, deindustrialization, relocation of manufacturing away from urban centers, decentralization, suburbanization, and fiscal crises given the flight of middle class residents to suburbia and the influx of the poor in need of expensive social services. At the neighborhood level, those troubles coalesced around ethnic and racial conflict, particularly in areas populated by the descendants of eastern and southern European immigrants of the Ellis Island era. While the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 slowed down European immigration considerably, urban centers like New York received large numbers of African Americans, pushed by the mechanization of agriculture in the South, as well as Puerto Ricans, whose migration north was made possible by their citizenship status and establishment of cheap commercial flights. After the liberalization of immigration in 1965, a new and diverse set of additional immigrants arrived, mainly from Latin America and Asia. Fueled by global forces, this non-European diversity tested one of the most enduring traits of ethnicity till then – its organization in ethnic structures and communal life at the neighborhood level.

The sociological study of ethnicity has therefore been intertwined with urban change since the turn of the twentieth century. The main sociological model of theorizing urban neighborhoods – human ecology – was based on a 'mosaic' vision of the city whose spatial logic reflected its social differentiation. Developed by Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and their disciples in the Sociology Department at the University of Chicago during the 1920s, this approach relied on ethnographic fieldwork examining different areas of the city. Turn-of-the-century Chicago was a cauldron of social change, where fast-paced and extensive industrialization led the city to become a major destination for massive numbers of different immigrant groups arriving from southern and Eastern Europe, as well as large numbers of African Americans escaping the post-slavery share-cropping systems of the South. The ensuing conflict between these various groups within developing labor and housing markets led to efforts of establishing the patterns of relationship between those groups in urban space. From Burgess (1925) and Park's early *concentric zone theory*, to Louis Wirth's (1938) classic formulation of urbanism as determined by *size*, *density*, and *heterogeneity*, human ecology portrayed the formation and development of the city through processes of *invasion* and *succession*. Such processes governed the distribution of urban space according to competing groups and uses, allocating priority according to the social status of the group in question or the intensity of use. Developed at a time when Chicago's emerging industrial order with its attendant rapid class differentiation and high pace of incoming migration – the ebbs and flows of rural immigrants from southern and Eastern Europe and African Americans from the south – invasion/succession held sway as the model of neighborhood transition. Studies documented 'ethnic and racial succession' (Duncan and Duncan, 1957) and identified 'tipping points' of turnover. The model has seen use in various iterations until recently, from early analyses of gentrification (Palen and London, 1984) to more

recent explorations of neighborhood reaction to ethnic and racial change in various Chicago neighborhoods (Wilson and Taub, 2007).

The urban crises of the 1960s prompted renewed sociological attention to urban neighborhoods form several theoretical perspectives. As a new generation of Chicago school writers expanded their focus to grapple with issues of intergroup diversity (Suttles, 1968) and political life (Kornblum, 1974) in the community setting, the 1970s also witnessed the development of socio-cultural/organizational, political-economy, and social movement approaches (Schwirian, 1983). The most influential break with the Chicago School came to be known as the New Urban Sociology. Its main early representatives were Manuel Castells and David Harvey. While their preoccupations with seeing the urban crises of the 1960s through the lens of consumption and social reproduction, and production and capital accumulation respectively, their approaches to urbanization converged in "establish[ing] the point that urban space is produced deliberately in response to the needs of capital" (Zukin, 1980: 589). In the decades that followed, perhaps the most influential manifestation of this new direction in urban sociology has been provided by Molotch (1976), and more broadly, Logan and Molotch (1987). Their 'urban growth machine' emerged as the leading institutional setup that explained the urban development in the United States. Transcending the study of group rivalries within urban space, they developed a political economy understanding of place that established urban growth – best understood through attention to real estate values – as the overriding objective of any urban coalition, with the concomitant ideology that growth was in the best interest of the public, and not just the urban elites who stood to gain the most.

The sociological literature on neighborhood transition has documented two main outcomes of ethnic enclaves facing ethnic and racial turnover. Some ethnic enclaves, especially when they represent areas of second or third settlement for the immigrant group in question, decide to fight and repel what they see as 'encroachment' but new groups, turning into 'defended' or 'fortress' neighborhoods that manage to retain the residential predominance of the settled group (e.g. Sennett, 1976, Rieder, 1985, Wilson and Taub, 2007). More commonly, however, immigrant enclaves experience 'white flight,' losing their ethnic character as their residents move to loftier domiciles in suburban locales. The description of Belmont's history will show that such forces coalesced to produce a scenario of white flight that, while slower and more organized than the exodus of Jews from their Bronx neighborhoods, nonetheless threatened to dismantle Arthur Avenue as an Italian neighborhood. In other words, Belmont experienced residential de-Italianization, which started during the 1970s and was largely complete by 2000. As ethnic turnover was underway, Belmont's trajectory appeared set to replicate the fate of other South Bronx neighborhoods that were 'white' before the massive shifts of the 1970s. Despite undergoing residential turnover, Belmont managed to retain the area's association with Italian ethnicity through the successful transformation of its commercial thoroughfare to a Little Italy. Its uncharacteristic trajectory therefore relied on the passage from a residential to a commercial definition of the dominant neighborhood ethnicity. As such, Belmont represents a case study that highlights both the dynamics of neighborhood succession established by the Chicago School, as well as an example of the commodification of urban neighborhoods in ways that represent new ways of expression of ethnicity. To do so, this dissertation explores the role of area leaders and institutions in creating Arthur Avenue's Little Italy, and identifies the mechanisms utilized to enhance the area's commercial ethnicity at the expense of its residential ethnicity.

Research and Organization of Chapters

The study relies mainly on 30 open-ended interviews with Belmont storeowners and community leaders. The first batch of 10 interviews was conducted during the summers of 2004 and 2005, while the second batch of 20 interviews was conducted during spring and fall of 2008. The respondents were selected due to their ownership of Belmont businesses, or leadership positions within Belmont community or local government organizations. 13 of the respondents were Albanian, of whom nine were Belmont storeowners at the time of the interview, one worked for an Albanian newspaper, another was a past editor of a second Albanian newspaper, one owned a marketing business geared towards Albanians, and one works for a local community organization. They represented different waves and geographies of Albanian immigration to the Bronx. Some respondents had arrived during the late 1960s, while the most recent ones had arrived after 2000; they had originated from the ex-Yugoslav territories of Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia, while some were from Albania. Of the remaining 17 interviews, six were Belmont storeowners or restaurant employees of Italian descent, two were Belmont storeowners of Jewish descent, one was the local community board District Manager of Puerto Rican descent, two were local community organization leaders of Italian descent, one was an Italian restaurant owner of Bolivian descent, one was a local business owner of Puerto Rican descent, one was the pastor of The Mount Carmel Church of Italian descent, and three respondents were affiliated with major area institutions that surround Belmont.

Because of its reliance on interview material, this study is not an ethnography in the traditional sense of the term. It has, however, benefitted immensely from extensive participant observation. From March 2006 to August 2010, I lived in three different locations on Fordham

Road and Pelham Parkway, each no farther than 2 miles from the fieldwork site of Arthur Avenue. I spent countless hours of observation before and after interviews, frequented the area businesses with some regularity, and took my students from the nearby Fordham University campus to tours of the history of Belmont's Arthur Avenue.

As noted above, this study presents an analysis of mechanisms of boundary work in a multi-ethnic, multi-racial neighborhood setting, as well as it highlights the importance of boundary work in the making of ethnic neighborhoods. Chapter 2 presents the early history of Belmont up to the transformative 1970s, offering a sense of the impact the South Bronx debacle had on mid-Bronx neighborhoods. It relies on news archives, historical accounts, and memoirs about the area, as well as refers to US Census Data that capture the demographic changes of Belmont from the 1960s onward, notably its residential de-Italianization. Chapter 3 presents the immigration trajectory of Albanians, focusing on two characteristics that had an impact of their forthcoming boundary work: the Italian sojourn of their immigration experience, and the diversity of origin that precluded straightforward institutions of group identity formation. Chapter 4 presents extensive interview material to explore the boundary work between Albanians and Italians. While no racial minority residents were interviewed for this study, I trace Albanian and Italian views on Belmont minorities to map the racial boundary between the two. Chapter 5 describes the role of the Belmont BID, in continuation of the institutional history that preceded it, in maintaining the neighborhood as Italian by shifting focus from residential ethnicity to commercial ethnicity. While US Census Data shows the residential de-Italianization of the neighborhood, I consulted the Cole Reverse Business Directories to capture changes in the commercial makeup of Arthur Avenue. Relying on snapshots of businesses of the area from 1971 onward, I noted the commercial re-Italianization of Belmont particularly in recent decades.

Chapter 6 explores the strategic deployment of Belmont street festivals as ethnic performances that negotiate the disparity between residential and commercial ethnicity. It relies on extensive participant observation of the three summer festivals that take place yearly in Belmont, particularly during the summers of 2008 and 2009, as well as interview material with area business owners and community leaders. Chapter 7 concludes with further discussion of the intersection of boundary-work and what we might call 'symbolic neighborhoods.'

Portrait of Belmont

This study focuses on Arthur Avenue, a shopping enclave within the Belmont neighborhood of the Bronx, the New York City borough that lies north of Manhattan. Once known as the Fordham section, Belmont covers a roughly half square-mile area located at the geographical center of the borough. A residential neighborhood since it came into being roughly a century ago, it is bounded by important traffic thoroughfares on its north (East Fordham Road), east (Southern Boulevard), and west (Third Avenue). The neighborhood once extended to East Tremont Avenue to its south, but the boundary has now receded to East 183rd Street, reducing Belmont to about half the size of the old neighborhood.

Belmont is a low- to lower-middle-income residential neighborhood, but is surrounded by some of the most important institutions in the Bronx. It borders on the Fordham University campus on the north side, the New York Botanical Garden on the northwestern tip, the Bronx Zoo on its east side, and the St. Barnabas Hospital to its southwest, all a short walking distance from Arthur Avenue. Despite its proximity to such prominent Bronx institutions, the area feels somewhat insulated from the rest of the Bronx. Two factors contribute to this feel. First, no public transportation routes pass through the main thoroughfares of the neighborhood, Arthur

Avenue and East 187th Street, making it rather inaccessible to non-drivers. The closest bus lines are on the thoroughfares at the edges of the neighborhood, and the closest subway station is a ten-minute bus ride away, taking an additional 30 to 40 minutes to reach midtown Manhattan. Belmont can be reached via Metro-North, a more expensive suburban commuter rail that travels from the Grand Central Terminal on 42nd Street to the Fordham Station in 20 minutes, at the corner of the leafy Fordham University campus. Arthur Avenue is a 15 minute walk from that

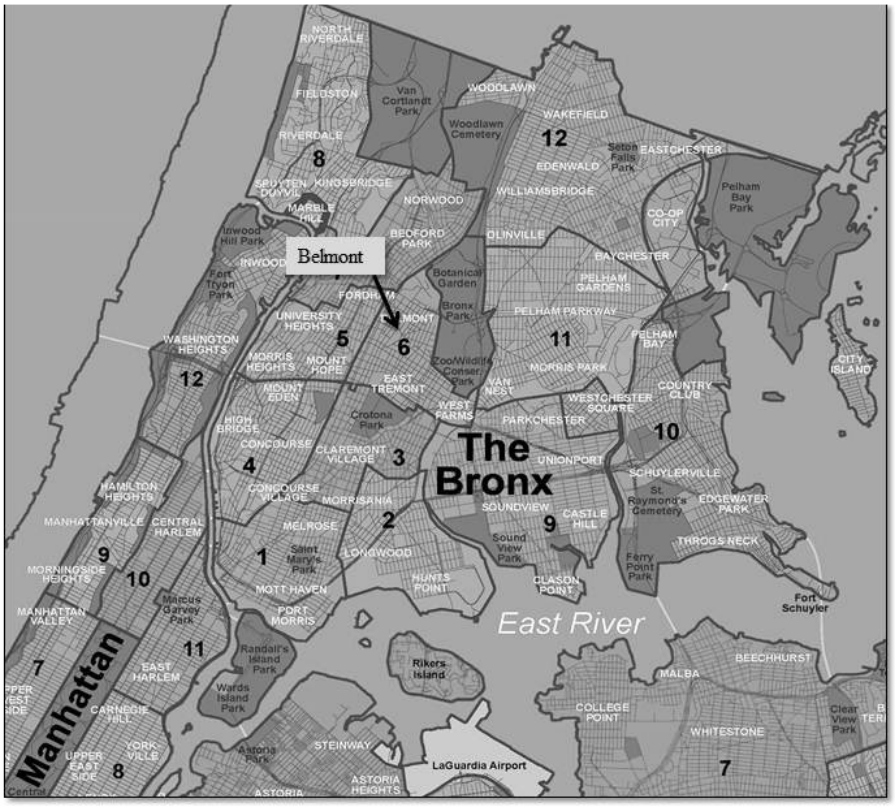

FIG. 1.1. Bronx neighborhoods and Community Board units
Source: New York City, Department of City Planning. Available at http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/neighbor/neigh.shtml.

station. Second, Belmont has a somewhat distinctive neighborhood architecture compared to areas in its vicinity. It is a mixture of low tenement buildings, interspersed with single family homes, which create more intimate spaces when compared to the width of East Fordham Road and the appropriately tall surrounding buildings, the large green expanses of Fordham

University, the Zoo and the Botanical Gardens, and the more stately architecture of art deco buildings from Grand Concourse to Pelham Parkway.

The commercial center of Belmont is Arthur Avenue, a lively shopping street just a few blocks long. While the avenue continues south past the current Belmont boundary, only the five blocks between Fordham Road and 183rd Street retain the commercial vitality of a previous era, when Belmont residents were mostly Italian immigrants and their descendants. Once the center

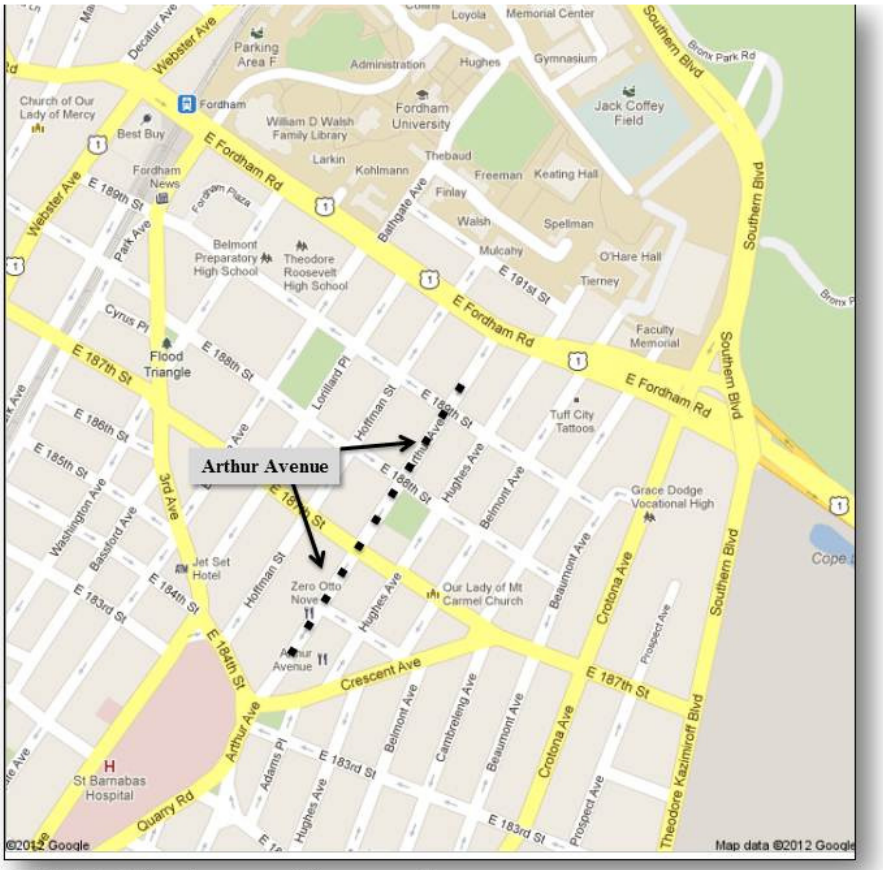

FIG. 1.2. Arthur Avenue and the surrounding area.
Source: Google Maps. Available at maps.google.com.

of social life of an Italian neighborhood, this section and the surrounding streets are today known as "The Real Little Italy in the Bronx." Arthur Avenue consists of many restaurants, pizza parlors and specialty food stores, and perhaps due to the low architecture and relative inaccessibility, the area carries connotations of authenticity in a sense that the touristy Little Italy

in downtown Manhattan no longer does, under the proverbial squeeze of the adjacent Chinatown and the extensive gentrification of its surrounding blocks.

Arthur Avenue is the main thoroughfare of Belmont, and the usual entry point into the neighborhood from Fordham Road, whether walking or driving. The blocks north of the intersecting 187th Street are rather quiet and residential, though not free of businesses, which include travel agencies, food and grocery stores, a restaurant and a pizzeria, two bars, a big Laundromat, a health center, a funeral home, a real estate office, etc. The commercial heart of Arthur Avenue consists of the blocks surrounding the intersection of 187th Street, however, with the best-known restaurants located between 187th and 183rd Streets. This section is home to a full display of restaurants big and small, mixed with sidewalk cafés, bakeries, pastries, specialty food stores, and neighborhood shops such as the occasional hairdresser, grocery store, liquor store, and jeweler or shoe store. Another ten to fifteen merchants occupy the indoor Arthur Avenue Retail Market, where the main wares are ethnic food products. The ground-level floors of almost all the buildings are shops, stores, and restaurants. The shopping atmosphere extends across the intersecting 187th Street, which is also commercially lively for at least several blocks east of Arthur Avenue.

Most of the buildings on Arthur Avenue were built in the early decades of the 20th century and are predominantly brick, low-density structures two to four stories high. Both Arthur Avenue and 187th Street are four lanes wide, two of which are open to traffic and the other two used for side curbside parking. Since commercial traffic (with the exception of deliveries) is banned and no public bus lines pass through, there is an extensive amount of jaywalking and the traffic runs slow. During the day, especially on Saturdays, there is a carnival-like atmosphere on Arthur Avenue. There is a lot of foot traffic as people shop, frequent the numerous cafés and

restaurants, or simply walk around. Many cafés have tables on the sidewalk, creating a leisurely atmosphere and blurring the boundary between the businesses and the street.

The defining characteristic of Arthur Avenue as a lively shopping enclave is ethnic food. Most of the restaurants serve Italian food, and many businesses have Italian names. Street poles on and around Arthur Avenue carry signs with emblems of different regions of Italy, like Emilia or Sardegna; others feature bigger signs with colors of the Italian flag and a smaller emblem in the middle that reads: "Little Italy in the Bronx: The Good Taste of Tradition," erected by the Belmont Small Business Association. In addition to Italian names, many restaurants and businesses use other ethnic symbols to convey Italianness, such as generous use of green and red in their awnings. A pizzeria often displays a shiny Fiat 500 on the sidewalk, a tiny car less than ten feet in length that FIAT of Italy produced from 1957 to 1975. The two prominent corners of Arthur Avenue and 186th Street are occupied by, respectively, a well-established ethnic grocery store in business since 1915, and Umberto's Clam House, a sibling enterprise of the original one in Manhattan's Mulberry street (before it went out of business in 2011).

The shopping experience in the multiple stores is also different from the typical supermarket experience. Smalls stores often play Italian music and songs, and sellers communicate joyously with patrons, simulating the experience of a previous era when sellers knew customers and their preferences, and haggled over prices and quality. Some restaurants famously do not carry a menu, but scratch the daily specials on a sign posted at the entrance, or simply have the server announce the menu to the diners ("…No menu… cash only.. family style…" wrote one commenter named *yogissimo*, responding to a New York Times article on the dearth of Bronx destinations in the AAA's 2008 New York tour book [Gonzalez, 2008]). The practice symbolizes food prepared from ingredients picked fresh from the local market, forgoing

choice for quality and taste. It also highlights an intimate atmosphere among customers and businesses as they consume and shop for food and other products. Other restaurants are known not only for serving Italian food, but preparing it in a particular regional way, such as Sicilian. Alongside the cafés and restaurants, pork and cheese specialty stores display an assortment of brand name products from Italy, next to their fresh mozzarella and in-store dried prosciutto.

Arthur Avenue is a celebrated destination for many shoppers and restaurants patrons around the city and the suburbs. Part of the charm of the area stems from its neighborhood feel, and some of the core restaurants and stores are still run by the families that established them many decades ago, when Belmont was an immigrant neighborhood. Through the past several decades, Arthur Avenue has transformed from a mainly working-class Italian immigrant neighborhood to a Mecca of ethnic culinary goods and experiences that carry an authentic aura. A Google search on Arthur Avenue today retrieves in excess of 600,000 links, with the vast majority of the early pages devoted to food, including shopping guides, restaurant reviews, and area store webpages.

But despite its characterization as a place where tradition lives, much has changed since then. The commercial transformation of Arthur Avenue occurred alongside the residential transformation of Belmont and the nearby areas, undergoing drastic changes as the borough's fortunes sunk over two decades of decline starting in the 1960s. As a mainly working-class borough, Bronx was hit hard by the de-industrialization of the city economy, losing jobs and people almost as fast as it had acquired them during the early decades of the 20th century. At the same time, the composition of its population was changing due to continued white flight and incoming new groups of immigrants from Puerto Rico, other Latin American countries, and minorities from Manhattan and South Bronx moving escaping urban renewal or the burning

South Bronx. Often described as originally a borough of relatively homogeneous ethnic communities of European background, by 1980 the majority of the borough's population was Hispanic and black.

These trends affected Belmont profoundly, if not abruptly. Two early groups had been moving into the area, intensifying the flight of the upwardly mobile Italians that were leaving the non-elevator tenement buildings for the comforts of the suburbia. The first major inflow consisted of Puerto Ricans, who were migrating in large numbers from the island after the end World War II, due to their U.S. citizen status and the advent of cheap air travel. Another group consisted of African Americans, who were coming from other areas of the city, especially northern Manhattan and south Bronx, occupying the residential towers that were being built at the edges of the neighborhood and nearby areas. Once the quota-based immigration regime was liberalized in 1965, other immigrant groups started arriving in Belmont, resulting in a kaleidoscope of immigrants from many Latin American countries, including a wave of immigrants from Mexico in the more recent decades. One small group of immigrants, which would prove particularly important to the transformation of Belmont, consisted of Albanians. They started arriving during the late 1960s and increased their presence consistently in the following decades. Thought ultimately their numbers were smaller compared to other incoming groups in Belmont, their presence would later prove crucial to the commercial stability of Arthur Avenue, as discussed in Chapter 3.

As these new resident groups were moving into Belmont, particularly after the new immigration of the 1960s, Italian flight from Belmont intensified. The move to the suburbs of Westchester and upstate New York, northern New Jersey and Long Island had started with the economic boom of the post-war years. (Returning solders suddenly found the tenement buildings

of Belmont small and inconvenient, and seized opportunities to move to suburbia where their wives could raise children without worrying about lack of elevator on the fourth floor of a building). As a result of this residential reshuffling, the boundaries of the neighborhood contracted, excluding blocks on the outer skirts of the neighborhood. While Fordham University and the Bronx Zoo provided natural boundaries on the north and east, fewer and fewer blocks to the west and of Arthur Avenue and south of 183rd Street belonged to Belmont as it is known today. In fact, interviews with business owners and community leaders reveal that in its heyday before the 1960s set in, the area of the Italian enclave was referred to as Fordham rather than Belmont, a name of more recent usage. The 'Fordham' name today is reserved for the area surrounding Webster Avenue, west of Belmont, while the area south of 183rd street is now included with East Tremont.

More significantly, the demographic changes resulted in a complete racial turnover of the neighborhood. The majority of the residents in the blocks surrounding Arthur Avenue are no longer Italian or even 'white', but of Hispanic descent or African American. Observing the success of Arthur Avenue today, it is hard to image the decade of this ethnic and racial residential turnover when merchants had to decide whether to stay and adapt to the changing business atmosphere, or leave. Since they catered to an ethnic clientele, the changing ethnic makeup of the neighborhood forced them to adapt or close doors. Many did leave, some did not, and new ones sprung exploring alternative ways to connect to old and new clienteles, as will become evident in later chapters.

Those changes are evident in the commercial makeup of Arthur Avenue and 187th Street today. While the area continues to be known as Little Italy, other resident groups in the area are

increasing their commercial presence (as will be discussed shown in detail in later chapters). As Albanians started arriving to the Bronx during the 1960s, they gradually found employment, took up businesses or started new ones on and around Arthur Avenue. They often worked in Italian restaurants and stores before opening their own businesses, and many remain as workers or waiters in the existing restaurants. When the Albanian migration into the Bronx intensified during the breakup of communism and the war in Kosovo throughout the 90s, the increased presence and nationalist feelings led to a resurgence of Albanian businesses in the area, turning Arthur Avenue into perhaps the most prominent Albanian public space in the United States, sometimes referred to as Little Albania in the Bronx. While that presence has somewhat subsumed in the recent years, Albanians remain an integral part of the commercial establishment of Belmont, staffing Italian businesses, owning and running Italian businesses, or owning and frequenting cafés and restaurants with Albanian names.

Another important commercial presence on Arthur Avenue and 187th Street consists of the Mexican businesses, such as restaurants and bodegas, most of which have opened within the last decade or so. While Latino groups are often lumped together into the Hispanic category, their population has grown diverse over decades, though still dominated by the earliest wave of Puerto Ricans and recent wave of Mexican immigration which intensified only after 1990. Notably, their commercial presence has been felt on Arthur Avenue only in the last decade. Besides owning and running Mexican restaurants, at least one owner of Hispanic descent runs an Italian restaurant, after taking it over from its original owners some years ago. And many Italian and Albanian restaurants and stores employ Mexicans usually behind the counter, and sometimes in front of the counter, if they are trying to reach the Hispanic clientele. There are also some Chinese stores on or around Arthur Avenue, and Arab owners have taken up some of the grocery

stores in recent years. It should be noted that a finer-grained analysis of *all* the businesses of Belmont, beyond Arthur Avenue, might reveal an earlier and richer store presence, revealing a closer relationship between the residential and commercial trajectory of the neighborhood. Instead, Arthur Avenue actively ignores that diversity, highlighting the Italian stores or restaurants, with the occasional Jewish business, remnant of en earlier era when Jewish merchants catered to the Italian neighborhood and spoke fluent Italian.

The mismatch between the residential and commercial trajectory of the neighborhood hints at the complexity underlying the seemingly singular ethnic flavor of Arthur Avenue. While fancier Italian restaurants and specialty stores rely on a wealthier clientele that drives into the area from suburban locales such as Westchester and Connecticut, on the whole Arthur Avenue caters to various clienteles. Strikingly, the majority of local residents, overwhelmingly low-income minorities, are confined to the neighborhood for their daily shopping, due to the insularity of the neighborhood and the lack of immediate access to public transportation described above. They are served by numerous bodegas, humble 99 cent and grocery stores that increase in intensity as one walks eastward on 187th Street. A third set of clients for Arthur Avenue are the large numbers of employees of the big institutions surrounding Belmont, such as the Bronx Zoo and St. Barnabas hospital, who often take their lunch break on the delis and pizzerias around Arthur Avenue. Additionally there are the large numbers of Fordham University students, who not only help the local businesses by catching a bite in the area, but have also been moving into Belmont in greater numbers as their university enrollments expand, making coveted tenants and transforming the real estate market of the area. And most Albanians who shop, dine or spend time in Belmont cafés do not live in Belmont but in nearby neighborhoods, such as Pelham Parkway and Mosholu Parkway, or further north in Westchester, depending on their

socio-economic situation. Despite this mix, Arthur Avenue successfully manages the status of a Little Italy and according to merchants and restaurant owners, attracts a crucial share of business from food aficionados from the city and beyond, whether former Italian residents or not. A cursory look at cars' license plates on a regular Saturday noon confirms their account, suggesting a clientele from the tristate area and beyond. The next chapter gives the historical background about Belmont.

CHAPTER 2

Belmont History

Introduction

> That is a live picture. Obviously a major fire in a large building in the South Bronx. My goodness, that's a huge blaze. That's the very area where President Carter drove just a few days ago.
>
> *The Bronx is Burning*, ESPN Miniseries, 2007[1]

Belmont sits just south of Fordham Road, the demarcation line between South and North Bronx. It is one mile north of the East Tremont neighborhood, whose precipitous decline in the aftermath of the building of the Cross Bronx Expressway by city planner Robert Moses was documented by Robert Caro (1974) and analyzed by Marshall Berman ([1982] 1988). It is also a mere two miles north of Charlotte Street, which became a symbol of the destruction – and eventual rebuilding – of the South Bronx after President Carter's visit in 1977, and subsequent visits by presidential candidate Ronald Reagan in 1980 and President Clinton in 1997. The dissolution of nearby neighborhoods created a palpable sense of imminent doom in Belmont, where departing Italians and arriving minorities prompted community leaders to try and stem the precipitous changes. This background is crucial in understanding the local response to those changes and the subsequent trajectory of what eventually emerged as the area's "Little Italy."

The history of the South Bronx prior to and during the 1970s is important to the overall argument of this study. Neighborhood change has been a central concern of American sociology from the early days of Chicago School, when large metropolitan centers contended with rapid

[1] "Time For a Change?" 2007. *The Bronx is Burning*, Episode 3. ESPN. Directed by Jeremiah S. Chechik, 24 July 2007.

industrialization and successive waves of incoming migrants and immigrants alike. The literature has documented two typical outcomes of neighborhood change. The first involves ethnic/racial succession, whereby the original residents move to other locales as a result of a combination of push and pull factors, while the neighborhood is repopulated with new residents of a typically lower social standing in the stratification landscape.[2] Alternatively, existing residents sometimes mount successful resistance against 'encroaching' groups, managing to 'repel' them. Such cases constitute the second outcome of 'defended' neighborhoods – enclaves that become embattled 'fortresses,' leaving residents with bitter memories despite the victory.[3] As many observers have noted, these dynamics have affected particularly working class neighborhoods, which have traditionally accommodated successive generations of immigrants. Italian neighborhoods provide typical examples. They were established around the turn of the twentieth century in areas that had housed either earlier immigrants – most commonly Irish – or African Americans, whose early spatial, occupational and racial proximity to Italians has been summarized by Orsi (1992).

Belmont's trajectory defies classification into either the 'defended' or 'succeeded' neighborhood scenarios. Predominantly Italian since the beginning of the twentieth century, the area experienced a gradual residential succession from the sixties onward. Despite organized opposition, its ethnic and racial composition changed from Italian to predominantly Hispanic, and to a lesser degree, African American. Yet while Belmont was 'succeeded' residentially, it

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[2] For a classic case of racial succession, see Duncan and Duncan (1957). For a contemporary example of ethnic and racial succession dynamics of Chicago neighborhoods, see Wilson and Taub (2007).

[3] For a discussion of Queens' Forest Hills, Brooklyn's Canarsie, and four Chicago neighborhoods, see, respectively, Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976); Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); William Julius Wilson and Richard P. Taub, *There Goes the Neighborhood: Racial, Ethnic, and Class Tensions in Four Chicago Neighborhoods and Their Meaning for America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007).

was ‘defended’ commercially, retaining and developing a concentration of Italian restaurants, cafés, and specialty food stores. The emergence of ‘Little Italy’ on Arthur Avenue rewarded the sustained efforts of community leaders and merchants to maintain Belmont as commercially Italian. The coupling of residential de-Italianization with commercial re-Italianization represents an unlikely trajectory that developed as a result of the particular local history and geography of Belmont, as well as the impact of post-1965 immigration.

This chapter describes the residential de-Italianization of Belmont, situating it within the troubles of the South Bronx. I begin with a discussion of the arrival of rapid transit from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, describe the breakneck speed of development the borough underwent during the first three decades of the twentieth century, and present the early history of Belmont within the emerging kaleidoscope of Bronx neighborhoods, focusing on Arthur Avenue and its centrality to the social life of the area. Relying on published memoirs, I describe the golden years of Belmont as a predominantly Italian ethnic enclave. I subsequently turn my attention to the urban dissolution of the South Bronx neighborhoods from the 1960s onwards, by briefly dwelling on two events that came to define the area in the public imagination for decades to come: the controversial construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway and its impact on the East Tremont neighborhood, and the arson and abandonment epidemic that engulfed the South Bronx and left wide areas of urban destruction in its wake. Lastly, I describe the residential departure of Italians and the arrival of other groups, including Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and Albanians.

An Early Bronx Neighborhood

Since early colonial days much of the Bronx was farmland, sparsely populated with farmer villages and small towns. During the second half of the seventeenth century, most of the land belonged to manors included in the Town of Westchester and was divided into large estates, which built and maintained mansions and horse stables. In an article on the beginnings of Belmont that appeared in *The Italo-American Times*, Foglia (1977) claims that "the village was apparently named after the estate of Jacob Lorillard, a tobacco manufacturer" who possibly "named the manor Belmont in honor of Governor Bellomont of New York" (p. 1). Change arrived as the first railway made its way through the Bronx in 1841, but Belmont did not take the contours of an urban neighborhood until the early years of the twentieth century. In a memoir, an area resident describes the early days of Belmont, known as 'Fordham' at the time, in this way: "Fordham was really country. Besides the various scattered houses, there were many vacant lots. … Some folks had barns where horses and carriages or sleds were housed. Between 194th Street and 195th Street was a chicken farm which sold fresh eggs and occasionally a fresh-killed chicken" (Storrs, 1987: 21).

The Bronx population was a mere 1,791 in the first US Census in 1790, and had only grown to 5,346 by 1840. The subsequent development of the borough followed closely the establishment of mass transit, which arrived to the Bronx in three stages. This development not only coincided – indeed was made possible – with the railroad arrival, but proceeded along the corridors established by the first lines. As population densities increased in the path of early rapid transit lines, further mass transit lines were laid to serve that population at later stages. Belmont lied in the path of one of those early corridors.

Stages of Rapid Transit and the development of the Bronx

The first stage of mass transit was inaugurated by the arrival of the railway during the 1840s, several decades before the Bronx was incorporated as a borough of New York City in 1898. Traveling north from Manhattan, New York and Harlem Railroad's (now Metro-North) first rail was completed to Fordham Station in 1841, adjacent to the new St. John's College campus, prompting the establishment of small communities along its path and providing jobs to them. Others followed soon. "The Hudson River Railroad was built in the late 1840s northward… reaching… Riverdale in 1849," notes Olmsted (1989: 73). He adds that the early railroads "threaded their way through the rural Bronx spawning the development of new communities along their routes, and establishing [growth] corridors through which rapid transit lines were later built" (p. 73). The Bronx population increased by one half during the 1840s reaching 8,032 in 1850, and grew ever more quickly to 23,593 by 1860. The early railroads had set the stage for the explosion of growth that had yet to come.

The Fordham area became home to two important Bronx institutions during mid-nineteenth century, following the arrival of New York and Harlem Railroad. Built on land obtained by the estates in the vicinity, Fordham University was originally established as St. John's College in 1841, while St. Barnabas Hospital was originally established as the New York Home for the Incurables under the Protestant Episcopal Church in 1866 (Curran, 1979; Foglia, 1977). Bromley notes that both institutions chose the area due to the 'accessible isolation' it provided, combining a serene setting with proximity to the city made possible by the arrival of the railroad: "The [Fordham University] site was originally chosen by … Catholic Bishop John Hughes because it offered cheap land adjacent to the Harlem Railroad… [and] provided the perfect compromise: accessibility to the metropolis, a pastoral environment, and isolation from

the temptations of the city," while the hospital's "location offered the same principles… a rural location, with transport to Manhattan via the Harlem Railroad" (1997: 196).

The Fordham area was populated with immigrants from its early days. The decades of the arrival of the rail during mid-nineteenth century coincided with what in retrospect is known as the first wave of immigration, when millions of northern Europeans, mainly German, and Irish, who crossed the Atlantic in the wake of the Irish potato famine and other societal changes taking place in Europe at the time. Many immigrants initially settled in the Lower East Side, including areas today known as the Bowery and the East Village (for a brief history of immigrant Lower East Side, see Mele, 2000). But many also settled in the Bronx in search of work. In an article on the growth of the Fordham section between 1840 and 1865, Sweeney identified the early industries that drew them as "shipbuilding (which pre-dated the railroad by many years), textile… clothing… carpet manufacturing, flour milling, manufacturing musical instruments (particularly pianos), manufacturing metal and metal products, and the Lorillard snuff-mill on the [banks of] the Bronx River" (1976: 69).

The Bronx becomes a borough

The second stage of the development of rapid transit in the Bronx came in the wake of the annexation of the area west of the Bronx River, also known as the 'North Side,' to the City of New York in 1874 (Olmsted, 1989; Hermalyn and Ultan, 1998; Derrick, 1999). As the railroads were making their way through the Bronx, a new form of rapid public transportation was being implemented in New York: the elevated lines, also known as the Els. Four lines were built in Manhattan during the 1870s, as the booming New York economy necessitated northward residential expansion to accommodate the increasing numbers of its workforce. Once the Second,

Third, Sixth, and Ninth Avenue lines reached the Harlem River, the stage was set for the extension of the elevated system into the 'Annexed District.' As Olmsted explains:

> In 1880, the Suburban Rapid Transit Company (SRT) was organized to extend elevated railway service to the city's newly acquired mainland suburb. … The SRT proceeded to build northerly along Third Avenue from 144th Street. Because of the influence of the earlier New York and Harlem Railroad … this area was the most settled in the Bronx. The Third Avenue El reached 169th Street in 1888 and 177th Street [East Tremont Avenue] in 1891. Ten years later, in 1901, the line reached Fordham Square (1989: 80-1).

Alongside the Fordham University and St. Barnabas Hospital, three other important Bronx institutions were established in the Fordham area just before the turn of the twentieth century. Coinciding with the arrival of the El, The Fordham Hospital was erected in 1882, while the nearby New York Botanical Gardens and the Bronx Zoo were established in 1891 and 1899 respectively, on land obtained by the Lydig and Lorillard estates, and with the support of some of the nation's preeminent politicians, bankers, and industrialists (Bromley, 1997; Foglia, 1977).

The arrival of the Third Avenue El to Fordham Square in 1901 was a turning point in the development of Belmont. "Stimulated by [its] construction … the population of the Bronx rose from 89,000 to 201,000 in the ten years between 1890 and 1900. Three quarters of the population lived close to the El in the south Bronx" (Bronx Museum of Arts, 1986: 17, quoted in Olmsted, p. 81). It provided fast and affordable transportation to Manhattan, while the exploding growth of the borough provided jobs for the arriving immigrants. These jobs, and the immigrants taking them, were different from the ones during the nineteenth century. At the turn of the twentieth century, the majority of the incoming immigrants were no longer Irish or German. The arrival of the El coincided with the massive 'new' wave of immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe. As a result, Italians and European Jews were the next principal groups to settle in the Tremont-Belmont area (Foglia, 1977). Relying on tract-level, decennial US Census data for the entire Community Board Six, which includes Belmont and five other surrounding

neighborhoods, Bromley notes: "[t]he 1920 census reported that 41.5 percent of the population was foreign-born … While Americans of Irish, German, British, and Scandinavian extraction predominated in the nineteenth century, by 1920s the southern part of CB-Six's population was mainly of East European Jewish extraction, while Belmont/Fordham, the northern neighborhood, was overwhelmingly Italian" (1997: 194).

The main rationale for the incoming Italian population of Belmont, according to Foglia (1977), was the new availability of jobs in a quickly developing Bronx. Most jobs were in the building trades, necessitated by various public works projects such as the Jerome Park Reservoir and the Bronx Aqueduct, twelve new schools of which four were built in Belmont alone, and the building of The Grand Concourse from 1902 to 1909, that was lined with large scale multiple dwellings in the vicinity of Fordham Road. Building trades were an appropriate employment opportunity for "skilled and semi-skilled labor [that] attracted thousands of Italian workers in Belmont" (*ibid*). They also "found work… in landscaping at the New Botanical Garden and the Bronx Zoo nearby… while some bought farms in the rural northeastern Bronx" (Hermalyn and Ultan, 1998: 64). While many Italians moved to the Fordham area following jobs, Belmont also attracted workers in other areas of the city, who could now travel quickly and cheaply to their workplaces thanks to the El service. As Bronx was transforming from a self-contained locale to a commuter borough, many Italians moved from downtown, "fleeing the total misery and depravity of Mulberry Bend in Manhattan," keeping their jobs in the digging of the subways in the Brooklyn Navy Yard (Foglia, 1977). Finally, "a large number if Italian Americans who managed construction firms, as well as a light sprinkling of other Italian professionals, settled in or conducted their business in the relatively pleasant atmosphere of the Bronx" (p. 1) For these

reasons, “the years closest to 1900 witnessed a rapid population growth in Belmont and its surrounding communities,” notes Foglia (1977).

The Bronx becomes urban

The last stage of the expansion of rapid transit in the Bronx consisted of the development of the subway lines. The first two – still in operation as the red lines 2 and 1 – arrived in 1905 and 1908, serving eastern Bronx and the western Bronx respectively.[4] Another expansion of the subway system followed a decade later. “The four-year period, 1917-1920, saw the greatest expansion of the rapid transit system in the history of the Bronx,” writes Olmsted (1989). Part of the expansion involved extending the original branches [lines 1 and 2], the Jerome Avenue line [number 4], and the Pelham Bay line [number 6]. This expansion of service was followed by concomitant massive population increase. “In the fifteen-year period, 1915-1930, the population of the Bronx doubled from 616,000 to 1,265,000. Population along the new routes rose by 434%, but the population in the Third Avenue El corridor began to decline as people moved from older neighborhoods to newer communities (Bronx Museum of Arts, 1986, pp. 21-22, quoted in Olmsted, 1989, p. 85). In a mere thirty years, between 1900 and 1930, the Bronx population had increased from 201.000 to almost 1.3 million.

A significant number of this population increase was provided by the ‘new,’ Ellis Island wave of immigrants, in full bloom till the introduction of the quota limits in 1924. The Bronx also attracted immigrant families from other early settlement areas in the city, such as the Mulberry Bend and the Lower East Side. To many, especially the urban Jews from the eastern

[4] All the subway lines in the Bronx run on elevated platforms, but they retain their name due to their suppressed portions in Manhattan. The obvious exception is the D line, which was built separately in 1933 under the Grand Concourse.

European territories, the Bronx provided an ideal opportunity for the development of an urban landscape of modernity, decades before visions of suburbia became the norm of social mobility after WWII. Mid-Bronx areas like the Grand Concourse and Pelham Parkway came to be known for their appeal to Jews leaving the Lower East Side. Many observers have noted the quality of the urban life that developed in the Bronx of the 20s and 30s as a result. In a chapter describing the move from the immigrant enclave to areas of second and third settlement on the fringes of the city, Deborah Dash Moore (1992) described the Jewish neighborhoods of the Bronx as "mark[ing] the transition into the urban landscapes of modernity" (p. 252). In contrast to the tenements of Brownsville's working class Jews and individual homes of Boro Park's middle class religious Jews in Brooklyn, she argues, the middle-class apartment buildings of the Bronx attracted unionized left-wing Jews employed in the garment and fur industries, who followed the transit lines to the Bronx during the first decade of the twentieth century. The result was areas like Pelham Parkway, a mile east of Belmont on the other side of the Bronx Zoo, which attracted Jews from the Lower East Side, but also Harlem and East Bronx (such as Tremont). These middle class apartments were built by "Jewish builders committed to some form of socialism and to the virtues of consumer cooperatives" (p. 260), and had "two exposures … offered the latest plumbing advances … were centrally heated with electricity … [and ensured] the privacy of each room, with its own entrance" in contrast to railroad type working-class tenements (p. 261). Substituting ground floor commercial space for community rooms, and surrounded by courtyards with grass, they created "a vision of a desirable urban community [marked by] tree lined streets, spacious parks … easy access to public transportation, convenient shopping, and good, new

public schools" (p. 256). In short, they were manifestations of what their residents saw as the ideal urban neighborhood.[5]

Pelham Parkway was of course only an approximation of the Grand Concourse, known for its collection of art deco buildings built along its sides during the 1930s.[6] Its buildings were marked by front gardens, spacious entrances, elevators, and apartments full of light, high ceilings, sunken living rooms, and many other amenities. In terms of style, "[t]he shining metal doorways, colored brick ornamentation, and the dramatic, indirectly lit lobbies spoke powerfully of modernity" (Moore, 1992: 262). In terms of the social standing and lifestyles of its residents, Hermalyn and Ultan (1998) note that "the area of Grand Concourse … became a symbol of social and economic success and had many apartment buildings of five or six stories with wide entrance courtyards bordered with grass and shrubs," adding: "by 1934 the housing in the borough had many more amenities than that of the other boroughs: almost 99 percent of residences had private bathrooms, about 95 percent central heating, more than 97 percent hot water, and more than 48 percent mechanical refrigeration" (p. 65). While its elegance was not matched elsewhere, the Grand Concourse set the standard for middle class apartment life in a quickly developing Bronx, and buildings with comparable amenities were being built around the borough, surpassing the El route housing that might have been built a mere two decades ago. Growing up in mid-Bronx, Marshall Berman described his childhood residence accordingly:

> The Grand Concourse … was our borough's closest thing to a Parisian boulevard. Among its most striking features were rows of large, splendid 1930s apartment houses: simple and clear in their architectural forms, whether geometrically sharp or biomorphically curved; brightly colored in contrasting brick, offset with chrome, beautifully interplayed with large areas of grass; open to light and air, as if to proclaim a good life that was open not just to the elite residents but to us all. The style of these buildings, known as Art Deco

[5] A *New York Times* article by Murray Schumach (1970) extolls the virtues of the Pelham Parkway Jewish community at the time.

[6] For a recent discussion of the history of the Grand Concourse, see Rosenblum, 2009

> today, was called 'modern' in their prime. For my parents, who proudly described our family as a 'modern' family, [they] represented a pinnacle of modernity. We couldn't afford to live in them – though we did live in a small, modest, but still proudly 'modern' building, far down the hill…" ([1982] 1988: 295).

Belmont becomes a neighborhood

Much has changed in both areas since then. But despite their close geographical proximity – Belmont is only a mile east of Grand Concourse on East Fordham Road – both areas retain a different and distinctive neighborhood feel defined by their early settlement patterns. Italian settlement in Belmont started during the late 1880s, and by the 1920s the neighborhood had already become a predominantly Italian community. Donna Gabaccia, who has traced the invention and spreading of the term "Little Italy" and its relationship to actual Italian neighborhoods, traces the first report of a Bronx Little Italy in the *New York Times* in 1902 (2007: 37-38). The best indication of the emergence of 'the Fordham area' as an Italian neighborhood during the first decade of the twentieth century is the building of an Italian Catholic church in 1908, representing a major step in reaching the 'institutional completeness' of typical immigrant enclaves. Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church remains an imposing structure on 187th Street close to the Arthur Avenue intersection. Prior to its establishment in 1908, Italian residents would walk to an Irish church rather far from the neighborhood, a testament to the earlier immigrants who had settled in the area. When the diocese granted a request to open a mission in Belmont, area residents began to convene in a small storefront church on 187th Street, where mass was held in Italian, before moving to the basement of Our Lady of Mount Carmel as construction of the rest of the building continued. The church quickly became a nucleus for the immigrant neighborhood. It was a site of congregation for important turning points in the lives of its parishioners, such as communions and confirmations, weddings and funerals. The church was

also an important organizer of community events, such as street festivals and processions that celebrated saints from across the ocean (see LaRuffa, 1988, pp. 110-4; Samtur & Mastroianni, 2003, p. 33).

Belmont's early settlement along the corridor originally established by the New York and Harlem Railroad, and later followed by the Third Avenue El, led to an architectural makeup that consists of a mixture of two- to four story walk-up tenement buildings and private houses.[7] A major change in the city's building regulations – the New Law Tenement House Act of 1901 – resulted in most of the new apartment houses in the Bronx to be constructed to higher standards than the Old Law tenements built up along the elevated lines" (Derrick, 1999, p. 57). Reflecting the area's early population of working class immigrant residents, the buildings lining Arthur Avenue and 187th Street continue to resemble the early tenements of the immigrant Lower East Side rather than the spacious apartment buildings that were built along the newer subway lines penetrating the Bronx. As a result, though flanked by areas of spacious, 'modern' apartment buildings like the Grand Concourse and Pelham Parkway described above – each a mile away in either direction on Fordham Road – Belmont's lower density architectural makeup creates a distinctive atmosphere of a more intimate scale. To this day, the blocks at the heart of the neighborhood retain a lower building density compared to its surroundings, which are defined by taller six-story elevator buildings or, at the neighborhood edge, the green expanses of the Fordham University campus and the Bronx Zoo and Botanical Gardens.[8] This characteristic becomes important for the later trajectory of the neighborhood. Unlike higher density areas, where renting was the norm, Belmont's smaller buildings and single family houses translated

[7] Their diversity of design led Foglia (1977) to conclude that they were probably built by owners who worked in construction.

[8] Belmont's architectural composition changed somewhat by the high rise residential towers built in its fringes after WWII.

into a higher home ownership rate, which slowed down the moving out from the neighborhood once urban decline set in. Another important feature of this architectural makeup, particularly the commercial space of the ground floor of its buildings – lacking from the otherwise stately Art Deco buildings of the Grand Concourse – is that it allowed Arthur Avenue to retain the authentic aura of an immigrant neighborhood. While large residential buildings elsewhere experienced thorough ethnic and racial turnover, Belmont was able to transform those commercial spaces into a Little Italy despite a similar residential turnover. The intimate scale and commercial space, in other words, allowed a transformation that proceeded separately from the residential one.

1920-1950: The Golden Years

The decades of the 1920s through the 1950s are remembered as the golden years of the neighborhood, coinciding with continued development of the entire borough during the third stage of the expansion of rapid transit. Memoirs of the era portray 'Fordham' as an ethnic neighborhood that provided a relatively safe cultural haven to an immigrant community not readily accepted by the mainstream culture. In *Fordham Was a Town: A Nostalgic Look into Fordham's Little Italy of the Twenties and Thirties*, Rocky D'Erasmo, a former resident who grew up in the area, characterizes the early years of the Fordham neighborhood as a "colony of Italian immigrants" stretching "from Southern Boulevard to Park Avenue, and from Fordham Road to 180th Street" (1978, p. 1). His account is one of a neighborhood-centered social life, defined by local institutions such as the neighborhood schools, the numerous movie houses in the Fordham area that have since disappeared, and the Mount Carmel Church. D'Erasmo describes family picnics at the nearby Bronx River, neighborhood festivals of saints and food, and the life of the streets around the tenement buildings, replete with street games, trips to the candy store,

and fooling around with 'the Johnny pump' (fire hydrants) during hot summers. A generation later Samtur and Mastroianni, in their memoir about growing up on Arthur Avenue during the 50s and 60s, invoke a romantic vision of life in the safety of a cultural enclave and ask the rhetorical question: "How on earth could fifty thousand people all living in the same neighborhood claim to be 'one big family?" (2003, p. 11)

The emergence of Arthur Avenue

Arthur Avenue is an example of one of the two distinct types of shopping spaces that developed as the Bronx was rapidly urbanizing during the beginning of the twentieth century. The historiography of the Bronx presents two simultaneous narratives of its developing urbanity: one as a landscape of modernity, represented by areas like Grand Concourse and Pelham Parkway, and the other as a mosaic of relatively homogeneous ethnic neighborhoods, represented by the immigrant 'colonies' that followed the Els to job opportunities in the Bronx. The developing shopping spaces of the Bronx reflected this difference in scale. On one hand, major shopping avenues boasted big department stores. On the other, neighborhood shopping streets featured specialty food stores and pushcarts with ethnic goods alongside more traditional immigrant commercial spaces such as social clubs, cafés, and travel agencies.

The subway arrival-related development boom in the early decades of the twentieth century led to the creation of two shopping districts in the South and mid-Bronx. "A major retail, business, and entertainment center developed at the transfer point at 149th Street and Third Avenue (the 'Hub')," notes Olmsted (1989, p. 82). Acknowledging the Hub with its movie palaces and vaudeville theaters alongside boutiques and department stores, Hermalyn and Ultan

note the development of another shopping district alongside a section of Fordham Road, the major east-west thoroughfare in the middle of the borough:

> Alexander's opened a department store [at the Hub] in 1928 and a branch on Fordham Road in 1938, where it soon made more sales per square foot that any other department store in the nation. Eventually a section of the Fordham Road eclipsed the Hub as the main shopping district of the Bronx. In 1929 Loew's Theater syndicate built the Paradise Theater for $4 million on the Grand Concourse immediately south of Fordham Road; it had four thousand seats and a Baroque décor that included a ceiling painted dark blue to resemble a nighttime sky, with small light bulbs added to resemble stars and simulated clouds blown across the ceiling by a cloud machine" (1998, p. 65).

The emergence of the shopping hubs paralleled the creation of the neighborhood shopping streets. During the first thirty years of the twentieth century, at a time when the population of the Bronx increased by over a million, the sleepy villages and farms of the nineteenth century quickly turned into urban neighborhoods. Most of the daily shopping took place in the social context of the neighborhood, where vegetable, fruit, and meat markets, grocery stores and eateries, candy and ice-cream stores, and tailors, show repairers, and hardware stores coalesced into neighborhood shopping districts. They became an important component of the street scene and the social lives of the residents, alongside more formal institutions such as schools and churches. Often, these shopping districts had an ethnic background in terms of ownership and clientele, even though the predominance of any single ethnicity in any given area has often been exaggerated (see Massey and Denton, 1993).

Arthur Avenue developed as one of those neighborhood shopping streets, serving as a backdrop to the department stores and movie theaters on nearby Fordham Road. It became the focal point of the neighborhood since its early days, serving as the main shopping street of the area. Other streets surrounding Arthur Avenue also had numerous stores, such as the intersecting 187th Street and the once commercially lively 182nd Street, which has since lost its stores and

turned into a residential street with little commercial activity. D'Erasmo's memoir recounting the Fordham of the '20s and the '30s devotes attention to Arthur Avenue early in the book:

> Arthur Avenue and 187th Street crisscrossed one another and were the main streets of this Italian colony… [They] were lined with stores selling food, clothing, and household needs. One was able to buy any item of food in a store specializing in a particular product. There were meat markets selling only meat, fish stores selling only fish, pork stores selling only pork products, and you could smell the aroma of coffee blocks away coming from the coffee shops roasting coffee (1978, p. 13).

Christiano, whose grandparents immigrated from Tuscany and Naples to Belmont around the turn of the twentieth century and who grew up in the area during the '40s and '50s, notes:

> Although I lived in Tremont, a neighborhood right next door, my grandmother and mother frequently did their serious food shopping on Arthur Avenue. … One of the highlights of these shopping treks was going to the chicken market around 188th Street and Arthur Avenue, where we could select a live chicken. It would be slaughtered, plucked, cleaned, and wrapped in a few moments. … One of our final stops was DeLillo's Bakery where we'd buy the best of Italian pastries. We'd go from store to store buying fresh fish, produce, and meats. There weren't many supermarkets in the 1950s (2002, p. 88).

These memories shed light on Arthur Avenue as a characteristic neighborhood shopping street. It was defined by small sized, family owned specialty stores, typically focusing on one main product such as pork or bread. There were no supermarkets yet; the nearest thing fulfilling the function of a supermarket on the Arthur Avenue of the '40s and '50s was the indoor pushcart market, still in use as the Arthur Avenue Indoor Market, where stands have long replaced the pushcarts. The structure housing the indoor market was built by Major Fiorello LaGuardia in 1940, who abolished "the pushcart evil" during the '30s and built enclosed spaces to modernize the trade and reserve the street for more modern uses (Bluestone, 1992). Until then, pushcarts used to line up and down Arthur Avenue during the '20s and '30s, a testament to the

predominantly immigrant population of the neighborhood at the time.[9] D'Erasmo (1978) remembers: "The center of Arthur Avenue was lined with pushcarts from back to back. You could start at one end and work your way back to the other side of the street. Unlike today's self-service food markets, when shopping from the pushcarts, you pointed out the fruits or vegetables you wanted. You never picked any fruit or tried to squeeze them" (p. 13). An account of the life of a celebrated neighborhood figure – known as 'the Mayor of Belmont' – relates that his pushcart experience prior to the construction of the indoor market "was no walk in the park. He endured the heat and the more threatening bitter cold by lighting fires in small buckets to keep warm on frigid winter days" (Samtur and Mastroianni, 2003, p. 165). The indoor market provided a space for pushcart owners to avoid the elements on the street. Today, it serves as a reminder of Arthur Avenue's authentic immigrant past.

1950-1980: The troubles of the South Bronx

The opening quote of the chapter was spoken live by Howard Cosell during Game 2 of the 1977 World Series, held at the Yankee Stadium between the New York Yankees and the Los Angeles Dodgers. He was referring to a blaze at an abandoned elementary public school a few blocks west of the stadium, visible from the stands and shown live on camera twice during the game. Whether Cosell actually uttered "There it is ladies and gentlemen, the Bronx is burning" is beside the point (he didn't). The phrase came to symbolize the deterioration of South Bronx during the 1970s, a decade when the borough was losing jobs, people, and buildings almost as quickly as it had acquired them. President Jimmy Carter highlighted the blight by visiting the

[9] Pushcarts arose in the 1880s as an overwhelmingly immigrant affair, and Bluestone (1992) shows ownership in 1925 to be 63% Jewish and 32% Italian.

area on October 5, 1977. He "walked a desolate stretch of Charlotte Street in the South Bronx, drawing the world's attention to the neglect and abandonment that made the borough a symbol of urban decay" (Fernandez, 2007). The president noted several proud residents of high rise buildings, who "in the midst of devastation and blight" kept their buildings graffiti-free and took their children to the park, "just like an oasis in the midst of a desert" (*The Bronx is Burning*, 2007).

The burning buildings in the South Bronx offered a particularly dramatic vision of urban decline during the late sixties and seventies, but the root causes were far more commonplace, as Nathan Glazer (1987) has observed. Several macro factors coalesced to transform the urban setting all over the American landscape, including the economic restructuring of the Fordist system, deindustrialization, and relocation of the remaining manufacturing away from the urban core. Metropolitan areas across the United States, particularly the industrial centers in the Northeast and the Midwest experienced a steady loss of mainly low skill, working class jobs that had provided the economic backbone of many urban neighborhoods. Paradoxically, even before the urban crises of the sixties took hold, working class neighborhoods were being dismantled or razed under the heavy-handed urban renewal approach of the post-war years.[10] Urban renewal, continued suburbanization and 'white flight,' and the liberalization of the immigration quota system in 1965 led to population movements that changed the dynamics of working class ethnic neighborhoods like Belmont in older cities. Such changes converged to produce an explosive atmosphere during the 1970s.

[10] Herbert J. Gans' (1962) classic ethnography of Boston's Italian West End argued against its ghetto designation by the city elites, a charged characterization that paved the way for its eventual razing.

While urban blight was hardly confined to New York City, the deterioration took a particularly destructive shape in the form of an arson and abandonment epidemic of buildings throughout the South Bronx, visible from the cameras at the Yankee Stadium that October evening in 1977. Trends of urban decline combined with local policies such as residential rent control to create the particularly combustible mix of factors that fed the blazes and turned the deterioration of the South Bronx into an infamous symbol of urban decline. While New York's rates of poverty, job loss, or shifting ethnic and racial composition of its population were comparable to other large Northeastern and Midwestern cities, the scale, "the direct onslaught on the physical structures by elements of the population that lived in them, [and] the apparent inability or unwillingness of the city to restrain the destruction" were unparalleled, according to Glazer (1987: 271). To convey the scale of destruction, he quotes:

> Based on census estimates, 321,000 dwelling units which were part of the New York City's housing inventory in 1970 had been lost by the time of the 1981 Housing and Vacancy survey. That is, these units had either been demolished, condemned, withdrawn from the market, and boarded up and/or burned out while still under private or city ownership, converted to nonresidential use or merged with other apartments. Net losses from the supply from April 1970 through March 1981 equaled approximately 11 percent of the 1970 and 1981 housing inventory. Of these 321,000 units, almost half have been demolished, while another 31 percent are still vacant, i.e., boarded-up, partially gutted by fire and/or open to the elements. … Some of the demolitions maybe buildings which landlords have abandoned because they have lost all hope of operating them profitably in the future. Other burned-out shells might have been apartment buildings which were profitable until they burned (Stegman, 1982: 176-7, quoted in Glazer, 1987: 269).

The numbers above concern the entire New York City, but the greatest impact was in the Bronx, which lost more than one-fifth of its entire housing inventory in 1970. Noting the "onslaught on physical structures that has no parallel in the history of civilized urban life," Glazer listed several elements that made the South Bronx unique, and discussed their relative weight (1987: 271). For example, the process could not have been a simple adaptation to a declining population, as 'white flight' was being offset by incoming new groups. Likewise, while some of the destroyed

buildings were inferior to newer stock, the process was not simply a filtering out of old housing, as "great numbers of well-built structures inhabited by the stable working class, middle class, and even upper-middle class" were also affected by the destruction (p. 270). Following many other observers, Glazer suggested that special attention be paid to the prominence of the rental housing sector in New York City. The disproportionately large number of renters, the policies of rent control and stabilization, and the structuring of rent assistance to welfare recipients, created a situation where various players tolerated, or even exacerbated, the destruction as a way of minimizing their personal liabilities. For example, when financial institutions decided to freeze lending to declining areas in the South Bronx – a practice known as *redlining* – their decision exacerbated the problem. Likewise, the availability of newer, more desirable low-rent projects, coupled with a welfare provision that prioritized the rehabilitation of tenants whose buildings became uninhabitable or destroyed, minimized such tenants' inclination to put up a fight for their old buildings. Rent control led to a stable tenantry, but it also constricted the landlords' ability to keep up with increasing maintenance costs. The result was a steady reduction in maintenance, tolerated by reduced building code enforcement on part of the city government. Glazer also notes the changing demographics as a factor: the majority of welfare clients were Puerto-Rican or African American, and by the 1970s there were wide-spread fears, whether racist or rational, that incoming minorities caused real estate values to drop and crime rates to increase, as Jonathan Rieder (1982) documented in his study of Brooklyn's Canarsie. Finally, Glazer notes the role of crime, often fueled by the search for drugs. Once the destruction frenzy got under way, drug users would reportedly burglarize occupied apartments or strip unoccupied ones of their sellable building materials. Landlords reacted to such practices by 'milking' the building for what it was worth before anyone else did it. All these factors outlined by Glazer contributed to the

atmosphere of abandonment and destruction; residents couldn't get out of South Bronx neighborhoods fast enough before they turned into heaps of rubble. It is hardly a stretch to imagine how this scenario defined the all-too-possible future of Belmont in the minds of its leaders, and shaped their responses to neighborhood change, as we will see below.

The Cross-Bronx Expressway

The burning and abandonment provided a painful episode in the deterioration and physical devastation of South Bronx neighborhoods from the late 1960s through the late 1970s. About a decade before the arson epidemic got underway, however, the South Bronx was embroiled in a separate urban debacle, which provided a similar picture of urban deterioration and served as a portend of the destruction to come. I am referring to urban planner Robert Moses' Cross-Bronx Expressway (CBE), a seven-mile highway stretch that was built to channel (I-95) interstate traffic between the George Washington Bridge to New Jersey, the Triborough, Whitestone, and Throgs Neck Bridges to Long Island, and points northeast to Westchester, Connecticut, and New England. The CBE run on a west-east axis through the heart of mid-Bronx, and its building spanned roughly a decade from 1954 to 1963. Its destructive impact was described by Robert Caro (1974), who dedicated three chapters of his biography *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* to "provide a detailed case study of the devastation wreaked by the Expressway's construction in a one-mile stretch through the East Tremont neighborhood" (Bromley, 1998: 5). According to Caro (1974), the single mile of the CBE that passed through the East Tremont necessitated the demolition of 159 buildings containing 1,530 apartments, causing the eviction of 5,000 people (p. 878). After all in its planned path was demolished, the "One-Mile" section was suppressed from the street level and

contained within high walls, which amplified the noise and confined access between the two sides of the neighborhoods to overhead passes on main avenues. Growing up in the proximity of East Tremont neighborhood, Marshall Berman witnessed the arrival of the CBE, which he described as:

> This road, although jammed with heavy traffic day and night, is fast, deadly fast; speed limits are routinely transgressed, even at the dangerously curved and graded entrance and exit ramps; constant convoys of huge trucks, with grimly aggressive drivers, dominate the sight lines; cars weave wildly in and out among the trucks: it is as if everyone on this road is seized with a desperate, uncontrollable urge to get out of the Bronx as fast as wheels can take him" ([1982] 1988: 291).

Writing about urbanism in New York, he lamented Moses' "expressway world," as Berman termed it, which was diametrically opposed, and threatened to shatter, a set of earlier modernist values that cherished the street life of lively city neighborhoods, exemplified by Jane Jacobs' description of her neighborly Hudson Street in Manhattan's West Village. Beyond Moses' vision of the 'expressway world,' what made the East Tremont episode particularly painful was the seeming inexplicability of Moses' refusal to allow the original CBE path to deviate as little as two blocks to the south, running along the fringe of Crotona Park instead of through the neighborhood. The alternative route was deemed feasible, would have necessitated much less demolition and eviction ("only six small dilapidated brownstone buildings instead of fifty-four [Caro, 1974: 850]), and would have left the neighborhood essentially intact, despite restricting access to the park.

Caro's well-read biography of Moses and his damning description of the construction of the CBE through densely populated urban areas "have acquired national notoriety, viewed not only as the instruments of East Tremont's demise, but often also as prime causes of the great South Bronx crisis of the 1960 and 70s," described above (Bromley, 1998: 6). Focusing solely on the impact of the CBE on mid-Bronx neighborhoods, however, may help draw attention away

from the much larger social forces at work that created the South Bronx crisis. In an article on Caro, Moses, and the impact of the CBE on East Tremont and nearby areas, Bromley (1998) argued that Caro exaggerated Moses' role on the destruction of the South Bronx, and that the roots of the crisis were more diverse and complex. Bromley hypothesized that if Caro was right and the CBE triggered devastation beyond its immediate vicinity, the effect would be visible in the population decline charts of nearby neighborhoods, abating with distance, and increasing with time. He found no clear correlation between the arrival of the CBE and population decline trends of East Tremont and surrounding neighborhoods. Longitudinal population change data of nearby neighborhoods from 1920 to 1990 indicate, according to Bromley, that East Tremont shows "broad similarities with [population] changes in other [nearby] areas, including the Belmont neighborhood," and therefore do not sustain Caro's 'thesis' that singles out the CBE arrival as the sole cause (p. 14; see pages 11 to 15).

Bromley proceeds to discuss six other processes that affected the mid-Bronx neighborhoods in the 1960s: 1) the area had long been rated "D" by the federal Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) since its inception in 1933, deemed ripe for urban renewal and subsequently 'redlined' by private financial institutions as well, 2) East Tremont was one of the early Bronx neighborhoods built around the arrival of the El, and consisted mostly of older stock buildings, which were seen as less desirable that newer areas where construction of better housing continued, 3) the discontinuation of direct Third Avenue El service to Manhattan in 1955, complete shutdown of the remaining Bronx service in 1973, and drastic decline of Harlem Railroad trains making local stops between Fordham Road and Manhattan severely reduced public transportation links of the area to job opportunities in Manhattan, 4) the simultaneous loss of jobs in Manhattan and the Bronx, particularly the Garment District apparel industry jobs that

Bronx Jews held, 5) the 'pull' forces attracting the mostly Jewish residents of older East Tremont to newer and more elegant areas such as the Grand Concourse, Pelham Parkway, and especially Co-op City, and 6) the general role of 'planning-blight,' caused by grandiose schemes of urban renewal that often "eliminated mixed-use areas, replaces tenements and private houses with public housing and industrial parks, cut back on mass transit, and created spaces for new public institutions, many of them never build" – such as Fordham Hospital, plans for whose building were shelved in 1970 after 2,700 people were evicted and their houses already demolished (1998: 22-4).

Reflecting on the destruction of the South Bronx in his *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, Berman bemoaned its "neighborhoods transformed into garbage- and brick-strewn wilderness… hundreds of boarded-up abandoned buildings and charred and burnt-out hulks of buildings; dozens of blocks covered with nothing at all but shuttered bricks and waste" ([1982] 1988: 290-1). In his last chapter, he wonders whether the South Bronx could have warded off Moses' "expressway" vision, had the novel vocabulary and urban activism of Jacobs and her neighbors, developed a decade later, been available to them. He nods unequivocally, however, to the lure of social mobility, that modern aspiration which was surely at work in the remaking of the South Bronx of the time, regardless of the CBE:

> All Caro says here seems to be true. And yet, and yet, it is not the whole truth. … How many of us would still be in the Bronx today, caring for it and fighting for it as our own? Some of us, no doubt, but I suspect not so many, and in any case – it hurts to say it – not me. For the Bronx of my youth was possessed, inspired, by the great modern dream of mobility. To live well meant to move up socially, and this in turn meant to move out physically; to live one's life close to home was not to be alive at all. Our parents, who had moved up and out from the Lower East Side, believed this just as devoutly as we did ([1982] 1988: 326).

One aspect that has not been stressed enough in the above summary is the role of race. Glazer mentioned ethnic and racial turnover as one of the causes that intensified the abandonment of the South Bronx, given widely held expectations of imminent neighborhood decline associated with demographic turnover. As cases of neighborhood defense have been documented in the literature (the most notable being Rieder's *Canarsie*), the crucial role of race cannot be overestimated. Bromley (1998) notes, for example, that the role of the CBE on East Tremont's overall population was mitigated by the arrival of racially different minorities eager to live in buildings abandoned by former renters, who were mainly Jewish. Caro (1974) is also keenly aware of the role of race, noting that one of the advantages of the alternative route for the CBE would have been to turn the northern edge of the park into a de facto barrier, 'fortifying' the southern border of East Tremont and keeping the minorities of the South Bronx contained. In other words, Caro proposes that the CBE could have been potentially utilized as a racial boundary to stabilize the populations of the remaining white neighborhoods.

The downfall of East Tremont and subsequent abandonment of South Bronx neighborhoods have been debated widely in the literature. When the worst was over, the Bronx remained a changed borough in fundamental ways. Economist and urban planner Emanuel Tobier (1998) summarized the scale of development and deterioration of the borough fortunes during an intense twentieth century. Noting the population explosion from 200,000 to 1.3 million between 1900 and 1930, its peak of 1.5 million in 1970, Tobier pointed to the decline to 1.2 million at the end of the century. The ethnic and racial composition of the population also changed radically. At the beginning of the twentieth century the borough population was 99

percent white, consisting principally of Germans, Irish, Jewish, and Italian immigrants.[11] As Tobier notes, the overall Bronx population a century later was 81 percent non-white, composed principally of Latin American, African American, and Afro-Caribbean groups, making the Bronx the borough with the smallest European-origin population in the city (1998; Badillo, 2007). Finally, dwindling jobs within the borough and the flight of Manhattan-employed middle-classes to the suburbia resulted in a drop of the general socio-economic status of the borough population from middle-class to predominantly poor by the end of the century. These major changes in the socioeconomic and ethno-racial composition of the borough population occurred in the three decades between 1950 and 1980 (Tobier 1998).

Belmont in crisis: the 1960s set in

While there was no immediate, strong 'push' factor comparable to East Tremont's CBE, many of the factors at work in the crisis of the South Bronx were also affecting Belmont. Its location south of the boundary between South and North Bronx – East Fordham Road – and the fact that it was one of the earlier Bronx neighborhoods with tenement-style housing led to the redlining of the area, restricting access to funds from federal agencies or private institutions to improve housing or invest in the area businesses. While never massive, the exodus of later generation Italians had set in as soon as WWII was over, as an expanding suburbia provided more inviting housing for young families compared to walk-up tenements. The termination of the Third Avenue El service in 1973, which had been largely responsible for the development of the neighborhood in the beginning of its eight decades of service, hindered relatively quick and inexpensive access to Manhattan. Finally, waves of minority residents began arriving to take the

[11] It is of course only in retrospective, as the whiteness literature has shown, that we can count Ellis Island era immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe as white.

place of leaving Italians, from Puerto Rico, other Latin American countries after the mid-1960s, and other areas of Manhattan and the South Bronx that were undergoing urban renewal. This was in line with the transformation of the Bronx as a dormitory for the poor, "a place for low-income people to live on the 'magnificent distances,' as viewed from upper Manhattan from across the Harlem River by urban planners in the 1920s who talked about moving the noxious uses from the West Side of Manhattan elsewhere (Westphal, quoted in Badillo, p. 21). In short, like its neighbor to the south, Belmont was ripe for urban turnover, and appeared set on the path of ethno-racial succession.

As the CBE-led displacement of the Jewish population of East Tremont was overtaken by the larger crisis of the South Bronx, things started to "fall off" in Belmont, in the words of a community organizer. A third generation owner of a grocery store, which has operated successfully on Arthur Avenue for the better part of a century, described the 1960s in terms of the South Bronx crisis and arriving minorities: "You probably heard about the South Bronx is burning. They would burn the buildings, and even though they may have remained structurally sound, they'd tear them down. Those people moved north and came over these parts of the Bronx." He noted two distinct problems that affected business: worsening security and financial climate, such as inability to obtain finance for capital improvements, including acquiring insurance, mortgage, and home or business improvement loans: "This zone became redlined – so risky banks would never give a loan. You see these pull-down gates? They never used to be here before the 1960s. We almost pulled out [of the neighborhood by closing the business]."

Demographic indicators portray a changing neighborhood during those decades. Census data show that Belmont lost over a quarter of its entire population between 1960 and 1980 (8,400

TABLE 2.1: Total population change in Belmont, 1960-2000[12]

Census Tracts	**1960**	**1970**	**1980**	**1990**	**2000**	Percent Change **1970-1980**
385	7,178	7,447	3,355	4,010	4,071	-54.9
387	4,462	4,381	3,127	2,938	3,392	-28.6
389	5,698	4,695	3,604	3,745	4,558	-23.2
391	7,304	7,305	5,708	5,685	6,372	-21.9
393	6,922	6,747	7,369	7,541	7,731	+9.2
TOTAL	**31,564**	**30,575**	**23,163**	**23,919**	**26,124**	**-24.2**

SOURCE: Social Explorer Tables (SE), Censuses 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000, U.S. Census Bureau and Social Explorer.

people), though a portion of that decline (one third) had been restored by 2000 (Table 2.1). The sharpest net loss occurred within a single decade, the 1970s, and was concentrated on the census tracts covering the outlying blocks of the neighborhood (see Fig. 2.1 on page 59). The area also experienced dramatic, if gradual, ethnic and racial turnover (Table 2.2 on page 58). Between 1960 and 2000, the portion or Belmont residents that reported Italian ancestry declined steadily from nearly 55 percent to just fewer than 10 percent. From a racial standpoint, the US Census reported almost 98 percent of the Belmont's population as racially white in 1960, while this percentage dropped to 42 in 1980 and 15 in 2000. Table 2.2 shows that residents of Latino descent and African Americans (60 and 20 percent of the 2000 population respectively) replaced departing Italians. Although Belmont retained Italian residential predominance until 1980, the area had undergone an almost complete residential de-Italianization by the end of the millennium.

[12] NOTE: Belmont consists of the following census tracts for the purposes of this study: 385, 387, 389, 391, and 393 (see Fig. 2.1 on page 59). Since Belmont boundaries 'contracted' during the 60s and 70s, I have chosen Bromley's (1998) conservative definition of Belmont, excluding census tracts 371/3/5/9 and 383 to its south, known as Northern East Tremont now (see also Maida, 1987). The area covered by these tracts is roughly square shaped, bounded by East Fordham Road in the north, Southern Boulevard in the east, East 182nd Street in the south, and Park Avenue in the west.

TABLE 2.2: Ethnic and racial change of the Belmont population, 1960-2000

Year	Total population	Percent White	Percent Black	Percent Hispanic or Latino	Percent Italian ancestry	Percent foreign born
1960	31,564	97.6	2.2	–	54.7*	31.3
1970	30,575	82.1	16.6	–	37.6*	23.9
1980	23,163	42.4†	16.8†	38.4†	33.9	26.4
1990	23,919	27.3†	17.6†	52.9†	17.5	26.2
2000	26,124	15.1†	20.2†	59.6†	9.6	30.5

SOURCE: Social Explorer Tables (SE), Censuses 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000, U.S. Census Bureau and Social Explorer.

* 'Foreign stock' is a category used to determine national origin before the ancestry question was introduced in the 1980 Census. It combines the foreign-born population with the native population of foreign or mixed parentage. The numbers presented above were calculated by adding respondents born in Italy to those natives born of Italian parent(s). These numbers do not capture third and later generation Italians, unlike the more flexible 1980 ancestry question that counts anyone who declares Italian ancestry. Therefore they provide conservative estimates of Italian national origin.

†"Hispanic" is a self-identified category introduced in the 1980 US Census as an ancestry group, including any persons with origin from the Latin American countries and Spain. The term "Latino" was added to the category in the 2000 Census. Persons belonging to this category can belong to any race, but the racial categories were affected in that it is possible to now distinguish "whites" as a racial category that includes persons of Hispanic origin from "non-Hispanic whites." Table two presents a racial breakdown of "black" and "white" for the 1960 and 1970 figures, while numbers from 1980, 1990, and 2000 belong to the "non-Hispanic white" and "non-Hispanic black" categories.

The changing demographics of the neighborhood led to turf skirmishes in public areas of Belmont. According to Jimmy, a community leader involved in the Belmont Arthur Avenue LDC for many years, a crucial change that happened at the turn of the 1970s was the buildup of critical masses of Hispanics and blacks confronting the remaining Italians: "It wasn't holocaust or world war or anything, but still tension," he noted. "Playgrounds, school blocks, fights, police would get hurt sometimes, offending nasty words, things like that. Things fell off; it was getting out of hand." News reports of the time confirm his account. In 1967, policemen had to set up

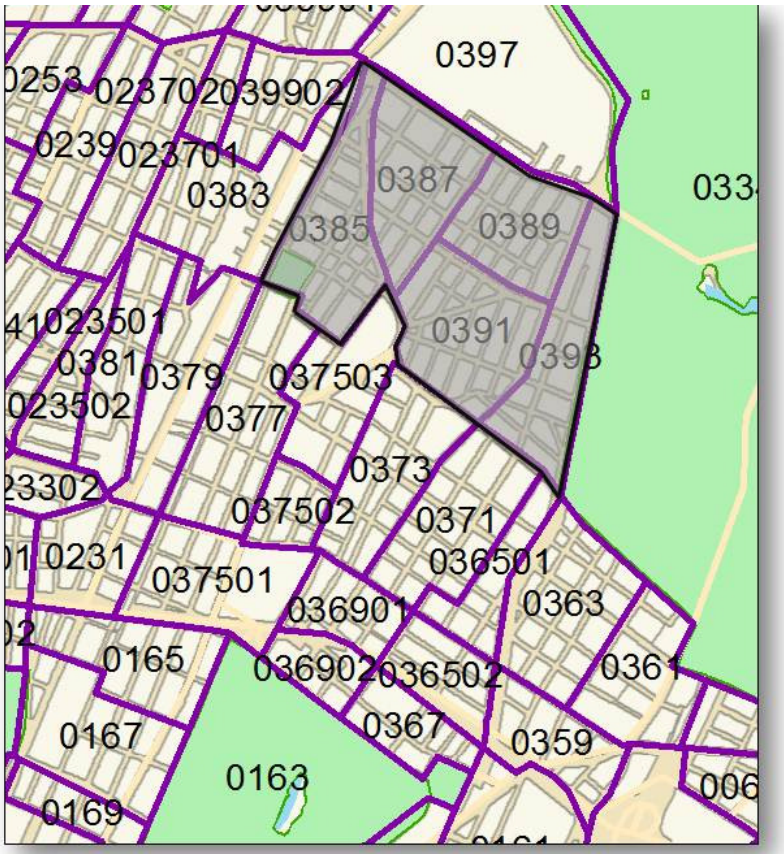

FIG. 2.1. Area covered in the study, by US census tract.
Source: US Census Bureau. Available at www.census.gov

temporary headquarters at Belmont Community Center to monitor possible repeat conflicts after a young Puerto Rican was beaten at Ciccarone Park.[13]

The sense of change was shared by people who lived or spent time on Arthur Avenue during later decades, including the 1980s and 1990s. An Albanian owner of a pizzeria, who grew up in a nearby neighborhood but spent time on Arthur Avenue during the 1990s, points to the decline of a tight-knit ethnic neighborhood and the sense of security it provided: "I remember the lady looking from the window in the second floor in that building [pointing to a second-floor window nearby]. [Then] a lot of people started to move away. Late 80s early 90s, many moved away, gave up businesses, new people moved in." Another restaurant owner from Montenegro

[13] See "Park in Bronx is 'Turf' and Battleground to Youths," The New York Times, Apr. 5, 1967

points to the illicit drug trade on neighborhood corners: "It was an Italian neighborhood, 10 years ago, maybe 12. Then it got all Mexican, Spanish, very bad, very bad. This corner right here was a drug corner, when I moved here. Now it's coming back." 'Turf' incidents also continued in later decades. In 1986, the New York Times announced that "200 officers [were] sent to the Bronx after new ethnic violence," after an attack on two Puerto Ricans in the vicinity of Ciccarone Park, which left one of them with a broken jaw, led to a retaliatory attack on two Yugoslav brothers a week later, leaving one with a fractured skull.[14]

Community leaders remembered the difficult decades as well. Jimmy, who was quoted above, described the 'decline' years as spanning roughly from the late 1960s through the mid-80s: "Changing demographics, declining economy… some communities collapsed, some transformed. The social pathologies of crime and prejudice… Belmont went through gravity changes, but unlike all those Irish, German, Polish communities throughout the South Bronx, Belmont held on." As he further explained, the area saw immigration from Puerto Rico, followed by Hondurans, Guatemalans, Argentineans, Venezuelans, Bolivians, Ecuadorians, Columbians, each forming small colonies. There was also the incoming immigration of the Albanian population from the late 60s onwards. Another community leader involved with the local community board also noted to role of immigration in changing the neighborhood demographics: "The community has changed due to immigration. We've had mostly immigrants from Kosovo, Mexico, etc. In the last twenty years there's been a lot of moving out as well."

[14] See articles by Crystal Nix on July 30 and August 5, and Samuel G. Freedman on August 6, 1986. Numerous news accounts of the time document the emerging and continuous concerns and efforts of area high schools in containing the ethnic and racial conflict among their diversifying student bodies (Rimer, 1984; Gonzalez, 1992a, 1992b; Flynn, 1999; Filkins, 2001a). For an analysis of the Albanian youth in nearby Pelham Parkway's Christopher Columbus High School, see Pinderhughes' (1997) comparative study of urban youth in three New York City neighborhoods.

Two other studies of Belmont confirm the decline and neighborhood change that began in late 1960s and gathered momentum in the 1970s. An unpublished PhD dissertation by Maida-Herman, tellingly titled *Belmont: A Community Fighting to Survive*, lists five interview quotes with area residents of the 1980s, confirming many aspects of change mentioned above, but primarily the role of ethnic and racial turnover:

Elderly, successful lawyer of Italian background, still living in Belmont: "It used to be that young people would leave when they could afford to. They would go to the other parts of the city, Long Island or Westchester. They moved away because of urban decay and the changes in the population of the neighborhood."

A numbers runner in his mid-thirties, also of Italian background: "A lot of Puerto Ricans started to move into the neighborhood and a lot of Italians started to leave. The riots started with integration in Roosevelt High School. A lot of teenagers went to jail for beating up on blacks. The ones that didn't go to jail moved out when they got married."

An Italian social service worker who resides in the community: "The most evident changes in the area are the shrinking perimeters of the neighborhood and the fact that the blacks and Puerto Ricans are part of the neighborhood now."

A teacher at Our Lady of Mount Carmel School of Italian background, who grew up in Belmont but eventually moved to Westchester: "The neighborhood is changing. It's multi-national now. A lot of people used to move out. They are moving in now, but they're not Italians."

An Albanian man who had lived in Belmont for eighteen years at the time of the interview: "Eighteen years ago, the neighborhood was all Italian with a little Albanian. Now that has changed. Those [Italian family] houses aren't here anymore. If [black and Puerto Rican] ethnics weren't mixed, those houses and people in them would still be here. But I feel safe here. If someone is in trouble people come to help" (Maida-Herman, 1987: 116-119).

Another study of the neighborhood, titled *Monte Carmelo* and published a year later (LaRuffa, 1988), relied on ethnographic research conducted during the early 1980s. The author found out that "people frequently say that they wish to move out of Monte Carmelo because 'the neighborhood is going bad'," and attributed respondents' changing perception of the neighborhood to a significant decline in the Italian-American population, substantial rise in the Black population, and the arrival of eight hundred Puerto Ricans by 1960, a number which kept

growing and surpassed 5,300 by 1970 (p. 19). The author also recounts the ensuing 'turf' wars in the streets and schools of the neighborhood.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the history of Belmont from its formation at the turn of the twentieth century to its imminent dissolution as a predominantly Italian neighborhood during the 1970s. Disruptive urban renewal projects like the CBE, coupled with the urban crisis that engulfed the South Bronx from the late 1960s onward, led to the dissolution of many neighborhoods like Jewish East Tremont, and foretold the likely future of Belmont given the steady departure of its Italian residents and arrival of minorities. The eventual emergence of a successful "Little Italy" defied the usual scenarios of ethnic succession or 'fortress' neighborhood, creating a path of maintaining the neighborhood's Italian identity that eschewed residential ethnicity in favor of Arthur Avenue's commercial ethnicity. While the decline of residential ethnicity was described in this chapter, the efforts of Belmont community leaders in upholding the commercial ethnicity of the neighborhood as Italian were helped by the arrival of the numerically small, yet highly influential immigrant group of Albanians. The following chapter describes their particular immigration trajectory and impact on the commercial scene of Belmont, while chapter 4 analyzes the nature of ethnic affinity that emerged between them and the Italians of the area.

CHAPTER 3

The Albanian Arrival in Belmont

Albanians began arriving to the Belmont area in the late 1960s. Their numbers were never large, especially compared to other non-Italian groups that were also settling in Belmont at the time.[1] As we will explore in greater detail in the following chapter, their influence on the emergence of Belmont's "Little Italy" belies their relatively small numbers. Moreover, their involvement with Arthur Avenue emulates the Italian involvement after the 1970s. From the early days of their arrival, Albanians pursued employment opportunities by working in the Italian businesses of Arthur Avenue, and business opportunities through opening their own establishments and buying real estate in the area. Albanians also continue to socialize significantly in the area; for over three decades Arthur Avenue has represented one of the most important Albanian public spaces in the US. But despite working, shopping, socializing, and conducting business on Arthur Avenue and surrounding blocks, Albanians never resided in Belmont in large numbers, or for extended amounts of time. They have preferred other North and Northeast Bronx neighborhoods such as Mosholu Parkway, Pelham Parkway, Pelham Bay and Williamsburg, and when sufficiently successful, the wealthier Westchester County immediately north of the city limit. In other words, they engage in the commercial realm which has since been redefined as Little Italy, but refrain from the residential realm which has since undergone almost complete de-Italianization, as shown in chapter 2. This chapter briefly summarizes their immigration history, illustrating the transnational nature of the emerging 'affinity' between

[1] Table 2.2 on page 58 showed that residents of Hispanic descent constituted 60 percent of the Belmont population in 2000, while another 20 percent was comprised of African Americans.

Italians and Albanians and situating this affinity within the opportunity structure created by transnational flows of people and culture.

Early Albanian immigration to the US

There have been three discernible waves of Albanian immigration to the United States throughout the twentieth century. The first took place roughly between 1900 and 1930, at a time when state boundaries in the Balkans were emerging in the wake of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. This early wave of immigrants has been notoriously difficult to document due to the mismatch between ethnic identification and the fluid nature of emerging nation states in Eastern and Southern Europe. Documentation problems exist because the US Census had not instituted the "Albanian" category yet; Albania was the last country in the Balkans to declare independence from the Ottoman rule in 1912. As a result, immigrants of Albanian background often entered the United States registered as Turks or Greeks, making their numbers difficult to ascertain. This early wave of Albanian immigrants located mainly in the Northeast, primarily Boston, the Greater Boston area, New York, and to a lesser extent, the industrial cities of the Midwest, such as Detroit and Chicago. By the late 1930s, their overall numbers were "estimated to be in the range of 35,000 to 60,000 people, most of whom were Orthodox Christians living in New England" (Federal Writers; Project 1975: 5, quoted in Trix, 2003: 10). As has been often noted about Ellis Island era immigrants from Southern Europe, they saw themselves as sojourners with a desire to accumulate wealth until their eventual return, commonly travelling back and forth between Albania and the United States to bring other family members, find brides, and the like (Trix, 2003: 8). But while the majority of these early immigrants were of a rural background, a minority of them had high levels of education and aspired to help the nascent

nationalist movement in Albania. Agitating for independence, they became part of the Albanian 'national awakening' movement, and helped define the entire group's role in political terms, as an avant-garde émigré elite laboring for the future of the young nation from afar. Several important members of this group organized *Vatra*, "a Pan-Albanian Federation … founded in 1912 in Boston to coordinate nationalistic support for the survival of Albania," and got involved in producing anti-Ottoman, progressive nationalistic publications (Trix, 2003: 4). As a result, the legacy of this early group of immigrants is tightly entwined with the emerging Albanian nationalism of the time.

A further characteristic of that first generation of Albanian immigrants was that many of its public figures were from the southern regions of Albania, traditionally associated with a more progressive, educated section of the population. While the majority of such public figures obtained their higher education in elite schools in Istanbul or other capitals of the region under Ottoman rule, they also happened to be Orthodox Christians.[2] They established churches in areas of early settlement such as South Boston, and proceeded to use them as centers of agitation and organizing against Ottoman rule and Greek influence after the declaration of independence in 1912.[3] Some of those immigrants returned to Albania for the national cause – occasionally heading short-lived governments – only to be neutralized or ousted by political opponents, disillusioned by the ongoing territorial shuffling of the newly 'independent' territories by the Great Powers, or overthrown and persecuted by the eventual establishment of the Enver Hoxha regime immediately after the end of WWII. Albanian borders were sealed, exchanges curtailed,

[2] However, the Greek invasion of southern Albania in 1913 precipitated a new wave of Albanian Muslims to immigrate to the US, according to Trix (2003: 7-8)

[3] Maria Todorova (1996, 1997) has described the role of the nineteenth century Bulgarian church in building a nationalism that highlighted religious difference from the Ottoman Empire, but also independence from the Greek Orthodox Church.

and it soon became clear that the Hoxha regime was there to stay. The cause that defined a generation of Albanian immigrants to the US lost its relevance.

Albanian immigration to the US during the 1960s

The second wave of Albanian immigration to the US began in the late 1960s, coinciding with the post-1965 liberalization of the quota-based immigration law in the United States.[4] In similar fashion to the first wave, their numbers have been difficult to establish officially, as most entered the United States under the Yugoslav category. The Albanians that started arriving to Arthur Avenue in the late 1960s – interviews confirm about twenty families living in Belmont as early as 1968 – were part of this second wave. Moored in the geopolitical considerations of the Cold War, their story is more circuitous and interesting than typical post-1965 trajectories of immigrants who arrived to the US largely through use of the family reunification provisions of the new law. Throughout the 1960s, in the hopes of encouraging defections from within the communist bloc, the US Congress instituted a policy of acceptance and assistance towards Albanian refugees that managed to escape through Albanian borders into Yugoslavia. The implementation of this policy was trusted to the Vatican. Given its proximity to the Iron Curtain, the Roman Catholic Church in Italy was authorized to ensure safe passage of the Albanian refugees to the United States, including establishing temporary refugee camps in Italy. Trix (2003) claims that this immigration was intended for Roman Catholic Albanians, and mentions two Detroit-based Albanian community leaders that facilitated the move from Yugoslav

[4] In her *The Albanians in Michigan*, Frances Trix (2003) identifies another wave of Albanian refugees arriving between 1945 and 1960 (see page 9). According to her, they fled Albania after the Communists gained power, having allied with the anti-Communist resistance during the war. A Kosovar respondent interested in the history of the Albanian immigration to the US mentioned these refugees to me, reporting that they used to congregate on the Lower East Side, and had even opened an Albanian café or two at the time. No trace of their businesses remains today.

territories to refugee camps in Italy set up by the Roman Catholic Church.[5] The US agreement with Vatican constituted the receiving end of this immigration.

Yugoslavia stood at the sending end of the network. Established as a federal system comprising of several republics, its union was predicated on a delicate balance of power between the federal government and the member republics, which were ethnically different from each-other. Many of the six republics had also considerable ethnic diversity within them. The Republic of Serbia was one of them, since it included the independent province of Kosovo, which was largely comprised of Albanian ethnics. Significant Albanian minorities lived also within the republics of Macedonia and Montenegro. It is said that the Yugoslav government at the time saw an opening in the US policy of offering safe passage to communism defectors. Allowing Albanians to take advantage of the US policy constituted an opportunity for several Yugoslav republics to alter their ethnic balance by reducing the numbers of Albanians living in them. [6] Political, economic and demographic pressures created incentives for many Albanians to emigrate from the Yugoslav republics (Ragaru and Dymi, 2004: 47). Soon many Albanians from the aforementioned Yugoslav territories produced papers showing they had escaped from Albania – the target country of the policy – and were not discouraged from enlisting. In preparation for their passage to the US, Vatican ensured their travel to Italy, where the incoming Albanians would be accommodated in refugee camps as they were being processed and their

[5] The first was Prenk Gruda, who was born in Montenegro and emigrated to Detroit sometime during the 1950. According to Trix (2003), he visited Yugoslavia in 1967, at which point who convinced many Albanians to emigrate, sponsoring the immigration status of many once they made it to the United States. Trix also mentions Father Primus Prenk Ndrevashaj, "who himself escaped from Albania in 1952, served on the staff of the Pontifical Office of Immigration in Rome, through which thousands of Catholic Albanians made their way to the United States [in the late 1960s and 1970s]" (p. 25).

[6] Trix (2003) claims: "It … appeared that the Montenegrin government actively encouraged emigration of Albanians from their republic" but gives no source (p. 10).

papers for travel to the US were being arranged. As a result, the immigrants of this wave "are principally from Albanian populations outside Albania… [including] Muslim Albanians from … Macedonia and the Kosovo region in Serbia, as well as Roman Catholic Albanians from Montenegro and Kosova" (Trix, 2003: 9)

It is in that transitory period in Italy that the story of the 'affinity' between the Albanians and Italians of Arthur Avenue begins. Though data remains spotty, many refugees reportedly stayed in Italy anywhere between six months to two years. Often of humble backgrounds, these refugees had little education or skills of use in industrial societies. Many learned Italian while waiting for papers in Italy, and found work in construction or the restaurants of the cities where they lived. When their green cards were ready, they took the trip from Italy to New York, arriving as permanent residents. Once in the United States, they encountered no Albanian enclaves or employment niches they could exploit from the previous wave of Albanian immigration. Their working knowledge of Italian and familiarity with the restaurant business did prove to be relevant skills, however. They gravitated towards the remaining old New York Italian neighborhoods, at the opportune moment in the late 1960s when such neighborhoods were beginning to dissolve under the combined pressures of white flight and racial turnover. That historical moment created what Merton (1996) has called an opportunity structure for Albanian incorporation into Arthur Avenue.

The Italian stopover of the second Albanian immigration wave to the US proved to be an unpopular interview topic with my respondents. There are several reasons why this may be the case. First, Albanians may have experienced discrimination in Italy, but have chosen to suppress that initial experience in order to maximize the chances of their ethnic affinity with Italians in the

United States. Second, many who benefitted from the particular immigration network of the late 1960s originated from Yugoslav republics, not the Hoxha communist regime in Albania that may have been the initial target of the program. While immigration policies rarely work the way they are intended to, it is easy to see the rationale for downplaying the whole affair, given the mismatch between governmental intention and the reality of implementation.

The third reason has to do with the reconstruction of the immigration experience in the United States. Just when the late 1960s wave of Albanian immigrants began to arrive to the United States, ethnic groups like Italians were experiencing a well-documented ethnic revival. As many observers have noted, this revival often included representations of the group's immigrant past that served as thinly veiled attacks on minority gains instituted as a result of the progressively successful Civil Rights movement. To illustrate, the ethnic revival of the 1970s typically reenacted the early immigration group history as one of endurance and hard work in face of exploitation and discrimination, depicting downtrodden people who overcame adversity. This aspect of the ethnic revival has been documented by the 'whiteness literature' in recent decades, which has pointed to the systematic downplaying of institutional or governmental help that was available to 'white ethnics' like Italians, often serving as justification for the rejection of 'affirmative action' policies that were portrayed as providing unfair advantage and government support to racial minority groups in the US.[7] In a similar light, Albanian immigrants may be suppressing the collective memory of their Italian sojourn on the way to the United States, in order to downplay any potentially mitigating factors – government help in achieving fast legal status – to building a narrative of personal endurance and success in the face of adversity.

[7] For a brief review and sociological critique of the 'whiteness literature,' developed mainly by historians, see Alba (2007)

Albanian immigration to the US during the 1990s

The third wave of Albanian immigration to the US dates back to the early 1990s. Two important events that took place in the 1990s changed the dynamics, pace, and composition of the Albanian immigration to the US. The first was the collapse of state socialism throughout Eastern Europe, including Albania, at the turn of the 1990s. Many Albanians immigrated to neighboring Greece and Italy, where they continue to constitute one of the biggest immigrant groups to date. Others immigrated to the United States, a progressively more desirable destination as the neighboring economies faced saturation of their labor markets. Members of this third wave are typically better educated compared to earlier refugees, and often have professional backgrounds that they attempt to break into after an initial period of adjustment.[8]

The second event that shaped the third wave of Albanian immigration to the US during the 1990s was the attempted ethnic cleansing of Kosovo by the Milosevic regime. Many Kosovar Albanians immigrated to the US in the years preceding the Kosovo War and subsequent NATO-led bombing of Belgrade and other military infrastructure in 1999. The dissolution of federal Yugoslavia has led to wars in Bosnia and Croatia, and the situation in Kosovo had been deteriorating rapidly following measures such as the suspension of the autonomous status of the province of Kosovo in 1989, mass expulsions of Kosovar Albanians from the workforce throughout 1990-1, and the forced closing, or restriction to Serbo-Croatian only, of Albanian-language education in elementary and higher education institutions. Facing soaring unemployment and abuse from the justice system and the police, many chose to leave. Kosovar immigration networks that developed after the WWII were not US-centric, however.

[8] The most thorough overview of emigration from post-communist Albania remains the edited volume by Russell King, Nicola Mai, and Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers, eds, *The New Albanian Migration*, Sussex Academic Press, 2005.

Immigration to the United States was slow during the decades immediately after the war, while the reconstruction of the Western Europe was absorbing enormous amounts of labor. Facing labor shortages, Western European governments had established regimes of importing labor – the most publicized case remain the "guest worker" programs in Germany, known as *gastarbeiter* – from countries with labor surplus such as Turkey and Yugoslavia. Kosovar Albanians had been similarly immigrating to Western European countries such as Switzerland, Belgium, Sweden and Germany.[9] The situation was reversed in the 1990s. The Western European immigration regime changed considerably after the collapse of communism, seeking to curtail illegal immigration from Asia and Africa, even as the European Union instituted the process of the 'Eastern Enlargement' as the decade wore on. As Western Europe sought to tighten its boundaries, the US became a more viable destination and emerged as a new host country for Kosovar Albanians.

In ways that are reminiscent of immigrants from the Albanian south at the turn of the twentieth century, and similar to the post-1990 immigrants arriving from Albania, many members of the Kosovar immigration were professionals who often fled, or were fired, from professional jobs in Kosovo due to their ethnicity. Leaving behind a deteriorating situation in Kosovo, they turned Arthur Avenue into a public center of political fervor in mobilizing the United States to pay attention to the situation in the Balkans and act against the Milosevic regime. As we will discuss in the next chapter, the political aspect adds one more layer of complexity to the Albanian diaspora in the United States, and particularly on Arthur Avenue. Overall, estimates of the population of Albanian descent in the United States range from a

[9] For a more nuanced understanding of Albanian migration to Western Europe after WWII, see Blumi (2003).

conservative 100,000 to a high of 500,000.[10] In the Bronx alone, Albanians were estimated to number anywhere between 26,000 and 80,000 in 2000 (Ragaru and Dymi, 2004: 49).

Ethnic group formation mechanisms

Two characteristics of the Albanian immigration to the United States become important in explaining their developing 'affinity' with Italians on Arthur Avenue. The first stems from the socioeconomic background of the second wave of Albanian immigrants starting around the mid-1960s and continuing through the 1970s and 80s. This group arrived to the United States with few professional skills, but their stopover in Italy equipped them with a working knowledge of Italian and familiarity in construction and, particularly, the restaurant business. Owning a pizzeria and/or working as a waiter in a restaurant were no longer desirable occupations to later generation Italian Americans, which created an opening for the development of an Albanian occupational niche.

The second characteristic of the Albanian immigration to the US was the problematic nature of their ethnic group formation in the United States. The transition from administrative provinces of the Ottoman Empire to the emergence of state boundaries during the first third of the twentieth century in the Balkans resulted in a fragmentation of populations that self-identified as Albanian between several national borders, including Albania, the predominantly Albanian-populated province of Kosovo within the Yugoslav Republic of Serbia, significant Albanian minority populations within the separate Yugoslav Republics of Macedonia and

[10] Presenting results from the 2000 Census Supplementary Survey, Ragaru and Dymi (2004: 48) estimated the number of Albanians in the US minimally at around 100,000, while predicting that a major share of the "Yugoslavian" category, which counts 288,347 excluding separately counted Serbs and Croats, must also be Albanian. On the higher end, Trix (2003: 12) cites personal communication with the National Albanian American Council, who put the number of Albanian immigrants and their descendants possibly over 500,000.

Montenegro, and even a minority population within northern Greece. As each of these states embarked on nation-building projects, their respective Albanian populations developed subjectivities with distinctive features. Therefore when they arrived to the United States, typical group formation strategies were not available to immigrants originating from such a fragmented statehood landscape. It can be argued that other factors can assume a unifying role as alternative group formation strategies in lieu of a problematic national origin, such as religion, language, region(alism), and even socio-economic characteristics. I discuss the problems associated with each of those potential alternative strategies as follows.

Religion

Religion could not readily function as a unification or community building strategy for Albanians in the United States. Albanians have traditionally belonged to three main religions, reflecting influences of different powers during various historical stages. Within Albania, estimates of religious affiliation show about 70 percent of the population as Muslim, 20 percent as Catholic, and the remaining 10 percent as Christian Orthodox. These numbers obscure further differentiations within each putative religious group. For example, being Muslim has carried different connotations in Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania. In Kosovo, Islam has generally symbolized the primary difference between Albanians and the various Slavic populations of Yugoslavia. In Macedonia, as Burcu Akan Ellis (2003) has shown, Islam and more particularly knowledge of Turkish continue to signal connotations of urbanity, harking back a century in marking affiliation with the Porte while the region was still under Ottoman rule. In Albania, the association with the Ottoman Empire has riddled Islam with symbolic representations of un-

European backwardness. In short, even membership in the seemingly same religious group has developed different connotations within different national boundaries.

Discussions of Albanian religiosity cannot brush aside the vast literature that, despite variations of nuance, unites on the notion that Albanians have never subscribed strongly to any religion when such affiliations would clash with clan affiliations or, particularly at the turn of the twentieth century, symbols other than religion (in this case language) were chosen as rallying points for building a unifying national identity. It is no coincidence that such debates consumed the first wave of Albanian immigrants to the US early in the twentieth century, when religious differences had to be put aside by focusing on unifying language against the common 'enemy' – the perils of nation-building at a time when the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire created land grab opportunities for neighboring powers. In a well-known illustration, a nominally Muslim leading figure of the nascent Albanian nationalism, who had immigrated to Boston in the 1900s, got ordained as a Christian Orthodox priest and established the autocephalous Albanian Orthodox Church in 1908 in Boston to minimize the Greek influence over the nascent Albanian nation. No immediately identifiable threats of the same gravity to the Albanian 'cause' galvanized the second wave of Albanian immigrants to the US in the 1970s, probably since the vilification of communism rarely took religious overtones.

Neither was Islam, the religious background of the majority of Albanians, a valuable currency in their incorporation efforts in the US, particularly in Italian Catholic neighborhoods like Belmont. It is not hard to see why religion did not serve as a group formation strategy to Albanians in the US, despite anecdotal evidence of many devout practitioners among the late 1960 immigrant wave. The lack of potential negative identification of Albanians with Islam after 9/11 speaks to the success of their strategy of ethnic affinity, and attendant claims to whiteness.

Language

Language would provide the likeliest candidate for an emerging Albanian nation, and became the rallying point of the 'Albanian National Awakening' movement at the turn of the twentieth century. The movement gained particular urgency in light of the efforts of the retreating Ottoman rule in the Balkans to hold on to its provinces by banishing instruction in local languages. The Albanian language happens to be classified as a member the Indo-European language family, and constitutes a distinctive branch of its own within it – a much touted fact among the Albanian elites anxious to steer the geopolitical repositioning of the new nation towards Europe after the split from the Ottoman Empire. However, Albanian is divided between the northern Gheg and southern Tosk dialects, which further divide into four and five sub-dialects respectively. While the distinction between the two main dialects is old, it is only in 1978 that a national language symposium in Albania established the Tosk (southern dialect) as the Standard Albanian. The divide was further strengthened by its loose association with regional and religious divides. Albanian historiography has always assigned the Tosk dialect of southern regions a special role in the canonical development of the Albanian national awakening literature, associating Tosk with an enlightened elitism and Gheg with a comparative backwardness, treating literary expressions in Gheg as exotic. It has been argued that the socialist regime had a strong hand in this historiographical construct, as Enver Hoxha was born in the southern city of Gjirokaster, and in his quest for unchallenged power, he was particularly ruthless in repressing northern Albanian elites, physically and symbolically.

I experienced the importance of this divide personally as I was conducting research on Arthur Avenue. The majority of my respondents were from mid- or northern Albanian regions,

while I am from the south. Respondents would notice my ('lack of') accent and typically ask where I was from. The question was two-fold: they were trying to determine whether I was from any of the ex-Yugoslav territories or Albania, and if so, whether I was from northern or southern Albania. The conversation would usually conclude with a comment about the 'purity' of my Albanian.

Socio-economic similarities

Lastly, it has been often noted that immigrants can utilize individual similarities in socio-economic background in developing symbolic group boundaries in new settings. The layered nature of the Albanian immigration to the United Stated throughout the entire twentieth century has made such a group strategy problematic. My interviews revealed consistent references to differences between each group of Albanians who emigrated during the 1990s from post-communist Albania, conflict-ridden Kosovo, and pre-1990 immigrants from then-Yugoslav regions. These differences were mentioned by many non-Albanian respondents, including storeowners and community leaders, which suggest durable divides. The marks of distinction were expressed in terms of elitism and professional status of each immigrant wave. They suggest the workings of multiple layers of symbolic boundaries that become relevant in studying emerging strategies of group formation and incorporation.

Conclusion

The ethnic 'affinity' between Albanians and Italians is neither coincidental nor should it be taken for granted. This chapter presented a brief history of Albanian immigration to the United States, focusing on the particular trajectory of what I called the second immigration wave

(late 1960s to the 1980s). This summary showed that the fragmented nation-state history of post-Ottoman Balkans renders Albanian ethnicity an elusive social construct. The layered Albanian immigration to the United States has translated into a challenging landscape of 'groupness' – or community building – making group formation strategies based on national origin, language, religion, regionalism, and socio-economic background open-ended forms that can act as intra-group boundaries while maintaining inter-group divides. Given that boundaries remain malleable and contextual, the openness of the Albanian 'groupness' has structured the dynamics of their incorporation on Arthur Avenue. Lack of Albanian enclaves, as well as familiarity with Italian due to their passage through Italy, may have contributed to their gravitation towards Italian enclaves upon arrival in the late 1960s and afterwards. Albanian arrival may have been seen favorably in the context of the threat of ethnic and racial turnover in such neighborhoods, while simultaneously supply an ethnically appropriate workforce replacement to Italian businesses in such enclaves. If these conditions structured the dynamics of Albanian incorporation on Arthur Avenue, what boundary-work enabled the transition? How did emerging Albanian 'groupness' and Italian 'affinity' interact with the arriving minority 'other'? The next chapter attempts to answer these questions in the historical context of Belmont's Italian enclave from the late 1960s onwards.

CHAPTER 4

When Italians Met Albanians

> "Because many had learned a smattering of Italian, some 6,000 of them gravitated toward the Bronx's Little Italy, the Belmont section south of Fordham Road. It is a pungent neighborhood where venders hawk squid and dried cod, and the aroma of anise toast advertises mosaic-tile bakeries. In the Arthur Avenue Live Poultry Market, Albanian women shop alongside Italians while cackling hens scamper underfoot."
>
> Allan M Siegal, *Change Creeps Into World of Bronx Albanians* (1974: 31).

> "Yet immigrants from Italy, Yugoslavia, and Albania continued settling in the community during the 1970s. The Yugoslavians and Albanians have had little difficulty integrating into the Italian-American dominated neighborhood. Many of the Albanians speak Italian and both groups are viewed as White and consequently are more like one's *parenti* and *paesani*. Blacks and Puerto Ricans have emerged as the threating *stranieri.*"
>
> Anthony LaRuffa, *Monte Carmelo* (1988: 20).

> "Café EUROPA: Cuisine Italia & Shqiptare"
>
> Café sign, Arthur Avenue, The Bronx (2005)

Introduction

Zef is an Albanian storeowner on Arthur Avenue. Well into his seventies now, he immigrated to the US through Italy in the early 1970s. After working in a few businesses in the Bronx, including a centrally located Italian bakery on Arthur Avenue, Zef opened his own food store in the mid-1980s. Zef comes from a region of Kosovo known for its expertise in preparing and handling dough – an old tradition probably inherited from Ottoman times, cultivated in a mountainous setting with meager natural resources, and refined in the bakeries of Western European countries that served as the main destination of Kosovar migration throughout much of the twentieth century. In short, "they know dough," claims another Albanian respondent familiar with Zef's trajectory. The respondent related a story which illustrates the nature of the Albanian

presence on Arthur Avenue. According to him, when Zef was hired at the now prestigious Italian bakery, he observed the preparation of dough, and immediately asked the owner to allow him to prepare the dough in a different manner. "Just once," had reportedly asked Zef, offering his resignation if the results would not be pleasing to the owner. The bakery owner agreed to take a chance on him, and consequently the number of bread loaves sold daily multiplied by several times within a week. "They still prepare dough the way he taught them to do," concludes my respondent, adding: "the old timers still know that place as Zef's Bakery, not [by its actual name]."

Zef's trajectory is typical of Albanian business owners that arrived on Arthur Avenue from the 1970s onward. Utilizing skills gained during their stopover in Italy, Albanian immigrants like Zef often began working in Italian restaurants and food businesses, carving a significant occupational niche and facilitating subsequent entrepreneurial incorporation into the Italian commercial establishment of Belmont. From the perspective of this emerging occupational incorporation during the 1970s, the main frameworks that long governed the understanding of ethnic relations in the United States would predict two distinct trajectories, bound to unfold in the decades to come: Albanians would either become Italian within the pizza business, or they would succeed Italians and reclaim the pizza business as ethnically theirs in the process. At various points in the intervening four decades, Albanian presence on Arthur Avenue has appeared to veer towards assimilation; at other points, it has appeared to represent a deepening ethnic succession within the commercial establishment of Belmont. Ethnographic fieldwork in the area during mid- to late-2000s revealed that neither trajectory has materialized. The bakery which Zef's employment may have transformed remains Italian, while his own store is Albanian-named and sells both Albanian fast-food and pizza. If assimilation and ethnic

succession fail to adequately describe his relationship to Italians, how does he see his ethnic position on Arthur Avenue? In an interview, Zef explained:

> The Italians have the 'profession.' We can't take their name. We know how to do food too. I know I can do pizza; I've done it. But it's their profession. For example here I sell [an Albanian dish]. I tell Americans this is Albanian food. I am proud of it. Many are not, actually. But this is a free country and I have symbols of my own too. No problem.

The way Zef is presenting himself vis-à-vis the ethnicity of the block may seem contradictory: given the city's economy and geography, he chose an Italian neighborhood to open an Albanian business. His entrepreneurial path illustrates the intricate involvement of the two ethnic groups. Zef is proud of his Albanian store. Yet instead of perceiving his role as competing with or overtaking the Italian businesses of the area, he sees his presence as partaking in and enhancing the general atmosphere of Arthur Avenue, ultimately validating and upholding the claim about its 'inherent' Italian ethnicity.

The story highlights several features of the developing relationship between Albanians and Italians in Belmont. In the previous chapter I described the problematic nature of Albanian 'groupness' in light of the fragmented nation-state history of post-Ottoman southeastern Europe, from where they emigrated. I also noted the transitional period Arthur Avenue was undergoing during their arrival, which provided special opportunities for shaping their group identity during that formative period. Their relationship with Italians and, less visibly but no less importantly, with the residential minorities of Belmont, has evolved towards what I describe as 'ethnic affinity,' encompassing not only the commercial but also the cultural realm of their group ethnicity. This chapter details the ethnic boundary-work that Albanian incorporation on Arthur Avenue entailed, and the delineation of the main contours of their 'ethnic affinity' with Italians.

Ethnic Boundaries

The starting point of this analysis is that ethnic identities are fluid and contextual. Steadily moving away from understanding identities as expressions of primordial affiliations, an extensive body of literature in recent decades has documented the role of political, economic, and socio-cultural factors in shaping ethnic identities. Two strands of that literature are of particular interest here. Ethnic identity, particularly for groups who trace their beginnings in turn-of-the-twentieth immigration such as Italians, is no longer understood through the community structures of the immigrant enclaves of yesteryear. The steady racial, economic, and socio-cultural incorporation of southern and eastern European immigrant descendants into the mainstream, the decline of immigrant enclaves, and the emergence of consumerism has shaped their ethnic affiliations through what Gans (1979) has been called "symbolic ethnicity." Further, as Brubaker (2004) has observed, "identity" is an overtaxed term that has continuously been asked to carry a tremendous conceptual baggage, especially given the lack of definitional agreement that prevails in the literature. Efforts to bypass such problems have sought to focus on alternative forms of analyzing group identities, such as tracing "everyday ethnicity" practices, including particular conditions and events through which identities materialize and are shaped into specific forms.

Boundary-work is another relatively recent conceptual tool in the sociology of immigration and ethnicity. Earlier theoretical traditions of the Chicago School model had approached race and ethnic relations in the urban setting through the lens of ethnic succession. The immigration literature of the time revolved around assimilation, whose classic treatment was established by Milton Gordon in his *Assimilation in American Life* (1964). Gordon developed a stage model, notably distinguishing between acculturation and structural assimilation. Shifting

focus from assimilation and invasion/succession frames, the 1970s saw the beginnings of a literature focused on boundaries. Following the classic collection of essays by Fredrick Barth (1969), an emerging body of works focused on the maintenance of boundaries as a constitutive dynamic of ethnic group formation and differentiation. Forgoing the study of 'essential' cultural characteristics of presupposed ethnic groups, this literature focused on boundary-work (reviewed in Lamont & Molnar 2002) as central to the construction and preservation of ethnic and racial difference. In other words, eschewing the study of the cultural 'content' of groups, attention to boundaries prioritized mapping the formation and maintenance of symbolic categories and classificatory schemes used in organizing social difference. In increasingly multicultural urban landscapes, boundary maintenance becomes central to group efforts to distinguish oneself, ethnically or otherwise, provided there are reasons to do so.

One area of boundary literature has highlighted how ethnic and racial identities are produced by governmental discourses and practices, as well as through the everyday experiences of immigrant groups and their neighbors. The study of boundaries has proved particularly useful in the research on the relationship between government immigration policy and ethnic group formation in Western Europe (see Wimmer 2004). For example, observers have noted how government categorizations and policy discourses actively constitute, rather than passively reflect, the immigrant groups in question, with repercussions for their identities. To illustrate, a study of three immigrant neighborhoods in Switzerland (Wimmer 2004) reported considerable disparity between the importance of ethnicity from the government's perspective, and that of the actual members of the three 'groups' of immigrants in question. The literature on boundaries has also provided a methodological alternative to what Brubaker (2004) has termed 'groupist

thinking' – the tendency to treat bounded groups as fundamental units of analysis – by focusing on everyday ethnicity as cognition and lived experience.

Within the sociology of immigration, boundaries have been increasingly used as an updated conceptual medium to tackle old issues of cultural fault lines throughout immigrant receiving societies, such as immigration policy or language use (Alba, 2005), as well as the study of incorporation strategies such as boundary crossing, blurring, and shifting (Zolberg and Woon 1999, Wimmer 2008). For example, in a study on the incorporation of the new second generation in New York City, Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters sought to move beyond the culturally bounded 'ethnic communities' model of multiculturalism, reporting the creation of "a new kind of multiculturalism, not of balkanized groups huddled within their own enclaves, but of hybrids and fluid exchanges across group boundaries" (2002: 1033). Few focus on the neighborhood level (with the notable exception of Wimmer, 2004).

What is ethnic affinity?

Arthur Avenue provides a special opportunity in understanding processes of group formation. Drawing on interviews and archival research, this chapter details the history of the emerging 'ethnic affinity' between the ethnic entrepreneurs of an urban enclave that was on the verge of racial turnover, and an arriving immigrant group with few obvious tools for building a group identity. The argument traces the boundary-work between Italians, Albanians, and the residential minorities that have since replaced Italians in the blocks surrounding Arthur Avenue. The objective is to show how ethnic group formation takes shape through specific manifestations within the urban landscape of the Bronx from the late 1960s onwards.

As noted at the end of chapter 2, Italian storeowners and community leaders saw the ethnic and racial residential turnover as a threat to the neighborhood. The arrival of Latinos and African Americans was deemed detrimental to neighborhood stability, and as a result the boundary between Italians and minority incomers was solidified and maintained at all cost. As I describe in chapter 5, their efforts to maintain Belmont as ethnically Italian focused on the commercial scene on Arthur Avenue. That strategy created a specific set of roles for acceptance or rejection of non-Italians. The particularities of Albanian immigrants made them suitable for the roles required in stabilizing the neighborhood, such as the continued successful operation of the businesses that kept the area Italian. As a result, Italians selectively opened their ethnic boundary to include them into the neighborhood, setting the stage for the ethnic 'affinity.' Albanians reciprocated by fulfilling the role that earned them acceptance into the Italian 'fortress,' further cementing their position by upholding the boundary between Italians and the neighborhood minorities. In doing so, they constitute a case study that showcases a new strategy of minority incorporation not captured by initial classifications of boundary crossing, blurring, and shifting (Zolberg and Woon, 1999) or more recent updates to ethnic boundary-engagement taxonomies (Wimmer, 2008).

Drawing on interview material, this chapter describes the incorporation of Albanian immigrants into the food businesses on Arthur Avenue. I argue that their occupational incorporation foreshadowed a larger cultural acceptance into the 'neighborhood.' I have described this cultural acceptance in the form of an 'ethnic affinity' between Italians and Albanians, which developed in the context of a neighborhood in transition. I present the material in three steps. I begin by describing the occupational incorporation of Albanian immigrants into Arthur Avenue, highlighting the Italian perception of their stabilizing effect on the commercial

establishment of Little Italy, and their evolving sense of carving a niche towards successful integration. I continue by describing the emerging narrative of an accompanying cultural similarity between the two groups, highlighting the selective interpretation and local reframing of cultural tropes that allow Italians to open their ethnic boundary to include Albanians as a strategy of solidifying the larger racial boundary towards Latino and African American residential minorities of the neighborhood. Finally I explore the nature of ethnic affinity that proscribes a particular set of roles for Albanian immigrants, aligning strategies of group formation in line with enhancing the commercial ethnicity of Belmont while discarding its residential ethnicity.

COMMERCIAL INCORPORATION

The incorporation of Albanian immigrants into the Belmont neighborhood is first and foremost a story of commerce. The residential de-Italianization of Belmont steadily eroded the natural clientele of the ethnic businesses on Arthur Avenue. Furthermore, the upward occupational mobility of later generation Italians created labor shortages in the demanding jobs involved in food businesses such as pizzerias and restaurants. The Albanian arrival proved timely in filling both gaps. Not only did they furnish new customers to the Arthur Avenue businesses, they also had few skills other skills upon arrival, and were eager to staff Italian establishments – particularly in light of their familiarity with the Italian language, but lack of knowledge of English. With time, their entrepreneurial involvement increased. Interviews with Albanian storeowners confirm that a majority of the ones who arrived before the 1990s worked on Italian establishments before opening their own businesses. The commercial presence of Albanians on Arthur Avenue takes three main forms: staffing Italian businesses, owning and/or managing

Italian businesses, and owning, managing, staffing, and providing a clientele to Albanian businesses.[1] At a time when the area businesses were faced with neighborhood transition they deemed threatening, the successful incorporation of arriving Albanians proceeded through employment in Italian businesses, and more broadly rested on their role in stabilizing the commercial establishment of Belmont.

'They Saved Us'

Sam, the Jewish owner of a centrally located grocery store that has been operating on Arthur Avenue since the early decades of the twentieth century, described the Albanian arrival as follows: "The Bronx was going downhill. Albanians really saved this place during the late 1960s and 1970s. I remember very well. They mostly came through Italy; I guess it was easier for them than to come directly from Albania. What's important was that they spoke Italian."[2] Sam's comments reflect his sense of the role Albanians played in the sustenance of the neighborhood and its commercial establishment, citing their knowledge of Italian as an asset that made them particularly suitable for such a role. He further explained that Albanians continue to constitute an important share of his clientele, alongside Italians and others who frequent his store. Participant observation confirmed the routine presence of Albanian speakers in his store.

[1] This chapter is mainly based on interview material. For an accompanying timeline of the appearance of non-Italian ethnic businesses on Arthur Avenue, including Albanian and Latino businesses, see Chapter 5 on the creation of the Belmont Arthur Avenue Business Improvement District. The data is based on a decennial count of Cole Reverse Business Directories from 1971 to 2010.

[2] From the early decades of the twentieth century, Arthur Avenue has had a relatively small, but well integrated, number of Jewish merchants, typically but not always residing in nearby East Tremont neighborhood. They are well remembered and regarded by community leaders and area merchants, and noted for their endearing nicknames and fluency in Italian in memoirs. D'Erasmo (1978) notes at least four merchants that donated money for the building of the Mount Carmel Church and School (p. 19), concluding that "the Jewish merchants were welcomed into the community" (p. 2).

Joe has been the manager of an important, centrally located Italian restaurant for several years. In his forties, he is of Italian descent and grew up in another borough of New York City, but has been employed on Arthur Avenue's Italian businesses since the mid-1990s, often alongside Albanians. Joe described Albanians positively as "in it for the long haul," citing their role and commitment in improving the business atmosphere of Little Italy. He explained: "I see somebody coming up here [in the Bronx] I don't care what nationality you are. I don't want somebody who's gonna come in, feed off the people, rip them off, and cut off. [Albanians] are in for the long haul, they have businesses here, their [sons and] daughters work here… they're nice people." This quote shows Joe's view of group boundaries in the area. Nationality differences become relevant only to the extent that they match successful and sustained business activity within the neighborhood. Albanian's commercial commitment equals commitment to the neighborhood for him, and therefore constitutes basis for inclusion.

More specifically, Joe underlined the cooperation between the restaurant he works for and two Albanian businesses located across the narrow street in more personal terms. "I watch his store, he watches my store, we look out for each other," says he about the owner of the café. He praised both the café and the travel agency as successful examples of family businesses, built with hard work. He described the travel agency owner in such terms: "She comes in on a Sunday, or holiday, because somebody died and [a potential customer] calls on their cell phone and they need an emergency ticket to Yugoslavia or wherever. And she shows up at 12 o'clock and writes them a ticket." He had similar praise for the owners of a cluster of several Albanian businesses on a corner of Arthur Avenue: "[The parents] took the whole family and put everyone of [the grown children] to work. And there's no slack! Nobody gets a day off over there. The

daughters bartend, the daughters-in-law bartend, who's got to pick up all the kids after school? And that's why it's always been like that."

The stabilizing role of the Albanian presence on the commercial establishment of Belmont, from the perspective of area merchants and community leaders, can be traced in their positive view of an emerging concentration of Albanian cafés on a section of East 187th Street. Earlier studies of Belmont have noted that the neighborhood boundaries contracted as Belmont changed demographically (Bromley, 1997 and 1998; LaRuffa, 1988; Maida-Herman, 1987). This change was reflected in the area stores and restaurants, an increasing percentage of which consolidated around the southern section of Arthur Avenue, eventually emerging as the area's Little Italy. As discussed in greater detail in chapter 5, the concomitant transition from a residential to a commercial definition of the 'neighborhood' ethnicity led to the remapping of Belmont streets to exclude areas that could not be commercially marked as Italian through the presence of ethnically appropriate stores. Such was the fate of a section of East 187th Street. Distance from the Arthur Avenue intersection signaled a relatively higher residential density of minorities, a relatively sparser Italian commercial presence, and a relatively different business mix, lighter in cafés and heavier in bodegas, Laundromats, wireless phone providers and the like – markedly catering to a lower income population. The emergence of a small concentration of Albanian businesses on a middle section of 187th Street that the commercial establishment had written off has served as a mark of renewed inclusion in recent years. Consisting of a minimum of four cafés and, at one point in time including as many as eight Albanian businesses within two blocks or so, their success invited commentary during my interviews. Sam referred to the area specifically when reviewing the Albanian trajectory in Belmont: "Albanians found this place first. They moved in, bought some buildings. And then they moved out. But they are opening

their own businesses here, especially in that [187th Street] area. I would have never thought in the past someone could do something in that area." It is obvious that his regard for the Albanian presence on the neighborhood is defined by their commercial success at the edge of the neighborhood. Joe expressed similar enthusiasm about Albanian success on 187th Street: "The guys at the clubs over there [on 187th Street]? They're not opening up these clubs where you have brawls, they have nice businesses. Hard working guys that come in, after a day of contracting [construction] bids, and they pull their trucks up and they sit outside and have a beer. Now they're not wild clubs that are um… you know." Both Joe and Sam implicitly acknowledge the presence of other minorities, marking it as undesirable from the perspective of Little Italy.

The successful incorporation of Albanians on Arthur Avenue, as the above quotes illustrate, rested on their role in stabilizing the commercial establishment of the neighborhood during a transitional period. From the establishment's perspective, Albanians provided an ethnically appropriate clientele and workforce from the late 1960s onwards. Among several minority groups settling in Belmont at the time, Albanians were the only group that fit into the specific role necessary to ensure the continued success of the Italian businesses. As such, community leaders redraw the Italian boundary to include Albanians, while continuing to exclude the residential minorities that were deemed detrimental to the neighborhood's Italian image.

'They Would Start as Busboys and Work Their Way Up'

As stated, the central mechanism of Albanian incorporation into Arthur Avenue was their occupational trajectory. The two main occupations that Albanians entered upon arrival were the

food business and the real estate industry. To recap, Albanians arriving during the 1970s emigrated from ex-Yugoslav territories stopping in Italy first. During stays that lasted from a few months to two years, they familiarized themselves with Italian and found work in local restaurants and pizzerias. Such familiarity and skills led them to restaurant jobs on Arthur Avenue in the Bronx. It should be noted that Belmont was not the only Italian neighborhood in the Bronx. Two miles to the east Morris Park was, and remains, predominantly residentially Italian to date. Belmont had two advantages that made it significantly more attractive to first generation immigrants, however. First, its stock of rundown tenement buildings, in contrast to the more suburban Morris Park where the dominant architectural form remains the detached single-family home, provided initial cheap housing opportunities without the requirements of home ownership. Second, the dense commercial corridor of Belmont's Arthur Avenue provided work opportunities. [3]

Agron, who emigrated from Montenegro with his family as a pre-teen, spent four months in Italy before arriving to the US in 1968. They first settled in Belmont with the help of friends and acquaintances, where they lived for about five years. Agron remembers around 20 Albanian families residing in the Belmont area at the time. He went to college and was later employed by a local community organization. His family's early trajectory illustrates one of the two occupational paths Albanian immigrants followed upon arrival. While he was attending college, Agron's family got involved in real estate and bought a small building in another predominantly

[3] Many Albanians additionally entered a second niche that was also particular to the 1970s Bronx: the opportunities of building ownership and management in a dismal, virtually abandoned real estate market. The buildings could be had for next to nothing, rented to welfare recipients of Section 8 housing aid with an initial lump sum the government paid to anyone who would accept aid recipients, and managed cheaply in light of sparse code enforcement. Albanians became owners, managers, and superintendents, a story that remains to be told beyond the occasional newspaper articles of the time (see, for example, Howe, 1985).

Italian neighborhood a few miles east of Belmont. They managed the building, bought another one, and eventually moved from Belmont to the neighborhood where the properties were located. Agron confirmed that engagement with real estate was commonplace for Albanians at the time, as was involvement in the restaurant business:

> When [Albanians] first got here they found jobs as superintendents, taking care of buildings. They started understanding real estate, and went down that [occupational] path. I know many people who have big companies now; they were superintendents themselves back in the day. The youth went into Italian restaurants. They would start as busboys and work their way up. They learned the business that way and opened their own businesses afterwards. This is how we got into it.

Behar, another community leader in his 40s, emigrated from Kosovo in the early 1990s and owns a marketing business geared towards Albanians. He described the Albanian occupational trajectory and the circumstances of their incorporation in Arthur Avenue in similar terms:

> Albanians came here in two steps. The first step was to go to Italy, where they would stay for a while, learn the language, and work in restaurants and the like. After their documentation was arranged there, they came here as the second step. They knew not a single word of English, but they knew the language of this Italian neighborhood, where they could communicate. They found jobs, and started to work in pizza places, restaurants. Some moved in to live in the neighborhood. This is the main reason why Albanians came to Arthur Avenue, and not any other places in the city.

Interviews with Albanian storeowners confirm that initial employment in Italian establishments was common. Several current storeowners started out by working in food stores or restaurants, typically preparing or serving food. Sam, the grocery owner quoted above, talked about three Albanian brothers he had hired at different points in time during the 1970s. Zef, mentioned in the opening of the chapter, also initially worked at the Italian bakery. He subsequently opened his own store, bought the building above, and remains a stable business presence to date. In more recent years, the Albanian commercial presence on Belmont has both diversified and become more visible (as discussed in greater detail in chapter 5). Many Albanian

interviewees acknowledged this presence, often outlining in detail the different Albanian businesses operating in the area. In a typical case Dritan, a storeowner in his 50s who emigrated from Montenegro during mid-1990s and has had a successive string of businesses in Belmont, started out by listing both Albanian businesses and Italian-Albanian businesses, such as: "At [a well-known bakery shop], only the owner is Italian. Everyone else is Albanian, but a lot of Italians shop there. [A restaurant with Italian food and name] is Albanian, has always been so from the beginning. But they [i.e. Italians] have of course most shops around here."

Some interviewees went beyond references to specific businesses to convey a sense of the general impact of Albanians on Belmont. The editor of Albanian newspaper who came to the US in the mid-1990s described the Albanian presence as increasing with time, confidently declaring "the ratio between Italians and Albanians [at] about fifty-fifty" during mid-2000s. He credited the increase in Albanian presence and entrepreneurship with creating an upward trend in the real estate values of the neighborhood. Several interviewees occasionally referred to this increased presence as "Little Albania." Two Albanian café owners, who came from Albania during the late 1990s, separately mentioned an increase in Albanian businesses and presence, and both shared a sense of advancement about Albanians' general prospects in the US. Another owner of a video and photography store, who came from Kosovo in the early 1990s, claimed that many buildings in the area were owned by Albanians. "We try to help," concluded he.

It is important to note that while Albanian interviewees cheer their presence and role on the commercial establishment of Belmont, they often pay tribute to the Italianness of the area in the same breath. As I explain in a following section, Albanians see Arthur Avenue as fundamentally Italian, and give meaning to their presence there as *enhancing* its Italian ethnicity, instead of succeeding it. Perhaps the most evocative indication of this position was provided by

none other than the story of Zef at the opening of the chapter. He has built a business presence for himself and is proud of it, but maintains that Arthur Avenue is inexorably Italian.

EMERGING CULTURAL SIMILARITY

In the previous section, I showed that the Albanian acceptance in Belmont took the form of commercial incorporation, began with their initial employment and grew with Albanian ownership of Italian and Albanian businesses, and was presented by both groups as a stabilizing influence in the area during a period of threatening transition. In this section, I argue that their commercial incorporation led to a broader cultural acceptance, which developed into what I have termed 'ethnic affinity.'

'It's Like the Tristate Area of Europe'

Jimmy, a community leader involved in the Local Development Corporation, is of Italian descent and grew up in Belmont. Asked about the Albanians in Belmont, Jimmy explained their presence referring to cultural similarities between Albanians and Italians: "Why [didn't they settle] in Grand Concourse but here? Not Irish but Italian, they find affinity. Mostly language and cultural affinity. They speak Italian. Maybe the Italian occupation [of Albania during WWII]… Maybe they were processed outside [Rome's main international airport] Fiumicino for a year before coming here." Jimmy also noted the role of other factors, including their origin from an area with a fragmented nation-state landscape ("I learned about Balkanism that way"), and his perception of the socio-economic differences between different waves of Albanian

immigrants, such as pre- and post-1990. Ultimately, Jimmy situated the emergence of the Italian-Albanian cultural affinity within the unlikely trajectory of Belmont, saying:

> This is the most successful urban laboratory that exists in the city, certainly in the Bronx. As an old world community, quality of housing, all other indexes… it should not be here. But it is. There's something different about it: still living representation of the old world but able to incorporate the new. We didn't turn against each other but found a way, although sometimes difficult, to incorporate each other. Food, language… that unifies us. Still some layers of separation are there of course: you have Italian social clubs in Italian, Albanian clubs in Albanian, but the younger generation both Italian and Albanian [speaks] English. There's intercultural blending, they may punch each other every now and then, but they also get together. I am Italian-American but my parents came from Italy. Now you have the Albanian-Americans growing up, but only recently.

It is important to note Jimmy's relative position to Belmont – he is a community leader involved in a local political organization devoted to the improvement of the business atmosphere as a strategy of neighborhood stabilization in the aftermath of the South Bronx crisis. Given his position, his statement is important not simply as evidence of an *actual* cultural affinity between the two groups, but as an accepted *representation* of the relationship between two groups. Two aspects of his representation stand out in the above quote. First, Jimmy presumes a direct lineage between the 'old world' immigrant neighborhood of yesteryear and Belmont's current 'Little Italy' despite important differences – particularly what I have shown as the discrepancy between residential de-Italianization and commercial re-Italianization. Further, the ability to 'incorporate the new' is striking in its lack of reference to the residential minorities of the neighborhood. The intercultural blending includes Italians and Albanians, but excludes most of the residential minorities of Belmont. Jimmy's narrative about Belmont's trajectory and his representation of the role of Albanians within it suggests that the cultural affinity between Albanians and Italians has become accepted wisdom, and reflects a shared understanding of how group boundaries operate within a rich ethnic and racial mix that manages to retain the Little Italy identification.

The cultural affinity between Albanians and Italians that Jimmy talks about appears as accepted wisdom in interviews with Italian storeowners and other community leaders. Many talked of close relations with one or many Albanian business owners, and held them in high regard. The case of Sam, the Jewish grocery owner mentioned above, provides an example. His experiences with Albanians were personal; he hired some of them to work in his business from the early days of their arrival: "There was this Albanian boy I employed first. He was so thin and weak, we didn't think he'd be good for work, so we actually took him as an interpreter. Then his brother started working here. They were three brothers and all worked here at one time or another. I knew their mom as well. Very nice people." Joe, the Italian restaurant manager also mentioned above, has personal, friendly relations with several Albanian merchants and businessmen, whom he holds in high regard, as evident when describing the trajectory of a former Albanian co-worker in an Italian food store: "he started working when he was 12 years old, and then worked for [an Italian deli on Arthur Avenue] for years, and is now very well off with his own real estate business. Great businessman, put himself through school, worked for somebody, [moved] to real estate, opened up a small place, got bigger, learned how to play the [business] game." Such experiences arguably led Joe to develop an opinion on the cultural similarity between Albanians and Italians: "But my whole thought was, first of all Albania, Italy, Yugoslavia – I mean it's like New York, New Jersey, Connecticut… it's like the tristate area of Europe! Most of the Albanians went to Italy to come out [to the US anyway]" To reinforce the last point, he mentions one of the owners of an Albanian food business: "She speaks English, she speaks Spanish, she speaks Italian. [Another Italian storeowner] will tell you she speaks better Italian than she does! They lived in Italy. Of course she speaks Albanian."

Catholic Albanians seem to have been welcomed by the religious institutions of Belmont. Asked about them Father Rizzo, who grew up in Belmont and served as a pastor of the Mount Carmel Church before moving away, confirmed both their institutional integration and cultural similarity. As he explained:

> Albanians were here when I [came back to Belmont in the early 1980s]. They first started to say mass in our church, in Albanian, I think in the school auditorium. By the time I came here, they already had a chapel on Park Avenue [in the Bronx], near Tremont Avenue. And now of course you know, they have an Albanian church in Hartsdale. Our Lady of Shkodra. The pastor there [used to be] my assistant at Mt. Carmel. Albanians were wonderful. Because most of the time, most of the Albanians speak Italian. And some of them were in Italy before they came to America, and so they integrate very well with the Italians."

Often the belief in the 'cultural similarity' of the two groups is represented through perceived closeness in consumption preferences, particularly food. Fiorino manages an Italian bakery on 187th Street, established in the late 1960s by his father and uncle who emigrated from Sicily. Asked about changes in the clientele over the years, Fiorino responded by pointing to the shifting residential makeup of the neighborhood, mentioning departing Italians and incoming minorities and immigrants, including Albanians. His comments on their consumption patterns reiterate the perceived cultural similarity: "20-30 years ago there were more Italians here; now there are more minorities, and more Albanians. But everybody eats bread, although they may be different cultures. Hispanics prefer more soft crust bread. Italians usually prefer hard crust, more rustic type of bread. Albanians are usually similar to Italians in their preferences."

Race, culture, language …'

How do Albanians position their presence vis-à-vis the Italian ethnicity of the area? How do they understand and portray the 'cultural similarity' between them and Italians? What are the main features of the intergroup ethnic affinity? Consider the following quotes (italics mine):

> "Kultura (*Culture*)."
>
> An Albanian newspaper's onetime editor, who immigrated from Kosovo in the early 1990s, on the reason behind the Italian-Albanian cooperation.

> "The *race*… our *culture*, the *language*."
>
> Bujar, the café owner who emigrated from Albania in the late 1990s, on why Albanians chose to settle in an Italian neighborhood.

> "Albanians came through Italy. They found an environment similar to theirs here [in Belmont]. First, it was cheaper to live here than many other places in New York. That was obviously important. Second, the *environment* was similar to ours, there was support. Third, the *food* is similar to ours. This is how the Albanian community here came about… So, not French or Irish, but Italian. That was what Albanians felt close to. Because [of their immigration trajectory], Albanians were more comfortable in Italian areas once here. We found that Italians accepted us in a nice way."
>
> Agron, who emigrated from Montenegro in the late 1960 and has been involved with a community organization for decades.

> "A grocery store opened in 1970, I think, and it was probably the only Albanian business here back then. Albanians started living around here, as well as nearby areas such as Grand Concourse and Pelham Parkway. There were less black and Hispanic population; it was a mainly European neighborhood. It was a good place to live for them. They opened businesses *on behalf of the historical links between the two, living like neighbors* and all. Italians accepted Albanians to work for them or side by side, although not as partners. The grocery, a meat place, cafés, they bought some buildings. As time went by, many Albanians congregated around here."
>
> Bajram, the former editor of Illyria who immigrated from Kosovo in the early 1990s.

The narrative of cultural similarity is one of the strategies that Albanians employ to give meaning to their presence on Arthur Avenue as a space they see as fundamentally Italian. A recurrent theme in interviews with Albanian respondents was the belief that this similarity relied

on *culture*. Different variants were offered as explanation for this similarity; 'culture' often included or designated *language*, *food*, and in several occasions, as the second quote from Bujar shows, it triggered discussions of *race*. When probed, many respondents referred to the geographical proximity between Italy and Albania, which are separated by the narrow Adriatic Sea in southeastern Europe. For example, in the fourth quote Bajram specifically refers to Albanians and Italians as *neighbors* given the geographic proximity of their home countries.

It may seem natural to see Albanians as culturally close to Italians in light of the spatial proximity and various historical points of contact, from the mass exodus of several Albanian tribes to regions of southern Italy during the early Ottoman incursions into southeastern Europe, to the Italian occupation of Albania during WWII. A categorization of the two countries as 'culturally similar' would be far less common in Italy and Albania, however. For one, shifting representations of various regions within the continent of Europe have continuously placed Albania on the 'wrong' side of history, first as a set of Ottoman provinces that became the ultimate 'other' for emergent visions of 'Europe,' followed by the experience of state socialist countries behind the Iron Curtain. Such divergent historical paths have resulted in a current map of Europe divided between the European Union and the rest, which place Albania in the Balkans, the place of a significant 'other' outside the European civilization boundary. Constructing a narrative of cultural similarity in the setting of Arthur Avenue requires a shift in *scale* and *frame of reference*.

First, Italians and Albanians on Arthur Avenue are a poor substitute for their 'home' countries. Arthur Avenue retains few links to Italy; it owns its Italianness to the life experiences of the Ellis Island Era immigrants from Southern Italy, as well as more recent efforts of community leaders to transform its commercial strip for continued symbolic consumption of

Italian Americans and more generally middle classes with disposable incomes. Likewise, Arthur Avenue has few links to Albania. The Albanians that began arriving during the late 1960s originated from locales within various Yugoslav republics of the time, and they remain a diverse group of national origin to date. The narrative of cultural similarity on Arthur Avenue is woven in relation to later generation Italian Americans and first generation Albanians, operating at a different scale that bypasses references to larger narratives of European nation-state building shifting geopolitical and geo-cultural boundaries.

Second, the narrative of cultural similarity operates within a different *frame of reference* on Arthur Avenue. In Europe, Italy is relatively wealthy, a member of the European Union, and a Catholic country. Albania is neither. Of course, prominent Albanians continuously elaborate analyses of cultural similarity with Western Europe, in hopes of shedding their doubly 'wrong' history as Ottoman subjects and members of the state socialist bloc – typically playing down the main religious affiliation of the country as an only skin-deep, unwanted Ottoman legacy of an otherwise 'inherently' European people. On Arthur Avenue, the frame of reference remains the South Bronx debacle and all the ills associated with neighborhood decline, unmistakably represented by residential and ethnic turnover. As Rieder (1982) described in detail in his study *Canarsie*, neighborhoods experiencing white flight often experience the arrival of different groups of ethnic/racial makeup and socioeconomic standing as harbingers of decreasing real estate values, increasing drug use and crime rates, declining schools and community institutions, and the like. The Albanian arrival provided a first-generation immigrant group that shared values of aspiring home ownership, hard work in and acquisition of small businesses such as cafés, food joints and restaurants, and claims to whiteness without the decades-long baggage of racial discrimination and politicization of groups such as African Americans and other minorities. The

narrative of cultural similarity will predictably be upheld by both Italians and Albanians as long as the majority of Belmont residences are populated by the 'culturally dissimilar' minority groups. Given this frame of reference, it is no surprise that both groups manage to turn the transnational narrative of European Italy and Balkanic Albania on its head, invoking instead the emergence of a European ethnicity in the United States, as several observers have noted (Alba, 1990; Waters, 1990).

Whiteness and Race

If the narrative of cultural similarity is a strategy that allows Albanians to give meaning to their presence on Arthur Avenue while upholding and validating its 'inherent' Italianness, it is also one that provides them with flexibility in drawing boundaries to include or exclude different groups present in Belmont. We can begin to get a sense of the outlines of this boundary through a closer analysis of the quotes that head this section. While the opening quote presented 'culture' as self-explanatory, Bujar redefines the term by adding *race* and *language* as boundary-defining attributes of the same order. As far as race goes, the implication is clear. Albanians uphold the Italian racial boundary, which includes them while excluding the other minorities in the neighborhood, primarily African Americans but also different groups of Hispanic / Latino descent, as non-white. Language is used in much the same sense, though at closer inspection the relationship is far less clear. While constituting a group of Indo-European languages in its own right, Albanian is not a Roman language. Spanish, the language spoken by the majority of Latino groups on Arthur Avenue, is a Roman language, however. When Albanians invoke language as an element of cultural similarity that underlies their ethnic affinity to Italians, they refer not to a quality of Albanian as a language, but to the fact that Albanians tend to *speak or at least*

understand Italian due to their immigration trajectory both before and after the dismantle of the Iron Curtain. In other words, of the two possible ways in which language could form a cultural boundary on Arthur Avenue, Albanians choose the one that allows them to uphold the Italian boundary by including themselves and excluding the 'culturally dissimilar' minority groups of Hispanic origin.

Agron's quote relies on similar conceptual work. While explaining the emergence of the Albanian community in an Italian enclave, he referred to specific elements of their institutional immigration history to the US ("they came through Italy") and the constrained opportunities afforded to a new immigrant group in a city like New York ("it was cheap to live in Belmont"). A narrative of cultural proximity between Albanians and Italians permeates his story nonetheless. He portrays Belmont as a *supportive environment* for arriving Albanians, due to its similarity to the presumed 'environment' Albanians hailed from. Since Albanians felt *comfortable* in an Italian area like Belmont, and were accepted there "in a nice way," an affinity was born.

Lastly in the fourth quote, Bajram tells the story of the establishment of the Albanian community in Belmont highlighting the *Europeanness* of the neighborhood as defined by the relative lack of African Americans and Hispanics. He invokes the geographical proximity between the home countries of Italy and Albania as underlying the neighborliness of the two groups in Arthur Avenue, a characterization that uses references to Europe and geographical proximity to draw a boundary that includes Albanians as present in a legitimate, albeit not constitutive ("side by side, although not as partners"), capacity while excluding other groups, unaware of the very real, widely documented physical and racial proximity of Italians to African

Americans in urban areas of the Northeastern and Midwestern United States throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Food

One of the central elements of the Albanian narrative of cultural similarity involves *food*. For example Agron, in the third quote of the previous section, specifically mentions food similarity as one of the reasons that made Belmont a comfortable place to settle for Albanians. Much like other aspects of this emerging narrative, a closer review of ways in which Albanians understand food reveals their efforts to give particular meanings to their presence in an Italian neighborhood, as well as utilize it as a tool for selective inclusion and exclusion of various different groups that have a bearing on Arthur Avenue's Little Italy.

As Zef's narrative reveals, any analysis of food – or food culture – on Arthur Avenue needs to begin by differentiating between the meanings that food consumption carries for later generation white ethnics versus first generation immigrants. As has been noted, Italian American food has been crucial in the creation of an Italian American identity, because it "conveyed the values of authenticity solidarity, and commensality contextualized in sites such as home, family and community, to which white middle-class America looked with longing and nostalgia" (Cinotto, 2010: 17). More recently, however, Little Italy's success should be approached, as Halter has suggested, as a new field of consumption that allows later generation ethnics to participate in symbolic ethnicity, or as a voluntary way to claim membership to ethnic communities in line with the middle class lives of those descendants. For first generation Albanians, food represents a potential alternative to community building in the host country,

given the problematic nature of typical strategies of immigrant community building discussed at the end of the previous chapter.

The way Albanians consider food, then, is first and foremost as a cultural artifact that has the potential to bring the community together. Consider these three quotes:

> "My place is a meeting place; people come here and talk about problems, [immigrant] documentation, any problems they might have in their life here. For example, we had sort of a party the other day. This woman had gone to court and they granted her the documents [legalizing her stay in the US] so there was a celebration here in the café."
>
> Bujar, an Albanian café owner in his 30s who came to the Bronx in the late 1990s and opened his café in 2002.

> "An Albanian who arrived here in 1992 but did not know the [English] language told me that he would come to that café [further south on Arthur Avenue] which belongs to someone from Kosova. He would frequent the place nonetheless. He tells me, 'I used to come to [that café] and sit there. No job. Sometimes some northerner Kosovar would come. They'd help me.' Albanians from Albania had yet to arrive to Arthur Avenue."
>
> Also from Bujar.

> "[Belmont] has been a center of Albanians and Italians – both Bronx and upstate [New York]. [It has been] also a center of Albanian food."
>
> An Albanian café owner who came from Albania at the turn of the millennium and opened his café in 2003.

Bujar's first quote shows that his café is a socializing place for recent immigrants who exchange notes about navigating life in the host society. It fulfills a function that few other existing ethnic organizations would be able to fulfill. Even the Albanian immigrants who live in the Bronx and Westchester are residentially dispersed over various neighborhoods, and have few associations for recourse. As the third quote from the café owner confirms, Arthur Avenue is the most prominent Albanian public space in New York City. Their presence is mainly commercial, however. Therefore the Albanian businesses serve different functions as economic opportunities as well as primary socializing venues for these new Americans. Bujar's second quote strengthens

the argument, for it illustrates how the paucity of co-ethnic venues open to new immigrants forced them to overcome boundaries and divisions inherited from the home countries ("some northerner Kosovar would help me") in search of job opportunities.

What about the food itself? I have noted that Albanians give meaning to their presence on Arthur Avenue as enhancing its overall Italianness, construing a narrative of cultural similarity whose flexible contours allow them to draw symbolic boundaries of including oneself while excluding other groups. Presented as an element of this cultural similarity, discussions on *food* reveal similar fault lines. I asked the wife of the Albanian café owner quoted above about Italian food. She managed the café along her husband and did some of the cooking. She said they knew Italian food, which they learned because they "spend some time in Italy before coming here." She knew Italian salads, for example, mentioning that they differed from Albanian salads because they were "greener" and less reliant on tomatoes and "stuff," which are preferred by Albanians. Their café prepared food as patrons often came in to eat and drink – consume alcohol – and their preferred dishes involved roasted meats. "We have a very good oven in the back," added she.

Though a closer analysis of ethnic food would reveal important insights on the construction of the cultural similarity narrative between the two groups, I should note that Albanian 'food' on Arthur Avenue is quite limited – unless the restaurant or café in question expressly serves 'Italian' food. Menus rarely exceed a short single page, and they are dominated by meat plates such as kebabs (*qofte*). My personal understanding of Albanian cuisine has always been that it is a variant of Ottoman cooking, simplified by decades of impoverished life under communism. I was therefore fascinated to hear my interviewees talk about food – Italian

food – as similar to theirs, except when they expressly indicated their knowledge of it given their immigration trajectory through Italy. My feeling that food reflected an instance of the kind of boundary work that this chapter explores was confirmed during an interview with the most prominent restaurant owner on Belmont, who emigrated from Montenegro during the early 1990s. Though he is not ethnically Albanian, he and another grocery store owner from Bosnia were routinely counted as 'Albanian' businesses by my respondents, and participant observation confirmed that his main clientele consists of Albanians. I asked him about the menu and the kind of food his restaurant serves, and am quoting the ensuing conversation in some length:

> I: What about the food, what type of food do you serve?
> R: Mediterranean, typical stuff. Albanian, Montenegrin, Slovenian, Croatian is basically the same. Some Italian as well.
> I: When you say Mediterranean food, does that include Italian? Can you give some examples?
> R: Well. I have pasta types and that's Italian of course. But we have *cevapi* [also known as *kofta* (*qofte*) – ground beef and/or lamb prepared in long cylindrical shaped patties] which we prepare ourselves, Italians don't have that. *Fasul* which is *groshe* [beans] which they don't really do either. Roasted baby lamb is another thing that's mostly not Italian. Goulash… that's more Hungarian but we do that as well."

This quote shows an effort to categorize food in ways that are compliant with the boundary work on Arthur Avenue. Specifically, there is a visible tension in the continuous attempt of the restaurant owner to bring elements of different cuisines under the umbrella of a 'Mediterranean' category, a flexible moniker that can variably denote food from Italy, Greece, Eastern Europe, Turkey, or in this case, most of them. While the owner begins by presenting his food as 'Mediterranean,' suggesting coherence and similarity, his list proceeds to include Italian and Albanian food, Montenegrin and Croatian, Slovenian and Hungarian (*goulash*). He tellingly uses both the Slavic and Albanian term for the beans dish; the Slavic term is a direct translation of the present-day Turkish word for the dish, which in term was assimilated from Greek. In

short, the restaurant owner invokes a unified 'Mediterranean' cuisine to include types of food that have since crystallized under the banner of national cuisines. In doing so he is able to include Albanian cooking – Montenegrin, in his case – into the same category with Italian. No reference is made to Latin American cuisine, whose inclusion of roasted meats and 'rice and beans' could easily offer more similarities to Albanian food than any other, including Italian.

As we've seen, food is an important aspect of the Albanian presence on Arthur Avenue on several grounds. It allows Albanians to congregate in cafés and restaurants in view of the lack of other institutional arrangements that could serve community-building purposes, given their needs as mostly first-generation immigrants. It provides a way of interacting with Arthur Avenue – a way of being in place, in Belmont – given their validation of the inscription of place as ethnically Italian and their involvement with it through a commercial lens. It finally serves as an element of the narrative of cultural similarity that allows Albanians, as I've argued, to construe their presence on Arthur Avenue as enhancing its qualities while drawing boundaries that exclude other possible cultural similarities with residential minority groups.

Italian food, on the other end of Arthur Avenue businesses, has also undergone changes. As outlined in the next chapter, the composition of the stores on Arthur Avenue has gradually shifted away from specialty food stores towards restaurant and cafés. Though not characteristic of all other white ethnic groups, perhaps one should expect the sophistication and widespread consumption of the once working-class Italian American cuisine in line with the increase in the socio-economic status of white ethnics. Perhaps it is this upward mobility and simultaneous democratization of Italian cuisine that opens new spaces of ethnic inclusion for groups like Albanians. A closer analysis of food is necessary in this regard.

BECOMING ITALIAN, REMAINING ALBANIAN

I started out with questions about the mechanisms of Albanian incorporation into Arthur Avenue, and pointed to the role of their particular immigration trajectory in facilitating their occupational incorporation into Belmont. As the Albanian commercial involvement expanded from staffing Italian businesses to owning and managing Italian and Albanian businesses, I outlined the emergence of a narrative of cultural similarity between the area merchants, community leaders, and incoming immigrants. Broadly referring to the relationship between Albanians and Italians as an ethnic affinity, I have presented it as a mutual strategy of maintain the Italian ethnicity of the neighborhood through commercial Little Italy against the threat of turnover from residential minorities. If Arthur Avenue presents a special case where one immigrant group, Albanians, reinforces the boundary of another ethnic group, Italians, then how does the narrative of cultural similarity account for the spatial presence of Albanians in a space marked as Italian? In other words, how does ethnic affinity handle the seeming paradox of creating an Albanian public space on Belmont while highlighting its fundamentally Italian character? What are the group identity ramifications of this duality? And finally, how do both parties respond to the ethnic and racial claims of the residential minorities of Belmont? The sections that follow present the emergence of Arthur Avenue as an Albanian space, its negotiation as a fundamentally Italian place, and a story about the mythical origins of ethnic affinity that places area minorities unequivocally on the other side of the larger racial boundary.

'I asked my uncle: where are the Albanians?'

As Cole Directory numbers presented in chapter 5 show, Albanian business presence on Arthur Avenue increased and diversified during the 1980s onward. Zef's case illustrated that

some immigrants who initially worked in Italian establishments eventually opened their own stores. Moreover, once the number of Albanian-owned businesses reached a critical level, Belmont became a destination that structured the opportunities of newly arriving immigrants of the 1990s wave. An Albanian café owner on 187th Street arrived from Montenegro in the late 1990s, for example, and opened a deli on Arthur Avenue in the same year with the help of his uncle, who had been in the Bronx for several years prior to his arrival and facilitated his nephew's entry into the business. As he explained: "When I first came of the US from Montenegro, I asked my uncle, where are the Albanians, take me there. I'd heard of the Bronx. I got here and I just couldn't believe it; here I am in America and all I hear is Albanian in the streets. I was very happy." Another restaurant owner from Montenegro arrived in the early 1990s. His nephew had already opened and managed a restaurant on Arthur Avenue for five years. He joined his nephew and proceeded to open other restaurants. "I wasn't interested in construction and didn't know the [English] language when I got here, so that's why [I entered the restaurant business], explains he.

Another reason for continued Albanian investment in the commercial scene of Arthur Avenue was the emerging concentration of ethnic businesses in the area, which increased the frequency of visits and consequently made it even more attractive to other ethnic businesses. Donika, who emigrated from Kosovo in the early 1990s, worked for an Albanian travel agency in Belmont for over a decade. She eventually proceeded to open her own travel agency in the mid-2000s. Donika explained the reason for choosing Arthur Avenue as the location of her new business: "When I got here, [Arthur Avenue] was still very much Italian. It slowly got more Albanian, especially after the [Kosovo] war. I thought about opening my business closer to

where we live [in a suburb], but there are no immigrants there! This is a hub for Albanians, a lot of people just walk in. that's why I opened it here."

The Temporal Dimension of Albanian presence and ethnic affinity

Finally, two historical events that occurred during the 1990s boosted the emergence of Arthur Avenue as an Albanian public space. The fall of the communist regime in 1991 released a new wave of Albanian immigrants to the US. The socio-economic differences from pre-1990 Albanian immigrants from ex-Yugoslav territories further diversified the Albanian presence on Arthur Avenue, but simultaneously resulted in new investment and an increased overall ethnic presence, which secured its place as a public space representative of the entire Albanian presence in the US.

The second historical event that increased the Albanian presence, visibility, and sense of community was the decade-long Kosovo affair, spanned by the painful dissolution of Yugoslavia throughout the 1990s. The episode began when the Yugoslav regime rescinded the autonomous status of Kosovo as a province of the Republic of Serbia in 1989, escalated to the mass expulsion of over a million Albanians from Kosovo (the 'war' of 1998-9), and led to the NATO bombing of critical infrastructure in Belgrade and elsewhere in 1999. Many Kosovars immigrated to the United States from the early 1990s onwards, in response to the quickly deteriorating conditions in Kosovo (sudden termination of employment for thousands, for example) and new restrictions from traditional immigration destinations to Western European countries.[4] In addition to the increased presence of Kosovar immigrants, the conflict led to renewed activism on Arthur Avenue, such as organizing efforts to support people in Kosovo in various ways, including

[4] For an overview of Albanian immigration from ex-Yugoslav territories, see chapter 3.

sending supplies; secure accurate and timely news coverage of a rapidly worsening situation; obtain safe passage for Kosovars escaping the conflict; collectively grieve in the event of known casualties; bring the conflict to the attention of the US media through editorials and information campaigns; lobby members of the US Congress, including President Clinton, to intervene; and organize on behalf of the emerging political parties of Kosovo during and after the height of the conflict.[5]

The effects of the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the communist regime in Albania transformed the Albanian presence on Arthur Avenue. Many Albanian new stores, often featuring 'Kosova' in their names, appeared during the 1990s, selling merchandise laden with ethnic symbolism, such as music and flags. Perhaps more importantly, a new threshold in the formation of an Albanian community was surpassed through the establishment of two Albanian newspapers, which operated from Arthur Avenue throughout the 1990s (but have since moved). Behar, who owns the Albanian marketing business, previously worked for one of the newspapers, and described the activism of those years as a great opportunity for the formation of the Albanian 'community.' According to him, the Kosovo conflict served to transform the Albanian experience on Arthur Avenue. The concern with Kosovo served to mobilize Albanians around a central issue, and provide them with a sense of community in the process. For him, the importance of this mobilization was twofold: the conflict imbued them with a political sense of nationhood that had not developed out of their occupational and business presence on Arthur Avenue, and the sense of community behind the national cause was able to foster *unity* among

[5] For an excellent overview of the emerging pro-Kosovo activist organizations on Arthur Avenue, the local branches of emerging political parties and factions in Kosovo, and their platforms, activities, and divergences, see Ragaru and Dymi, 2004.

immigrants typically divided by time of arrival, country of origin, and socio-economic standing. It is insightful to quote his description of the role of the conflict on Arthur Avenue at length:

> 1998-9 was a miracle for Albanians [on Arthur Avenue], so to speak, because that's when they started to get organized around the question of Kosovo. The center of all that organizing has always been Arthur Avenue. Before 1990, Albanians had no name whatsoever in America. They were known as belonging to 500 thousand different small groups, all hating each other, bad-mouthing each other. Every single group is supportive of something and against all the other things some other groups maybe supportive of. They were not a compact group. It's also about where they came from, of course, old, new, from Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, all over the place.

Similarly, Behar described the establishment of the Illyria newspaper as a way to provide coverage of the conflict, thought the newspaper tried to balance its coverage of Kosovo and Albania during the momentous decade. Ultimately, the Kosovo affair both confirmed and increased the Albanian presence on Arthur Avenue. The location of the newspaper offices were no coincidence. As he stated, "Arthur Avenue is well known to Albanians. There are clubs, cafés, etc. Illyria's history is thoroughly related to Arthur Avenue, and its introduction represents the culmination of the Albanian presence here." Its impact was also clear: "Until then, Arthur Avenue was mainly an economic center of activity for Albanians. Illyria added the political aspect to their presence."

The connection between Arthur Avenue and Kosovo were deeper than the location of the newspaper offices would suggest. Bajram, a one-time editor of Illyria who immigrated from Kosovo in the early 1990s, elaborated on the usefulness of the Albanian businesses and the concentration of organizations for community organizing efforts in Belmont during the Kosovo affair. He noted the presence of a number of organizations throughout the 1990s, including the Illyria newspaper; Vatra, a patriotic society in operation since the turn of the twentieth century, based in Boston for most of its life before moving to the Bronx; the Democratic Union of

Kosova (LDK), a Kosovar movement which later turned into a political party; and the League of Prizren, another patriotic movement assuming the name of an earlier one. Bajram further noted: "The other reason about the Albanian presence around here was the numerous [Albanian] clubs and bars. The League of Prizren had its salon, LDK too. They used to hold various gatherings, especially related to the problem of Kosova. It was a community that came together around the problems of Kosova and Albania."

The Kosovo episode continued to generate communal activity for years to come. Arthur Avenue became the center of public celebrations when Kosovo declared independence in February 2008 and subsequent anniversaries. But the fervor of the national question soon waned and activity of the multiple organizations mentioned by Bajram winded down. In the long term, the mobilization around the Kosovo crisis did not create enduring mechanisms of community formation and maintenance capable of superseding the immediate crisis. Nor did the Kosovo affair lead to a sustainable business strategy. While acknowledging that "the Kosova thing was big at some point," a business owner related that the sale of "Albanian stuff like cassettes and national symbols" constituted less than ten percent of the volume it did during the late 1990s "because it's not the same atmosphere right now." Involvement in Italian food remained a sustainable business strategy for him, which is why "some Albanian restaurants pass for Italian, of course."

'This is an Italian Neighborhood'

The Albanian presence could have been construed as threatening to the Italian ethnicity of commercial Arthur Avenue. Instead, Italian merchants and community leaders accommodated

the Albanian presence as a stabilizing influence to the Italian commercial establishment, and developed an accompanying narrative of cultural similarity. How did Albanians account for their increasing presence in a neighborhood they accept as fundamentally Italian? Consider the following quotes:

> "This is of course an Italian neighborhood. As a matter of fact they used to live here, but have since left. Their businesses remain only. They are famous. An incredible amount of people frequent the neighborhood because of them."
>
> Bujar, a café owner in his late 30s who emigrated from Albania to the US in the late 1990s and opened his café in 2002.

> "Albanians [arrived] fifty years ago. But Italians are very old here. They have been here for centuries."
>
> Another café owner in his forties, who also emigrated from Albania at the turn of the millennium and opened his café in 2003.

> "[Italian] businesses remain but they themselves left, residentially. Albanians don't live here either, though they live in nearby areas."
>
> The owner of a video and photography store, who emigrated from Kosovo in the early 1980s and opened his store in 1989.

These quotes illustrate the general story that emerged during interviews with Albanian storeowners and community leaders. It involves a complex narrative regarding the relationship between ethnicity and place in a multiracial neighborhood. From an Albanian perspective, a crucial element of this narrative is the assertion that Arthur Avenue is a fundamentally Italian place. All three respondents above, in ways similar to many others, matter-of-factly present the neighborhood as Italian. The presence of other groups becomes a story to be explained, but does not change the overall ethnic designation of the neighborhood. The second quote is telling, for though it exaggerates the timeline of Italian and Albanian arrival, it strongly conveys the general sentiment of the neighborhood ethnicity from the Albanian perspective.

Two problems have to be overcome in order to maintain the coherence of the neighborhood characterization as Italian in light of its diversity. The first is the dissonance between Belmont's current residential and commercial ethnicity. As explained in the second chapter, while Belmont progressively lost its Italian residents from the 1970s onwards, area leaders took steps to solidify its Italian commercial presence on Arthur Avenue, ultimately taking the current structure of a successful Little Italy surrounded by residential minorities. Albanians have appropriated the solution to this problem from Italians, who strategically employ a commercial definition of neighborhood ethnicity (for the history of the shift from a residential to a commercial definition of neighborhood ethnicity, see chapter 5 on the Business Improvement District). The first and the third quotes directly acknowledge the nature of Italian presence in the neighborhood as confined to the commercial scene. For example, Bujar qualifies his admission that they "have left" residentially by claiming that "they are famous" and largely responsible for the area visitors, thus defending the Italianness of the neighborhood. The second quote does not acknowledge their residential absence explicitly, but confirms their 'primary' identification with the area despite Albanian arrival, suggesting an uninterrupted Italian presence that can only be claimed through clinging to a commercial definition of the neighborhood. In short, one of the choices that allow Albanians to see Arthur Avenue as Italian is to employ a commercial definition of neighborhood ethnicity, bypassing reference to the ethnic and racial makeup of the area residents.

How do Albanians account for their own presence in an Italian neighborhood? As the quotes reveal, they do not construe their presence as challenging the Italian ethnicity of the area. Their status of relative newcomer cannot match the 'centuries' of Italian presence; as a result, the neighborhood 'of course' remains Italian. The key to their *special presence* lies in their

understanding of *the Albanian trajectory* as *parallel* to the Italian historical presence in the neighborhood. Take the third quote at the opening of this section, for example. The café owner explicitly mentions that Albanians, following the choices of earlier Italian residents, actively avoid living in Belmont, preferring nearby areas of a higher socio-economic background. This point was supported by Agron, a community leader who witnessed the Albanian trajectory on Arthur Avenue for over forty years, from the late 1960s when his family emigrated from Montenegro and initially settled in Belmont, until recently through his decades-long involvement with a community organization. Agron described both the business and residential relationship of Albanians to Belmont. He described Albanian businesses as doing increasingly better with time: "There was a new wave of [Albanian] stores in the 1990s, and there are more now compared to 20 years ago. They are doing pretty good right now – this is probably the peak in Albanian businesses around here. First, there are the travel agencies; second, the restaurant and cafés, obviously, and third, the grocery stores." Residentially, Agron states: "Albanians themselves, like Italians, begun moving out [of Belmont] as well, relocating to better areas like Morris Park, Pelham Parkway, and Westchester… this is obviously progress and I am actually proud of it." In other words, Agron confirms the general sense that the Albanian presence on Arthur Avenue *parallels* the Italian presence in following a similar trajectory of coupling commercial control with residential disengagement. Finally, because Albanians see their presence on *parallel* terms to the Italian one, they are able to construe it as *enhancing* – instead of threatening – the designation of the area as ethnically Italian. In other words, Albanians see their role in Belmont and Arthur Avenue businesses as supporting and enhancing the Italian legacy.

Belmont and the 'other' boundary

As of 2000, a combined 80 percent of Belmont residents were African American or of Latino descent.[6] Only 15 percent of the Belmont residents self-identified as racially white, and an estimated 9.6 percent claimed Italian ancestry. To preserve a continuous affiliation with the Italian ethnicity of past residents, Arthur Avenue must maintain a strict boundary between its commercial scene and surrounding residential blocks. We noted that Albanians construe their presence as parallel to the Italian presence, which is confined to the commercial scene, and instrumental in enhancing the identification of the area as Little Italy. This engagement also limits Albanian exposure to the minorities of the neighborhood, rendering their work easier in preserving the dividing line between them. There is of course plenty of contact between the commercial and residential scenes of Belmont. Zef, whose story opened the chapter, employed three Albanians and two Mexicans, who usually worked at the counter, at the time of the interview. It made business sense for him "since a lot of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans live around here." As Barth (1969) has shown, ethnic boundaries do not reflect lack of cultural contact, but often emerge to regulate the existence of often extensive cultural and economic contact.

Throughout my interviews with Albanian storeowners, I encountered a commonly told story that I have since learn to interpret as a foundational myth of Albanian affinity to Italians and hostility to area minorities in general, and African Americans in particular. The story involves a 'war' between neighborhood Italians ("and Albanians") and African Americans who were making claims to the public spaces of the neighborhood sometime in the early 1970s. As African American residential presence was increasing particularly on the southern and western fringes of the neighborhood, a public transportation bus route, or possibly school buses that passed through Belmont, became targets of neighborhood ire for carrying the 'unwanted

[6] See Table 2.2 on page 58.

element' through the neighborhood streets and normalizing their presence. The general outline of the story is that at a particular point in time one or more buses were attacked and scorched, and subsequently the route was either eliminated or rerouted away from passing through Belmont.[7] A version of the story makes up an important part of the plotline of *A Bronx Tale*, a 1993 movie that marked the directorial debut of Robert DeNiro and was set in the Belmont of the late 1960s, exploring life in an ethnic enclave facing the arrival of the racial other.[8] Citing demographic changes of the late 1960s, LaRuffa (1988) claims that "[East 182nd Street] became an active war zone," separating youth-maintained battle lines between Italian Americans on one side and blacks and Puerto Ricans on the other, and witnessing bloody battles that resulted in serious injuries, including death (p. 19). LaRuffa does not cite sources, but tells the following story:

> The most dramatic of these confrontations occurred when the New York City Transit Authority decided to inaugurate a new bus route along [East 187th Street] in the hope, perhaps, of assuring the safety of Puerto Rican and Black students attending North Street High School. The reaction was violent: several buses were badly damaged and one was completely destroyed; a number of the students were seriously injured, and one Black youth was killed (1988: 20). [9]

[7] I have been unable to trace the incident in news accounts of the time with certainty. Two *New York Times* articles in 1967 (Reeves, 1967; Kifner, 1967) tell the story of increased police presence in order to contain clashes between White and Negro (*sic*) students in Belmont schools. The article by Kifner refers to a school bus taken over by "a band of Negroes" and driven for several blocks, presumably through Belmont streets, ending in an interracial fight. Interracial clashes in area high schools were a recurrent problem for the next two decades (see Pinderhughes, 1997).

[8] DeNiro's movie portrays small incidents in which Belmont youth of Italian descend make threatening gestures to African American youth riding the bus through East 187th Street. The movie offers a certain measure of complexity to the race relations between Italians and African Americans, setting a racial confrontation that leaves three Italian American youth dead against the background of an interracial romance of the main Italian American character of the movie.

[9] LaRuffa used pseudonyms for the streets of Belmont, which he called Monte Carmelo. Based on educated guesses, I have substituted East 182nd Street and East 187th Street for South Street and Main Street, respectively. North Street High School possibly denotes Theodore Roosevelt High School on Fordham Road.

Most of the Albanian respondents I spoke to had arrived to the United States too late to have been protagonists in such a story, whether it took place in the mid-to late-1960s or early to mid-1970s. Yet many referred to it as a foundational moment of their presence. Asked about the Albanian presence on Arthur Avenue Bujar, the café owner who emigrated from Albania in the late 1990s responded: "Have you seen the movie *A Bronx Tale*? It's a very interesting movie. It is about the changes that started in this neighborhood. Now there are more and more Hispanics around here, but then Albanians…" The owner of a video and photo store, who emigrated from Kosovo in the early 1980s, was more direct: "In 1973, war, Italians and Albanians. Together. The stores are still Italian, but the rest … no more." While both respondents offer few actual details about the confrontation, the story permeates Albanian accounts of their early presence and serves to outline a clear boundary between Italians and African Americans, simultaneously securing Albanian alignment on the correct side of the dividing line.

THE DYNAMIC NATURE OF ETHNIC AFFINITY

This chapter presented material from interviews with Italian and Albanian storeowners and community leaders. I traced the occupational incorporation of Albanian immigrants into the commercial establishment of Arthur Avenue, and the development of an accompanying central narrative of cultural similarity that shaped the emergence of the Albanian group identity and continues to govern the relations between Italian Americans and Albanians. Referring to this relationship as 'ethnic affinity,' I noted its ability to accommodate the presence of a particular immigrant group within the commercial ethnicity of a Little Italy. Bypassing theoretical frames of assimilation or ethnic succession, whose predictions of complete Albanian invisibility or

Italian evacuation of the Italian food trade have not materialized, I develop a framework that relies on a mapping of ethnic boundaries. I argued that Albanians construe their presence on Arthur Avenue as *enhancing* the Italian ethnicity of its commercial establishment, while Italians selectively opened their ethnic boundary to include incoming Albanians, given their contribution to the stabilization of the Little Italy at a time of change. This boundary movement relied on the firming of a larger racial boundary between Italians and Albanians, on one hand, and neighborhood residential minorities, on the other, excluding them from claims to the ethnicity of the area by focusing on commercial ethnicity instead of residential ethnicity as the defining feature of Little Italy. I showed that Albanians highlight key terms such as *culture*, *race*, *language*, and *food* as markers of their 'ethnic affinity' to Italians, while elevating the story of an interracial neighborhood 'war' to quasi-mythical status that secures their position with the ethnic and racial matrix of the area.

It is crucial to step back at this point and reiterate the larger structural factors that allow transnational flows of people and symbols to interact with local urban neighborhoods in developing unexpected avenues of group formation and maintenance. The 'ethnic affinity' between Italians and Albanians is presented matter-of-factly, but it relies more on the particular historical trajectory of Albanians emigrating from ex-Yugoslav territories from the late 1960s onward than tropes of European commonness resurrected in the course of developing a narrative of cultural similarity. Likewise the Albanian incorporation within the commercial establishment of Arthur Avenue relies on the particular moment of their arrival, and the promise that they would help maintain the Italian ethnicity of Belmont, dodging the dismal trajectory of other ethnic neighborhoods of the 1970s South Bronx. It is therefore important to point that the 'ethnic

affinity' between Italians and Albanians, based as it is on key historical moments, is not static and can shift over time. Changing conditions on the ground, particularly the continued success of the Little Italy on Arthur Avenue, can decrease the need for Albanian mobilization to 'save' Belmont, and trigger renewed negotiation of the boundary between them.

It is for this reason that some Albanian interviewees voiced concern with regard to the general situation in Belmont after the turn of the millennium. Given the success of Arthur Avenue's Little Italy, rents have already become higher and displaced many Albanian businesses towards lower-rent 187th Street. Somewhat ironically, the cluster of the Albanian businesses that Sam and Joe praised for claiming a previously 'lost' area of 187th Street, may be a negative consequence of Albanians' earlier success in stabilizing Arthur Avenue. It is possible to view Albanian presence as a continuous buffer, cyclically moving toward lower-rent 'lost' sections of the commercial areas of the neighborhood and marking them as compatible with the business atmosphere of Arthur Avenue in the process.[10]

Worse yet, the Albanian resolve to associate with Italians may turn the 'ethnic affinity' between the two groups into a liability for the 'real' Little Italy. Bajram, the one-time editor of newspaper Illyria who had immigrated from Kosovo in the early 1990s, talked in some length about the relationship between them, declaring Albanians "half-partners" with Italians. He explained by referring to both economic and cultural factors: "[Italians] dominated this area. They had an interest in Albanians, who liked their Italian food because it was similar to theirs. [For that reason Italians] could use them as customers of their food and products. [That made

[10] Albanian storeowners claimed that rents on Arthur Avenue for comparable spaces stood at around three times the rents on East 187th Street during the mid-2000s. One of my Albanian respondents understood the disadvantage of single-constituency Albanian ethnic businesses in competing with multiple-constituency established Italian businesses in paying higher rents.

them] half-partners." Bajram continued to clarify that he thought Arthur Avenue has always been under Italian control, and the Albanian presence should be understood through that prism:

> "Even today they are not equal. Take the Arthur Avenue [Retail] Market example. It is [run by] a quite powerful group of mainly Italian merchants, though there are some Albanians [included in it] as well. Italians saw that Albanians are hard workers, and they accepted Albanians to work for them, given that they would work for half the money. All the bakeries employ Albanians for example; they also do the cooking at various Italian places. Arthur Avenue is a business center for Italians, but it has also always been an employment center for Albanians."

Dritan, who emigrated from Montenegro in the mid-1990s and has since had a string of stores on Arthur Avenue and 187th street, was less gentle. He conveyed a sense of diminishing welcome from the Italians of the area, relating a story about an Italian café for sale. When an interested Albanian sent someone to ask the price of the café on his behalf, the Italian owner reportedly answered that "their money is no good for it" because he wouldn't sell to Albanians, leading Dritan to conclude: "Italians here have started to react badly, especially as of lately."

The dynamic nature of the ethnic affinity is therefore reactive to the changing status of the two groups in question. If the Italian status of Arthur Avenue is no longer in doubt, the affinity may have run its course. On the Albanian end, the boundary-work that underlies the ethnic affinity secures Albanian claims to whiteness and Europeanness. The fact that the religious belonging of most Albanians in the US did not become an issue after 9/11 – particularly after incidents like the Fort Dix attack case – speaks both to the necessity of this strategy on their part, as well as to its current success. But if and when the structural conditions that underline the Albanian strategy of becoming American via becoming Italian change – an Italian return to now artisanal, upscale Italian cuisine and restaurant jobs? – will Albanians continue to manage their claims to whiteness?

CHAPTER 5

The Belmont Business Improvement District and the making of a Little Italy

In the previous chapter I described the occupational and entrepreneurial incorporation of Albanian immigrants into the commercial establishment of Belmont. While their numbers were not large enough to reverse the residential turnover of the neighborhood, I argued that arriving Albanians provided ethnically 'appropriate' workforce replacements for the upwardly mobile Italian ethnics, and played an important role in stabilizing the commercial presence on Arthur Avenue, reinforcing its ethnic character as Little Italy.

If the incorporation of Albanians into the commercial establishment of Arthur Avenue was one factor that provided relief as a key moment, other institutional arrangements came into being to organize, if not determine, the neighborhood transition during the turbulent 1970s and 80s. How was the neighborhood transition organized, and by whom? What mechanisms were deployed to ensure the successful transformation of Arthur Avenue from a shopping street of butchers and grocery storeowners catering to the local ethnic residents into a Little Italy with numerous restaurants, trendy cafés and pizzerias catering to the workers of the large institutions surrounding Belmont, as well as suburban shoppers? How did a neighborhood in the mid-Bronx, lacking the access to tourists that its Manhattan counterpart enjoys, manage to reinvent itself as 'Italian' despite its fading Italian residential identity?

This chapter and the next seek to answer these questions. In addition to the mechanisms related to the labor market and immigrant entrepreneurship, this chapter examines the institutional setup that arose as a response to the problematic seventies and attempted to control

the rate and direction of change. The mid-70s saw the creation of several community institutions whose general purpose was the maintenance of Belmont as Italian in the face of residential ethnic and racial turnover. Important examples include the Council of Belmont Organizations (C.O.B.O.) established in 1973, the Belmont Small Business Association (BSBA) established in 1975, and the Belmont Arthur Avenue Local Development Corporation (LDC) established in 1983. These institutions and the strategies they employ have changed over time. The neighborhood and the nature of its Italian ethnicity have also changed over time, as will be described below. But the objective of these institutions, I argue, has been the maintenance of Belmont's commercial viability through reliance on its Italian ethnic image. As such, they constitute an important part of Little Italy's current success.

In this chapter, I look at the recent formation of the neighborhood's Business Improvement District, the Belmont BID. While BIDs' role in framing urban spaces has been documented, little has been written about their relationship to the making of ethnic urban neighborhoods. The literature has treated BIDs as urban growth institutions, with few references to their role as cultural agents. Studied within the realm of emerging urban governance institutions, their effects have been analyzed from an economic and political standpoint, focusing on aspects of urban regeneration such as impact on real estate, crime rates, and generally improved business atmosphere. Because of their narrowly defined business-related functions, BIDs are not customarily seen as neighborhood institutions that fulfill cultural functions. In my analysis, however, I argue that the Belmont BID represents the latest incarnation of a strong institutional response to the residential and commercial change that Belmont underwent during the last forty years. Its aim has been to negotiate, and ultimately uphold, the symbolic presence of Italian ethnicity as Italian-Americans were leaving the neighborhood. The BID effort is part of

that institutional framework, and represents a new mechanism fulfilling old aims. It attempts to make a symbolic neighborhood.

What follows is an examination of the effort behind the BID formation as manager of the local ethnic identity of the Belmont neighborhood. I argue that the BID effort goes beyond boosting local commerce and real estate values, working to maintain a symbolic sense of the neighborhood as ethnically Italian. I begin with a historical overview of the emergence of Business Improvement Districts, pointing to the developing BID literature that has studied them as agents of a new urban regime favoring entrepreneurship over traditional welfare functions. Next, I show the growing dissonance between the ethnic identity of the commercial strip and that of Belmont residents, using Cole Reverse Business Directory data for commercial ethnicity and US Census data for residential ethnicity. I proceed to offer an overview of the historical development of neighborhood institutions during the 1970s and 80s, and note their strategies in maintaining Belmont as an Italian neighborhood in the face of change. To contextualize the BID effort within this institutional history, I follow by presenting material from interviews with business owners and BID promoters, and review newspaper articles and promotional material related to Belmont and the BID. I conclude by arguing that the Belmont BID ultimately constructs a symbolic ethnic presence with reference to past residence, perpetuated within the commercial realm of the area, raising new research questions for understanding the role of BIDs in managing ethnicity and remaking urban neighborhoods.

BIDs in perspective

Business Improvement Districts are voluntary associations that collect a special assessment from local business property owners and use it to provide services to that particular

area. Operating under state and city law, they are public-private partnerships that came into being during the seventies as a response to the worsening fiscal landscape of large metropolitan municipalities and the ensuing cutbacks in city services. Aiming to restore some of those cutbacks, BIDs typically provide additional services such security, sanitation and graffiti removal, streetscape improvements, marketing and promotion of the area, etc.

BIDs emerged at a particular conjuncture of the North American urban development. From the sixties onward, metropolitan areas in the United States faced multiple pressures, leading to urban crises that would redefine American cities for decades to come. Many factors coalesced to transform the urban setting, including economic restructuring, deindustrialization, relocation of manufacturing away from urban centers, decentralization, suburbanization, and fiscal crises given the flight of middle class residents to suburbia and the influx of the poor in need of expensive social services. The restructuring of the American economy from Fordism to flexible accumulation signaled a general decline in local governments' ability and willingness to provide welfare services, and paved the way for the emergence of a new form of urban governance "increasingly occupied with the exploration of new ways … to foster and encourage local development and … growth" (Harvey, 1989: 3; 1990). Epitomizing this new ideology of urban entrepreneurialism, the first BID was established in Toronto in 1970, and BIDs reached the United States a few years later with the formation of the downtown development district in New Orleans in 1975 (Briffault, 1999). Since then, BIDs have spread throughout the United States, UK, New Zealand, South Africa, Jamaica, Serbia and Albania. The first BID in New York City was the Union Square Partnership, formed in 1984 (Walsh, 2006). There are currently 67 BIDs

in New York City, serving over 3,200 blocks and 16,000 retail businesses by generating over $100 million in yearly revenue.[1]

Sociologists and geographers have largely been critical of BIDs on several accounts. One enduring criticism has been that BIDs gain control of prominent public spaces – such as streets and parks in and around commercial areas of the city – by collecting resources and subsequently deploying them in ways that delimit and channel uses of those public spaces to middle-class activities that are particularly conducive to commerce, therefore *privatizing* them. In a description of the transformation of Bryant Square Park in mid-town Manhattan, Zukin (1995: 29-33) described the new design that would "visually and spatially ensure security" (p. 30), appropriating the park for a middle-class public culture that reflected the priorities of the office workers in the surrounding buildings while excluding less reputable uses and users. In a more recent example, Clough and Vanderbeck (2006) analyzed the activities of Church Street Marketplace's BID in Burlington, Vermont, and found that the management construed various kinds of political activity as either assets or liabilities given the carefully themed environment of the BID area, regulating and policing them accordingly. Relatedly, BIDs have also been criticized for *securitizing* public spaces by using urban planning and architectural design strategies based on control, in what has been called 'aestheticization of (urban) fear (Zukin, 1995; see also Davis, 1992, and for a celebration of taking over 'our' urban spaces, Siegel, 1992). Further, political scientists and urban planners have also noted what can be called the 'democratic deficit' of BIDs as a new institutional form of urban governance (Briffault, 1999; Peel, Lloyd, and Lord, 2007; Justice and Skelcher, 2009; see particularly the edited volume by Morcol et al, 2008).

[1] New York City Department of Small Business Services, Help for Neighborhoods, Business Improvement Districts: http://www.nyc.gov/html/sbs/html/neighborhood/bid.shtml.

The rapid social change that transformed American cities during the 1970s also led to the decline of the traditional 'Chicago school' approach to urban spaces, ushering the development of a political economy perspective that stressed the role of various forms of capital, and groups with differential access to them, in socially constructing urban spaces. Perhaps the most influential manifestation of this direction in urban sociology has been provided by Logan and Molotch (1987), whose 'urban growth machine' emerged as the leading institutional setup of urban development in the United States. Transcending group rivalries whose 'competing claims' provided the subject-matter of earlier ecological approaches, they developed an understanding of place that established urban growth, as exemplified by real estate values, as the chief objective of any urban coalition, with the concomitant ideology that presented 'growth' to be in the best interest of the public, not just the urban elites that stood to gain the most from it. Within this framework of political economy, BIDs have been seen as institutions of boosterism since their creation. They have been treated as urban growth institutions that create consumable visions of urban spaces (Mitchell, 2008). Studies have typically measured BIDs' effect on urban regeneration indices such as their impact on reducing crime rates (Brooks, 2005; Calanog, 2004; Hoyt, 2005) and increasing real estate values (Ellen, Schwartz, and Voicu, 2007). In a study characteristic of this approach, Hackworth and Rekers (2005) looked at four ethnic areas in Toronto and noted the role of their respective BIAs (Business Improvement Areas in Canada) in the ethnic packaging of their commercial corridors with the objective of valorizing nearby real estate markets. Undeterred by the growing dissonance in the ethnic identities of the commercial strip and the remaining residents of the areas in question, the BIA leaders repackaged ethnic

culture to residentially gentrify the adjacent areas.[2] Their study confirms the role of BIDs in the making of urban spaces.

If BIDs create urban spaces that embody particular visions and commercial interests, how do they relate to the making of urban *neighborhoods*? How do they relate to the ethnic cultures of neighborhoods with old immigrant pasts? There is no question that BIDs' primary objective is to improve the business atmosphere of its area. Similar to the Toronto case, areas of ethnic consumption such as Little Italy in Manhattan's Mulberry Street, Little Tokyo in LA, and Belmont in the Bronx engage in ethnic packaging to boost their commercial strip, catering to the "symbolic ethnicities" of the now suburban descendants of earlier immigrants. But in the Belmont case, as I will show, the debate about the BID formation centered around notions of *neighborhood*, in the form of efforts to preserve the Italian neighborhood of the past decades. The BID represents an effort to reinforce the ethnic character of the area, through maintaining an ethnically defined sense of neighborhood and community. In order to understand the wider mission that the BID is expected to fulfill, one has to reach back to the earlier tradition of Chicago School and its analysis of the role of neighborhood institutions in creating and maintaining (ethnic) communities. Family and peer group, the church and local newspaper, the school, the ethnic stores, restaurants and social clubs have all been studied as institutional settings for the negotiation and reinforcement of ethnic identity, and its relationship to a sense of neighborhood. In a recent illustration, Wilson and Taub (2006) looked at four Chicago neighborhoods 'threatened' by racial and ethnic residential takeover and targeted local organizations – PTAs, civic and business groups, churches and political groups – to understand

[2] Hackworth and Rekers (2005) reported successful gentrification in two of the four areas they studied.

the different response of each neighborhood to social change. While BIDs are hardly exclusive managers of neighborhood ethnic identities, their efforts utilize and transform those identities.

There are important parallels between Belmont and the Chicago neighborhoods Wilson and Taub describe, despite the fact that Belmont is no longer a 'threatened' neighborhood in an immediate sense. The Belmont BID is expected to improve commerce while maintaining the Italian ethnicity of the neighborhood, effectively behaving like any other neighborhood organization, which Wilson and Taub define as "the extent to which the residents of a neighborhood are able to maintain effective social control and realize their collective goals" (p. 12). There is, however, one major difference between the expected role of the Belmont BID and the role of community institutions within the Chicago School tradition. The kind of neighborhood that the Belmont BID is expected to maintain does not hinge on *residence*. As envisioned by the BID, Belmont is a neighborhood that welcomes anyone willing and able to eat and share in the Little Italy image that the restaurants project. Wilson and Taub's research exemplifies traditional human ecology studies where the sense of neighborhood was forged out of *residents* who struggled with or adjusted to change. In contrast, the Belmont BID is attempting to forge a sense of neighborhood based on the symbolic presence of *past* residence. In that sense, the Belmont BID is not simply boosting business and raising rents. It is remaking an ethnic neighborhood.

Residential and Commercial Ethnicity in Belmont

As noted in chapter 2, Italians moved into 'the Fordham area' in large numbers around the turn of the twentieth century. Within a few decades, Belmont took its place as an Italian neighborhood in the perceived ethnic mosaic of the Bronx. Arthur Avenue and 187th Street

became the symbolic centers of the neighborhood, with a concentration of businesses owned by and mostly serving Italian residents. The area began to change after WWII, as the housing stock proved inadequate to the expanding and increasingly wealthier later generation Italians. As one interviewee explained, newly returned soldiers found the small apartments in the area tenements without elevators less desirable, if at all available, to homes in the developing suburbs to start families.[3] Other immigrant groups such as Puerto Ricans moved into the area in the 1950s and some Albanian families during the late 1960s. As the South Bronx entered its precipitous decline in the 1970s Belmont tried to resist change, somewhat successfully up to the beginning of the 1980s, when the Italian exodus can be seen clearly in US Census data. Demographic data shows that Belmont experienced the highest population loss during the 1970s (see Table 5.1 in the next page). The blocks surrounding Arthur Avenue lost over a quarter of their population between 1960 and 1980, though a portion of that decline (one third) had been restored by 2000. The area also experienced dramatic, if gradual, ethnic and racial turnover. In the four decades presented in Table 5.1, the portion of area residents that reported Italian ancestry declined steadily from nearly 55 percent to just fewer than 10 percent. Residents of Latino descend and African Americans (60 and 20 percent of the 2000 population respectively) replaced departing Italians. While Belmont managed to retain its Italian predominance until at least 1980, it has undergone an almost complete residential de-Italianization by the turn of the millennium. It nonetheless remains an immigrant neighborhood, where the percentage of foreign-born residents has increased from about 24 percent in 1970 to over 30 percent in 2000.

[3] This is not to suggest that the area was ever 'stable.' The change was not strictly one-way, for example. While immigration from Italy slowed considerably after 1924, new Italians continued to arrive to Belmont throughout the 1960s, arguably keeping some links to the old country alive. As an area resident remembers, even people who did not know him personally would address him in Italian first during the 1960s of his childhood.

TABLE 5.1: Demographic Change in Belmont, 1960-2000.[4]

Year	Total population	Percent White	Percent Black	Percent Hispanic or Latino	Percent Italian ancestry	Percent foreign born
1960	31,564	97.6	2.2	–	54.7*	31.3
1970	30,575	82.1	16.6	–	37.6*	23.9
1980	23,163	42.4†	16.8†	38.4†	33.9	26.4
1990	23,919	27.3†	17.6†	52.9†	17.5	26.2
2000	26,124	15.1†	20.2†	59.6†	9.6	30.5

SOURCE: Social Explorer Tables (SE), Censuses 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000, U.S. Census Bureau and Social Explorer.

* 'Foreign stock' is a category that combines the foreign-born population with the native population of foreign or mixed parentage, used to determine national origin before the ancestry question was introduced in the 1980 Census. The numbers presented above were calculated by adding respondents born in Italy to those natives born of Italian parent(s). These numbers do not capture third and later generation Italians, unlike the more flexible 1980 ancestry question that counts anyone who declares Italian ancestry. Therefore they provide conservative estimates of Italian national origin.

†"Hispanic" is a self-identified category introduced in the 1980 US Census as an ancestry group, including any persons with origin from the Latin American countries and Spain. The term "Latino" was added to the category in the 2000 Census. Persons belonging to this category can belong to any race, but the racial categories were affected in that it is possible to now distinguish "whites" as a racial category that includes persons of Hispanic origin from "non-Hispanic whites." Table two presents a racial breakdown of "black" and "white" for the 1960 and 1970 figures, while numbers from 1980, 1990, and 2000 belong to the "non-Hispanic white" and "non-Hispanic black" categories.

Population decline and residential de-Italianization might lead one to expect parallel changes in the commercial scene, such as declining business numbers and commercial de-Italianization. Such predictions hold to a certain degree in the short term, but in the long-term the result has been precisely the contrary. The exodus of the Italian residents had an impact of the commercial strip of Arthur Avenue, which had developed to serve its particular ethnic clientele. Column 1 on Table 5.2 presents a decennial count of the *total number of businesses* on Arthur

[4] Since Belmont boundaries 'contracted' during the 60s and 70s, I have chosen Bromley's (1998) conservative definition of Belmont, excluding census tracts 371/3/5/9, and 383 to its south, known as Northern East Tremont now (see also Maida, 1987). For a map of the area covered by the chosen census tracts, see Figure 2.1 on page 59.

Avenue between 1971 and 2009.[5] After an initial decline in the overall store numbers during the 1970s, the numbers begin to increase, constituting an overall increase of about 18 percent

TABLE 5.2: Ethnic Identification of Businesses in Belmont, 1971-2009.

Year	Total businesses	Clear Albanian identification	Clear Hispanic identification
1971	184	–	–
1980	165	6 (4 percent)	–
1990	177	9 (5 percent)	–
2000	183	20 (11 percent)	6 (3.3 percent)
2009	218	30 (14 percent)	15 (6.9 percent)

SOURCE: Cole's Reverse Business Directories.

NOTE: Only the businesses on Arthur Avenue and the Lorillard Place to Beaumont Avenue Section of East 187th Street are included here (see Fig. 1.2 on page 20).

between 1971 and 2009. The initial decline may have been more severe than the numbers suggest; one longtime community activist of Italian background noted that many food stores converted to low rent uses, such as social clubs or community centers, to avoid shutting down during the 1970s and 80s. In that case, the increase in the recent decades is even more significant that the numbers suggest. It is clear that population decline has not been paralleled by commercial decline.

The residential de-Italianization of Belmont has similarly not led to commercial de-Italianization. Arthur Avenue stores and restaurants remain overwhelmingly Italian, in stark

[5] To outline the changes in the commercial scene of Arthur Avenue, I consulted the Cole Reverse Business Directories, which provide lists of all the registered businesses by address starting in 1971. I limited the sample to the core commercial strip, excluding surrounding blocks that tend to be less commercially dense. The spatial business sample required the inclusion of blocks on two streets. Arthur Avenue is the main commercial center of the area, from East Houston Street to the north until its intersection with Crescent and East 184th Streets to the south. The intersecting East 187th Street is also a major commercial corridor, particularly around the Arthur Avenue intersection. I therefore included the businesses on East 187th Street between Lorillard Place and Beaumont Avenue. "Arthur Avenue" will heretofore refer to both sections.

contrast to their residential makeup. Further, Belmont's Little Italy nowadays cultivates an Italianita that can be deliberately more pronounced, illustrated by glossy storefronts that display prominently Italian cultural symbols. A storeowner in the immigrant enclave of decades past would see little need for a large storefront display with Italian symbols such as flag colors; his clientele likely lived in the neighborhood and knew him personally. In short, the quantitative measuring of Arthur Avenue's commercial ethnicity may be missing qualitative inscriptions beyond the store name, signaling an even *more* Italian scene in response to demographic change and more recent diversification of clientele. Conversely, businesses that maintain a clear Italian identification have been criticized as 'inauthentic' in the press, blogs, and scholarly reviews, whether due to their 'infiltration' by other ethnicities, apparent disconnect to most local residents, or as examples of as consumption urban ethnic theme parks catering mainly to tourists.[6]

Cole data allows tracing the emergence of non-Italian businesses over the decades. An analysis of business names reveals the increasing commercial presence of the new residential groups such as Hispanics, but notably also Albanians discussed in the previous two chapters, despite their small numbers and non-Belmont centric residential preferences. Table 2 shows 6

[6] For the transformation of New York City's Little Italies into urban ethnic theme parks, see Jerome Krase, "The Spatial Semiotics of Little Italies and Italian Americans," in Mario Aste, Jerome Krase, Louise Napolitano-Carman, and Janet E. Worral, eds., *Industry, Technology, Labor, and the Italian American Communities* (Staten Island, NY: American Italian Historical Association, 1995), 104. See also Jerome Krase, "Visualising Ethnic Vernacular Landscapes," in Ray Hutchinson and Jerome Krase, eds., *Research in Urban Sociology 7* (2004). For a comparative analysis that traces the differences in residential and commercial ethnicity between Mulberry Street and Arthur Avenue, see Ervin Kosta, "The Immigrant Enclave as Ethnic Park: Culture, Capital, and Urban Change in New York's Little Italies," in Simone Cinotto, ed., *All Things Italian: Consumer Culture in Italian American History* (Fordham University Press, *forthcoming*). For an informal discussion of Zukin's (2010) exploration of "authenticity" with relation to Arthur Avenue, see The Brooklyn Rail article "Letter from the Bronx: Authenticity and Arthur Avenue" (Sitler, 2010).

businesses with clear Albanian identification in 1980, 9 in 1990, 20 in 2000 and a significant 30 Albanians businesses in 2009, constituting 14 percent of the entire sample at a minimum.[7] Despite their much larger numbers, it is only in recent decades that the commercial presence of residents of Hispanic descend has been felt, with 6 stores in 2000 and 15 (mainly Mexican) stores in 2009. Albanian and Hispanic businesses constituted 21 percent of the entire sample in 2009. [8]

If the residents have changed, how have the businesses adapted? What kinds of businesses serve Arthur Avenue, and to what clienteles do they cater? Donna Gabaccia has recently pointed to the connection between Little Italies and food, noting that "well over half of Little Italy webpages [of a google search] … take readers to information about restaurants or food."[9] Restaurants, pizzerias and specialty food stores have come to define the commercial strips of Little Italies such as Arthur Avenue. "You can get a good espresso here, or Italian soccer shirts," mused a reporter recently, "but the reason you go [to Arthur Avenue] is to eat."[10] An analysis of food-related businesses on Arthur Avenue revealed that while their numbers have increased over the decades, their portion to the total number of businesses remained relatively constant at around 40 percent (the lowest was 35 percent in 1990; the highest was 43 percent in 2009). Food consumption in a Little Italy can of course take many forms, uniting a cornucopia of consumers and modes of consumption. Tourists may go to a restaurant for a taste of New York,

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[7] Not included in these figures are businesses the researcher has determined to be Albanian-owned, but otherwise not marked as such with clear ethnic identifiers.
[8] For the Albanian entry into the pizza business in Belmont and New York, see New York Times articles "The Albanian Connection: As Italians Move Up, a New Group Does the Pizza and Pasta" (Filkins, 2001b) and "Albanian? Now That's Italian" (Beehner, 2004). For the increased Mexican presence in Belmont, see New York Times article "In an Italian Enclave in the Bronx, Signs of Mexico Begin to Show" (Semple, 2010).
[9] Gabaccia, "Inventing Little Italy": 7.
[10] Seth Kugel, "The D Train to Cannoli Heaven," *New York Times* (September 3, 2006).

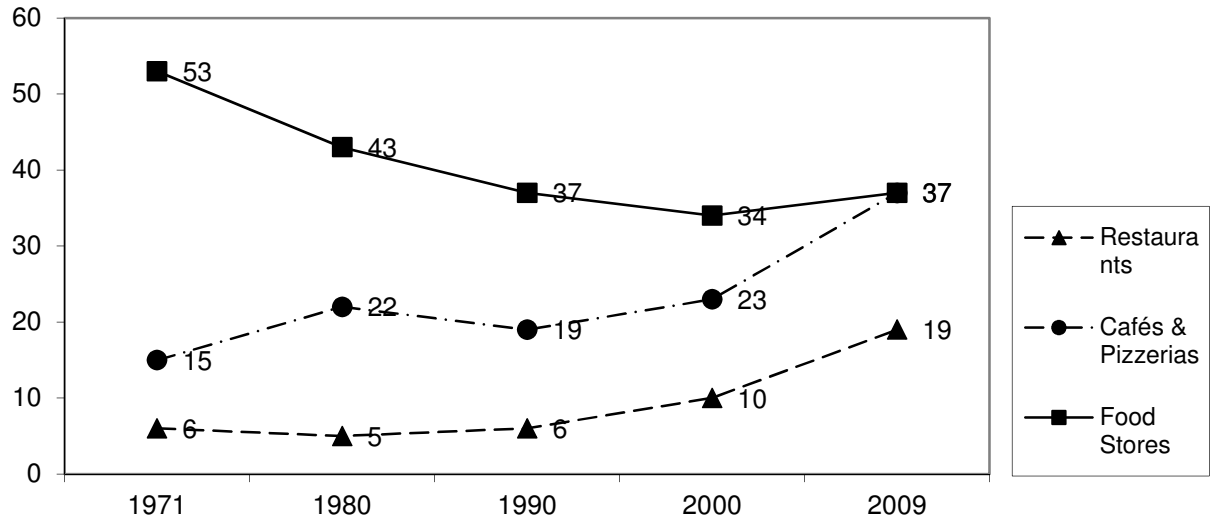
food aficionados may chase the latest restaurant sensation, students living nearby may go to a café for the pastries, while former neighborhood residents may go to the cheese store for the fresh *mozzarell'* prepared daily. Typically inscribed in the business name, the Cole Directories allow the identification of store types. To determine the relative weight of different forms of food consumption on Arthur Avenue, it is necessary to look at the changing *composition* of businesses within the food category. To that end, food-related businesses were divided into three main categories: 1) *restaurants*, 2) *café and pizzerias*, and 3) *food stores*.[11]

Tracing the change in the composition of food-related businesses provides a clear indication of the commercial transformation of Arthur Avenue from an immigrant enclave to a Little Italy. Figure 5.1 presents a graph based on a count of the three categories over four decades of available Cole data. Before residential de-Italianization had progressed, Arthur Avenue retained a very high number of food stores (53) in 1971, compared to fairly low numbers

[11] The first category singles out restaurants, given their proliferation and centrality to areas designated as Little Italy. The general rule was to include businesses that provide full service for their prepared food including establishments that go by the less formal names of *trattoria*, *luncheoenette*, or *bistro*. The second category singles out cafés and pizzerias. It includes businesses that serve light food or fast food, usually lack full waiting service, provide at least some tables for customers, and usually serve as venues for socializing. In addition to cafés and pizza parlors, typical businesses that fall under this category include pastry shops that often serve as cafés and deli stores that prepare (gourmet) sandwiches. This category also includes establishments typical of an earlier era, such as candy and ice-cream stores. Social clubs that were a staple of immigrant neighborhoods in earlier decades also fall under this category, where socializing took place and coffee was served. Similarly, bars have been included, but not community centers or the occasional benevolent society. Chinese restaurants were also included, unless the researcher has been able to ascertain that they provide full table service. The third category includes the variety of (specialty) food stores, such as cheese and pork stores, bakery and home-made pasta/ravioli stores, fruit and vegetable stands (inside the Arthur Avenue Retail Market), fish and poultry stores, and wine and liquor stores. Mini-markets and supermarkets will be included in this category. Similar to pastry stores, bakeries often also carry pastries and on occasion may have a few tables inside the establishment. But since their staple product is bread, they have been included in this category. Likewise grocery stores often have deli counters where customers can order sandwiches, but because this is not a significant part of their business activity, they are counted as food stores.

of café and pizzerias (15) and restaurants (only 6). Specialty food stores were indeed the defining feature of Arthur Avenue during the early decades of Belmont history, as discussed in chapter 2. Two main trends determine its subsequent transformation. On one hand, the originally distinguishing high number of food stores has seen a steady decline, from 53 to 37. On the other, the numbers of both categories of restaurants and cafés have increased from 6 to 19 and 15 to 37,

Figure 5.1: Food Business Categories on Arthur Avenue, 1971-2009



SOURCE: Cole's Reverse Business Directories.

respectively. The interviews confirm this change and its significance. Asked about how the Ferragosto celebration has changed over time, an area institution worker of Italian background who enjoys shopping on Arthur Avenue remarked: "Some local merchants have disappeared. Especially the specialty stores are gone. There used to be a lot of pork stores, butchers. They've either closed now or don't come out to the feast. Or they do come out but some stuff they don't do anymore." The old delis and butchers have given way to restaurants and cafés, whose target

clientele no longer resides in Belmont. In the words of the general manager of a core restaurant on Arthur Avenue: "The thing is, everybody wants to go after the people in Westchester. And Connecticut, and Long Island, and Manhattan. Because that's where the money is, they say." In short, residential de-Italianization has led to a decline of specialty food stores, while the emergence of Little Italy has been marked by an increase in restaurants and cafés.

The emerging institutional order

Belmont's proximity to the dissolving South Bronx neighborhoods amplified the insecurity caused by the departure of Italians and arrival of minorities. A number of organizations emerged during the 1970s, with the objective of ensuring it remained an Italian community in the face of precipitous changes. Their strategies centered on slowing down the residential Italian flight, essentially equating neighborhood stability with maintaining Italian dominance in the midst of flux. It is therefore important to review the historical development of the institutional setup that led to the present-day BID, and note their evolving strategies of preserving Belmont as an Italian neighborhood.

The changing demographics and declining economic situation presented three challenges for Belmont. First, the economic basis of the businesses was eroding, partly due to the worsening economic climate of the borough, but particularly due to the residential flight of their local ethnic clientele. Second, the incoming immigrant and minority groups of different ethnic and racial background led to the contestation of the public spaces of the neighborhood, including streets, parks, and local schools. And third, the residential turnover compounded the problem of an already old and increasingly inadequate housing stock, introducing unwelcome diversity and intensifying the Italian flight. Some of the early organizations that emerged in Belmont sought to

address these challenges. The Council of Belmont Organizations (C.O.B.O.) was established in 1973, the Merchants Association (later the Belmont Small Business Association) was established in 1975, and the Belmont Arthur Avenue Local Development Corporation (LDC) was established in 1983.

Eye of the storm

I interviewed several community leaders about the changes of the 70s and the role of those organizations in dealing with them. One leader I will call Jimmy has been involved in the Belmont Arthur Avenue LDC for many years. He described the difficult, 'decline' years, spanning roughly from the late 60s through the mid-80s:

> During the late 60s early 70s, the American urban setting was changing. Changing demographics, declining economy… some communities collapsed, some transformed. Belmont underwent all those changes, but in a different degree. Of all those Irish, German, Polish communities throughout the South Bronx, Belmont is the only remnant of European background. It went through gravity changes, but unlike many communities in South Bronx, Belmont held on.[12]

According to Jimmy, the buildup of critical masses of Hispanics and blacks confronting the old remaining Italians was a crucial change that happened at the turn of the 1970s. "It wasn't holocaust or world war or anything, but still tension," he noted. "Playgrounds, school blocks, fights, police would get hurt sometimes, offending nasty words, things like that. Things fell off; it was getting out of hand." News reports of the time confirm his account. In 1967, policemen

[12] The reason, according to him, was that the Italian residents eventually moved out, but slowly and deliberately, "not fleeing in a panicky way due to the social pathologies of crime and prejudice" that characterized other neighborhoods to its south. He noted that the residents did not like the way the community was changing but they accommodated to it. As he further explained, the area saw immigration from Puerto Rico, followed by Hondurans, Guatemalans, Argentineans, Venezuelans, Bolivians, Ecuadorians, Columbians, each forming small colonies. There was also the incoming immigration of the Albanian population from the late 60s onwards.

had to set up temporary headquarters at Belmont Community Center to monitor possible repeat conflicts after a young Puerto Rican was beaten at Ciccarone Park.[13]

Jimmy situated the emergence of the community organizations mentioned above within the demographic changes and economic decline of the late 60s and 70s. Asked about C.O.B.O., he explained: "Traditional community institutions, such as the church, were no longer effective in dealing with [those changes]. An organization was created to deal with the reality of youth tension, economic development, housing, etc. They were trying different ways of resolving the conflict through working with youth, under the hospices of the Church." He described the LDC's emergence similarly: "It goes back to March 1983. The fabric of the community was not successful and could not deal with the changes [of late 60s and early 70s], so organizations devoted to local development came into being. They try to stabilize, preserve, and redevelop a certain community or locale depending on how the community reacts to such changes." And finally, he noted the emergence of the Merchants Association:

> Then there were the economic issues, I'd say late 1970s early 80s. Many places were simply empty, or rather low rent things like social clubs, storage, etc. So the Merchants Association formed, [and] tried to decide, do we go or do we stand? They decided [to] stand. Literally we created Little Italy. It was just a shopping district, so they were trying to get people back, engaging them.

[13] See "Park in Bronx is 'Turf' and Battleground to Youths" in the New York Times, Apr. 5, 1967. 'Turf' incidents continued for decades to come. In 1986, the New York Times announced that "200 officers [were] sent to the Bronx after new ethnic violence," after an attack on two Puerto Ricans in the vicinity of Ciccarone Park, which left one of them with a broken jaw, led to a retaliatory attack on two Yugoslav brothers a week later, leaving one with a fractured skull (articles by Crystal Nix on July 30 and August 5, 1986). Numerous news accounts of the time document the emerging and continuous concerns and efforts of area high schools in containing the ethnic and racial conflict among their diversifying student bodies (Rimer, 1984; Gonzalez, 1992a, 1992b; Flynn, 1999; Filkins, 2001a). For an analysis of the Albanian youth in nearby Pelham Parkway's Christopher Columbus High School, see Pinderhughes' (1997) comparative study of urban youth in three New York City neighborhoods.

Jimmy's quote shows that the Merchants Association was from the very beginning oriented towards maintaining Belmont as an Italian neighborhood. The work of the Council of Belmont Organizations (C.O.B.O.) also had a strong ethnic character according to him:

> It was basically the old guard trying to deal with the new reality. Honestly, this was an Italian driven reality. There was a lot of input obviously, but still created and supported by Italians, [such as an all] Italian board of directors. Fortunately Albanians spoke Italian, so [the directors] were trying to get more of them to come.

We see again that C.O.B.O. was an organization that emerged out of the changes of the 1970s, and responded to those changes by trying to slow them down and perpetuate the ethnic character of the area as Italian.

Agron, an Albanian community counselor who has been working for C.O.B.O. for over two decades, confirmed that the organization emerged as a response to the changes of the 1970s. He explained that C.O.B.O. was created in 1973 by "community people, with some church assistance, for the benefit of the community," because "the poverty level was pretty bad. There was a lot of need for services such as housing, seniors, immigrants' advocacy, food stamps, Medicaid." He further noted that when he started working for the organization, the majority of the clients were Italians who lacked English skills and needed help with the appropriate forms, though C.O.B.O. helped "Italians, Albanians, Hispanics… anyone."[14]

[14] In addition to helping people access a variety of welfare services, LaRuffa (1988) describes C.O.B.O. as an "umbrella-like" structure for various community organizations, operating as a "broker" agency between local community associations, on one hand, and funding sources at the city, state, and federal level, as well as political networks such as the Bronx Democratic Leadership, on the other. "Because of its many social and economic programs and its accessibility to funding sources and political networks," C.O.B.O. was an organization of great influence in Belmont, leading LaRuffa to conclude that "like the Merchants Association, it is committed to preserving Italian-American hegemony in [Belmont]" ((pp. 97-100).

Initial Strategy: Residential Ethnicity

In his ethnography of Belmont during the 1980s, Anthony LaRuffa (1988) describes the efforts of various community organizations in reversing the worsening business climate in the neighborhood. The Merchants Association and C.O.B.O. attempted to respond to the interrelated problems of economic decline and increasing contestation of the public spaces of the area. To attract business to the neighborhood, the Merchants Association focused its efforts on marketing strategies such as putting up street decorations for the Christmas Season, organizing a joint "Sale Day" event in 1978 that developed into the Family Reunion Week in later years, and holding an Italian Christmas Exhibit at the nearby New York Botanical Garden. LaRuffa also mentions the Merchants Association's role in the renovation of the iconic indoor Arthur Avenue Retail Market, completed in 1983. Utilizing its connections to the Bronx Democratic Leader and the Bronx Overall Development Corporation, C.O.B.O. ensured the allocation of funds for the renovation of a number of stores in Belmont, and supported energetically the restoration of the centrally located Ciccarone Park, as well as the construction of the Belmont Branch of the New York Public Library, also known as the Enrico Fermi Cultural Center, in 1981. LaRuffa's discussion of the role of these institutions clearly shows their coordinated efforts to 'save' Belmont as an Italian neighborhood.

If these efforts to improve the business atmosphere of the neighborhood were important, no concern was more central to 'preserving' Belmont than the housing problem. The challenge was twofold: to improve the deteriorating housing stock so that the neighborhood remained a viable locale for more affluent later-generation Italian-Americans, and to retain, and convince to return, as many Italian-Americans as possible to maintain ethnic predominance in Belmont. LaRuffa noted the vigorous, unrelenting attempts of all the major community institutions,

including the church, to "stem the flow" of the Italian-Americans from the neighborhood, and residential predominance became the centerpiece of the strategy to "preserve the character" of Belmont. For example, citing specific instances, LaRuffa (1988) noted the Merchants Association's involvement with residential buildings, from its "persistent support for the construction of new apartment complexes; the renovation of old, abandoned dwellings; and the building of single-family private homes, mainly for Italian-American renters or buyers" (p. 96). He described the coordination of efforts between the Merchants Association, C.O.B.O., the LDC, and the Mount Carmel Church with the objective of controlling the selection process, from disseminating information about housing opportunities selectively, to carefully screening the applicants for projects completed with government funds channeled into the neighborhood through them.

Those efforts probably did slow down the Italian residential flight, though they ultimately could not stop it. To illustrate, consider the history of the Twin Parks East towers, three high-rise apartment buildings located at the eastern edge of the neighborhood. Current complaints related to the Towers are a systematic remainder of poverty-related problems at the local Bronx Community Board 6. In an interview during the summer of 2008, the district manager had told me that the towers house most of the "problem" residents of the area. For that reason, when the Twin Parks Northeast II Apartments' management changed in 2008, the community board held its September monthly meeting in the building's 'Unity Garden' in a show of support. In the meeting, the district manager introduced the new president of the building's tenants association and remarked on "taking the community back one building at a time," citing the full support of the public officials in the endeavor. However, this venue proved problematic for maintaining the usual orderly atmosphere of most community board meetings. I attended the meeting, which took

place in the patio-like area underneath the building itself, where chairs were arranged in ten to fifteen rows facing a makeshift podium. Several times during the meeting, residents from the apartments above threw trash which hit the ground only a couple of feet from where people were sitting. It was hard to determine whether this was a common form of protest or behavior aimed particularly at the meeting. The security personnel, perhaps particularly sensitive due to the presence of the new captain of the 48th police precinct, eventually started to alert people to stay away from the edges of the patio. Additionally, because building tenants who wanted to speak out failed to register at the beginning of the meeting, they were denied the opportunity to voice their concerns on procedural grounds. As a result, there was little discussion about the Towers themselves, except praise for the new management. Therefore a lot of residents started sharing their concerns about the continuing building problems right outside the meeting area, where constant chatter and arguing prompted continuous pleas for silence from the district manager.

This was not meant to be the fate of those buildings, which were conceived as a means to stabilize the residential makeup of the neighborhood during the late 1960s. On September 28, 1967, the New York Times announced that "fourteen Bronx neighborhood associations and religious institutions" formed the Twin Parks Association to sponsor the housing project that would become the Twin Parks East. [15] While those institutions belonged to many neighborhoods surrounding Belmont, the acting chairman of the new organization was the assistant pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, signaling the Belmont leaders to be the driving force behind the project. An aide from the Bronx Borough President's office, where the incorporation papers were signed, described the planned housing developments as a "timely stopgap to prevent further deterioration of the neighborhoods" ("Housing Project," 1967). In other words, the buildings

[15] "Housing Project Planned in the Bronx," September 28, 1967; *The New York Times*.

were meant to be a barrier stopping the problems of the South Bronx from reaching Belmont, which could only be accomplished by keeping the Italians from leaving. A church leader, who grew up in the neighborhood and served at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church for many years, was familiar with the history of the buildings, and told me that similar efforts to keep Italians in Belmont had been tried by building on the opposite, western edge of the neighborhood, and largely failed. The towers succeeded in keeping people in the neighborhood, according to him: most of its original residents were Italians and mostly former residents of the neighborhood, including people that came back to live there. LaRuffa's account confirms that one of the three buildings was largely rented to Italian-American senior citizens, while the remaining two were rented to a combination of Italian-Americans and Fordham University students. Only in recent years, the church leader told me, the buildings were neglected, and the increasing number of drug addicts led to a diminishing quality of life for the older Italian-American residents, who subsequently left.

The first BID attempt

The current BID similarly serves to preserve Belmont's Little Italy, but its institutional focus on the businesses of the area signals a shift in the strategy of achieving that objective. This strategic shift was necessitated by the emerging dissonance between the residential and business ethnic identities of the area, as shown in previous sections. The emergence of this dissonance was seen as undesirable, and as a result, as we saw above, the institutional setup of the 1970s worked to ensure continuing *residential* predominance in Belmont through minimizing Italian flight. It must have become clear to the main actors, however, that large social forces at work would eventually overwhelm their efforts; as US Census data showed, less than 20 percent of

Belmont residents reported Italian ancestry in 1990. Not surprisingly, the current Belmont BID no longer focuses on preserving Italian *residence*. It was rather brought into being to ensure the *symbolic* presence of Italians by focusing on the businesses that constitute the "Little Italy" and the public areas that surround them.

A key moment that illustrates this transformation of strategy from residential to commercial focus occurred in 1993, when Jimmy, the community leader involved with the LDC, attempted to make a Belmont BID.[16] The most important aspect of that first BID effort was its proposed *area*. Notably smaller than the area of the current BID, it included little beyond the south portion of Arthur Avenue and the few blocks of 187th Street where the church is located (see the map of the proposed area in fig. 5.2 on page 146).[17] Understanding the logic behind the proposed area offers clues to the shifting strategy of the Belmont institutions over time. It is often noted that the neighborhood boundaries shrunk closer to the Arthur Avenue core as an increasing number of Italian-Americans were leaving for the suburbs (see Bromley 1997, 1998; Maida, 1987). The proposed BID area followed those shrinking boundaries, similarly covering only the remaining 'core' portion of Belmont. However, in a strict sense BIDs are business

[16] The effort did not succeed. Various reasons regarding its failure were voiced by a number of people familiar with the effort, including Jimmy. They included a tightening of procedural standards by the Giuliani administration (requiring 51 percent of the putative participants, up from the previous 25 percent, to vote in the affirmative instead of 'lack of objection'), a decidedly less upbeat economic forecast about the future of the neighborhood, a lack of expertise with city administrative channels that a key member of the current BID effort provided, and possibly a less systematic presentation strategy of potential BID benefits to the property owners.

[17] On Arthur Avenue, only businesses from 183rd to 188th Street were included. In comparison, the current BID goes up to the Fordham Road, including the entirety of its businesses for seven blocks – mostly auto-service related stores, such as Midas Muffler, two gas stations, two car rentals, a car wash, etc, remnants of a specific commercial zoning of earlier decades. On 187th Street, Jimmy included businesses from Hoffman Street to Crotona Avenue, while the current BID includes businesses from Lorillard Place to Southern Boulevard.

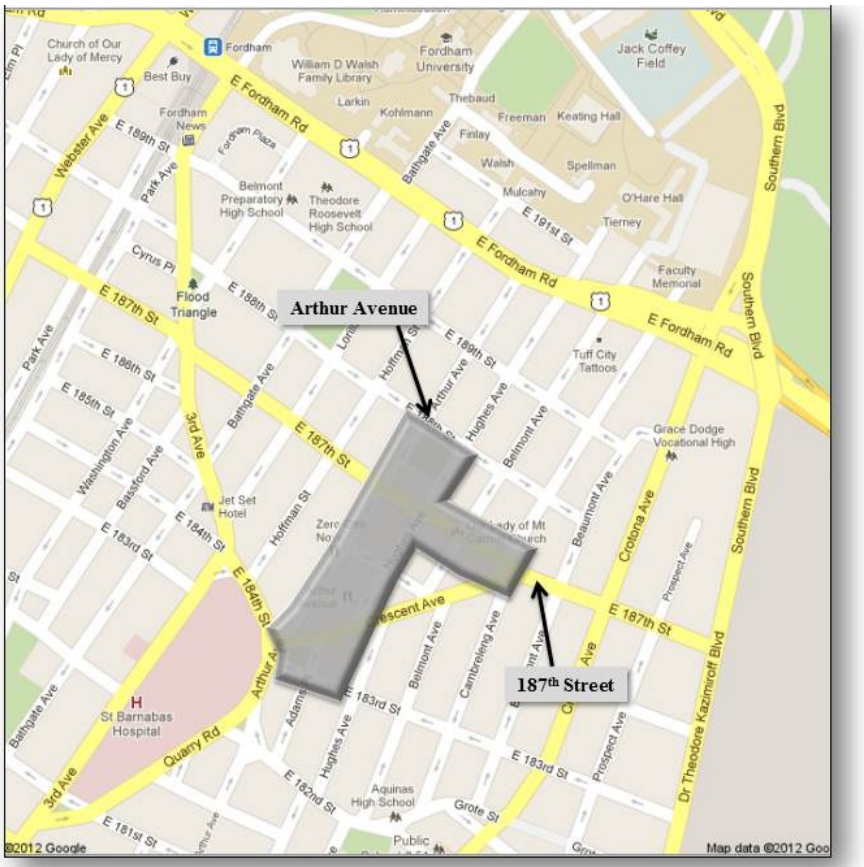


FIG. 5.2. Area covered by the attempted Arthur Avenue Belmont BID, 1993
Source: Google Maps. Available at maps.google.com.

associations, not directly related to the residential areas surrounding the commercial strip they are founded on. The effort reflected the BID's objective to enhance the Italian character of the area through supporting its businesses. By restricting its proposed area within the confines of the remaining Italian residents, it also illustrated the fact that the notion of an Italian neighborhood was still understood residentially. The 1993 BID effort was an attempt to adapt a new institutional tool to the old objective of keeping the neighborhood from disintegrating – by keeping it Italian. In the process, it tried to redefine the Italian businesses through reference to the remaining Italian residents. The redefinition of Italian residence – *symbolic residence* – through reference to the businesses had yet to happen.

The current Belmont BID

Marking the successful culmination of a nearly three-year effort on part of several Belmont merchants and businessmen, Mayor Bloomberg signed the Belmont BID into law on December 1, 2008.[18] At first glance, the BID appears to be little more than an institution of the urban growth machine whose main objective is to boost local commerce and adjacent real estate values by mobilizing the cultural currency of 'ethnicity.' Community leaders routinely describe the BID effort in the press in urban growth language, such as: "This BID would really enhance the whole area… Our merchants do so much. The BID will keep them around," and "We don't see the BID as necessary to survive, [but] as necessary to explode… turning Belmont into a Tri-State tourist destination."[19] But a closer look reveals the continuity of the BID effort with the earlier community institutions described above. The main actors behind the BID, for one, are primarily local merchants, businessmen, and community leaders concerned with the fate of the area since the onset of the precipitous 1970s. The BID's organizational sponsor was the Small Belmont Business Association, originally known as the Merchants' Association, whose role was described above. This institutional continuity ensures a continuity of outlook. Much like the institutional setup of the 1970s, whose general purpose was the maintenance of Belmont as an Italian neighborhood, the current BID is widely recognized and expected to preserve the Italian character of the area. Numerous actors involved in the BID effort understand and support this mission, regardless of personal ethnicity. Representatives from various levels of local and city government, for example, cited the need to preserve the area's Italian character at public hearings

[18] "Restaurant-rich Belmont becomes Bronx' newest BID," *Bayside Times*, 12/12/2008: http://www.yournabe.com/articles/2008/12/12/bronx/doc493fe9a005f8f185234785.txt, by Daniel Beekman.

[19] Quotes from the Bronx Community Board 6 District Manager and a leader of the Belmont Small Business Association that sponsored the BID, in "Big business plans in Bronx's Little Italy," *Daily News*, 02/04/2008, by Tanyanika Samuels; Beekman, *ibid*.

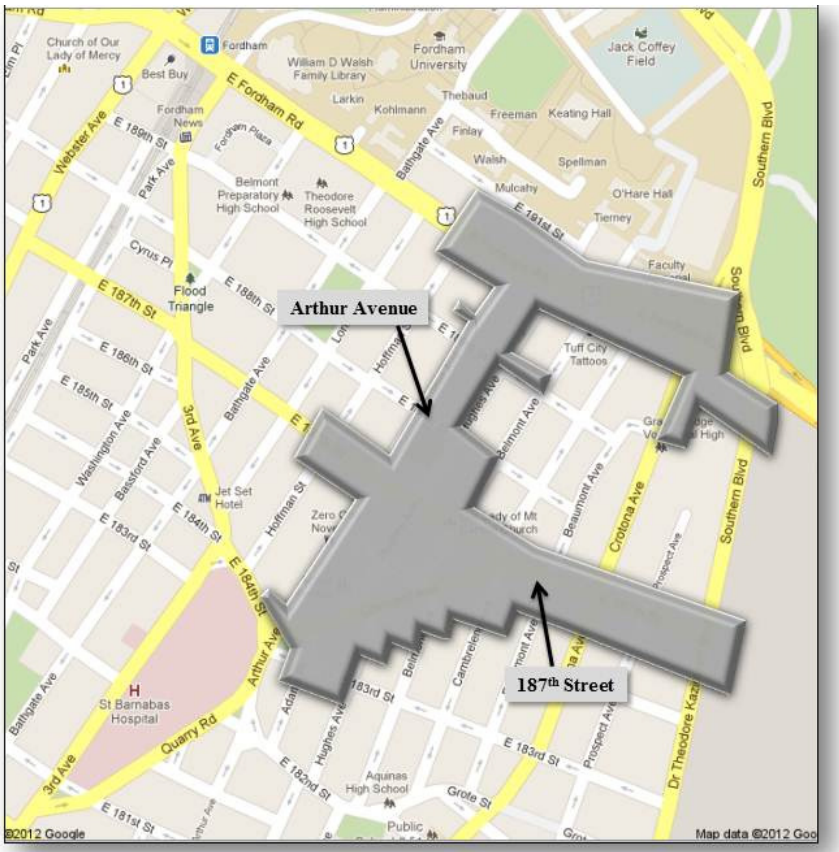


FIG. 5.3. Area covered by the Arthur Avenue Belmont BID, 2008 – present.
Source: Google Maps. Available at maps.google.com.

during the BID's approval stage.[20] Similarly, several community leaders in Belmont specifically pointed to the preservation of the 'cultural identity' of the area a central BID goal, as demonstrated by these interview quotes:

- "The area has a historic background. We see it as Little Italy. It has stayed like that although the community has changed due to immigration." The district manager of Community Board 6, of Puerto Rican descent.

[20] The third and final procedurally required public hearing that took place at City Hall on October 7, 2008, opened with (often passionate) statements of support and concluded with a 'support' panel; the list included the Assistant Commissioner for the Department of Small Business Services that oversees BIDs, a number of City Council members (including District 15 representative which includes Belmont), representatives from Fordham University and the Bronx Zoo, the District Manager of the Bronx Community Board 6, representatives from the Mount Carmel Church and the sponsoring Belmont Small Business Association, and a number of local business and property owners.

- "We support it. Hopefully it will benefit the neighborhood." Local merchant, owner of a renowned grocery store dating several decades ago, of Jewish descent.

- "We're losing our cultural identity, and this is going to help keep our identity as Little Italy. The reason for the BID is to create a cultural identity with the Italian theme that helps to promote the businesses in the area, and ensure the economic sustainability in this neighborhood." Local merchant, real estate businessman, and one-time Community Board 6 member, of Puerto Rican descent.

- "This comes at a time of transition. The BID will help us maintain our Little Italy identity, so we're not banging heads with the big guys up on Fordham Road." Local merchant of an old-time Italian clothing store, of Italian descent.[21]

- "Fordham Road is a shopping district, while Arthur Avenue is a cozy neighborhood and like a piece of Italy. They complement each-other. People can shop on Fordham Road and go to Arthur Avenue for Italian food." Executive director of the Fordham Road BID.

These accounts make clear that the sense of ethnicity that Little Italy preserves, and the BID is expected to enhance, has little to do with notions of ethnicity that defined the social organization of an ethnic group before ethnicity became symbolic (Gans, 1979) or a matter of choice (Waters, 1990). The Italian character of Belmont is, among other things, a business strategy that promises to work for Italians and non-Italians, residents and non-residents – in short, anyone who has a stake at the future of Belmont.

A Shift in Strategy: Commercial Ethnicity

But if the institutional pedigree of the Belmont BID and its general purpose are clear, the growing dissonance between the commercial and residential ethnic identities of the area necessitated a general shift in strategy. The combined efforts of the 1970s institutions to maintain Italian residential predominance may have slowed Italian flight, but powerful social forces ultimately led to the thorough de-Italianization of the residential blocks surrounding Arthur

[21] Beekman, *ibid*.

Avenue and 187th Street. Consequently, unlike the first BID effort that attempted to cling to the narrowing boundaries of the Italian neighborhood from a residential perspective, the current BID leaders have shifted focus to the commercial scene as the primary carrier of the cultural identity of the whole neighborhood. From this commercial perspective, the BID is expected to utilize the image of ethnic groceries, cafes, pizzerias, and restaurants to manage an expansive Italian identity that includes and redefines the commercial presence of the newer ethnicities described above, as well as instills an Italian sense of 'neighborhood' to the residential blocks surrounding Arthur Avenue.

Recognizing the need to reconcile the commercial and residential diversity with an 'Italian' image of Belmont, Belmont leaders departed from the conservative boundaries of the first BID effort. They defined the current BID area expansively, including businesses on the northern and eastern ends of Arthur Avenue and 187th Street, which are neither Italian nor predominantly food-related (see the map of the current BID area in fig. 5.3 on page 148). Riccie, a leading member of the BID effort, explained their decision to be inclusive towards the 'whole community,' not just the Italian businesses: "This is not an Italian neighborhood. The predominant feeling might be Italian, but the majority of the businesses aren't Italian, and the vast majority of the people who live here aren't Italian. That doesn't mean we can't have a Little Italy in it." He elaborated on the importance of the BID to perpetuate the Italian character of the area through a redefinition of the commercial diversity:

> It's important for everyone to understand [that] we don't want to change Little Italy: [it's] what brings money here [and] why this neighborhood is here. But the term Little Italy and being an Italian neighborhood are two different things… You could be Dominican and own an Italian business, but you still want to advertise it as an Italian business because that's what's bringing the business in. You can have a Dominican business too, but it's not going to have the same commercial viability. We don't want to lose what makes this neighborhood different from West Farms, Tremont Avenue…

Riccie's narrative acknowledges the overall goal of the BID in institutionalizing the Italian character of the area. Moreover, it reflects the residential de-Italianization of Belmont, and the subsequent necessity of building an Italian image with recourse the remaining businesses. As a result, Belmont is no longer an 'embattled' neighborhood – such concepts are invariably defined with reference to residence. It is a space of possibilities, where the BID can capitalize on the presence of a cluster of Italian businesses and the memories of an Italian enclave to create the kind of present place where representations of an ethnic past are produced and consumed in a commodified form.

A symbolic neighborhood

It is no wonder that the main conflict surrounding the approval of the BID centered around notions of 'neighborhood.'[22] At a public hearing held in City Hall, six business and property owners on Fordham Road presented a unified opposition to the BID initiative. Of those, one noted that at stake was only "a very short strip of restaurants [on Arthur Avenue];" three explicitly suggested that the proposed BID area should exclude the Fordham Road area. Highlighting the fact that their businesses were not located on Arthur Avenue, were not food-related or Italian, the last speaker noted: "It's a puzzle to me why we're included in this." There

[22] Warned about the strong emotions that BID formation usually elicits – would the big Arthur Avenue merchants see the BID formation as a dilution of their influence? The low-income residents as the onset of residential gentrification? – I attended meetings and public hearings expecting strong opposition. Atypically, there was little up until the last public hearing at City Hall on October 7, 2008, when six business and property owners from Fordham Road presented a unified front against the BID initiative. All of them argued that the BID was conceived during better economic times – some had even supported it during its early stages – but the economic downturn had created an unsuitable situation to raise taxes, and while not categorically against the idea, they opposed its creation in the meantime.

may have been a number of motivations behind their opposition, but they recognized the centrality of the Italian identity within the BID effort and its effort to include and redefine the surrounding neighborhood.

Several days after the meeting, Riccie contradicted the notion that Fordham Road businessmen generally do not identify with 'the community' of Little Italy. Because of their location and proximity to the Fordham Road BID, he told me that in the course of deciding whether to include those businesses into the Belmont BID proposal, he 'asked a number of business and building owners' if they considered themselves part of Little Italy or the rest of the Fordham Road, to which they replied Little Italy. He reiterated that instead of strict presence of Italian businesses in the outlying blocks, he focused on common geographical boundaries and business synergies between the neighborhood and the large institutions that define its boundaries – Fordham University and its students, Botanical Gardens and the Bronx Zoo and its workers and visitors – as definitive of the Belmont community. He finally added that he had to defend the decision to include the outlying blocks to many Arthur Avenue merchants as well, who quickly realized those blocks would require a disproportionate use of BID services such as security and sanitation, compared to their contributions. Defending the inclusion of blocks close to Southern Boulevard into the BID, he noted:

> There are no Italian stores there, but they are people that live in our community, that shop in our community. Maybe there will be Italian stores there, maybe not, but just because there isn't one now… there might be a Little Italy, but it's not Italian!… You can't have twenty Italian stores in a neighborhood not relating in any way to the rest of the community. We need a safe, viable community to work in, for people to come and shop in.

Conclusion

If the Belmont BID effort fulfills the objectives that Richie summarized, the businesses on Arthur Avenue will have one more resource to organize and implement the thematic aura of Little Italy. But that will not change the fact that the majority of the area residents remain overwhelmingly non-Italian. One might be tempted to think that the expansive borders of the current BID effort are meant to create a more inclusive atmosphere beyond the literal presence of Italian businesses, as Richie indicated. On the other hand, one can also interpret the expansive BID borders as an attempt to extend the 'correct' uses of the neighborhood into areas that have continuously served to remind shoppers of the sharp boundaries between commercial ethnicity and residential ethnicity. This interpretation also highlights the connection between boundary-work within the commercial realm, explored in the previous chapter, and the transformation of urban space in response to that boundary-making.

If Belmont's commercial ethnicity is predicated upon the control and invisibility of its residential ethnicity, how does Arthur Avenue negotiate everyday ethnicity in the streets that surround the stores and resideces? In the following chapter, I turn to an analysis of the street *feste*, which included both traditional Church-organized summer festivals that have recently come under the control of the merchants, as well as the creation of a new event, Ferragosto, held every September from 1997. I argue that street feste are deployed in ways that show an *idealized* spectacle of everyday ethnicity, refuting patterns of real everyday use that are not a part of the commodified, Italian-themed spectacle of a 'real' Little Italy.

CHAPTER 6

The Transformation of Street Feste

Introduction

In 1997, the New York Times hailed the upcoming celebration of the Ferragosto feast on Belmont's Arthur Avenue as "a real taste of Old World Italy" (Gittrich, 1997). Pointing to the prevalence of stereotypes, one of the organizers expressed the intention to "share real Italian identity and culture with New York." The festival was reportedly staged as a "correct" celebration of Italian American culture and arts that eschewed "overfried zeppole … rented, rusted amusement park rides [and] chintzy carnival games," and instead featured "excerpts from popular operas … Shakespeare's Italian-based plays, and a rendition of 'The Adventures of the Pinocchio." "This is the true Little Italy [and] we want everyone to see true Italian heritage," said one of the merchants, showing off a sheet of fococcia schiacciate from the deli his father established half a century ago (*ibid*).

Ferragosto was first held in 1997. Organized by area merchants and community leaders, it was initiated as an addition, or rather response, to the two other church-organized street feste of Belmont. Anxious about the success of Little Italy, Belmont leaders remained underwhelmed, and often dissatisfied, with the state of celebrations of the religious feasts, which have been held since the early days of the neighborhood history for over one hundred years. This chapter tells the story of the transforming street feste, and describes the work of area merchant and community leaders to produce the spectacle of an 'authentic' Little Italy – and neighborhood – amid the rapidly changing demographic landscape of Belmont.

The previous chapter on the Belmont Business Improvement District described the institutional history behind the emergence of the area's Little Italy. It relied on a distinction between residential ethnicity and commercial ethnicity, and noted the strategic shift from the former to the latter as area leaders attempted to preserve the Italian character of the neighborhood. The successful restructuring of the commercial strip of Arthur Avenue from an immigrant shopping street to a Little Italy both heightened and necessitated the successful management of the disjuncture between the ethnicity of the stores and that of the residents in the blocks surrounding Arthur Avenue.

Street festivals were employed with similar goals and effects. Like the everyday patterns of commercial life in the neighborhood, annual festivals occur on the *streets*, making them important tools for managing the divergent ethnicities of the consumption spaces and residential areas around them. As the New York Times article illustrated, street events can serve as powerful tools in projecting specific visions of old ethnic neighborhoods like Belmont. Their unique role in redefining street uses makes them particularly suitable in establishing the commercial ethnicity of Arthur Avenue as a singular vision that subsumes the actual variety of the entire neighborhood ethnicities. As a result, street festivals became a site for contestation over what – and who – best represented the 'true' character of the neighborhood for area merchants and religious leaders. It is within that context that recent Ferragosto emerged as a representation and site of 'true Italian heritage' compared to the 'overfried zeppole [and] chintzy carnival games' of the much older religious street festivals of Belmont.

This chapter offers an analysis of the transformation of street feste in Belmont, noting the role of local actors and institutions in recruiting neighborhood festivals to imprint everyday ethnicity with past Italian residence. I argue that street feste are deployed to maintain an

idealized spectacle of everyday ethnicity, becoming a tool for the preservation of Belmont as an Italian neighborhood despite residential turnover. I begin with a description of the decline of Belmont's religious feasts in response to changing residential demographics. Next, I present the history of merchant involvement in the organization of the religious feasts, tracing their attempts to adapt the feasts in tandem with the commercial makeover of Belmont, and uncovering different visions of 'neighborhood' in the process. I continue with a description of Ferragosto's ascendance, providing an analysis of the main elements of its organization that lend the feast the aura of authenticity. I conclude with a discussion of the social significance of the commercial vision for the future of Belmont, noting the construction of an 'authentic' Italian ethnicity as an ultimate strategy of 'whiteness' in a racially contested setting.

THE DECLINE OF THE RELIGIOUS FEASTS: CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS

Few communal events were more prominent than religious feasts in early Italian immigrant neighborhoods. Typically celebrating saints associated with southern Italian towns where the immigrants originated, these annual events provided "site[s] for the construction, elaboration, and performance of the various emergent meanings of 'Italian American' by the immigrants and their children" (Orsi, 1992: 322). Given their centrality to the social life of the neighborhood, changes in the street feste provide an important lens in understanding the transformation of Italian neighborhoods from ethnic enclaves to urban ethnic places (Kosta, *forthcoming*).

Religious feasts were important social events of neighborhood life throughout much of the twentieth century in Belmont. In a memoir about growing up in 'the Fordham town' during the 1920s and 1930s, D'Erasmo noted that "Italian festivals honoring different patron saints were

the big events of the summer months," describing the decorations and the street food carts that sold "sausage and peppers, barbecued meats, liver wrapped in a thin layer of fat with basil, sweetbreads, and lamb barbecued on skewers" (1978: 91). An ethnographic account of Belmont from the mid-1980s, as well as a more recent memoir, affirm their continued importance to the community (LaRuffa, 1988; Samtur and Mastroianni, 2008). Our Lady of Mount Carmel appears to have been the favorite feast according to D'Erasmo (p. 97), who describes the procession of the statue and the Neapolitan folk songs that entertained the crowd for hours.

The feasts have undergone significant change in the intervening decades. For one, the number of celebrated festivals has dropped over time. Belmont residents originated from many towns in southern Italy, and many of their patron saints were celebrated in early decades. D'Erasmo mentions Saint Joseph and Madonna di Monteverde, both no longer celebrated in Belmont (1978: 85).[1] Father Rizzo, a pastor who grew up in Belmont and served at our Lady of Mount Carmel Church for twenty years before transferring outside the neighborhood, confirmed the decline in the number of feasts: "in the early days of our [neighborhood] history there used to be six or seven festivals. [I remember] St. Anthony, Mount Carmel, St. Mark, [Madonna di] Monteverde… at least 5 of them. Now there are only two." The pastor was referring to Saint Anthony and Mount Carmel, which take place in mid-June and mid-July respectively. By the time LaRuffa published his ethnographic study of Belmont, based on research conducted during the early to mid-1980s, Saint Anthony and Mount Carmel were already the only ones still celebrated. Held since the establishment of our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in 1908, they remain the only religious festivals celebrated in Belmont to date.

[1] Another observer talks about the statue of Our Lady of Monteverde being paraded through the streets of Throgs Neck (Twomey, 2007: 140). The celebration might have been a parallel one, or may have followed Belmonters subsequently moving to Throgs Neck.

The remaining feasts have also undergone changes. Attendance has been steadily declining for decades, as ethnic and racial turnover has accelerated. Asked about the current state of the religious feasts, many respondents would be answer dismissively, focusing on the past glory of the feasts instead. Ethnographic observation during three summers in the late 2000s revealed that only three blocks of 187th Street have been cordoned off from traffic and lined up with food vendors and games, in contrast to accounts of earlier decades when the feasts stretched for over eight blocks (LaRuffa, 1988: 114). The route of the procession that concludes each feast has been shortened, and the number of attendees provides a stark contrast to the crowds visible in photos from early decades. A police officer who has been providing security to the procession for many years confirmed the shortened route and dwindling numbers attending the procession. The duration of the feasts has increased from the typical two to three days in the Italian towns where they originated to about two weeks in Belmont. The increased duration has its origin in church efforts to maximize feast-generated income for the financial benefit of the parish school (LaRuffa interview with a priest, p. 115; personal interview with pastor Rizzo quoted above). More importantly, the feasts appear to have undergone a continuous decline in their religiosity. The procession of the saint statue around the streets of Belmont on the concluding day of festivities remains important, even though more research is needed to establish whether it is still preceded by the kind of communal effervescence Orsi documented in the case of Italian Harlem's Madonna of 115th Street (1985; 1992). But the procession appears somewhat disconnected to the street festivities, and for most attendees little is evidently religious in nature. A remnant of residential ethnicity, the religious feasts in their traditional iteration clash with the more immediate claims of commercialism and Italianness dictated by Little Italy's commercial ethnicity.

MERCHANT INVOLVEMENT IN RELIGIOUS FEASTS

The changing logistics of the festivities suggest a clear trajectory of decline, which is to be expected given the steady residential de-Italianization of the neighborhood. Ethnographic fieldwork during the late 2000s in the area revealed that merchants, community leaders, and attendees share the feeling that the present feasts are but a shadow of their former selves. In recent decades, merchants and community leaders have engaged in various efforts to transform the street feste, striving to adapt the celebrations in conjunction with the commercial re-Italianization of the area. The main issue of contention has been the particular format of the feasts, and specifically their duration. Continuously critical of the lengthy duration of the feasts, community and business leaders invested in the future of the Little Italy have time and again attempted to wrestle some organizational control from the Church. Their vision of the feasts as a potential element of valorizing Little Italy differs from the Church vision. In the following paragraphs I unpack the meanings underneath the merchant request for shorter feasts.

The merchants of Arthur Avenue and 187th Street reacted to the impending ethnic and racial turnover of the neighborhood as early as 1975, creating a Merchants Association. LaRuffa notes that the association collected fees from the businesses "used to defray the cost of the street decorations setup … every June and July to celebrate the feasts of Saint Anthony and Our Lady of Mount Carmel (*ibid*, 94). By the 1980s, the merchants were trying to intervene in the organization of the feasts, and their relationship to the church seems frayed. For two years in a row, LaRuffa mentions the shortening of the Mount Carmel feast from twelve to five days, noting "speculation that the merchants with stores on [187th Street] were complaining that the booths reduce the number of parking spaces and, as a result, prospective customers go

elsewhere" (p. 115). This statement shows that the celebrations did not represent a business opportunity for the merchants in question, but were rather seen as detrimental to their interests. The decision to shorten the feast coincided with the arrival of a new pastor, according to LaRuffa, so the reason for the change in format is unclear.

By the time I was conducting research on the feasts – twenty years later – their format still remained contested, and the merchants continued to have an on again, off again history of collaboration and frustration with the church. Gerry, an Italian American local merchant who owns a popular pastry shop, has been organizing Ferragosto since 2008, and also serves as master of ceremony [MC] during the religious feasts. He conveyed the general feeling among merchants when questioning the length of St. Anthony: "It runs eleven days, a little too long in my opinion. That's the parish, so it's organized by the Church [unlike Ferragosto]. Mt. Carmel in July is a little shorter. I think they should run both of them five days or so." Asked about the slow weekdays during the celebrations, as well as the paucity of local merchants among the food booths, Gerry responded: "St. Anthony is going down. It got reduced to almost a block or something. [At some point] there was nobody to MC it really. That's how I got into it."

Why would the merchants prefer shorter feasts? Why would the Church prefer longer feasts? The answer lies in the different visions of Belmont that they imagine operating within. Despite its Italian background, the Church ultimately operates within the Belmont neighborhood and tries to engage the current minority residents that live in the residential blocks of Belmont. The merchants and community leaders are first and foremost interested in the preservation of Belmont as an Italian neighborhood, and their efforts are focused on the commercial Little Italy, a reality that at best bypasses the residential minorities, and at worst actively excludes them. As a result, long-lasting feasts generate more income for the church, do not affect the spirituality of

the procession of the saint statue during the concluding day of the festivities, and provide an extended opportunity to engage and include the residential community of Belmont, whose predominant Latin American origin makes them natural constituents for the expansion of the local Catholic Church. In contrast, a two-week long feast presents organizational challenges that work against the area merchant and business leaders' vision of a successful Little Italy. Weekday festivities fail to draw the typically white, middle-class suburban crowds that the merchants hope to lure into the area restaurants and specialty stores. The carnival games that line up the sidewalks of the designated blocks, such as Whack-a-mole and Drown the Clown, draw children, families and youth from nearby residential blocks, who lack the disposable income to be potential clients to the commercial establishment of Arthur Avenue. Further, from the merchants' perspective, the local residents' minority status may impede the area's image as Italian. As a result, rarely do Arthur Avenue merchants 'come out' to serve the crowds, though some pizzerias and cafés on or near 187th Street stay open. The feasts are mainly served by non-local vendors who attend street events across wide geographical areas and serve typical festival fare. It is no wonder that, as LaRuffa reported twenty years ago, 187th Street merchants resented the duration of the religious feasts. They did bring crowds in; it's just that those were the *wrong* crowds.

Differing visions of neighborhood – Area Merchants' Commercial Belmont

The merchant reservations about the religious festivals, and their efforts to change their format, reflect their desire to make the celebrations more successful and turn them into tools of a strategy of boosterism. The differences between the church and the merchants' vision of Belmont stem from the residential and commercial disparity that developed as Belmont underwent turnover. The merchant efforts in adapting the feasts in alignment with the commercial ethnicity

of the neighborhood show how important they are to their vision of Little Italy. Their efforts seek to adapt the feasts in alignment with the commercial ethnicity of the neighborhood. Joe, the Italian-American manager of a centrally located Italian restaurant, described in some detail the bouts of cooperation and conflict between merchant groups and the Church over the organization of the festivals. Joe began by identifying at least three merchant groups vying for leadership – a source of continuous conflict in and of itself – and proceeded to describe one instance of success, followed by fallout:

> Joe: And [there] was an issue with the feast. We have a great feast. It's going downhill, it's horrible.
> Me: I just attended it. Nobody from the neighborhood! [No local merchants].
> Joe: Ho-rri-ble feast.
> Me: Why?
> Joe: A lot of reasons. The monsignor doesn't want to let go of the reigns. He thinks there is an underground power net that wants to come in and try to take over and run illegal operations off it.[2] Maybe he is an older gentleman and that's the way he thinks. Now five years ago, [the owner of a deli] says to the monsignor, let the [merchants] association help you. The best feast we've ever had! It was beautiful! We had everything, the best entertainment, great crowds, everybody was out. He brought Daily News in, and he brought a meat company in [as sponsors]…

An exasperated Joe proceeded to tell me about the subsequent fallout at the association meeting after the feast over issues of financial transparency regarding sponsorship money.

[2] It is possible that, in addition to the frayed relationship between the Church and the merchants, as well as the role of the personalities involved Joe alludes to, the monsignor may have been acting out of an abundance of caution after the San Gennaro debacle in the mid-1990s. Mulberry Street's feast, in Lower Manhattan's Little Italy, achieved notoriety in 1995 after a Federal grand jury in Manhattan, convened at the behest of then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, alleged that leaders of The Society of San Gennaro had ties to the Genovese family of organized crime, and used the feast to siphon a significant part of the rents paid by festival vendors. Mayor Giuliani allowed the 1995 feast to run only after its leaders accepted oversight of its finances by an independent city-appointed monitor; citing the conclusions of the investigation, the Mayor denied permit to the organization and installed new managers for the 1996 feast. For a selected sample of coverage in New York Times, see Selwyn Raab "U.S. Contends Major Festival Is Run by Mob," *New York Times* (September 2, 1995); Dan Barry "Citing Mob, Mayor May Shut Street Festival in Little Italy," *New York Times* (September 9, 1995); Dan Barry, "Report Urges Ousting Leaders of San Gennaro Feast," *New York Times* (January 18, 1996); Vivian S. Toy, "Giuliani Installs Managers for Little Italy Fair in New Move on Mob," *New York Times* (August 21, 1996).

Another example of tension was the time when the whole neighborhood agreed to an initiative to advertise together in a metropolitan newspaper for weeks in a row – an effort initiated by one particular business. The effort ultimately led to accusations of unfair exposure of certain businesses over others, leading to the exclusion of some businesses from the campaign altogether.

Tensions of this nature are to be expected in settings where different businesses attempt to get organized and pursue larger goals. Despite the setbacks, their efforts underlie a realization that their individual success relies on the larger success of the area's Little Italy, necessitating a strategy of presenting the entire area, instead of each individual business, in a favorable light as an ethnic destination. The continuous merchant efforts to change the format of the festivals reflect their anxiety in ensuring that the events successfully reflect the 'correct' image of the neighborhood, based on the centrality of its commercial ethnicity. Joe understands the relationship of the businesses to each other and the area accordingly, and relayed efforts to overcome the difficulties in getting organized:

> Joe: Now everybody is suspicious. We have to start all over again. I have been going out there and working with [a restaurant owner and grocery store owner] to get back in line and do something again. It doesn't do me any good to have somebody come to my name, my restaurant. I think Arthur Avenue needs some serious advertising.
> Me: You think it's better for business if you have the whole place advertised instead of just your own?
> Joe: Yes. I have ads on the radio, they hear it and they come, that's fine. But, families usually don't go to seafood places. But, if we say come to Arthur Avenue instead of come to my restaurant, we solve that problem.

Joe therefore tied the success of the restaurant he works for to the success of the entire area in becoming a destination. Zukin and Kosta (2004) have argued that even downtown consumption spaces such as East Village's 9th Street, which have infinitively better access to the financial, cultural, and tourist flows that characterize New York's urban core, rely on group

specialization, rather than individual business, as a successful long-term strategy. But if the unit in question was one block in the case of the East Village, what is the unit in Joe's case? A story that Joe told about overcoming a rough week in terms of business offers a better idea about the contours of 'Arthur Avenue':

> The thing is, everybody wants to go after the [middle-class, higher income] people in Westchester, Connecticut, Long Island, and Manhattan. Because that's where the money is, they say. They're absolutely wrong! And I proved it when I ran [a local deli before becoming a manager of a restaurant]. The real money is the consistent money that's here everyday. And that's the 4,000 Fordham University students in the neighborhood! One February, it was zero degrees outside, and 12 inches of snow. Nobody is coming down from Westchester. All the restaurants were closing for the day by noon or so… some didn't even bother opening. We went on the computer. Or that thing on the phone… Facebook? We put it on Facebook, "we're staying open, half price on everything." By 10 o'clock at night, people are in line trying to get in. They are coming in flip-flops and pajamas from down the street, in the snow… they don't care! They want a place to go, they're not staying in their room all day, something's got to be open. We did almost five thousand dollars in business that day!

Joe claims that the business strategy of the Italian restaurants in the area is short-sighted in single-mindedly pursuing a middle-class suburban clientele that is attracted to the area because of its Italian ethnicity. His strategy is more locally inclusive, geared towards both said suburban middle-classes, but also courting local constituencies. The discussion of the store's marketing strategy during the storm day reveals Joe's presumptions about the local constituencies, and ultimately his conception of the 'local' – one that includes the students of nearby Fordham University, many of whom stay in dorms or rented apartments in Belmont, but that does not include the actual area residents of the neighborhood, because of their lack of disposable income.

Differing visions of neighborhood – The Church's Residential Belmont

How does the merchants' map of commercial Belmont compare to the neighborhood vision of the Church? To learn more about the differences, I interviewed Father Rizzo. He grew up in the Belmont of the 1940s, left for several decades, and returned to serve as a pastor at the Mount Carmel Church during the early eighties. After serving for twenty years, Father Rizzo transferred to another church in the suburbs, but he still attends Belmont festivals and is enthusiastic about the preservation of its Italian ethnicity. Father Rizzo described the residential transformation of the neighborhood, and the church's reaction to the changing ethnic makeup:

> When I grew up, it was still entirely Italian. When I came [back in the 1980s] it was a changing neighborhood in the sense that Italians had diminished in number, and there were other nationalities living there, mainly Spanish. We had more black people than we had when I grew up there. And there were Albanians. Population had decreased; the number of people living in the area had decreased. While it was still an Italian neighborhood – even today I consider it Little Italy – it had become more multicultural, multilingual, multiethnic. And the beginning of the influx immigration Spanish people, that moved us to start having a Spanish mass sometime in the early 1990s. I first started by having a Spanish priest come in every week. Then we started to have a Spanish neo-catechumen. When I began this movement, I started [mass] first in Italian, then English, and then Spanish. … So, about 15 years ago I started to give more emphasis to the Spanish, but not neglecting the Italian heritage and the Italian traditions. And I tried to maintain the Italian traditions, and integrate the Spanish with them. So as a result, many times in big feasts, such as Easter and Christmas, the mass will be in three languages: English, Italian, and Spanish.

Father Rizzo makes clear that the church was trying to strike a balance between the Italian past of the neighborhood and the 'present' reality of the minorities that had moved in – at least in the narrow sense of holding mass in different languages. Reassessing Robert Caro's portrayal of the damage that Moses' Cross-Bronx Expressway had inflicted upon the East Tremont neighborhood, Bromley (1998) cites the nearby Gethsemane Baptist and St. Mary Protectress Ukrainian churches as "hav[ing] continued to function very effectively close to the Expressway… attracting commuter congregations from the suburbs" (p. 24). I asked Father

Rizzo whether the Mount Carmel Church continued to serve the Italians who have since moved away in any significant way. He explained:

> They would like to come to mass here, but they can't drive and may have no one to take them here. But this has been always a center of Italian activity, so people get married here, they get buried from here, have its children baptized here, have special occasions here. So some of the older people would like to come back to the neighborhood if they could, but it's mostly for the major [holidays].

Father Rizzo's explanation indicates that the Mount Carmel Church retains its identification with the Italian residents of past decades, reinforcing the link during important occasions (and the yearly summer festivals). But the Church does not serve Italians on a regular basis, or exclusively. As Father Rizzo already indicated, the Church has had to acknowledge the residential turnover of the neighborhood, and broaden its appeal towards and inclusion of local groups, particularly Spanish speaking residents of Latino descent who originate from typically Catholic countries. The relative ethnic stability of the neighborhood until the 1970s meant that the same population simultaneously served as the church's parish and the area stores' clientele. The church and the stores were important institutions in the social lives of the same ethnic population. In other words, both the commercial and religious establishment had a shared understanding of 'the neighborhood.' The ensuing turnover has problematized how the two institutions relate to the neighborhood. Joe's interview quoted above ("the thing is, everybody wants to go after the people in Westchester. And Connecticut, and Long Island, and Manhattan. Because that's where the money is, they say") confirmed that the majority of the core businesses on Arthur Avenue have transformed themselves into catering primarily to a clientele that no longer lives in the neighborhood. And because that suburban clientele, whether Italian American or otherwise, is of a notably higher socio-economic status compared to the current lower-income residents of Belmont, the meaning of Belmont is restricted to the commercial establishment and

the workers/students of the major area institutions, such as Fordham University, St. Barnabas Hospital, and the Bronx Zoo. The church, on the other hand, still identifies its parish in local ways: while retaining its connection to previous Belmont residents of Italian ancestry, Father Rizzo's interview shows that the bulk of its 'clientele' remains neighborhood residents, a majority of whom are now immigrants of Hispanic origin.

Given the divergence of what 'the neighborhood' represents for the Church and the area merchants, it is no wonder that street festivals, as key symbolic events that negotiate and fix symbolic boundaries in place, are contested. The merchants attempt to adapt those events more responsive to a vision of the neighborhood that can offer ways of consuming the Italian ethnicity. Father Rizzo understands the problems associated with differing definitions of the parish. Asked about the festivals, he acknowledged that they were much bigger celebrations in earlier decades, but also that the religious festivals retained a symbolic importance for the Church that was not shared, or could not be fulfilled, but the more recent Ferragosto initiated and run by the Local Development Corporation on behalf of the merchants. He explained the difference as follows:

> St. Anthony and Mt. Carmel feasts are principally religious, cultural, and traditional events. Ferragosto is principally a business event. It's also cultural of course, and it performs a very good service. But it's just one day, to remain economically feasible, and they make a killing in that one day. It's easy to run a feast or the fair for one day. Most of the big street festivals in the city are one-day affairs, unlike religious festivals, that tend to be longer. Now, what some people in our neighborhood don't realize is that St. Anthony is a very popular saint, and there are many churches all around New York State that have feasts on St. Anthony, and also some of them have Mt. Carmel. In other words, the Italian spirit, no matter where they are, they have these feasts. And so these two feasts are very, very important for us. First, it has a religious aspect. Second, it has a tradition of the Italian salvation."[3]

[3] Later in the interview Father Rizzo mentions that the feasts enable to church to raise revenue in support of its school ("of course we don't make millions of dollars because we don't have the number of vendors and the number of people that are attracted to Mulberry Street's St.

While Father Rizzo describes the differences in the significance of the feasts to the Church and the merchants as religious versus business ("they don't need the religious feasts"), it is important to note that they share a common sense of Italian ethnicity. His example of St. Anthony indicates that the feasts can serve as symbolic linkages between the local parish and a larger (Italian) Catholic universe. Such linkages to a larger Italian identity can in turn provide an anchor of preserving past Italian identity within a more locally diverse population. In short, Father Rizzo's narrative illustrates that contested understandings of the neighborhood translate into differing roles for the street feste of Belmont.

The mismatch between the actual residential community of Belmont and the symbolic community envisioned by Little Italy's boosters has led local actors to attempts transforming the street feste in line with the particular needs of Little Italy. Business leaders have introduced various new elements into the religious feasts intended to affect the composition of attending crowds, increase the involvement of area merchants, and ensure profits for participating merchants and the Church. For example, a makeshift stage hauled by a New York City Department of Parks and Recreation truck is positioned at the Arthur Avenue intersection, the eastern edge of the designated feast area. Successive bands playing on the stage provide continuous live entertainment, constituting the only official program of the evening. In contrast to the carnival games that create an atmosphere with few ethnic markers, the stage performances are typically Italian-related, and the master of ceremony is an Italian American merchant and community leader that continuously remarks on the Italianness of Belmont.[4] Crowds congregate

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Gennaro"). But while the financial aspect is necessary, the quote shows that the symbolic significance of the religious feasts is far more important to the church.

[4] He often asks the band at hand to perform, or plays the record of, what he calls "the official song of the neighborhood," Cool Change's "On the Street of Belmont Is Where I Want To Be."

in front of the stage, sitting on the skirts of the sidewalk, on rows of street chairs placed in front of the stage, or by the tables of the large corner café that carries the last name of its Italian owner. The organizers hope that the entertainment will appeal to former residents, who will drive to Belmont to meet up with friends and reminisce. Because the makeshift stage faces the blocks closed to traffic, the crowd lined up in front of the stage turns its back to the rest of the designated feast. Whether by accident or design, this setup results in a somewhat divided feast where a relatively mature crowd may be listening to a singer performing old Neapolitan songs on the stage, while less than two blocks away African American youth are performing an impromptu Michael Jackson talent show driven by the boom-box music of the small Puerto Rican store selling themed t-shirts. In short the merchant and community leaders seek to negotiate this ethnic and racial diversity by sustaining a vision of the neighborhood as ethnically Italian.

THE INITIATION OF FERRAGOSTO

The efforts of community and business leaders to influence the religious feasts are inherently limited by their long tradition and the organizational control of the Church, whose priorities do not always mesh with those of the merchants. A clearer representation of the leaders' vision of Little Italy, and the role street feste can play, is offered by Ferragosto, Belmont's third and last summer festival. A mid-August short holiday in Italy, its celebration in Belmont was initiated in 1997, under the leadership of a community leader and the combined

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The song appeared during the opening and closing credits of *A Bronx Tale* – a 1993 movie directed by Robert DeNiro that takes place in the Italian Belmont of the 1960s – and is popular with the crowd in front of the makeshift stage.

efforts of several local merchants and organizations.[5] The main features of the Ferragosto celebrations contrast with the religious feasts, representing symbolic choices on the part of its organizers that work to enhance their particular vision of Little Italy. This section of the chapter will explore some of these symbolic choices, in order to outline what the merchants' vision of Little Italy looks like, and how it is different from the sense of community that the religious festivals rely on.

The opening paragraph of the chapter quoted the New York Times article that portrayed the first Ferragosto festivities as representing 'true Italian heritage' in 'the real Little Italy.' About ten years later, the theme of authenticity resonated throughout the review of the 2008 Ferragosto by Abbondanza!, a Seattle-based lifestyle and culture magazine dedicated to promoting "all things Italian" (italics mine):

> This wasn't your average Italian street fair; it wasn't filled with *outside vendors* that come in, setup shop for the day and then disappear into the night … This was a true display of Italian pride; and a true display of *community and camaraderie* that you seldom see of feel on a street fair in a city of this size. The majority of the "street" [*sic*] vendors at this event were actually *neighborhood businesses*.[6]

The description points to the presence of area merchants and businesses as the bearers of 'true Italian heritage,' highlighting the centrality of commercial ethnicity in the remaking of Belmont as a Little Italy. Three elements of the celebrations stand out as defining the character of Ferragosto in Abbondanza!'s description, in contrast to "average Italian street fairs." The first is the centrality of food and food consumption, mentioned in every single paragraph of the review

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[5] The feast has proved a major success, and very lucrative for area businesses. Gerry, an Italian American merchant who took over the organization of the 2008 Ferragosto, predicted the overall attendee number around 10,000 people, judging by the restaurants' meal counts. That represented a significant increase from the 6,000 to 7,000 attendees that previous years had averaged.

[6] Accessed on 04/17/2012 at <http://www.inabbondanza.com/journal/2008/9/10/the-arthur-avenue-ferragosto-2008-review-little-italy-in-the.html>

("a gastronomic feast was really at the hands of all who wanted to partake"). The second element of Ferragosto celebrations was its unfolding upon the *streets* of the neighborhood. The review mentions that "restaurants had their tables outside allowing diners to dine al fresco in the beautiful weather," adding that "there was plenty of activity over at [a fish market store] where patrons enjoyed raw food specialties [on the street]; and the businesses from the Arthur Avenue Retail Market were out [on the street] in full force too – selling fresh grilled sausage, pinwheels, and roast suckling pig, among a variety of the other Italian specialty food products." Finally, the third element of the Ferragosto celebrations highlighted by the Abbondanza! review was the presence and nature of entertainment, laden with markers of distinction and ethnic references: "entertainment was available almost everywhere, from the lively performances by Angelo Coppola as he played his Dino Baffetti accordion at the Musica Italiana stall, to the impressive celebrity vocals (Anthony Pirano, Dominic Chianese, Enzo Venuto and many more) resonating from the main stage."[7] The review also mentions the Commedia dell'arte Players, actors dressed in full costumes portraying 16th century characters, hired to entertain children and adults throughout the designated streets enacting short, impromptu scenes, dances, or movements. Ethnographic observation confirms the different nature of entertainment during the religious festivals, who are dominated by games brought in by trucks, such as a Ferris Wheel, Drown-A-Clown, Whack-A-Mole, and a variety of similar games where participants try to score – with a basketball, toy gun, baseball, or the like – to receive a free toy or candy.

Ferragosto celebrations of recent years on Arthur Avenue successfully manage a central paradox: the presentation of the merchants' commercial vision of Belmont as an Italian 'neighborhood' that relies on the enactment of *past* Italian residence for the consumption of non-

[7] Dominic Chianese if a singer that originates from Belmont. He is also an actor, best known for his portrayal of "Uncle Junior" in *The Sopranos*.

resident visitors. Perhaps the first step in understanding the significance of Ferragosto to Belmont's Little Italy is to note the organizers' understanding of the nature of its celebration in Italy. The glossy 18-page event booklet announcing the 2008 program described it as an old Italian feast from Roman times celebrating maternity and fertility. While the original character of the feast was religious, the brochure claims that "the religious aspects of the holiday definitively take 'a back seat' [*sic*] to many Italians who see this as a time of rest, relaxation, and beating the heat."[8] The holiday takes place in mid-August, when "most things are going to be closed as Italians head to the mountains." In other words, the adoption of Ferragosto on Arthur Avenue involves the transformation of the feast from an Italian event marking an occasion to abandon work and head for recreational areas in the beach or the mountains, to a Bronx event involving a return to the old neighborhood to meet friends and reminisce the good times. It's fitting that the feast's focus on fertility, instead of religious feasts' saints, translates into a celebration of Italian American heritage by focusing on Italian food.

If Ferragosto was initiated by merchants to confirm and strengthen a particular vision of the neighborhood, what are the strategies that implement this vision? What symbolic choices are involved in differentiating Ferragosto from the religious feasts of St. Anthony and Mt. Carmel described above? I discuss four main elements in detail as follows.

Duration and Timing

To maximize attendance, enthusiasm, local merchant involvement, and profits, Ferragosto is held as a one-day event, in contrast to the lengthy Saint Anthony and Mount Carmel feasts. The event starts usually shortly before noon and winds down in the early evening,

[8] *Ferragosto*, 2008. Event brochure published by the Belmont Small Business Association, in cooperation with the Belmont Arthur Avenue Local Development Corporation.

sometime between 6 and 8 pm. It has proven much easier to build and maintain anticipation and a festive atmosphere for a one-day event, as opposed to the lengthier religious festivals that continue throughout the entire week. This choice affects the crowd composition in that it allows suburban families from the tristate area to Belmont for the day. In contrast, the religious feast crowds typically consist of local resident minorities. It is possible that this differentiation has turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy; many middle-class ethnics who continue to live in nearby residential neighborhoods of northeastern Bronx, such as Morris Park, Pelham Bay Park, Eastchester Bay, Country Club, and Throgs Neck may already be *choosing* to refrain from attending weekday festivities during religious feasts.

Another important decision that the organizers had to make involved the timing of the event. The first Ferragosto was held in mid-August, in line with Ferragosto celebrations in Italy.[9] At a later point, it was decided to move the event so it takes place in early September, on the first Sunday after Labor Day. The reasons for this choice are two-fold. First, the target attendees that the area merchants would like to attend – suburban middle-class residents – tend to go to holidays or take time off in mid-summer. To ensure maximum attendance of former residents, the event was moved to early September, marking an important difference to the religious festivals that take place in early and mid-summer respectively. The second important reason of moving Ferragosto to early September was to ensure it coincides with the beginning of the new academic year at nearby Fordham University Rose Hill campus. The opening days of the fall semester typically bring parents in town to ensure the accommodation of their freshmen sons and

[9] The mid-August timing of the late 1990s feasts was mentioned by several respondents, and is confirmed by the publication date of the New York Times article quoted in the opening paragraph of the chapter, which is August 14, 1997.

daughters into the dorms. This difference in timing therefore has important implications for the crowd composition of Ferragosto compared to the religious festivals.

Place Symbolism

Another major difference between Ferragosto and the religious festivals involves their location: the latter are held on 187th Street, while Ferragosto is held on the southern portion of Arthur Avenue. This street choice introduces several important markers of difference between the two, both symbolic and material. The Church of Mount Carmel is located on 187th Street, and its front doors mark the beginning and end of the religious procession during the concluding day of the festivities of both religious festivals. Its location determines the location of the religious feasts throughout their duration, even though the actual procession goes through most of the neighborhood streets, including almost the entire length of Arthur Avenue, in a practice that Orsi (1992) has called 'spatial mapping of Italianness.' In addition, 187th Street is heavily residential, progressively so as one moves away from the Arthur Avenue intersection towards Southern Boulevard. In contrast, Arthur Avenue has a very low number of residences and is considerably less frequented by minority residents. The southern portion of Arthur Avenue houses the majority of the core Italian businesses of the area, and constitutes the heart of Belmont's Little Italy. The symbolic choice of holding Ferragosto on Arthur Avenue has clear connotations for broadcasting the merchants' vision of the neighborhood, defined through the commercial presence of the Italian stores and restaurants.

It is hard to speculate on the early differentiation between Arthur Avenue and the intersecting 187th Street in a consistent way. As I showed in chapter 2, the neighborhood was known as the Fordham area in the early decades of the twentieth century, but was identified

through its main commercial strip of Arthur Avenue, even though other streets were commercially active. Two important movies about Belmont imply a similar differentiation. Paddy Chayefsky's 1955 movie "Marty" portrayed the life of an Italian American butcher, and its opening scene is a bird's eye view of a busy Arthur Avenue with a lot of car traffic and lively sidewalks filled with people with shopping bags.[10] Some forty years later, Robert DeNiro's 1993 movie "A Bronx Tale" shows a 187th Street sign in its opening scene, and portrays the life of a neighborhood kid growing up on 187th Street and torn between the differing role models of his working-class father and local mob leader. In other words, the movies portray Arthur Avenue as mainly commercial and 187th Street as mainly residential.

Food

A major difference between Ferragosto and the religious festivals is the centrality and ethnicity of food. Consumption of Italian food lies at the heart of Ferragosto, as the noted by the Abbondanza! review. Virtually all the restaurants, pizzerias, and cafés of Arthur Avenue put tables out, and people enjoy food, drinks, and music in a festive atmosphere on a typically balmy September afternoon. The tables claim not only the sidewalks but also most of Arthur Avenue itself, leaving narrow corridors for people to walk around. The southern section of the avenue turns into numerous islets of tables occupying the front of each restaurant, served by its waiters and its music, where people sit and enjoy Italian food. Specialty food stores place stands on the sidewalks in front of them, where bakeries sell pastries while butchers fry store-made sausages. A local butcher from the Arthur Avenue Retail Market is a crowd favorite with two slowly roasting suckling pigs on a spit setup on the street in front of the Market. The atmosphere

[10] For a discussion of the significance of this movie in the social history of Arthur Avenue, see Chronopoulos, 2007.

provides a marked contrast to the on-the-go, generic, cheap food that the stands that rent space at the religious festivals have to offer.

Entertainment

Another difference between the religious feasts and Ferragosto arises from the nature of entertainment that is made available for the attending crowds, as highlighted by the Abbondanza! review. The entertainment for the religious feasts consists largely of truck-hauled games, such as a Ferris wheel, Drown-A-Clown, Whack-A-Mole, and a variety of similar games where participants shoot or throw something to a target and receive some sort of toy if they succeed. There are also air-inflated, enclosed 'houses' for children to play and bounce as parents watch, and a carousel. Few ethnic markers designate the entertainment as Italian, and the typical crowds it draws are dominated by the minority residents of nearby blocks. Ferragosto has no "chintzy carnival games," and though it can involve a cacophony of sounds, they are Italian sounds. One year, a stand selling Italian music CDs had hired a young talent to play Italians songs with his accordion in front of small crowds admiring his skill. Several Italian restaurants had hired singers to sing Italian songs to their customers on the tables in the sidewalk and the street. Other pizzerias and restaurants had added speakers broadcasting Italian music outside. The sounds of Ferragosto contrast to the blast of generic pop hits from the carnival games.

Ferragosto and the religious feasts share an important entertainment feature in common – the makeshift stage that is hauled around by a city truck belonging to the New York City Department of Parks of Recreation. Originally hired for Ferragosto, the truck stage was introduced to the religious feasts by the merchants, who have been involved in various degrees in their organization in recent years. In the last two years, the stage program has been similar to the

one in Ferragosto in that it features the same bands that perform Italian music alongside more popular rock and roll or American music.[11] But even this seemingly similar form of entertainment is deployed in different ways between the feasts. During Ferragosto, the makeshift stage is placed at the entrance of the "Enrico Fermi" Belmont branch of the New York Public Library, facing the intersection of Arthur Avenue and 186th Street, a central corner flanked by some of the most prominent Little Italy businesses. Multiple rows of chairs are laid out filling the street until Arthur Avenue, creating a sitting audience throughout the day. The stage is therefore placed roughly at the center of the area closed to traffic. The program is Italian-themed and defined by neighborhood nostalgia; nationally recognized local notables often make appearances (such as actor Chazz Palminteri who played "Sonny" in *A Bronx Tale*, and singer and actor Dominic Chianese who played "Uncle Junior" in *Sopranos*). To further mark the celebrations as Italian, the organizers call on and preserve award to well-known local notables in between the program shows. Chaz Palminteri addressed the crowd during Ferragosto 2009, praising Italian Belmont. The district manager of the local Community Board Six, the board chairperson, and a councilmember who offered strong support to Belmont's BID effort in the City Council hearings, also received awards and reiterated their commitment to Belmont as an Italian neighborhood. Finally, Mayor Michael Bloomberg appeared on stage and praised the organizers and the neighborhood, only weeks before his third term mayoralty elections.

In contrast to the central positioning of the makeshift stage during Ferragosto, it is parked at the edge of the designated blocks during the religious festivals, and often feels disconnected to

[11] Because the religious feasts generate income that church uses for the parish school, less money may be available to hire the bands. Therefore the program tends to be less formal, with fewer bands, laxer start hours, and no printed program. In such cases the master of ceremony announces each day's program from the stage.

the rest of the festivities as one walks away from 187th Street's Arthur Avenue intersection.[12] The games lining both sides of the street customarily blast the latest hit music, usually hip-hop, while a small store on the sidewalk plays latin rhythms – which creates a cacophony of sounds. No chairs are laid out in front of the stage, and people have to grab a seat on the cafés on the side of the stage, stand, or sit on the sidewalk. The MC continuously reminds the audience of the need to love and support the neighborhood, much like during Ferragosto, but the crowd is decidedly less homogeneous, and the message becomes more tenuous. My observations show that the crowd is also less committed, with people coming, going, or passing through, probably due to the lack of chairs and a less thoroughly organized program. All in all, the stage is not central to the celebrations, but competes with other forms of entertainment which lack any significant markers of Italian ethnicity.

I have highlighted four factors of differentiation between the Ferragosto celebrations and the religious festivals. The timing, duration, centrality of food consumption, and nature of entertainment during Ferragosto are designed to appeal mostly to middle-class attendees, while the religious festivals' entertainment is centered on games that appeal mostly to a young, local crowd. These differences are symbolic of class, ethnic, and racial differentiation: my observations confirm that religious feast celebrations are mostly populated by young, minority crowds who live in the area, while the crowds that walk around Arthur Avenue during Ferragosto are older and predominantly white, visiting from the tristate area of upstate New York, Connecticut and New Jersey.

[12] The parking locations were probably selected due to logistical considerations, and not intentionally to create a difference on part of the organizers. This does not make the symbolism and effect on the feast less relevant.

The class differentiation between the feasts corresponds to an ethnic differentiation. Ferragosto's centrality of food provides a strong marker of Italian ethnicity that the religious festivals lack. The music that dominates the stage and the street is Italian music, both from the stage and the one-man shows that the restaurants or stands organize. The commedia dell'arte actors that walk around and delight the young refer to a dramaturgical tradition that developed in Italy. As a result the part of the neighborhood that has hardly any residences on it turns into a proxy of an Italian neighborhood during Ferragosto. Little Italy no longer refers to an isolated commercial establishment, but symbolically recreates an Italian neighborhood that has since ceased to exist in materially significant ways.

CONCLUSION: ITALIAN ETHNICITY IN BELMONT

The emergence of Ferragosto in the late 1990s provides an example of what street events can do for Little Italy. Beyond its immediate success as a daily feast, Ferragosto has become a yardstick for measuring the performance of the religious feasts by area merchants and leaders. Its atmosphere is less religious and more festive, celebrating the "neighborhood" as epitomized by area businesses. Its target clientele comes from outside the neighborhood, and includes former residents, their friends and family, and people affiliated with area institutions such as Fordham University, Saint Barnabas Hospital, and the Bronx Zoo and Botanical Gardens – in short, a crowd of a higher socioeconomic status that the Arthur Avenue businesses hope to lure on a weekly basis. The festivities of Ferragosto represent a skillful commercialization of the Italian past of the neighborhood, shifting focus from the current minority residents of the area to the businesses that reframe the 'authentic' past of Belmont. Such strategies make the feast profitable not simply in the financial sense, but help maintain the area as ethnically Italian, raise the

neighborhood cache and increase its commercial potential. The continuous pressure that Little Italy managers apply to the Church to add similar elements to the religious fests points to their desire to remap the street as an extension of the Italian businesses, rather than the apartment buildings of 187th Street.

Why the focus on 'neighborhood'? The notion of neighborhood emerged in contestations regarding both the Belmont BID and the divergent meanings of the festivals according to the Church and the area merchants. While ethnic festivals always involve group-making, they do not necessarily retain ties to specific spatial boundaries. There is no claim, for example, to Fifth Avenue during the Puerto Rican Day Parade. And while San Gennaro, the sole festival of Lower Manhattan's Mulberry Street, similarly celebrates a commercialized version of Italian ethnicity, there is no illusion that Mulberry Street's Little Italy is still 'Italian,' or attendant claims to Italian authenticity (Kosta, *forthcoming*). Like Ferragosto. San Gennaro combines religious elements such as the statue procession, with a festive atmosphere infused with ethnic markers. But despite its similar commercialization, San Gennaro differs from Belmont festivals in a crucial sense. In addition to the million-strong additional tourists Mulberry Street enjoys, that section of Lower Manhattan never became home to minority resident populations in the same way that South and mid-Bronx did. The position of Mulberry Street within the downtown urban scene ensures that San Gennaro does not have to contend with the racial markers of non-whiteness Belmont's Little Italy does. As a result, San Gennaro can present the image of a Little Italy as a spectacle of food and entertainment, recasting the immigrant history in the light of a joyous, pleasurable lifestyle marked by consumption of ethnic symbols.

Belmont's history as a mid-Bronx neighborhood that manages the growing disparity between residential and commercial ethnicity creates a different set of parameters for its

festivals. Its unusual trajectory as not quite a 'defended neighborhood' – for it was 'lost' to ethnic and racial turnover – but not exactly a 'succeeded neighborhood' – for it retained commercial ethnicity and recreated it as Little Italy – underlies both the pursuit of an 'authentic' Italian presence on the part of the street festivals, as well as the presumption of a 'neighborhood' as the site of authenticity. In this sense, Belmont festivals serve as tools of recreating that 'authentic' past that marks the commercial ethnicity of present Little Italy as a surviving outpost of Europeanness in a borough that 'lost' its ethnic enclaves to the suburbs (such as Jewish East Tremont).

CONCLUSION

Symbolic Boundaries

In a recent article on strategies of ethnic boundary making, Wimmer (2008) claimed that if "modes of ethnicity making are indeed finite," then "shared mechanisms might govern ethnic group formation processes" across time and place (p. 1026). Citing Barth's (1969) original collection of essays on the production of ethnic boundaries and pointing to more recent attention to "boundary-work" (Lamont and Molnar, 2002), Wimmer offered an updated typology that was based on Zolberg and Woon's (1999) widely recognized distinction between boundary crossing, shifting, and blurring.

In light of these efforts to approach the study of ethnicity through the lens of boundary formation and maintenance, the case of Arthur Avenue offers a unique opportunity in delineating a new strategy of immigrant involvement with ethnic boundaries. Relying on extensive participant observation, 30 open-ended interviews with area business owners and community leaders, and archival data of various types, this study traced the story of Albanian group formation and incorporation into a formerly Italian neighborhood, through a process that involved the reworking and repositioning of ethnicity by both groups in a multi-ethnic, multi-racial environment. On the one hand, the historical circumstances that led Italian ethnics on Arthur Avenue to expand their ethnic boundary selectively to include arriving Albanians, recruiting them into concerted efforts to retain the Italian identity of the area despite changing neighborhood demographics. On the other, the strategy of Albanian group formation that relied on confirming and strengthening the racial boundary between Italians and the residential

minorities of the neighborhood, describing the emerging type of boundary-work as an 'ethnic affinity' between the two groups.

This ethnic affinity between the two groups developed in the form of the occupational incorporation of Albanians in the Italian food trade, and the parallel production of a discourse of 'cultural similarity' between the two groups. The particular historical moment at the turn of the 1970s presented specific opportunities for the emergence of the ethnic affinity. On one hand, the Belmont Italian establishment was under intense pressure to retain the identification of the area as Italian, given the dissolution of adjacent South Bronx neighborhoods and arrival of residential minorities, including Latino groups and African Americans. The problem was the gradual but steady departure of Italian ethnics, whose occupational and residential upward mobility progressively deprived the ethnic stores of the neighborhood of clientele and staff. On the other hand, arriving Albanian immigrants from various republics of former Yugoslavia, generally possessing few skills immediately adaptable to professional middle-class work, were drawn to the small entrepreneurial jobs of fading Italian neighborhoods of New York. Their particular immigration trajectory ensured some familiarity with the Italian language, which proved useful given the general lack of Albanian enclaves in the US metropolitan regions. These historical circumstances created for Albanians what Merton (1996) has called "opportunity structure," whereby they penetrated the Italian food trade in neighborhoods like Belmont, pursuing an occupational niche that was no longer desirable to Italian ethnics, while simultaneously allowing them to maintain ethnic ownership of the commercial strips of the otherwise declining ethnic neighborhoods.

The remarkable feature of the occupational incorporation of Albanians into the Italian food trade was the development of a parallel discourse of cultural similarity between the two

groups.[1] The Italian storeowners and community leaders saw the role of incoming Albanian immigrants as stabilizing the neighborhood, particularly given their focus on the commercial establishment of Belmont. In doing so, their boundary-work of 'cultural similarity' consisted in the local reframing of various cultural tropes relating Italians to Albanians, from a shift in *scale of reference* (as immigrant/ethnic groups rather than national groups) to a shift in the *frame of reference* (as actors involved in averting the South Bronx drama, instead of divergent groups in the 'civilizational' divide of Europe).

Albanian immigrants, on their end, construed their engagement with Belmont as mirroring Italian engagement, which meant patronizing the commercial realm while ignoring the residential realm. Given their differences in national origin, religion, language dialect, and socio-economic background – in short, the lack of readily available cultural mechanisms for building a group identity – Albanians positioned their presence and group identity as enhancing, rather than succeeding, the ethnic identification of Belmont as Italian. In doing so, Albanians relied on the selective interpretation of several cultural tropes, including highlighting their linguistic familiarity with Italian while downplaying the closer connection of Spanish to Italian; construing an inclusive 'Mediterranean' food category while bypassing possible similarities to cuisines of groups from Latin America; and perpetuating 'foundational' myths about neighborhood racial incidents during the 1970s that purportedly preserved clear distinctions of the ethnic and racial boundaries between the various groups that were changing the demographic makeup of the area.

[1] Many Italian and Albanian restaurants and pizzerias, in Belmont and elsewhere, typically employ Mexicans in the kitchen and/or at the counter, without any apparent recourse to a 'cultural similarity' between the ethnicity of the employer and employee.

Symbolic Neighborhoods

The story of ethnic boundaries on Arthur Avenue is interconnected with, and informed, the transformation of Belmont from an immigrant neighborhood to a commercial Little Italy from the 1970s onward. I began my research expecting to find evidence of invasion/succession – after all, US Census numbers proved that residential de-Italianization was almost complete. I soon realized that Belmont's Little Italy was a creation of the 1980s rather than a holdout of the old neighborhood; that it was getting more successful with time; and that the successful maintenance of the ethnic identity of the neighborhood as Italian had since been dissociated from the ethnicity of the minority groups now residing in the neighborhood. The transformation of Arthur Avenue into Little Italy constituted the second story told in this study. While the literature on ethnic neighborhoods often paints them as 'succeeded' or 'defended,' I quickly noticed that Belmont's Little Italy on Arthur Avenue coupled residential succession with commercial 'defense.' The historical trajectory of the neighborhood institutions showed their determination to retain the Italian association of Belmont. I noted the recent emergence of the Belmont Business Improvement District as a manager of the local ethnic identity, and the culmination of a slow but steady shift in the strategy of abandoning residential ethnicity with a focus on commercial ethnicity as the defining vision of the neighborhood. The transformation of street *feste*, for example, showed their adaptation to the residential de-Italianization and commercial re-Italianization of the neighborhood. The decline of the church-organized religious feasts, the anxiety of the area merchants concerned with the image of Little Italy, and their consistent efforts to intervene in their organization with the objective of adapting the religious feasts to the new vision of the neighborhood ethnicity. The initiation of the new feast of Ferragosto by area merchants and community leaders upheld the commercial ethnicity of the neighborhood. Several

of the feast's main elements (duration/timing, place symbolism, nature of food and entertainment) reflected the organizers' purpose in marking the commercial ethnicity of Arthur Avenue as Belmont's dominant identity. In tandem, these transformations provide evidence that, in addition to the boundary-work among the various ethnic and racial constituencies of Belmont, the remaking of Arthur Avenue as an 'authentic' Italian shopping venue represents a commodified vision of ethnicity whose success rests on its simultaneous disassociation from the ethnicities and racial identities of current neighborhood residential minorities.

Ultimately, the sociological significance of Arthur Avenue's Little Italy relies on the fact that its neighborhood vision seeks to minimize the presence of its actual residents. Neighborhood studies have traditionally assumed residence of their research subjects. The predominant terminology – ethnic enclave, ethnic and racial succession – reflects this assumption; the fate of neighborhoods is defined by the people who live or cease to do so in them, shaping their social spaces. Places like Arthur Avenue's Little Italy reflect the need for new conceptualizations of just what constitutes "the neighborhood" as a space defined by uses of non-residents. Whether they are called "urban ethnic theme parks" (Krase, 1995) or "urban ethnic places" (Lin, 2011), the remaking of old immigrant neighborhoods into new ethnic places allow new expressions of ethnicity, reflecting both the changing nature of ethnic identities as symbolic and optional (Gans, 1979; Waters, 1990), as well as the importance of the marketplace as a crucial backdrop for the expression of such identities (Halter, 2000). The commodification of such urban spaces recasts multi-ethnic, multi-racial areas in the image of an idealized mono-ethnic immigrant past, creating "symbolic neighborhoods" that can serve as sites of "ethnicity without groups" (Brubaker, 2004).

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