BROOKLYN. The land of diversity, change, engagement, self-image. These are the four core areas that, more or less, depending on the neighborhood, unite the borough. It has been called the “hottest borough,” but is it really that? Can a minicity that contains within it at least forty-four distinct neighborhoods be lumped into one general category for anything other than geographical purposes? Can we really consider those who live lives of grinding poverty in East New York and Brownsville to be in the same world as those residing in a luxurious apartment in North Williamsburg or in a Park Slope brownstone? Clearly not.

Can the rhythms of life that govern Hasidic Jews who wait for the siren in Borough Park proclaiming the beginning of the Sabbath, or the calls to daily prayer for Muslims of the muezzin in Bay Ridge, be compared to the secular lifestyles of those who go clubbing along Third Avenue in the same Bay Ridge, or those attending a rock concert in Prospect Park? Clearly not.

And what about those who work in downtown Brooklyn for an investment firm or for the Department of Education? Surely their lives revolve around different matters and concerns than those that animate retirees basking in the summer sun on the benches lining Brighton Beach’s boardwalk. Can recent Chinese immigrants to Sheepshead Bay, Sunset Park, or Bensonhurst be living the same lifestyle as the mostly white residents of Gerritsen Beach whose parents or grandparents were Irish or German immigrants?

Every day, tens of thousands of Brooklynites ride the trains through the tunnels and across the bridges to Manhattan and other points throughout the metropolitan area. But what do these riders share with the retired public employee who lives in Canarsie and who lets me know emphatically that he hasn’t been to Manhattan in ten years and is no longer sure how to get there? What do the
members of Brooklyn's only Cambodian temple in Flatbush have in common with the gay community in Brooklyn Heights? Do those who fear leaving their homes at night because of crime see Brooklyn through the same lens as those who can't wait to leave their homes in the evening for a night of partying?

The residents of Brooklyn share the same 71 square miles of land, but that doesn't make them the same. And yet, that's precisely what they have in common—their amazing diversity. Even within their enclaves, differences abound. Whatever remains of the Puerto Rican community of Williamsburg is acutely aware, as its members walk the changing streets, of the cultural and socioeconomic gulf separating them from the young and well-heeled newcomers who have migrated to their neighborhood. They know it when they see their dress, way of speaking, mannerisms, and general lifestyle. Specifically, they know it when they are hard-pressed to find a cup of coffee for less than three dollars, and they know it when they pass stores selling used clothing as vintage attire at exorbitant prices. And they experience the pain of seeing longtime friends and relatives depart for not-so-green pastures in the aging suburbs of eastern Long Island or the south-central Bronx. Similarly, in Gravesend and Bath Beach, older Italians look on with wonderment as ethnic succession in the form of Chinese and Russians alters the character of the communities they inhabited for generations together with Jews, Irish, and other white ethnic groups.

So it goes as well with disparate communities whose members rub elbows and shoulders because their communities border each other. Chinese and ultra-Orthodox Jews meet between Eighth and Ninth Avenues where Sunset Park and Borough Park share a border. Yet they do more than meet—they collide, competing fiercely for the homes that become available there. Similarly, the gentrifiers, Hasidic Jews, and blacks vie for the same living spaces in sprawling Bedford-Stuyvesant. These battles reveal the depths to which change has become a defining characteristic of the borough.
This change, which is becoming more and more pronounced, is a second unifying characteristic of Brooklyn. In fact, it has been so throughout the borough’s rich and storied history, a past that has long been a beacon of hope for generations of newcomers. It was so for the Italians, Irish, and Jews, who came here from the teeming slums of the Lower East Side to escape their wretched existence in stultifying conditions so well described by Jacob Riis in his classic work, *How the Other Half Lives*. And when they came to Brooklyn, they met with prejudice, just as later black and Hispanic arrivals experienced the same treatment at the hands of those who preceded them.

In the larger sense, the story of class, race, and religion in Brooklyn is best seen through the prism of five distinct groups: blacks, Hispanics, Orthodox Jews, Asians—mostly Chinese—and gentrifiers. To clarify, these groups aren’t monolithic by any means. An estimated 25 to 40 percent of the black population is Muslim, and they come from a variety of nations, especially those in the Caribbean. Hispanics also come from many different lands, and they include both Catholics and Protestants. Orthodox Jews range from modern types to Hasidim and many who are in between, and Asians are made up primarily of Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and Christians from every part of the continent. With the diminished presence of Italians, Irish, and more secular Jews, these new populations represent the dominant trend in Brooklyn’s shifting population. They are sweeping into communities where they had never lived before. Sometimes there are clashes over territory, but overall there’s an attitude of live and let live. Most newcomers are too busy carving out lives for themselves to worry about other nationalities living nearby. The gentrifiers are also a varied group. They come from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds and from all over the country. They are likely to be middle or upper class, and their reasons for moving into neighborhoods range from convenience to work, to a desire to be in the city’s more exciting areas, and, in
some cases, to a belief that they’re preserving the city’s heritage and authenticity by settling in its inner core.

In addition to change, a third uniting feature is an openness to engagement with others. Call it a melting pot, call it a salad bowl, call it a mosaic, a kaleidoscope even, but the reality is the same. To be one of this borough’s estimated 2.6 million residents is to be a person who constantly encounters and is accepting of people different from oneself. To begin with, they share public space—streets, parks, housing, beaches, murals, museums, supermarkets, bars, and such. A group of Asians will play Ping-Pong in a park, while Colombians and Ecuadorians engage in a game of soccer. Walk by that same park later on in the day and you’ll see these two groups playing basketball together and with African Americans as well. I saw this scene, or a variation of it, perhaps in a swimming pool or picnic area, over and over again.

In the supermarkets, people shop and interact with one another, from asking where something is or discussing the best food for their pet, to working together as employees in that same store, or restaurant, or clothing outlet. Students on a school outing from a Hasidic institution in Borough Park meet Muslim students on a school trip to Bay Ridge’s Owl’s Head Park. When I see them, they’re playing in the same playground, side by side. But perhaps in five or ten years, they’ll take that step across the line and friendships will result, just as the owners of a Turkish restaurant next to a kosher eatery interact. One of the great opportunities that Brooklyn, and the city in general, creates is the chance for groups not at all friendly with each other in the old country to get to know one another on neutral ground—Dominicans and Haitians, Pakistanis and Indians, blacks and Asians from Guyana, etc., etc.

Another arena for engagement is a concept that I call “daygration.” What appears to be a map of separate communities is actually far more porous. While many people may live in more separate and homogeneous communities, they often work elsewhere. So when Russian seniors are bused to a nice center that happens to be in mostly black Canarsie, they spend time with their West Indian
caregivers for many hours during the day. White physicians with practices in Bushwick serve the needs of Hispanics. Chinese employees in a take-out place have black or white clienteles in so many parts of Brooklyn. An Italian restaurateur of a famous restaurant in Dyker Heights, Tomasso’s, reports that much of his clientele is Russian. The same is true for the owner of a Peruvian eatery in Gravesend. A Polish landlord in Greenpoint tells me about what it’s like to deal with his gentrifying tenants. It’s far different from the Holocaust survivor who explains to me how she relates to her Polish cleaning lady who is, after all, from the country that she fled because the local population was generally not sympathetic in the least to her plight. An Italian funeral director describes to me, in vivid terms, how he adjusted to a black clientele, after the neighborhood in which he grew up and worked underwent a demographic transformation. In his words: “I could have run away, but I only did so in terms of where I moved to. I kept my business here and it worked out pretty well.”

Much has been written about gentrification, affordable housing, and residential segregation, and these are abiding concerns that often generate sharp differences of opinion. That debate sometimes obscures the far more important reality: Brooklyn, as well as the rest of the city, must address these challenges now if it is to retain its reputation as a borough for all, one worthy of being called a leader in innovation and tolerance. And nowhere is this more apparent than in Brooklyn because Brooklyn is indeed “hot” when it comes to being on the cutting edge of change, both socially and culturally and in terms of physical growth. The sounds of jackhammers, cement mixers, cranes lifting and balancing beams of steel, and God-knows-what-else resound through many of the communities here. This is probably the biggest challenge facing Mayor Bill de Blasio and his administration, and it will be so for future administrations as well.

What does this portend for the future? Greater engagement than ever before. The pace and direction of change is inexorable, and more and more people of widely divergent socioeconomic and cultural
backgrounds will be living in closer proximity to each other. Mixed buildings, where, in varying proportions, residents of apartments are low income and live together with middle and even upper classes, will inevitably generate greater contact and awareness of each other. This will result in a more nuanced view of others whose lifestyles and attitudes diverge.

A fourth area of commonality is more subtle, and that is the importance of Brooklyn's self-image to its residents. I heard this again and again everywhere I walked in my journey through every neighborhood in the borough. And it is dominated by a belief that Brooklyn has become a world destination, a place that's really on the move. Every positive story about Brooklyn that appears in the media feeds that perception and causes things to snowball. Of course, it's one that's more prevalent in the areas where real estate is booming—Brooklyn Heights, Williamsburg, DUMBO. But even in areas like Marine Park, Sheepshead Bay, and Brownsville, the idea has taken hold.

People feel that this general trend will continue and will ultimately affect them. Hotels are going up, mainly to serve tourists, in areas like Gowanus and Bushwick that never had them. When locals see that visitors from all over the world are willing to stay a week in their home borough, it changes how they think about it. The same holds true when Brooklynites see all the people who travel from other parts of the United States to throng the Coney Island amusement center, with its new rides and restaurants. It's still relatively undeveloped, but definitely on the upswing.

As the prime neighborhoods for change have become more crowded, hungry investors have also broadened their views of what's a good bet for the future. Bedford-Stuyvesant is a perfect example. The area has become more diverse in terms of its population and, as a result, new businesses are constantly opening up. Hotels like the Akwaaba Mansion on MacDonough Street, an African-themed guest house, are thriving. Brownsville, long considered a no-go area because of its relatively high crime rate, is suddenly a possibility. I spoke with a black man who lives on Long Island and is rehabbing
an old brownstone there. “I travel forty miles every day to get here
because I know this is going to happen once Bed-Stuy becomes too
expensive for a lot of people. And I want to be in here before it’s too
late, before the prices really go up.”

In short, there’s a feeling of pride that their hometown has become
a focus of worldwide attention and interest. People are increasingly
beginning to say they hail from Brooklyn rather than the individ-
ual communities in which they reside, especially when talking to nonresidents. Prospect Park, Grand Army Plaza, the Promenade in
Williamsburg, the beaches, marinas, museums—they were all here
before, but in those days these were quiet pleasures, enjoyed by lo-
cals and perhaps others in the know. But now everyone else knows
about them. Before, movies like Saturday Night Fever, Goodfellas, and
The Lords of Flatbush celebrated Brooklyn as the home of “dese” and
“dem,” and as stomping grounds for the Mafia.

Today, the image has changed completely. Brooklyn’s streets hum
with activity, its bistros and nightclubs are packed, and visitors from
everywhere talk about its vibe. Brooklyn has become a place limited
only by where the imagination can soar. Then again, imagination is
based on reality, and the reality is that Brooklyn has come a long
way in the last twenty years.

At the same time, as this book makes clear in the descriptions
of its neighborhoods, Brooklyn’s vitality also lies in the fact that it
is home to many quiet residential communities where the pace of
life is slower, its people more traditional, and where the emphasis is
on family, schools, religious institutions, and a sense of community
that often resembles a small village rather than a bustling center of
constant activity. In this way, Brooklyn isn’t one whole. Communi-
ties like Flatlands, Carroll Gardens, Mill Basin, Brooklyn Heights,
East New York, and Dyker Heights still look, feel, and function in
very different ways—physically, economically, socially, and culturally.

But even in these places, there’s an awareness of context. Places
like Prospect Park South, Bergen Beach, and Dyker Heights may
be oases of tranquility. But, unlike folks who live in small towns
throughout America, these residents can, in a flash, be a thirty- to forty-minute ride away, they can be in the epicenter of Brooklyn’s nightlife or in Manhattan itself, something that residents of Iowa or Kentucky can’t do. And Brooklynites know it. It’s what gives them a dual identity of cosmopolitanism and localism, a big city and small town mentality, each influencing the other and resulting in a hybrid strain that’s unique. While Brooklyn’s farther reaches are somewhat protected from dramatic change by distance, this could all change if faster and more efficient modes of transportation narrow the distances to the city’s core.

In general, Brooklyn, and the city as a whole, must find a way to balance the interests and needs of all socioeconomic groups, be they developers and gentrifiers, the middle classes, or the poor and working classes. Building more affordable housing, for example, has become a mantra, but it isn’t just a matter of committing to the idea, but the extent of that commitment. Similarly, keeping crime rates low is a key factor, but it must be done in a way that guarantees the rights of all. And even when these priorities are addressed, other factors like the national economy and federal and state policies that are largely beyond municipal control could upend the city’s best efforts. For the moment, however, Brooklyn remains an incredibly complex and differentiated place, one where multitudes of people coexist, largely peacefully, living their lives and dreaming their dreams.

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My love for walking the city can be traced back to a game my father played with me as a child, called “Last Stop.” On every available weekend, when I was between the ages of nine and fourteen, my dad and I took the subway from the Upper West Side, where we lived, to the last stop on a given line and walked around for a couple of hours. When we ran out of new last stops on the various lines, we did the second and third to last, and so on, always traveling to a new place. In this way, I learned to love and appreciate the city, which I
like to call “the world’s greatest outdoor museum.” I also developed 
a very close bond with my father, who gave me the greatest present 
a kid can receive—the gift of time.

In walking, actually rewalking, Brooklyn, my approach was the 
same as when I did the research for The New York Nobody Knows: 
Walking 6,000 Miles in the City: a comprehensive analysis of all five 
boroughs. I walked and observed what was going on around me, all 
the while informally interviewing hundreds of people. New Yorkers 
are a remarkably open group if approached in a friendly and respect-
ful manner—no one refused to talk to me. Sometimes I told them 
I was writing a book, but much of the time I didn’t need to, and 
simply engaged them in free, casual conversation. I often taped what 
they were saying, using my iPhone function in front of them. Hardly 
anyone asked why, and if their attention lingered on the phone, I 
quickly explained why I was recording. No one minded. Perhaps 
that’s a statement about what we’ve become—a society accustomed 
to cameras and recorders, and one that assumes that few things are 
really private anymore. Clearly, this is a great boon for researchers. 
Greater tolerance in general and an abiding belief that the city is 
safe are also contributors to this state of affairs. Indeed, it is pretty 
safe, certainly in the daytime.

I walked in the daytime, at night, during the week, on weekends, 
and in all seasons, in rain, snow, or shine, from mid-October of 
2014 to mid-August of 2015. I averaged about 80 miles a month. I 
attended parades, block parties, and other events and also hung out 
on the streets, in bars and restaurants, and in parks. Most of the time 
I walked alone, but sometimes, my wife, Helaine, and, on occasion, 
our dog, Heidi, accompanied me. I began in Greenpoint and fin-
ished in Cypress Hills, walking through every community for a total 
of 816 miles, as measured by my pedometer. I had, of course, walked 
almost every block in the borough for the first book, and probably 
sixteen times before that, albeit more selectively. I wore Rockports, 
in my view the world’s most comfortable and durable shoe. In fact, 
I was able to do most of the walk in just two pairs.
Although I’d already walked nearly every block in Brooklyn, the findings here are mostly new because the city is constantly changing. New stores, murals, and buildings go up, parks change, and there are different events every year, like concerts, comedy shows, protests, parades, feasts, and town hall meetings. Everyone with whom I spoke was new, and the conversations often led in different directions. Walking is, for my money, the best way to explore a city. It slowed me down so that I could see and absorb things and literally experience the environment as I talked to those who know it best, the residents. And the more I walked, the greater the chance I had to get really good material. I just didn’t know whether it would happen in the first or the fifth hour of my trip on any given day. Bicycling is the next best option.

This book is intended to be a guidebook for those wishing to explore Brooklyn. Because the intended audience is largely tourists, curious residents of these neighborhoods, nostalgia seekers who grew up in or lived in these areas, and New Yorkers looking for interesting local trips, the book discusses every single neighborhood in Brooklyn. In order to make it a book that could be easily carried around it was necessary to limit the discussion to the most interesting points, but there’s much more to see than what is mentioned here.

The focus is on the unusual and unknown aspects of these neighborhoods. The combination of quotes from interviews with residents, musings on life in general—from air conditioning, to cell phones, to careers—plus many anecdotes about all manner of things, and its focus on sociological explanations of why things are the way they are, all combine to make it what I believe is a rather unique guidebook.

There’s a street map for each community, and the reader can walk that community in any order, searching out whatever is of interest. To cover every area, it was necessary to be selective in what was chosen for discussion. But what was chosen is also meant to whet the appetite, to entice the reader into wandering these streets to make new discoveries. Large cities are always changing, and some
of the places described here may no longer be there when you take your walks. But I’m sure there will be new things to see of equal or even greater interest. Most of the borough is quite safe, though caution may be necessary in some areas. These are identified in the appendix in the back of the book, along with some tips on how to safely explore them.

The areas are divided into seven groups and are arranged according to geography and similarities. They can, nonetheless, be walked in any order. There’s some historical information in the sections, but not much. This is, after all, a book about the present. Brooklyn has an enormous number of famous residents, past and present, and a few are noted here. If a reader is interested in searching out the residences of well-known personalities, I suggest first looking them up on Wikipedia and other Internet sources. And if specific topics like parks, Italians, or bars are of interest, the comprehensive index should definitely be consulted.

The vignettes, interviews, and descriptions have one overall goal—to capture the heart, pulse, and soul of this endlessly fascinating borough.