
Allston Christmas: How Local Rituals Reproduce Neighbourhood Temporality and Deter Gentrification

Sarah Siltanen Hosman
(Emerson College, Boston University, U.S.A.)
sshosman@gmail.com

Allston, Boston's student neighbourhood, has experienced durable trends of both economic upscaling and decline, existing as a 'hybrid neighbourhood'. As a hybrid neighbourhood, Allston has experienced trends such as a dramatic increase in condominiums as well as decreases in median household incomes, alongside the exodus of an industrial economic base and growth of local universities in the neighbourhood. Therefore, Allston has not experienced traditional gentrification at the pace or to the extent as would be suggested by urban literature, but rather has experienced moments of upscaling and moments of decline, marked by distinct cohorts of residents, 30 years apart, who understand themselves to be 'pioneer' gentrifiers. Allston's student presence, especially the annual ritual of 'Allston Christmas' and turnover of rental leases, perpetuates the cultural narrative that Allston is 'young', specifically to mean student-oriented, and, therefore, not amenable to middle-class tastes and upscaling. Allston Christmas is marked by a visual and physical disturbance of sidewalks as renters discard mattresses, furniture, home goods, and other items. Coupled with precarious housing conditions, such as house fires, rat infestations, and building code violations, Allston Christmas, as a ritual and rite of passage, has deterred additional upscaling in the neighbourhood and perpetuated its cultural narrative of youngness. The continued narrative of youngness and limited upscaling have perpetuated Allston's hybrid status, by emphasizing its instability, transience, and precarious housing. Finally, Allston's hybridity and Allston Christmas contribute, with other factors, to a local experience of temporal sameness—or the feeling that the neighbourhood has not changed significantly.

Keywords: Gentrification, housing, neighbourhood rituals, hybrid neighbourhood, students.

Introduction

During a conversation with Cameron, a 21-year old undergraduate student living in Allston, I inquired about his daily experiences. He explained that he lives in a central part of Allston and often stops at the diner at the end of the street (@Union Café) to grab breakfast and coffee before jumping on the subway to go to class at Boston University. Later, while interviewing Robert, a 56-year old local business owner who moved to Allston while attending college, I asked about his most vivid memory of Allston. He thought carefully for a minute and stated:

My most vivid memory ... In spite of the fact that I've owed businesses here for such a long time, living here as a college student on Park Vale Avenue [off Glenville Ave.]. I would get up in the morning and there was this diner that was on Harvard Avenue where @Union is now ... I used to go and have breakfast there and get on the T [subway] and go to BU and talk to my roommates. I had a great time living here as a college student. It was very safe, it was affordable. The first apartment I ever lived in, I was a young adult, and all of a sudden I had the responsibility of paying the rent every month.

The parallels between these experiences, 30+ years apart, articulate several unique aspects of Allston. As a neighbourhood, Allston has experienced a temporal sameness, marked by enduring trends of both economic upscaling and decline that shape local narratives of place. Specifically, cultural narratives of Allston as a young neighbourhood have steered undergraduate students to Allston by drawing on Allston's identity as Boston's student

neighbourhood. In relying on narratives that frame Allston as a student neighbourhood, and in engaging in rituals that highlight Allston's student presence, neighbourhood actors have perpetuated Allston's status as a 'hybrid neighbourhood' and thereby deterred gentrification.

Allston is a neighbourhood in Boston, MA known for its young, especially university student, population¹, lively nightlife, trendy restaurants, and underground music scene. Allston appears ripe for gentrification, or 'An economic and social process whereby private capital (real estate firms, developers) and individual homeowners and renters reinvest in fiscally neglected neighbourhoods [or towns] through housing rehabilitation, loft conversions, and the construction of new housing' (Perez 2004: 139), especially as Allston's hip milieu intensifies, and given its proximity to downtown, local institutions (Allston is bordered by three major universities and one major hospital) and public transit. However, Allston's propensity for gentrification has been discussed in popular conversation since at least the 1980s, as local newspapers published exposés on students who feared being priced out of Allston. Yet, by measures typically used by scholars, Allston has not gentrified, or at least not at the pace and/or extent that literature might suggest. Rather, Allston has experienced durable trends of both upscaling and decline, existing as what I call a 'hybrid neighbourhood.' Additionally, 82% of students at Boston universities who live off campus live in private residences², indicating that students significantly affect Boston's private housing market. Based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork, interviews with 67 neighbourhood actors and analysis of historical and Census data, I examine how neighbourhood actors grapple with Allston's hybridity and utilize cultural narratives to orient Allston's history and future, which, in turn, have deterred gentrification and reproduced an understanding of temporal sameness. After outlining Allston's historical trajectory, I turn to Allston Christmas as one mechanism that has deterred gentrification by making visible Allston's transience, instability and precarious housing market.

A Hybrid Neighbourhood

First referred to as 'Little Cambridge' (Marchione 2007), Allston was a 'streetcar suburb' where those who worked in downtown Boston lived. In the early and mid-20th century, Boston's Auto Mile developed and thrived in Allston and attracted sizeable populations of immigrants. However, Allston saw a decline in its auto industry during the 1970s, as many repair shops and dealerships moved to nearby suburbs. As Boston saw the exodus of its industrial and auto production economies, several universities in Boston grew during this time, buying up industrial spaces in Allston. Today, Allston is known as Boston's student neighbourhood, as 'Allston Rock City,' reflecting its vibrant underground music scene and as 'Allston Rat City,' in reference to the large rat population and gritty, dirty environment.

¹ The City of Boston began collecting data on where students live in 2015. According to the 'City of Boston Student Housing Trends 2016-2017 Academic Year Report,' Allston has the second largest concentration of students. The median age in Allston is 26 years old, younger than the city of Boston (2016 ACS).

² Ibid.

	Gentrified Neighbourhoods	Declining Neighbourhoods	Allston
Residential Changes			
Higher rents than non-gentrified neighborhoods	Yes	No	Yes
Increase in Owner Occupancy	Yes	No	No
Population Changes			
Highly educated (greater % with BA than other neighborhoods)	Yes	No	Yes
Higher household income than other neighborhoods	Yes	No	No
Increase in white population	Yes ³	No	No; decrease
Commercial Changes			
Upscaling of retail (boutiquing)	Yes	No	Yes—to a degree

Table 1. Comparison of Gentrification, Decline, and Allston

As the ‘student ghetto’⁴, yet also a neighbourhood lamented for its ‘Brooklynization’⁵ with some of the highest residential rents in Boston, Allston has experienced change that can be characterized as a type of hybridity. As outlined in Table 1, Allston’s trajectory has been a mix of trends toward economic ascent and decline. Urban literature suggests that Allston would have experienced reinvestment following the deindustrialization of its auto industry and the subsequent growth of immediately surrounding universities, yet Allston has not gentrified to the extent or at the pace suggested by existing literature. Neighbourhood actors utilize cultural narratives to make sense of a neighbourhood that has experienced durable economic ascent and decline, including a 2000% increase in condominiums and increasing median rents, higher than that of Boston, paired with two decades of decreasing median household incomes, while household incomes in Boston increased, and continued higher renter occupancy rates than the city. These cultural narratives entrench local inequality and perpetuate an exploitative housing market, especially for undergraduate students with limited housing options.

Additionally, since at least the 1980s, Allston’s housing has been overwhelmingly renter occupied, with rents, on average, greater than those for the city as a whole. Classifying the changes Allston has seen since the 1980s is less clear, however. Local media have lamented

³ With notable exceptions, (e.g., Hyra, 2008; Pattillo, 2007).

⁴ Hofherr, J. & Salomon, S. (August 4, 2015) *What to Make of All those Allston Stereotypes*. Retrieved February 8, 2016 from <http://www.boston.com/real-estate/community/2015/08/04/what-make-all-those-allston-stereotypes/xKwYMsUC6Rqz0GCNX8ztpK/story.html#sthash.EsD8klK5.dpbs>

⁵ Harris, D. (April 26, 2015) *The Brooklynization of Allston Begins*. Retrieved February 8, 2016 from http://www.bizjournals.com/boston/real_estate/2015/04/is-this-the-start-of-the-brooklynization-of.html.

impending gentrification⁶, marked by commercial revitalization and residential investment, yet also emphasize the precarious and unsafe living conditions in many Allston apartment buildings and houses⁷.

Two distinct time periods in Allston, 1980s/1990s and 2000-now, have been marked by influxes of ‘risk oblivious’ (Clay 1983) residents, primarily students and creative types who have facilitated residential and commercial changes. Both cohorts embrace an ‘Allston as young’ narrative, with an evolving orientation to this narrative from Allston as a student neighbourhood to Allston as a neighbourhood for young professionals. While both cohorts acknowledge Allston’s student presence, they also note their own investment in the neighbourhood and its potential for upscaling. Both cohorts moved to Allston during their college years, but have remained a presence in the neighbourhood as business owners, residents and/or community activists, shifting their role from student to young professional in the neighbourhood.

Members of the 1980s/1990s cohort expressed motivations for moving to and opening business in Allston that reflect their role as early gentrifiers, including Allston’s central location, its vibrancy and amenities and the relatively low cost. Like pioneer gentrifiers (Kerstein, 1990), this group of neighbourhood business owners and residents saw opportunities to open their own businesses and invest in residential properties. Respondents specifically described Allston in the 1980s and 1990s as neglected, declining and sketchy and relayed stories of rampant heroin use and overdoses throughout the area. Following a pioneer narrative (Kerstein 1990), they explained how disinvested Allston was at the time, but also how they sought to gentrify it:

When I came to Allston, it was a very different landscape. It was rough. We had to clean the blood off the sidewalk every night from the brawls and the puke. It was horrible...I started doing Sunday brunch. No one else was doing Sunday brunch. Sunday Brunch in Allston? People were like ‘Are you kidding me?’ I think, not that I’m crediting myself, but I turned it around. I did the landscaping. I cleaned up messes. I got rid of some of the homeless people. You know what I mean? I cleaned it up so it got more respectable. (John, business and residential owner in his 50s)

Allston experienced commercial gentrification in the 1980s and 1990s, as dive bars were replaced with craft beer bars, yet did not experience residential gentrification and the in-movement of middle class residents. Rather, Allston was able to maintain its student-oriented real estate market, and, due to students’ relative transience, did not experience residential gentrification, characterized by increases in owner occupancy by middle-class people.

⁶ Harris, D. (April 26, 2015) *The Brooklynization of Allston Begins*. Retrieved February 8, 2016 from http://www.bizjournals.com/boston/real_estate/2015/04/is-this-the-start-of-the-brooklynization-of.html

⁷ *Shadow Campus: A Globe Spotlight Team Investigation* (n.d.) retrieved March 2015 from <http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/specials/shadow-campus>

Currently there is group of residents who are referred to as ‘bike people’ by lifelong residents due to their emphasis on improving bike and pedestrian access and transit-oriented development in Allston. Bike People are a cohort of relatively young, white civically engaged residents in Allston who overwhelmingly rent and most moved to Allston for college in the early 2000s and have stayed in the neighbourhood. This group of relatively longtime residents in Allston understand themselves to be ‘pioneers’ in Allston in that they advocate for specific forms of development to ‘improve’ Allston, yet are also ‘social preservationists’ (Brown-Saracino 2004), aware of potential impacts such developments can have on longtime residents.



Figure 1. Remnants of a Triple-Decker that Suffered a Fire in June 2016, Linden Street

While bike people advocate for developments that urban scholars would predict might usher in gentrification, locals point to the consistent neighbourhood disarray, in the form of house parties, underground music performances, public intoxication, drug use and the neighbourhood’s transience. For example, The Boston Globe recently published an in-depth series on Allston, entitled, ‘Shadow Campus,’ in which they attempted to quantify the deleterious housing conditions in Allston that many students attempt to navigate. The Globe, and other accounts, point to fires that break out in large, old, Victorian homes that have been carved up into illegal apartments as evidence not only of Allston’s decaying housing stock and landlord neglect, but also point to the danger for residents in this neglect, including the resulting student deaths from these fires, and the rapes of two local university students due to a broken lock on a door. Figure 1 presents a triple decker that experienced a fire and remained boarded up months later. As explicated below, Allston’s ritual movement, highlighting its transience and instability, compounded by the high renter occupancy and housing conditions, have deterred residential gentrification, despite two distinct cohorts who see themselves as early pioneer gentrifiers.

Allston Christmas: Ritual Movement

Dubbed ‘Allston Christmas,’ September 1st of each year is the biggest moving day in Boston as renters enter into new leases. The concentration and visibility of moves is particularly evident in Allston due to its even greater renter occupancy and notoriety as Boston’s student neighbourhood. Allston Christmas describes, specifically, the phenomena of local residents moving out of their units and discarding used mattresses, couches, shelving, lamps, and other goods on street sidewalks. Many of these items have only been used for a short period of time due to the high turnover and movement of residents, and so, other residents take these free furnishings—like gifts on Christmas morning. The presence of such items blocks sidewalks and is considered a nuisance by local residents and housing organizations, as illustrated in Figures 2-3. The presence of trash and discarded items strewn on the sidewalks is coupled with images of a declining housing stock, often referencing houses that have experienced fires and have not been repaired.



Figure 2. Linden Street, Allston Christmas, 2016



Figure 3. Kelton Street, Allston Christmas, 2017

While local residents express annoyance at Allston Christmas, various local businesses, residents, media and even police officers embrace the tradition and ritual. On September 1, 2016, I volunteered with a local housing organization to pass out information to movers and warn of potential bed bugs. From my field notes:

After people talk for a while, Dave says we should all head back towards the offices because there is going to be a press conference. Slowly we all walk back towards the housing organization offices where there are several news media outlets set up with cameras and a few reporters. The head(s) of ISD [Inspectional Services Department] and other organizations speak to the media. Dave informs me that at some point they'll do a walk through of the neighbourhood and talk to people while cameras are watching, but that the ISD and neighbourhood services won't be back in the neighbourhood until this time next year. Dave seems irritated by this fact, but also a bit resigned to this situation as matter-of-fact.

As Dave predicts, members of neighbourhood services and ISD walk down Pratt St., putting bedbug stickers on mattresses and couches that just an hour ago Dave had put stickers on when we first passed down the street. Dave points this out to me, indicating, again, that they are merely doing this for the cameras. Dave specifically points to one ISD worker who places a bedbug sticker on a wooden dresser, halfway laughing, halfway frustrated/irritated.

The group of inspectors, now joined by the police officers, slowly walk down Pratt St., talking to whomever they come across. We get to a curve in the road and suddenly there is a bunch of commotion and I overhear people saying something about someone riding a mattress ('he's being pulled on a mattress...'). I try to see what is happening, but my view is blocked by trucks and cars. The group moves quickly toward this commotion, where I notice a small group of young people on the left side of the street (approximately 46 Pratt St.). There is a young (20ish) white man dressed as Santa Claus and the Allston district police sergeant moves very quickly toward the young man. I sense that the officer is not happy and that the young man will be scolded, especially as the cameras and media are around. I watch as the sergeant approaches the young man, but I cannot hear what they are saying. They speak briefly and then the sergeant turns, puts an arm around the young man, and the two pose for a picture for the media. I later find out (through Twitter and other social media) that the guy dressed as Santa had been pulled by a moving truck while sitting on a mattress—an Allston Christmas sleigh ride of sorts.

I notice a reporter and photographer stop and speak with a woman whose son is moving into a house on Pratt St....the woman is not happy with the conditions of the house her son is moving into.

Additionally, as illustrated in Figure 4, a local grocery store had workers dress in Christmas costumes and sing carols on a prominent corner in Allston, promoting their store. While local residents bring humour to Allston Christmas, and city and neighbourhood organizations help ameliorate the clutter and confusion of the day, Allston Christmas not only serves as a physical movement throughout the neighbourhood that marks the beginning of the school year, but also has symbolic and cultural meanings that perpetuate the local neighbourhood narrative frame that Allston is a young, specifically student, neighbourhood, and not amenable to traditional middle class gentrification.



Figure 4. Employees at a local grocery store dress as ‘Allston Christmas Carolers’ during Allston Christmas, August 2016

‘At least with gentrification our property values would increase!’

Allston Christmas as Gentrification Deterrent

At a local civic meeting, residential developments and the future of Allston are discussed, debated, and argued over. In one particularly contentious discussion about Allston’s future, Sasha, an immigrant in her 50s, exclaimed, loudly, ‘At least with gentrification, our property values would increase!’ demonstrating both her perception that gentrification in Allston has not occurred, but also that neighbourhood upscaling is not completely unwelcome. Indeed, Sasha (and others) would go on to specifically insist on development plans to intentionally deter students, such as deed restrictions limiting residency to owner occupants (e.g., families) and control of parking on local streets. Residents in attendance at local meetings often criticize the developments that do gain approval for being rental properties, near bars and without adequate parking (based on their insistence that most residents drive cars, especially families, who they aim to attract).

Allston Christmas is considered a rite of passage and is even approached with a playful attitude, while local civic organizations and the city frame Allston Christmas as hazardous due to the presence of bed bugs and general chaos. However, it also functions to deter further upscaling. The visibility of trash and discarded furniture, coupled with the declining housing stock, have deterred the gentrification of Allston by presenting an image of Allston as not amenable to middle and/or upper class tastes. Specifically, Allston Christmas makes visible to those within and outside the neighbourhood the presence of trash and students, neighbourhood instability and transience. This further engrains Allston's identity as Boston's student neighbourhood, despite Fenway-Kenmore housing a larger proportion of Boston's student population⁸. While several major U.S. cities have rental occupancy rates similar to that of Boston, Allston's renter occupancy is greater than Boston, but also the movement in and out of rental units is concentrated on one day. Additionally, the constant ebb and flow of residents is a deterrent to gentrification because gentrification requires relative stability of residents to do things like create new organizations that advocate for the neighbourhood, engage in residential investment, invest in relatively long-term upscaling, and often to buy, rather than rent, property (Clay 1983; Kerstein 1990).

Conclusion

Cameron and Robert, 35 years apart in age, both described daily routines of striking similarity and understand Allston to be a young, and therefore, student neighbourhood. Both also represent cohorts who understand Allston as not having gentrified, yet. The temporal sameness and expectation of gentrification that distinct cohorts of residents have experienced is shaped not only by residential housing markets and commercial districts, but by the cultural narratives of place that are deployed in Allston. Specifically, Allston Christmas is one mechanism that perpetuates the cultural narrative that Allston is young, represents Allston's transience and residential instability, has worked to deter gentrification and reifies Allston's hybridity.

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⁸ City of Boston Student Housing Trends 2016-2017 Academic Year Report.

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