

Prologue

The Tale of Sludgie the Whale

On April 15, 2007, a violent nor'easter slammed the New York City metropolitan area, showering its residents with hailstones and heavy rain. First percolating in the Deep South, the storm had expanded eastward as warm Gulf winds and Atlantic cold fronts swirled in combat, blanketing half the country. That Sunday afternoon, the nor'easter hit the East Coast head-on. Winds of nearly a hundred miles an hour raised two-story-high waves that destroyed beaches and damaged riverfronts. Major roads shut down in coastal New Jersey, Connecticut, and New York as hundreds of car accidents were reported. The rainfall in Central Park was the second highest in 138 years of recorded weather history, more than five hundred flights were canceled at local airports, and 18,500 people lost power in the tri-state area.

By Monday morning, the storm had blown itself out to sea. Newspapers, blogs, and wire services reported millions of dollars in damages and at least eighteen people killed across the region. Even the IRS was forced to adapt, granting storm victims an additional two days to file their tax returns. Just hours before, Robert Guskind, a forty-eight-year-old veteran journalist, had posted pictures he had taken of the storm the previous evening on his popular Brooklyn-based blog,

the *Gowanus Lounge*. The photos showed the Gowanus Canal, a curious waterway that stretches 1.8 miles from the Upper New York Bay northward into the borough of Brooklyn, overflowing its banks. Water poured across the intersection of Sackett and Second Streets on the eastern border of Carroll Gardens, an old residential neighborhood known mostly for its genteel red brick townhouses. “Also bear in mind,” Guskind wrote under the flood pictures, “that during heavy rains like yesterday’s, raw sewage flows directly into the canal, so that what you are looking at is (almost literally) crap in the streets.”

The *New York Times* covered the deluge with an understated headline, “East Coast Storm Breaks Rainfall Records,” and a small feature, perhaps coincidentally, of the Gowanus overflow. The venerable paper also published a photograph of a Brooklyn man, Jorge Aguilar, in the basement of his house at 467 Sackett Street, one block from the canal. In the photo Aguilar is bending over with his pants rolled up as he retrieves a sodden object from gray, ankle-deep water.

The raw sewage Guskind intimated was no accident, per se, but the result of nineteenth-century urban planning. Almost all American cities at the time were built with “combined sewer systems,” in which storm water runoff and raw sewage flowed through a single pipe. The term among engineers and city planners for what happened in the Gowanus streets during the storm is “combined sewage overflow,” or CSO. In the case of Brooklyn’s sewer system, all of the water collected in that area is supposed to flow to one of two catch points nearby, the Owl’s Head Wastewater Treatment Plant in Bay Ridge or the Red Hook Wastewater Treatment Plant (which, despite its name, is located in the Brooklyn Navy Yard). However, if the volume of water is too great for the sewer pipes to handle—an all-too-often occurrence, as Brooklyn has grown exponentially since the original sewers were built—sewage flows into the nearest exit channel, usually a body of water like the Gowanus Canal. Today there are eleven outfalls, or sewer exits, emptying into the canal, dumping almost four hundred million gallons of wastewater into the canal every year.

But other headlines that Monday morning competed with the dramatic weather for readers' interest. Some five hundred miles farther south, Seung-Hui Cho, a twenty-three-year-old Korean American student, had gone on a shooting rampage at the Blacksburg campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Cho, a disaffected English major, had killed thirty-two people and wounded twenty-five more before shooting himself, leaving the country reeling in shock. Between the Virginia Tech massacre and the short-lived but powerful storm, it's understandable that many might have failed to notice another small item that followed: in the wake of news of such natural and human violence, on Tuesday morning, April 17, a baby minke whale had been discovered swimming placidly at the mouth of the Gowanus Canal.

John Quadrozzi, the president of the Gowanus Industrial Park (a collection of small businesses surrounding an abandoned grain elevator at the canal's entrance), was the first person to spot the creature. Soon after Quadrozzi contacted the coast guard, a WNBC helicopter captured footage of the whale breaching in the Gowanus Bay, into which the canal empties. When the coast guard arrived to inspect the animal from their boats, it reported never having heard of a whale being spotted in New York's harbor, and then estimated that the heavy waves churned up by the nor'easter had likely separated the young mammal from its mother.

News of the whale quickly spread from WNBC's morning TV coverage to the staff of the *Daily News*, who immediately emailed Guskind, the local Gowanus expert, for verification. He posted the breaking news to his blog, and the story of the whale's arrival soon went viral. By Wednesday morning the *Daily News* had published an article under the headline "A Whale Swims in Brooklyn," referencing Betty Smith's beloved 1943 novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. The newspaper dubbed the twelve-foot-long, two-ton mammal "Sludgie the Whale," evoking in one stroke both another popular cetacean, Carvel's signature ice cream creation, and the polluted muck of the

Gowanus Canal. The Associated Press, having caught wind of the sighting, ran with the story, and soon Sludgie appeared in newspapers across the nation. During these early days, there were conflicting reports of Sludgie's weight: the *Daily News* first described Sludgie as a "15-ton whale," while the *New York Post* put its heft at "30,000 pounds." A *New York Times* article stated that Sludgie weighed "several tons," while the *Daily News* revised its estimate the following day to 5,000 pounds. In fact, a 30,000-pound whale would have been around the size of garbage truck, while the diminutive Sludgie was more like a motorcycle.

Regardless of her size, within a day of her discovery Sludgie became a media microheroine as New Yorkers flocked to the mouth of the canal, many with children in tow, to grab a glimpse of the unlikely visitor. In a city where a gaggle of actors hobbling down the street dressed as zombies or a flash mob of pantsless subway riders is practically quotidian, Sludgie's sudden appearance was an enthralling reminder of the natural world in a seemingly endless stretch of concrete. That a wild living creature—a cute baby mammal, no less—was swimming in the harbor was reason enough for dozens of locals to grab a pair of binoculars and leave work early. One *New York Times* article, reporting in the shadow of the Virginia Tech tragedy, quoted Sludgie enthusiasts who came out to root for the whale simply because they wanted something to feel good about. After such a violent beginning to the week, the kind of innocent joy associated with spotting a juvenile minke that had survived a massive storm and was flourishing in a stagnant basin of polluted water was practically tangible.

But the joy was short-lived. Pointing out in an interview in the *Daily News* that the nor'easter had drained tons of sewage into the canal, Guskind remarked that Sludgie had appeared at "probably the worst time to wander in there." Arthur Kopelman, president of the Coastal Research and Education Society of Long Island, confirmed

the presence of toxins in the canal and deemed it “an incredibly nasty place to be for a whale.” According to most reports, the whale had suffered cuts along her head after banging into bulkheads along the Gowanus Bay, and at around four forty-five on Wednesday afternoon, April 17, a witness saw Sludgie thrashing in the water near the mouth of the canal. She then beached herself onto some rocks and, quite suddenly and to the disappointment of many, died just before five o’clock, only a single day into her celebrity.

Guskind reported her death that evening and Thursday morning posted a retrospective: “While we worried about its health . . . the chance that the whale would make it back out to sea or be rescued was enough to counterbalance the concern that it had wandered into water that we knew was especially fouled by this week’s Nor’easter. . . . So, yes, we were very depressed when we learned of Sludgie’s demise last night, sad that this beautiful creature hadn’t survived and a little selfishly upset that the days of Gowanus whale watching had abruptly come to an end.”¹ Upon hearing of the tragedy, Mayor Michael Bloomberg remarked from the steps of City Hall, “My thoughts are with the whale.”

Sludgie’s many fans were understandably saddened by the news. “We just came hoping for good news,” said one woman who had arrived at the mouth of the Gowanus with some friends, only to find out that Sludgie was dead. “After Virginia, you come here rooting for the whale. You hope that something good has to happen, because it turns out these are days for tears.” Follow-up reports of her necropsy—which revealed that Sludgie was female—failed to find a connection between the whale’s death and the quality of the Gowanus waters, although the exact cause was never determined. Sludgie was a baby and very disoriented, and she may have been sick before ever venturing into the Gowanus. Nonetheless, her sudden, startling appearance had focused attention on the murky and mysterious waters of the Gowanus once again.

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My relationship with the Gowanus Canal began in late 2006, when I moved to the transitioning neighborhood quite by accident. The surrounding area was just at the cusp of its plunge into city-wide “rediscovery,” and my having landed in a notoriously seedy, literal backwater afforded me more street cred than any newcomer deserved. I had previously worked as a travel journalist and guidebook researcher, so the countless number of unusual old buildings to discover and odd waterfront corners for exploration became a regular source of satisfaction (and a fantastic metaphor for the self-discovery of a twenty-three-year-old fledgling writer). As I became familiar with the landscape and its crumbling, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century industrial architecture, the innocent intrigue for my adopted corner of Brooklyn became an obsession: What is that odd brick house, that unusual warehouse? Where did this water come from, and why was it here? Who dug this and why, or was it naturally occurring? How polluted is the water really, and how did it get that way? The budding writer in me was full of questions, and thanks to the village-like nature of the community in the Gowanus and Carroll Gardens, there were plenty of people willing to stop with answers.

As it turned out, I was hardly the only person obsessed with the Gowanus Canal. After speaking with many neighbors, other pedestrians, and local store owners and falling into the vortex of reading Brooklyn-based blogs, I found that everybody who “discovers” the Gowanus for the first time always goes back to see it again, and again—even after forty years of living by its shores. With its odd bends and angles, you never see the exact same thing twice, and usually catch a detail missed the first time around. Exploring the neighborhood reveals the dead ends where streets meet the canal water, where unlikely urban plant life grows alongside the rotting wooden docks. Those warehouses, crowned with porcelain signs declaring “Kentile Floors” and “Eagle Clothes,” were monuments of long-departed mid-

century businesses, but they were hardly abandoned. On the east bank of the canal, the red brick, Romanesque revival building—nicknamed “the bat cave,” I later discovered it was the former power station for the Brooklyn Rapid Transit—towering above the low-scale skyline was a haven for squatters and drug addicts, but also a sprawling canvas for graffiti art. Across the street, at the corner of Third Street and Third Avenue, a strange and beautiful concrete house sat in an empty lot, save the crumbling walls doused in more graffiti. Gowanus was a patch of New York that felt untouched, a bit wild—the authentic postindustrial urban experience. I was no artist, but the presence of creative types was palatable in the repurposed former factories and garages, including the saxophone player who practiced at the end of Bond Street by the canal.

Furthermore, because of the unusually pungent pollution, the future of the Gowanus Canal was a matter of great civic importance to a number of people in the community—enough to make it a regular source of new stories in a breadth of subjects: art and culture, environment and health, urban development, politics, and, of course, real estate. The deeper I dug, the more I found—the history of Gowanus indeed extended back to the earliest days of colonization, and beyond.

Gowanus is the name of not only a canal, but a whole region that sprawled out beyond the marshes of this tiny waterway, but the bay and surrounding area on the coast of Brooklyn; to the east arose the hills in today’s Prospect Park and Green-Wood Cemetery (the Gowanus “heights”), down to the grassy meadows of today’s Sunset Park. Throughout time the name “Gowanus” has invoked diverse meanings and definition, from bountiful farmland to rough-and-tumble industrial thoroughfare. During the past century and a half, it devolved to a befouled, dirty quarter, fit for the poor, working immigrants and the socially maligned. Most recently, the discovery of Gowanus now invokes images of postindustrial decay converted into a creative and popular site of contemporary urban renewal and creativity. Not only because of this relatively recent upgrade in its public relations

does the history of Gowanus deserve to be fleshed out—and not only because as a neighborhood with a canal it is unique within New York City. The Gowanus waterway and its environs have been active participants across American history. Through this lens we have a unique vantage point for examining the growth of a great city, like the focal point of a historical microscope. It is one of the earliest sites of settlement in the history of America, one of the oldest places where our recorded history begins. In a way, the Gowanus is a microcosm—a lens through which to view the passage of history, and in particular the growth of Brooklyn and its unique identity in relation to its environs.

From its present polluted state, human documentation of the Gowanus Canal can be traced back more than three centuries. In the 1630s, after the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam was established, officers of the Dutch West India Company purchased huge swaths of land across the western edge of Long Island to develop for agriculture and eventual settlement. Large tracts near the Gowanus Creek, the natural precursor to the Gowanus Canal, were some of the first to get snatched up. The saltwater estuary—a tidal inlet connected to the ocean—was surrounded by mile-wide salt marshes. The region surrounding the marshes was also dotted with hills and meadows, freshwater springs, and abundant wildlife—all of the ingredients attractive to both settlers and speculators. The early Dutch farmers used ponds dug along the creek to power their gristmills and for convenient boat access to Manhattan. The local waters teemed with fish and eels, dinner-plate-size oysters, and dolphins and whales. A curious sea mammal swimming to the mouth of Gowanus Creek would probably not have been an unusual sight to local residents at that time, nor would the estuary have been dangerous to these aquatic visitors.

But progress drove massive change, and the fate of the Gowanus was closely tied to that of Brooklyn itself. After playing a significant role as the site of the Battle of Brooklyn during the Revolutionary War, the former Dutch settlement grew into a city so popular that

by the early nineteenth century its population doubled every ten years. As the new country grew rapidly and expanded westward, New York was a nexus of commerce and opportunity. Masses of goods and work-hungry immigrants poured into the expansive bay, and with their proximity to bustling Manhattan, the villages of modern-day Brooklyn transformed and grew as some of the arrivals, smelling opportunity, chose to settle across the East River. Brooklyn's rapid growth would require a serious development of infrastructure.

The idea of turning Gowanus Creek into Gowanus Canal was first proposed in 1848, with the purpose of draining the local salt marshes and establishing a conduit for sewage and storm water. The person who made it possible was an ambitious entrepreneur from Upstate New York named Daniel Richards. His arrival in New York in 1827 led him to the undeveloped tracts of land in the area known as Red Hook, which lay at the outskirts of what would become a thriving industrial metropolis and, for a time, the third largest city in America. Key origins of Brooklyn's explosive growth in the mid-nineteenth century can be found in the urbanization of the boggy marshlands of Red Hook, the personal project of Richards, whose enterprising modernist vision transformed Brooklyn's landscape into one of the first large-scale commercial developments of its waterfront. Richards's drive and creativity triggered the possibility for growth that led to the conception of the Gowanus Canal as we know it today.

The canal, built between 1853 and 1874, would serve as a thriving transport lane for more than fifty years during the height of the industrial era in the heart of the extensive neighborhood development of the large area once referred to as South Brooklyn. This denomination contains the present-day neighborhoods of Cobble Hill, Carroll Gardens, and Park Slope, some of the most sought-after and expensive real estate in all of New York City—much of which owes a great deal to the Gowanus Canal. In addition to providing a conduit for transporting the building materials that engendered these buildings and

the commercial goods that filled them, the Gowanus was an energy source for the growing city. As a major site of coal delivery, the canal not only allowed for large shipments of the “black diamonds” but also provided a site for manufactured gas plants—the smoke-belching production centers that furnished heat and light to Brooklyn’s growing populace.

Beyond the lost Gowanus history of Daniel Richards is that of Edwin C. Litchfield, a Gilded Age railroad tycoon, also from Upstate New York, who was the archetypical wealthy American social climber. Having amassed a vast fortune in partnership with his brothers, Litchfield bought a square mile of land in today’s Park Slope, but in his era it was part of the greater Gowanus area. While Richards may have conceived of the Gowanus Canal as we know today, it was Litchfield who used his money and influence to make it a reality. His goals were utterly American—to make another fortune, but this time through the time-honored tradition of New York real estate. When researching the origins of the Gowanus Canal, I found that Brooklyn’s historians had almost forgotten these dedicated and brilliant architects of an urban landscape that rose and fell in its usefulness. The evolution of Brooklyn’s lands from agricultural to industrial had a particularly profound effect on the Gowanus waterway and the people who lived and worked in its vicinity. Recalling the successes and mistakes of these historic dreamers of Brooklyn can only inform the current renaissance that Gowanus is experiencing today. These developers responded to the call of speculation in the hopes of achieving a great fortune. But beyond yielding wealth, their ideas morphed the landscape of Brooklyn into never-before-seen shapes, whose results were not always positive, yet echo physically and culturally to the present. Their lives, however distant, recall a previous age of the city, when Brooklyn competed with New York in vitality, business, and culture. Those who struck out into the “wilds” of this other place were at the same time foolish and creative. Their degree of success

can be measured in the stories they left behind for us to uncover, more than a century later.

Despite the tireless efforts of figures like Richards and Litchfield to launch a golden age of industry from the Gowanus shores, it was difficult to overlook one of the canal's most distinguishing features: it was an open sewer. In 1858 the city of Brooklyn laid several local sewers that emptied into the new canal, and an influx of raw sewage from Brooklyn households has flowed through the Gowanus nearly every time it has rained since then. In particular, one sewer exit at the end of Bond Street has long been a source of complaint, appearing multiple times in the story of Gowanus, persisting through 150 years of pollution. Thanks to this unfortunate fact of Brooklyn's early city planning, in the late 1870s shoals (or "sandbars") of human waste and industrial byproducts had formed at the exits of four different sewers along the canal. Not only was this a health hazard, it made navigating the waterway especially difficult. Unsurprisingly, a public outcry over the contamination ensued, engendering a neighborhood battle with local government spanning several centuries, and earning the canal the nickname "Lavender Lake."

While some particularly aggressive opponents called for the Gowanus to be filled in with concrete (an opinion that emerges with every generation), almost anybody who used it for commercial purposes agreed that the waterway needed to be regularly dredged. Many complained of the unhealthy stench and disease-causing miasmas—the nineteenth-century belief, sometimes synonymous with malaria (literally, "bad air") that infectious ailments traveled through the air, which became a reoccurring theme throughout this study. But dredging the waste proved difficult, and not just because the city had to coerce commercial landowners along the canal to fund it. At the one Board of Health meeting in 1877, J. H. Raymond, the sanitary superintendent of the city of Brooklyn, pointed out that "the dredge cannot be used successfully as the filth slides from the shovel back into the water

as soon as it is displaced.” It seemed at the time that the development of the Gowanus had created as many problems as opportunities.

It also turns out that the contemporary Coast Guard officials had gotten it wrong. Sludgie, the baby minke, was not the first, or even the second, whale recorded to have entered the Gowanus. In a profile published in the *Brooklyn Eagle* on June 22, 1952, a veteran policeman told a reporter that a baby whale had once tried to make a home in the canal sometime during the 1940s, before eventually getting stuck in the flushing tunnel at the canal’s northernmost point. Although the officer, Mike Harrigan, didn’t specify what had happened to that whale, the profile reported that he “consider[ed] the Gowanus a ‘region of the dead,’ like the River Styx of mythology.” During his twenty-nine years on harbor duty, a beat that included patrolling the canal, Harrigan recalled retrieving “a couple of thousand dead bodies.” But before Harrigan, there had been many other bodies over the years. Further back, in 1922—just before Officer Harrigan began his Gowanus beat—a baby sperm whale had appeared in the canal, provoking a bloody battle between man and beast that bears little resemblance to the popular response to Sludgie’s rise and fall.

By this era, a large Italian population had settled around the Red Hook and Gowanus neighborhoods, replacing generations of lace-curtain Irish. Their arrival in Brooklyn changed the culture of the area, creating an entirely new street life that was at one time foreign to Brooklyn’s population, but now drums up images of the “authentic” urban village. Through this change, the docks and waterfronts of Gowanus also gained notoriety for their association with organized crime—and in the latter years of the twentieth century that of the Mafia. Al Capone grew up near the banks of the Gowanus, and later on it became a center of bootlegging and illegal alcohol production, a main source of mob income. Although the contemporary view of Gowanus is this rough neighborhood of the twentieth century, the true origins of this violent character extend much further back to the industrial era of nineteenth-century Brooklyn. The dangers of too-

dense boat traffic or explosions and fires from industrial accidents often caused gruesome deaths; victims of suicides and muggings or the drunks who fell off of the bridges spanning the canal regularly turned up in the murky waters. Yet because it would eventually be the home turf of the Gallo brothers, Albert, Larry, and “Crazy” Joey, members of what would become New York’s infamous Colombo crime family, the Gowanus gained a reputation as the dumping ground for their unfortunate victims.

After the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed, the world had changed, and the Gowanus along with it. Army Corps statistics show that during the 1930s commercial activity along the canal steadily declined. Although stepped-up production during World War II eventually revived the economy, the newest commercial sea vessels, with the ability to hold multiple shipping containers, were favored over the smaller barges that once crowded the canal. Cars and trucks became the primary source of transportation of goods on land, as the government oversaw the construction of hundreds of new highways, roads, and bridges. In a final coup de grâce, the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway—a massive highway project advanced by the indomitable Robert Moses in 1950—effectively severed Red Hook and the mouth of the canal from the rest of Brooklyn.

With these developments, entrepreneurs could avoid the cramped spaces and outrageous cost of renting industrial facilities in cities, building their factories and processing plants on cheap, broad tracts of open land. Furthermore, while big metropolises once offered the dense population of potential workers needed to operate these businesses, the automobile made possible the lure of life in suburbia, where the working and middle classes could live in comfortable houses with driveways and backyard patios, instead of tiny apartments, and drove (pun intended) many families out of the city. By 1953, the number of vessels that sailed the Gowanus had shrunk to one-third of those employed in 1924, and the number of businesses numbered less than half. And still the problem of sewage remained. In 1960 a manhole

cover was supposedly thrown into the works of the Gowanus flushing tunnel (some residents swear by this story, others consider it apocryphal), causing the whole pumping apparatus to cease functioning altogether. Without an influx of fresh water, the Gowanus's already polluted stream was rendered completely stagnant. That no plans were made now to repair the damage confirmed what everybody already knew, that the canal was simply obsolete, and during the following two decades, the Army Corps stopped recording statistics on the canal's use completely. The breakdown of the flushing tunnel was, effectively, the final, sputtering death of the Gowanus Canal as an industrial waterway.

For the next thirty years, the Gowanus Canal was a stagnant cesspool in a neighborhood that New York City forgot. Local community members, a majority of whom were Italian American, complained of the stench as much as the residents from a hundred years before had, but their voices were unheeded. New York was nearly bankrupt in the 1970s, and many landlords had abandoned their huge and now useless industrial spaces in Manhattan, particularly in the SoHo and TriBeCa neighborhoods. Even though the cheap access to these ample lofts prompted repopulation of those neighborhoods by artists, if downtown Manhattan was the rotten core of a Big Apple, the area known as South Brooklyn—the neighborhoods of Cobble Hill, Boerum Hill, Park Slope, Carroll Gardens, and Red Hook—was little better than a slum. Yet amid the associations of pollution and crime, the possibility for reinvention was built into the DNA of the Gowanus neighborhood, even if its history had been totally forgotten. Through the slow but steady climb of gentrification, South Brooklyn's motivated residents and brownstone settlers recognized the usefulness and beauty in the neighborhood's postindustrial grit. Their sensibilities led the way to the kind of postindustrial urban renewal that defines cities in the twenty-first century. By 2010, the Gowanus Canal had been designated by the EPA as a highly toxic Superfund site, placing it

in the company of the approximately thirteen hundred most heavily polluted venues in the country. Yet in that designation lies a seed of Gowanus's renewal.

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Throughout the biography of this small waterway in the heart of a city are some reoccurring themes. The unique geography of the Gowanus poses an opportunity to urban dwellers, encouraging in its settlers the spark of innovation. From its earliest development until the present day, the waters of Gowanus have been either a problem or a solution, an attraction or a deterrent. This magnetism, for lack of a better term, has inspired generations of creativity and provided a unique identity to the many people who have settled near its waters.

Gowanus is often ignored for long periods until some enterprising person or entity from outside “discovers” the neighborhood during waves of high speculation—and then attempts to introduce sweeping changes. In consequence, throughout its history exists a palatable anxiety about the evolution of this neighborhood. While such anxiety is hardly unique to New York City or the life of all cities, the Gowanus's unique location and character—that of a natural waterway surrounded by a dense urban population—have set it apart from all other areas of the former Dutch colony of New Amsterdam. Through the evolution of Gowanus from the city's earliest years, we can observe centuries of urban dwellers attempting to control their environment.

Because the area was long regarded as a swamp, and then suffered consistent pollution beginning in the modern era, it has a much older association with flooding, poverty, stench, and disease than locals might realize. Only recently has it been considered suitable for dwelling by anybody except the poorest working classes, minorities, and immigrants. Thanks to its historic placement on the frontier between neighborhoods and regions, the Gowanus region has an ancient repu-

tation as a place of the “other” on the fringe of society. While I am almost entering dangerous territory by invoking the following term, over time these exceptional characteristics have given life to unique and “authentic” urban characters—an ever-evolving popular view of a certain kind of Brooklynite. At one point this indicated a person of a certain class who is a bit rough, accented, and usually ethnic, while today’s Gowanusian can evoke any number of stereotypes of someone who lives in Brooklyn. While the specifics of this identity have evolved over time, I argue that the unusual environment and buildings that characterize Gowanus have created the ideal setting for the urban sidewalk ballet that persists in celebrating this “authenticity” scholars have discussed since the publication of Jane Jacobs’s *Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Because of the ubiquitous nature of this discussion, and the manner in which it has been applied to the development of urban environments the world over, a historical breakdown of the Gowanus to its current state has broad application to all cities in America’s postindustrial society.

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To New York City’s approximately eight million residents, a broad, open sky is a luxury, and probably one of the first things one notices while walking around the Gowanus Canal today. Viewed from the Third Street Bridge, magnificent sunsets unfold with nary a skyscraper to interfere (although the skyline is definitively growing). Admittedly, in that same direction (southwest) hulks a giant subway bridge and platform, the Culver Viaduct, which cuts across the Brooklyn horizon like a rickety black zipper. Just under eighty-eight feet tall, it houses the highest subway station in New York City and, according to the MTA, the world. It exists because digging a subway tunnel under the Gowanus Canal was structurally impossible.

Some time around the turn of the twenty-first century, Brooklyn came to be widely acknowledged in the media as the designated

stomping ground for New York's young creatives. According to one fading popular image, the borough may be aptly characterized as an extended campus of hip urbanites dressed in skinny jeans and thick-framed glasses, all launching eclectic boutiques and authoring blogs from cafés manned by tattooed baristas. While somewhat fantastic, this representation is shaped around a central truth: by the 1990s, scores of up-and-coming artists and wired media professionals priced out of Manhattan had unleashed a tidal wave of gentrification that spread rapidly across Brooklyn's oldest neighborhoods. The industrial landscape of Gowanus and its low rents had long attracted the city's fearlessly offbeat and creative dwellers who saw beauty in the neighborhood's grit. As in SoHo and the East Village before Brooklyn, the developers arrived on the heels of this creative class, licking their chops and ready to build.

Before the 2008 recession, industrial neighborhoods like Williamsburg and Greenpoint drove these architects and development firms wild with possibility. As they had the chance to restore derelict factories into luxury condos or build shiny residential towers on abandoned lots, any open space was considered a potential goldmine. "Brownstone Brooklyn" neighborhoods like Park Slope, Boerum Hill, Fort Greene, and Carroll Gardens—where rents now rival those in parts of Manhattan—were also the rage for their village-like charm. Until the mid-2000s the popularity of these surrounding brownstone areas overshadowed the less obvious appeal of Gowanus, which had a seedy reputation and, of course, the toxic canal. But at the height of the housing bubble these negatives actually spelled untapped potential: an underdeveloped area that was not too expensive, with copious old industrial buildings in a proximate location. The tight-knit neighborhood, zoned for a mix of residential, commercial, and industrial use, was a Jane Jacobsian utopia ripe for urban renewal.

The *New York Times* has long been publishing stories about the potential of Gowanus property in its real estate pages, but early in this century it amped up the cultural coverage: a 2006 article described a

group of artists living in a houseboat docked on the canal. In 2008, *New York* magazine published a short item describing Gowanus—which it termed “Fringeville”—as unmistakably “Brooklyn’s newest culture cluster.” A week after the EPA had announced the canal’s Superfund designation in 2011, *New York* posed the question, “The Gowanus Canal: Toxic wasteland or real-estate hot spot?” and two months later ran a story about the city’s decidedly hip “microneighborhoods,” cheekily dubbing the Gowanus area “Superfund South.” And the notoriety wasn’t just local. In 2010, the Jonathan Ames HBO series *Bored to Death*—mostly shot in Carroll Gardens—ran an episode titled “The Gowanus Canal Has Gonorrhea!”, while in May 2012, during an episode of *Law and Order SVU* set around the canal, Mariska Hargitay’s Detective Olivia Benson exclaims, “Why would anyone go swimming there? It’s a Superfund site!”

Once an eyesore of empty shop windows and daytime streetwalkers, Gowanus, as if exerting its newfound Superfund chic, has sprouted a brewery, two popular music venues, a French bakery and restaurant, art galleries, multiple barbecue restaurants, a Whole Foods, a New England-style clam chowder shack, an aikido studio, a tiki-themed shuffleboard court, and a shop dedicated purely to artisanal pies, heralded across the city (to name a few). New ventures pop up practically every month. Light industry and custom craft studios have flourished, and other small businesses have been launched in the many lofts and industrial spaces that dominate the neighborhood. In the beginning of 2014, the neighborhood had reached such an apex of civic and cultural note that it became the platform for that intellectual buffet of the Internet age, a TED conference (technically it was a TEDx, or independently affiliated, day-long lecture series, “TEDxGowanus”; full disclosure—I was a co-curator and speaker).

It appears that the Gowanus, after fifty years of blight, is staging a comeback. But the challenges that have defined the canal throughout its transformation from bucolic stream to functional urban waterway continue to lie ahead. As journalist Robert Guskind wrote in

a retrospective following Sludgie's death in 2007, "The fact that we still tolerate rivers of sewage flowing right into the Gowanus during rainstorms—and that the pollution goes right into New York Harbor and eventually into the Atlantic—is as astounding as a whale showing up in the Gowanus Bay. But that is a different issue."²