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South Broadway: A Qualitative Analysis of Legal Marijuana and Place in a Denver Commercial District

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South Broadway: A Qualitative Analysis of Legal Marijuana and Place in a Denver Commercial District

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Sociology

By

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Table of Contents

List of Illustrations ......................................................................................................................... iii
Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ iv
Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 1
Literature Review ............................................................................................................................. 5
  Incorporation of Deviance and Subcultures Into the Mainstream ............................................. 5
  Legalizing Vice: The Case of Prostitution ...................................................................................... 10
  Themed Areas of Vice: Red Light Districts .................................................................................... 12
  Medical Marijuana Dispensaries in California ........................................................................... 18
  Post-Industrial America ................................................................................................................ 23
  Themed Environments and Signs ................................................................................................ 25
  Gentrification ............................................................................................................................... 27
Methodology .................................................................................................................................... 30
A Brief History of South Broadway ............................................................................................... 33
Contemporary South Broadway: From Antique Row to The Green Mile ..................................... 56
Discussion & Analysis ..................................................................................................................... 72
  The Normalization of Marijuana: South Broadway ................................................................. 72
  Signs and Symbols ....................................................................................................................... 75
  Marijuana and Gentrification ...................................................................................................... 77
  Legal Marijuana and Urban Space: A ‘Green’ Light District? .................................................... 79
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................... 86
References ....................................................................................................................................... 90
Vita .................................................................................................................................................. 97
List of Illustrations

South Denver Map ................................................................. 46
South Broadway Looking North .................................................. 50
South Broadway Storefronts ....................................................... 51
Bob Marley Mural ....................................................................... 52
Antique Row Map ........................................................................ 55
Displeased Tagger ......................................................................... 56
Green Mile Sign ........................................................................... 58
Antique Row Sign ........................................................................ 59
Antique Shop ................................................................................ 60
Shuttered Antique Shop ............................................................... 62
South Broadway Demographics .................................................. 67
Drive High Get A DUI .................................................................. 68
Smoke Shop .................................................................................. 71
Themed Goods .............................................................................. 73
Abstract

The economic impact of legalized marijuana has been massive, but does legal marijuana have the impact to create new types of urban spaces? The legalization of formerly illicit vices has created urban spaces thematically constructed around vice, such as The Strip in Las Vegas (gambling) or The Wallen in Amsterdam (prostitution). This paper suggests that legalized marijuana similarly has the potential to construct vice-themed urban spaces in a post-industrial economic paradigm defined by consumption. Using Denver’s South Broadway (an urban area that has been rebranded as “The Green Mile” due to the outgrowth of marijuana businesses in the area) as the foundation for the analysis, this paper uses qualitative methodologies including historical and content analysis and interviews to examine how marijuana becomes normalized through legalization and resituated for mass consumption, in turn creating the possibility for the construction of thematic urban spaces.

Keywords: Gentrification, marijuana, marijuana legalization, normalization of vice, urban space
**Introduction**

In 2012 voters in Colorado and Washington approved measures to legalize recreational marijuana sales, possession, and use by adults. In doing so, these states became the vanguard of recreational marijuana legalization in the United States, and by 2018 seven more states would follow suit. Marijuana legalization has been a boon to Colorado’s economy, with an overall economic impact of $2.39 billion, $996 million in total sales, and over $120 million in taxes collected from the marijuana industry in 2015 (Light, et al. 2016). Additionally, the marijuana industry is credited with creating over 18,000 direct and ancillary full time jobs that year (Light, et al. 2016). A great deal of the tax revenues generated by legal marijuana have been directed towards education. Pueblo, located in Southern Colorado, received attention for channeling $420,000 from local marijuana excise taxes towards scholarships last year (Zhang 2018), with an expected increase in years to come. Additionally, many of the fears associated with marijuana legalization (such as increased homelessness and access to children) have proven false (Zhang 2018). Indeed, recent research suggests that marijuana legalization has actually contributed to a 6% increase in housing values in the state (Cheng 2018). This explosion of the legal marijuana industry has even led some to call Colorado’s Front Range the “Silicon Valley of Cannabis” (Light, et al. 2016).

Legal marijuana’s impact on Colorado’s economy has clearly been significant. However, the impacts of legalized marijuana are not strictly limited to those of an economic nature. Recent developments in cities such as Oakland, California suggest that marijuana legalization has the potential to impact the character of urban areas. This is the case on Denver’s South Broadway, a retail shopping and entertainment district and one of the city’s major north-south thoroughfares and an essential artery connecting Denver to its southern suburbs. In the wake of marijuana
legalization, South Broadway has become an epicenter for the marijuana industry in Denver, earning it the monikers “The Green Mile” and “Broadsterdam.” At the same time marijuana legalization has been enacted, the Denver Metro’s population has exploded and many neighborhoods have increasingly become gentrified. Five Points, historically Denver’s most heavily Black neighborhood, was declared blighted as recently as five years ago, but is now awash in skyrocketing rents and many longtime locals fear displacement (Rubino 2017). South Broadway has also been the site of a wave of gentrification. Long known as “Antique Row,” the home to an eclectic cluster of antique shops, bookstores, and boutiques, many South Broadway merchants have been displaced by rising rents in recent years. Sites that decades earlier were industrial complexes and working class shopping districts have been (or are currently in the process of being) replaced by upscale condos, office space, and retail outlets catering to middle-class tastes- and marijuana dispensaries.

While gentrification efforts have typically functioned to eliminate vice from areas of urban renewal, such as the removal of adult theatres and peep shows in New York City’s Times Square (Zukin 1995), the legalization of marijuana has created a paradigm where (this specific) vice instead becomes co-opted by urban gentrifiers. Indeed, a recent Grist headline loudly proclaims, “As Sales Boom, Pot Shops Have Become the New Face of Gentrification” (Bernard 2016). This begs the central question, how can a formerly illicit vice enter into such a compatible relationship with gentrification, a process that has typically been situated in direct opposition to vice? This in turn leads to the question, does the legalization of marijuana have the potential to transform urban spaces or even create marijuana-themed districts? While gentrification has been studied at length and its contours generally understood, the introduction of legalized marijuana- the normalization and, in turn, commodification of vice- to the equation adds a new wrinkle to
the understanding of the nature of gentrification and urban renewal in a post-industrial,
consumption-driven economy.

Marijuana has alternatively been vilified (see 1936’s *Reefer Madness*) and celebrated by
various factions of American society (such as the 1960’s hippie subculture or the hip-hop
subculture decades later). The process of incorporating deviant or subcultural behaviors into the
mainstream is multidimensional, identified by Dick Hebdige (1979) as possessing components of
both commodification and ideology. Legalization serves to ideologically incorporate marijuana
into mainstream society. No longer pushed to the fringes and the underground, marijuana is now
marketable for mainstream, mass consumption. This new marketplace has physically manifest
itself on South Broadway in the form of “The Green Mile.” Whereas urban renewal has often
centered around removing vice from the targeted areas, at the intersection of gentrification and
legal marijuana vice instead becomes commodified. By turning marijuana into a commodified
vice that is accessible largely to the middle class, legal marijuana becomes a natural aspect of
gentrification. Legal marijuana dispensaries now look right at home in a district otherwise
populated by hipster bars, music shops and venues and other fashionable joints.

South Broadway has had nearly countless different looks over the years. The homes of
many early civic leaders were on the street, yet a century later the avenue was best known as the
home of drunks and vagrants. It has hosted a professional baseball stadium, and was once the
road to take to get to a major industrial exposition that was designed to rival World’s Fairs. It has
been the home of factories, department stores, development and decay. It has been South
Denver’s main street, a center for retail commerce and urban social life, and a sleazy drag that
housed many of the city’s porno theatres (Goodstein 2008). It has been the center of a
Prohibitionist community and a pioneering site of marijuana legalization. But this variety and
breadth of functionality only underscores one central fact: South Broadway has always played a central role in the South Denver community, and has seemingly always been identified with the predominant industry of the time. At various times, South Broadway has been known as The Miracle Mile, Antique Row, and more recently, The Green Mile. For South Broadway, the recent intersection of urban renewal and legal marijuana is just the latest chapter in a story that began over a century ago- somewhat ironically- in an attempt to rid South Denver of vice.
Literature Review

Incorporation of Deviance and Subcultures Into the Mainstream

Marijuana is ubiquitous with the counterculture that emerged in the Sixties. While marijuana far pre-dates the 1960s, marijuana (and to a lesser degree, other drugs such as psychedelics) became represented in American culture to a greater extent than ever before. These representations became manifest across varied forms of popular culture. In music, noteworthy artists to emerge in this era such as Steppenwolf, Neil Young, and even the metal-progenitors Black Sabbath all referenced marijuana use in their lyrics, in some cases even writing entire songs about pot. The critically acclaimed film *Easy Rider* (1969) represented countercultural ideologies and became notorious for the actors using real drugs in the scenes where drug use took place. One could equally look to Cheech and Chong as representative of the proliferation of marijuana-fueled countercultural elements in the mainstream American cultural marketplace. Their 1978 film *Up In Smoke* reflects the free love and drug culture that blossomed in the Sixties. Chong would go on to play the role of the stereotypical hippie burnout “Leo” in the television series *That ’70s Show* (a show which routinely featured thinly-veiled depictions of the main characters using marijuana) decades later, to an extent reprising his caricature from his prior works with Cheech, and introducing himself as a domesticated vision of the Sixties hippie to a newer generation of viewers. In literature, writers such as Hunter S. Thompson and Ken Kesey became synonymous with counterculture, their works often driving the culture itself and enabling the proliferation of the culture to broader audiences. Interestingly, both Thompson and Kesey have Colorado connections. Kesey was a native of La Junta, and Thompson resided in the Centennial State for some time before passing away in Woody Creek in 2005. In the wake of the countercultural movement, marijuana appears to have saturated the American cultural panorama.
Dick Hebdige identifies two chief methods through which deviant behaviors associated with subcultures can be incorporated into the mainstream. First, “the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e. the commodity form),” and secondly “the ‘labeling’ and re-definition of deviant behavior by dominant groups—the police, the media, the judiciary (i.e. the ideological form)” (Hebdige 1979, pp. 356). While subcultures are often initially situated oppositionally to hegemonic society, the styles, ideas, and fashions of a subculture are inextricably bound to diffuse into broader society by the nature of production and commodification. “As soon as the original innovations which signify ‘subculture’ are translated into commodities and made generally available, they become ‘frozen.’ Once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise” (Hebdige 1979, pp. 357). Indeed, “Youth cultural styles may begin by issuing symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions; by creating new commodities, new industries or rejuvenating old ones” (Hebdige 1979, pp. 357).

While the counterculture of the Sixties may have eschewed the social order of corporate, capitalist society, the symbolic elements of that culture are now readily available for mass consumption through major corporate firms. In 2018, a quick perusal of the online retailer Amazon reveals a seemingly endless supply of counterculture and marijuana themed merchandise. From men’s underwear to women’s dresses, from socks to hoodies, any form of clothing imaginable is available with the symbol of the marijuana leaf emblazoned on it. Equally, tie-dyed apparel or merchandise conspicuously displaying the peace sign is readily available. While the ethos of the hippies may have been oppositional to capitalist, hegemonic society, by
present times their cultural contributions have been appropriated and commodified by hegemonic society for mass production and capital gain.

In Hebdige’s ideological form of incorporation, the subcultural threat to hegemonic society is reframed within the context of hegemonic society. Hebdige identifies two chief manners in which this takes place. First, “the Other can be trivialized, naturalized, domesticated” (Hebdige 1979, pp. 358). Against the backdrop of the shocking and sensationalist response to the punk movement of the Seventies, Hebdige points to certain media representations of punks as part and parcel of family life. Describing such a 1977 article, Hebdige notes, “Photographs depicting punks with smiling mothers, reclining next to the family pool, playing with the family dog, were placed above a text which dwelt on the ordinariness of individual punks” (Hebdige 1979, pp. 358). Alternatively, the Other can be reduced to “meaningless exotica” (pp. 358). In this form, the Other is transformed into something of an objectified character that is situated beyond analysis. In response to the punk subculture, media depictions would vary between reactionary and sensational accounts of the threats posed by punks (such as a punk-related beating) and depictions which sanitized the supposed threat itself- such as pieces on “punk babies, punk brothers, punk-ted weddings” (pp. 358). In either way, the unknown Other is transformed into an object made comprehensible to hegemonic society. Whatever the punks may have wanted to be (Hebdige points out that punks often embraced the role of the deviant, villainous Other), their position in society was often constructed based not upon their own efforts, but rather by the way they came to be labelled and understood by hegemonic society. It would not be long until punk styles, born out of direct opposition to societal norms, became incorporated into the realms of high fashion (Hebdige 1979). Much as the hippies a decade earlier who had resisted societal norms and expectations only to have their cultural contributions
appropriated and commodified by capitalist culture, so befell such a fate upon punk styles. Birthed out of resistance to mainstream culture, neither the hippie nor the punk movements could escape the pervasiveness of capitalist consumer culture. Both were sanitized for domestic tastes and reframed within the context of hegemonic society for mass consumption in the pop cultural marketplace.

**Legalizing Vice: The Case of Prostitution**

To best comprehend the nature and processes of legalizing vice, it is first and foremost important to recognize that criminalizing vice has never succeeded at eliminating vice. The United States’ Prohibition of alcohol (1920-1933) did not rid American culture of the wicked liquors it sought to. Speakeasies and bootleggers continued the alcohol trade, and were often associated with elements of organized crime. Similarly, the prohibition of illicit drugs in the United States has failed to stop the flow of illegal drugs into the country, and has created its own host of problems, from prison overcrowding to the financially improvident War on Drugs. Illegal drugs continue to be available for consumption, and are often trafficked (much as alcohol was during Prohibition) by criminal syndicates. While criminalization and prohibitions may fail to outright eliminate vice, what such efforts do achieve is the reduced visibility of vice. From a spatial perspective, prohibitions serve to sequester vice to secluded, inconspicuous sites. Conversely, legalization presents the opportunity for vice to occupy more pronounced spaces such as storefronts or even entire districts centered around vice, such as Amsterdam’s Wallen (prostitution), Las Vegas’ Strip (gambling), or New Orleans’ Bourbon Street (alcohol). For instance, illegal gambling may still occur in areas where it is prohibited, but it is conducted in areas out of public view for the obvious reason of its illegality. Indeed, between 1910 and 1931
when gambling in Nevada was illegal, gambling continued to flourish in Las Vegas (Gottdiener, et al. 1999). Contrast that to post-legalization Las Vegas’ Strip, a glittering, ostentatious monument to legal gambling in a locale known as “Sin City.” Without the legalization of gambling in Nevada, such a publicly-viewable development of space devoted to vice would be unfathomable.

An excellent examination of the nature of vice markets is offered by Ronald Weitzer in his study of legalizing prostitution (2012). Despite nearly-universal bans on prostitution in the United States (Nevada and until recently Rhode Island remained the only exceptions), somewhere between 15-18 percent of American men admitted to having paid for sex (Weitzer 2012). However, little reliable baseline data is available to track trends, and due to the stigmas associated with soliciting a prostitute the actual figure may in fact be higher. Clearly, prohibitions on paid-sex have not eliminated the prostitution market in the United States, just as prohibitions have failed to eliminate alcohol or illegal drugs. However, prostitution is legal and regulated in many places around the world, and de facto tolerated in others (such as Belgium). Such examples offer insight into both the nature of illicit markets (in outright-illegal and illegal-only-by-regulatory-incompliance areas) as well as the impacts legalization has upon urban space.

Even in locales where prostitution is illegal, a stratified marketplace exists for the trade (albeit underground), and in locations where prostitution is legal and regulated, illegal transactions continue outside the purveyance of regulatory authorities. A significant gulf exists between the “indoor” and “outdoor” markets (i.e., streetwalking vs. escorts, call girls, legal brothels, etc.) regardless of the legality of prostitution in a certain jurisdiction. Whereas street prostitutes often work in dangerous conditions (risks of violence, disease, arrest), many of these risks are mitigated for indoor prostitutes (Weitzer 2012). In fact, the risks undertaken by street
prostitutes are not entirely dissimilar from the risks undertaken by “street” marijuana dealers; risks of violence and/or arrest, and the disincentivization to pursue legal recourse if one is victimized. As prostitution moves indoors, into controlled brothers or sauna clubs, etc., these risks diminish. Indoor prostitutes face lesser risks of victimization through violence, and also exert more control over their working conditions and client base, which in turn helps to minimize the risk of diseases. Indeed, prostitutes working in the legal sex industry in Antwerp, Frankfurt, or Amsterdam do not run the risk of arrest, unlike most street prostitutes. In Nevada’s legal brothels, prostitutes do not risk arrest, are routinely checked for health reasons, and are under the security of managed and monitored brothel operators, reducing their likelihood of victimization (Weitzer 2012). Although the legalization of prostitution has created thriving, legal marketplaces in jurisdictions where it has taken place, illegal prostitution still occurs beyond the confines of regulations. In other cases, street prostitution has largely left one city for another, as was the case when Antwerp de facto legalized regulated prostitution but cracked down on street prostitution and many street prostitutes simply relocated to Brussels (Weitzer 2012).

The clientele served by the street and indoor markets varies as well. As Weitzer (2012) notes, upscale, indoor prostitutes often provide greater degrees of service (such as the Girlfriend Experience or “GFE” which offers the client a greater degree of both physical and emotional intimacy than traditional modes of prostitution), operate in safer, cleaner environments, offer clients greater choice and variety in service, and the prostitutes themselves are often perceived as being of a greater quality than their streetwalking competitors (less likely to suffer from drug addiction, etc.). As such, indoor prostitutes are typically more expensive than street prostitutes. While the clients of street prostitutes vary widely across the socioeconomic spectrum, high-end indoor prostitution remains accessible primarily to the well off (Weitzer 2012). Those without
the means to attain an “indoor” prostitute (in either a legal or illegal jurisdiction) may instead turn to an “outdoor” prostitute, which even in many prostitution-legal areas where prostitution is regulated is still an illegal act, as it lies outside the boundaries of the legal, regulated sector of the trade. It should be understood that legal prostitution almost exclusively takes the “indoor” form.

Even in areas with legal, regulated prostitution, the prices of legal prostitution may preclude some potential clients from the market. Additionally, although regulatory controls may increase safety and help legitimize the vice, they may also disincentivize participation for some actors. Prostitutes may not wish to comply with burdensome regulations and prefer to work on the underground fringes of the market. Others may be de jure precluded from participation; those with STDs, minors, etc., and forced to continue working on the streets. Similarly, some “johns” may still choose to solicit street prostitutes as they find a thrill in the act itself (Weitzer 2012). Nonetheless, regulations are essential in transforming prostitution from an illicit vice into a legitimate business. Regulation offers control and security to both seller and client. The client may feel less likely to be “ripped off” during the transaction due to the oversight provided by legal regulation. Similarly, prostitutes may find recourse in the event of a disorderly customer. In Antwerp’s red light district, a small police station is clearly marked and visible to maintain order in the area. However, many prostitutes who are victimized may still avoid recourse as the stigma attached to sex work remains regardless of legality and, as such, they may wish to remain anonymous (Weitzer 2012). While legalization and regulation may lend some legitimacy to sex work, “stigma and claims that prostitution is immoral do not magically disappear postlegalization” (Weitzer 2012, pp. 100). Nonetheless, the stigma of *criminality* is removed from the sex trade. Despite the remaining stigmas associated with the sex trade, its legalization
provides the legitimization necessary for prostitution to move towards occupying more prominent, visible spaces in urban areas.

**Themed Areas of Vice: Red Light Districts**

The spatial contours of legal prostitution vary widely depending upon the specific manifestation it takes in each jurisdiction. For instance, with leaders recognizing the host of problems created by street prostitution, but also cognizant of the fact that cracking down on prostitution rarely eliminates it, the concept of the *Tippelzone* was introduced in the Netherlands in the mid-1980s. Such areas were specifically designated by governmental authorities as sorts of “tolerance zones” wherein street prostitution would be legal; outside of the zone it would not. The Tippelzone in Amsterdam was located on the outskirts of the city (Weitzer 2012). Due to a variety of problems (including illegal workers and an oversupply of prostitutes in the zones) many have since closed, including Amsterdam’s. Beyond the Tippelzones, the vast majority of legalized prostitution in the Netherlands is of the “indoor” variety, including brothels, window rooms (which have no real American counterpart), hotels and private residences. Approximately one-quarter of the Dutch sex trade takes place in brothels, with roughly 20% taking place in window rooms, with the remainder (approximately half the total trade) the domain of escorts or women operating out of private residences. Only approximately 1% is street prostitution (Weitzer 2012, pp. 151).

Weitzer’s examination of red light districts in several European cities offers insight into how legalized vice is spatially manifested in urban districts. Comparisons of red light districts in Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands demonstrate how differently such areas can develop,
largely due to the contours of legality surrounding prostitution in a given jurisdiction and cultural attitudes towards prostitution in a given area. For instance, Weitzer suggests that the presence of a small red light district in a residential part of Amsterdam reflects that prostitution is accepted as part of the city’s culture (2012, pp. 127). Red light districts, as areas of vice, are often situated uniquely in the community and can take a variety of forms: a tidy, quiet, controlled pedestrian mall in Antwerp; a raucous party in Amsterdam’s central Wallen; or somewhat sleazier forms in Frankfurt or Brussels (Weitzer 2012). Additionally, it should be understood that legal prostitution exists outside of red light districts in these cities in the forms of escorts, prostitutes who work out of private residences, and brothels and sauna clubs located outside of red light districts.

Antwerp’s red light district offers the most striking example of control in the spatial organization of vice. Although clandestine prostitution occurs outside of the red light district, visible prostitution in Antwerp has been largely restricted to the red light district (Weitzer 2012). Antwerp’s red light district currently consists of a quiet, pedestrian-only area featuring window-rooms and catering largely to locals. Additionally, it features a police station on-premises, as well as health services and counseling available for sex workers (Weitzer 2012). Located near the old docks about a twenty minute walk from the city center, Antwerp’s red light district lacks other attractions to bring people to the area; it is an example of a single-use red light district.

Amsterdam’s legal-sex landscape has been manifest somewhat differently. Although Amsterdam boasts three separate red light districts, these areas typically feature window-rooms while brothels exist in other parts of the city outside of the red light district. Amsterdam’s two smaller red light districts are located outside of the city center in inconspicuous areas of the city, one in a mixed commercial/residential area and the other in a largely residential area (Weitzer
These red light districts do not boast the carnival atmosphere of the main red light district in the city center, and do not draw tourists like the main red light district does; most of the customers are locals and their presence in residential areas reflects the cultural atmosphere of Amsterdam (Weitzer 2012). However, Amsterdam’s main red light district (The Wallen) is in the city center and features over 300 window rooms as well as a variety of other establishments for entertainment and consumption such as bars, restaurants, marijuana cafes, and gift shops. It is an example of a mixed-use red light district (Weitzer 2012), offering all the amenities for an entertaining night out. Opposed to the other two red light districts in the city, the main red light district is a major tourist draw and attracts high amounts of foot traffic. The area is often quite busy, and due to its location in the city center also increases its visibility. The increased visibility and party atmosphere (unlike the other red light districts it is not uncommon for intoxicated persons—be it alcohol or marijuana—to be found in The Wallen) make The Wallen a major tourist draw. However, this also increases the potential for disorderly customers and increased visibility when politicizing issues arise (Weitzer 2012).

Despite the vast differences in the manifestations of red light districts in the cities analyzed by Weitzer, several trends emerge across the variations. For example, the concentration of vice into red light districts has had varied levels of success at reducing the prevalence of vice in other parts of cities. In Antwerp, visible prostitution has been largely contained in the red light district. However, in Frankfurt and Amsterdam, brothels or sauna clubs may exist well outside of the red light district, even in residential areas. Nonetheless, regardless of the form individual red light districts may take, efforts at restricting the proliferation of vice have been largely successful at reducing street prostitution (Weitzer 2012). This is largely due to the simple fact that by making other (‘‘indoor’’) forms of prostitution legal, street prostitution was singled-out by law
enforcement for attention and many prostitutes found improved work conditions indoors. Additionally, red light districts are constructed based on the legal structure of prostitution in each jurisdiction as well as the individual paid-sex contours of each city. German hotel-brothels and sauna clubs may proliferate into other parts of the city more easily than Amsterdam’s long tracts of window-rooms. Conversely, Amsterdam’s window-room setup lends itself to the sprawling, ultra-visible tourist hub The Wallen has become. In the same vein, The Wallen epitomizes the mixed-use red light district deployed for maximum visibility and patronization. Contrasted to the less raucous, single-use red light districts (like the one in Antwerp) that serve a primarily local clientele, The Wallen is a centrally-located tourist destination. Its existence is the product of both the dimension of legal paid-sex in the Netherlands as well as Amsterdam’s permissive and tolerant attitude towards vice such as prostitution (Weitzer 2012). Indeed, bars and marijuana cafes compliment prostitution to make The Wallen an internationally-visible site of vice.

Themed areas of vice are not limited to red light districts centered on prostitution. New Orleans’ infamous Bourbon Street is synonymous with vice. Saturated with bars and strip clubs, Bourbon Street is a major tourist draw that is often emblematic of New Orleans. Yet perhaps the most prominent display of vice is Las Vegas’ glittering strip. Indeed, vice has taken on a significant spatial dimension in “Sin City.” Fremont Street in downtown Las Vegas is a district centered on gambling, as is the Strip, technically located just outside of city boundaries to avoid city taxes and government controls (Gottdiener, et al. 1999). Importantly, in these districts the vice of gambling is immediately visible; not only is it not hidden, but it is garishly displayed, offering an enticement to tourists eager to experience the thrills of the wager. Much like The Wallen in Amsterdam is a themed area of legal vice (prostitution), The Strip and Fremont Street are themed areas of legal vice (gambling). Interestingly, many Las Vegas casinos offer a themed
environment (within a themed environment) by constructing and visually designing their spaces according to a central motif. For instance, an “Arabian Nights” theme was central to casinos such as The Aladdin, The Sands, The Dunes, or The Sahara (Gottdiener, et al. 1999). The use of themes and symbols in constructing the image of Las Vegas has been significant. For instance, the giant neon cowboy “Vegas Vic” is a readily understood symbol that is synonymous with Las Vegas and gambling. From his home on Fremont Street, Vic’s “Howdy Partner” greeting has welcomed countless tourists to the district (Gottdiener, et al. 1999). In the 1990s Las Vegas invested millions of dollars into creating the Fremont Street Experience, an entertainment district including retail outlets and nightlife opportunities (Gottdiener, et al. 1999). While still centered on the vice of gambling, the Fremont Street Experience resembles mixed-use vice districts such as The Wallen. The development of such districts underscores the significant impact legalized, consumable vice can have on crafting urban space. Other socially stigmatized behaviors also can develop unique, themed urban spaces, such as themed environments offering a consumable experience in “gayborhoods.”

Although contemporary understandings of sexual orientation are more enlightened, LGBT lifestyles have historically been treated as deviant behaviors by mainstream society, and through legislation such as (now-invalidated) sodomy laws, were indeed functionally illegal for many years. In this sense, although LGBT lifestyles are not necessarily “vices,” they have often been treated similarly by societal powerbrokers. Thus, “gayborhoods” have developed similarly to how congregated sites of vice have developed. Examples of such are manifold. San Francisco’s Castro District is an immediately recognizable site of the gay community, and attracts multitudes of tourists, gay and straight alike, from around the world on an annual basis eager to take in the experience of The Castro (Abrahamson 2006). Located in a formerly
working-class neighborhood that experienced decline as industry left San Francisco in the post-War decades, The Castro began to become a center for the gay community in the late 1960s. As the hippie movement’s themes of love and acceptance of alternative lifestyles resonated in the gay community, gay hippies began to populate The Castro, lured by cheap rents and the geographic proximity to Haight-Asbury, an epicenter of the hippie movement (Abrahamson 2006). Over the following decades, The Castro would evolve into something of a gay Mecca; rainbow flags, a symbol of gay pride and community identity, are prevalent in the area (Abrahamson 2006). Chicago’s Boystown neighborhood similarly functions as a destination for gay culture and social life. The site of numerous bars, restaurants, clubs and other attractions that cater to a gay clientele, Boystown has become a gay entertainment district (Orne 2017). In Ohio, a small coterie of middle-class gay men began to settle in Toledo’s Old West End beginning in the 1950s (Schroeder 2014). While many of these men operated in industries (such as interior decoration) that catered to Toledo’s wealthier clientele, due to the political nature of the era their personal lives required a degree of separation from their professional lives, and the handsome Victorian houses of the Old West End became a center for the gay community in Toledo (Schroeder 2014). As was the case with many Rust Belt cities, many of Toledo’s neighborhoods declined in the post-War decades, and the gay community’s entrance reinvigorated the neighborhood. Indeed, the entrance of large numbers of gays into a neighborhood has been frequently associated with the gentrification or redevelopment of an area (Abrahamson 2006; Goodstein 2008; Schroeder 2014). As these examples demonstrate, a behavior deemed deviant by hegemonic society can come to thematically define a neighborhood, or even function to develop a bona fide entertainment district for consumption.
Much as the various models of legal prostitution employed in European cities create numerous different incarnations of vice in urban space, legalized marijuana also maintains the potential to enact similar effects on space. The ideological acceptance of prostitution in some European cities (be it through de jure legalization or a cultural acceptance like that of Amsterdam) has combined with the commodification of sex to create discernable and differentiated- and importantly, legal- marketplaces for prostitution. Naturally, these marketplaces take on a spatial manifestation shaped by the laws and cultures of the cities in which they exist. Similarly, legal marijuana’s spatial dimensions are equally influenced by the dynamics establishing the legalization of marijuana in a given jurisdiction.

**Medical Marijuana Dispensaries in California**

While legalization of recreational marijuana is a relatively new phenomenon, medical marijuana has existed in California since 1996 when The Golden State was the first to legalize medical marijuana. As such, the spatial contours of medical marijuana in California have been subject to analysis. Research suggests that marijuana dispensaries almost exclusively operate in spaces zoned for commercial businesses (Morrison, et al. 2014; Thomas & Freisthler 2016). This is to be expected given that municipal zoning ordinances in most jurisdictions restrict the places where commercial businesses, including dispensaries but regardless of industry, are permitted to operate. Studies that examined medical marijuana dispensaries operating in Los Angeles, California, found that city zoning requirements cause medical marijuana dispensaries to open and operate in commercial settings that often share similar characteristics with one another (Morrison, et al. 2014; Thomas & Freisthler 2016). Dispensaries are primarily located in areas
zoned for commercial use with easy highway access, allowing marijuana consumers convenient access to the dispensaries (Thomas & Freisthler 2016). Furthermore, the prevalence of marijuana dispensaries is linked positively with the prevalence of alcohol retailers (Morrison, et al. 2014; Thomas & Freisthler 2016). Furthermore, dispensaries appear to operate in areas with low incomes near to municipal boundaries (Morrison, et al. 2014). Although dispensaries operate in commercially zoned locales, these locales may be near to residential areas, and the relationship between dispensaries and low income and alcohol outlets suggests that their presence may be indicative of an area that was unable to resist their presence. Given the association between heavy alcohol use and increased probability for the use of other illicit substances (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2011), the correlation between marijuana dispensaries and proximity to alcohol outlets has the potential to increase marijuana use in these communities. Despite the higher density of dispensaries in commercial districts, areas with access to highway on/off ramps, and alcohol (both on-premise and off-premise) outlets in the proximity, no relationship appears to exist with schools, parks, or libraries. This is likely because city ordinances and zoning laws that restrict the potential locations of dispensaries have effectively prevented the operation of dispensaries in other locations (Thomas & Fresithler 2016), as is the case in Denver where zoning ordinances prevent dispensaries from operating near schools or childcare centers, restricting their presence in many places. Additionally, a correlation was found between demand for marijuana in a given area and the prevalence of dispensaries in that area as well as a correlation with Hispanic populations (Morrison, et al. 2014). As proximity to medical marijuana dispensaries presents the potential for additional marijuana use, Hispanic populations seem to be vulnerable to an increase of marijuana use in their communities. However, it remains unclear whether the percent of Hispanic residents has
any direct linkage to dispensaries, or if the increased presence of marijuana dispensaries in their neighborhoods is a result of the proximity of their neighborhoods to commercial districts, the only area in which dispensaries can operate. It is important to note that in both the referenced studies, although correlations between various factors were established, no causation was ultimately determined for the prevalence of dispensaries in certain areas, although it is arguable that city zoning ordinances are in fact a causation of dispensaries opening and operating in certain locations.

For legal marijuana to maintain a compatible relationship with gentrification, it is paramount that legalizing marijuana does not increase crime in areas where dispensaries operate. Fresithler, et al. (2016) utilized routine activities theory to analyze the potential impact of medical marijuana dispensaries for increasing crime in the surrounding areas in Long Beach, California. Many dispensaries are located in low-income and high retail-employment areas, indicating a lack of guardianship in the surrounding area (Fresithler, et al. 2016, p. 1028). Controlling for other factors such as demographics and proximity to alcohol outlets, no association of increased criminal activities in the immediate vicinity of dispensaries was observed, however increases (2.5% increase in violent crimes) in crime were observed in adjacent census tracts (Fresithler, et al. 2016, p. 1030). Additionally, police records from Oakland reveal that crime did not increase in areas of the city in which dispensaries operated, including the Oaksterdam neighborhood, the home of the infamous Oaksterdam University, a college designed to educate prospective cannabis entrepreneurs on the contours of the burgeoning industry (Downs 2012).

Other studies have examined how dispensaries intervene in their areas to enact change in the environment (Fresithler, et al., 2013). Environmental interventions focus on changing the
environment or the characteristics of a place to achieve some sort of end, and the effect of the presence of dispensaries was analyzed in relation to the effect their presence to crime in the area. Utilizing crime data from 2000 in Sacramento, California, Fresitler, et al. (2013), examined the specific measures taken by dispensaries to prevent crime at their businesses. Using the 31 operational dispensaries in Sacramento at the time, the authors compared their methods of crime prevention and the effectiveness of such efforts in reducing crime within 100, 250, 500 and 1000 feet of the dispensary. The findings were that medical marijuana dispensaries that utilized security cameras or had posted signs requiring a valid identification prescription card had lower crime rates within the 100 and 250 foot barriers (p. 286). Notably, all measures had significantly less impact in reducing crime at the 1000 foot barrier level. Of notable interest is that dispensaries that utilized locked metal screen doors actually had noticeably higher instances of crime than dispensaries that did not employ such a method. However, the authors speculate that this speaks more to the overall condition of the surrounding area than it does to dispensaries, with the authors suggesting the possibility that many of these dispensaries inherited such features from previous tenants in locations in bad neighborhoods (p. 287). This is comparable to the dispensaries on South Broadway, many of whom inherited their locations from previous tenants. Many of these locations continue to utilize metal bars (likely a legacy of South Broadway’s rougher days), suggesting a comparison between South Broadway and the neighborhood conditions of dispensaries operating in Sacramento.

Researchers have also compared crime rates between states with and without medical marijuana legalization. In one such study, Morris, et al. (2014) compared state-level crime data for certain crimes. Opponents of marijuana legalization have put forth the argument that legalized marijuana would lead to an increase in crime; however, this does not appear to be the
case on a statewide level (Morris, et al. 2014) or in the direct vicinity of dispensaries (Freisthler, et al. 2016). While these studies have failed to detect a causation between legalized marijuana and reduced crime, perhaps the most significant finding is that they have also failed to detect a causation between marijuana legalization and increased crime. This may be due to the security features employed by dispensaries functioning to mitigate crime (Freisthler, et al, 2013; Freisthler, et al. 2016).

The fact that dispensaries tend to open in low income areas (Morrison, et al. 2014) suggests a potential relationship with gentrification. In Oakland, a city awash in gentrification, marijuana dispensaries have become associated with gentrification, in some instances pushing out longtime low-income residents such as artists collectives (Veale 2018). Indeed, dispensaries have not been associated with increased crime (Downs 2012), and have played a significant part in the gentrification of downtown Oakland. Interestingly, although the legal marijuana industry is overwhelmingly White, initiatives in Oakland (such as Hood Incubator) have attempted to bridge this gap (Blau 2018; Fox 2017). As gentrification often displaces minorities in urban areas, such initiatives present the potential to alter the dynamics of gentrification along the contours of legal marijuana. Nonetheless, the gentrification of American cities is largely a result of the exodus-and then return- of large swathes of largely White middle class residents to cities. As such, to best understand the relationship between marijuana and gentrification, it must be situated in the proper context in relation to the impacts of deindustrialization, suburbanization, and the changing dynamics of American society that accompanied such forces.
Post-Industrial America

In 1950s and 1960s, America’s economy began to shift away from an industrial, manufacturing-based economy towards a consumption-based model in which the service sector bypassed the manufacturing sector as the largest employer in the United States. The processes of deindustrialization and deconcentration powerfully transformed the United States and a new sociospatial organization emerged (Gottdiener & Hutchison 2006). Deindustrialization refers to the massive decline in manufacturing in the United States, with domestic factories closing or relocating overseas and a rise in industrial unemployment. In 1950, the largest proportion of employed Americans worked in the manufacturing sector (26 percent), but by 1980 manufacturing had been replaced by the service sector as America’s dominant field of employment (24 percent to 22 percent). In the 1970s, the United States lost 8 million manufacturing jobs; many of these employers relocated manufacturing operations overseas (Gottdiener & Hutchison 2006). Up through the 1950s, urban family life in the United States was largely centered around the routine of factory life; however, by 1980 this had radically changed. Manufacturing no longer dominated cities’ economies, and predictable and secure employment in the industrial sector had largely vanished. Illustrative of this is the case of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which in 1930 had nearly one-third of its population engaged in manufacturing; by 1980 this had dropped to approximately 14%, and Pittsburgh lost 24% of its jobs and 37% of its population between 1940 and 1980 (Gottdiener & Hutchison 2006).

Coupled with the processes of deindustrialization are the trends of deconcentration. Deconcentration refers to the shift of people and activities away from city centers and into largely suburban areas (Gottdiener & Hutchison 2006). Since 1970, areas outside of city centers have been growing faster than cities, and in the 1980 census virtually no trend towards the
concentration of the population was recorded— for the first time in over a century (Gottdiener & Hutchison 2006). By 1970 more Americans lived in suburbs than in cities, demonstrating America’s shift from a largely urban, industrialized society to one defined by suburban lifestyles. Not only have individuals left cities for suburbs, but so have many corporate actors. Industrial parks and science and tech parks in suburban areas attract major businesses: Silicon Valley in California (a high tech hotbed) and the exodus of PepsiCo and General Electric from Manhattan to Purchase, NY and Fairfield, CT, respectively, serve as excellent examples (Gottdiener & Hutchison 2006). Coupled together, the forces of deindustrialization and deconcentration have radically altered the American social paradigm in the latter half of the twentieth century. Cities have experienced decay while suburban areas have grown drastically.

The changes in American society wrought by deindustrialization, decentralization and suburbanization not only changed the way Americans lived and worked; it also changed the way they shopped. For years, neighborhood shopping districts had been a central site for not only commerce but also urban social life. However, as the middle class fled the city for the suburbs, large suburban malls (and later mega-malls) replaced previous shopping districts as the predominant places of retail commerce. “Suburban shopping malls were so successful that their numbers increased more than tenfold from approximately 2,000 in 1960 to over 20,000 by 1980. Over time this success threatened central city shopping areas and bypassed them as the important places to consume” (Gottdeiner & Hutchison 2006, pp. 123). Not only did suburban malls bypass neighborhood shopping areas as places to consume, but also as centers for social life as the population drifted outwards from the city centers. “In the 61 years since the first enclosed one opened in suburban Minneapolis, the shopping mall has been where a huge swath of middle-class America went for far more than shopping. It was the home of first jobs and blind dates, the
place for family photos and ear piercings, where goths and grandmothers could somehow walk through the same doors and find something they all liked... The mall has been America’s public square for the last 60 years” (Sanburn 2017). Sharon Zukin adds: “At the same time, suburban malls also changed. The concentration of stores and people encouraged buildings for more diverse uses, including post offices, hotels and offices, schools, and community centers. It became common to speak of suburban malls as ‘new downtowns’” (Zukin 1995, pp. 208). The suburban mall is the progenitor of the contemporary mega-mall, massive complexes that often feature attractions beyond simple retail outlets. “This type of spectacular, fully enclosed space for shopping has begun to replace the downtown streets of the central city department store district… Central cities cannot compete with such family attractions in immense suburban spaces” (Gottdiener & Hutchison 2006, pp. 124). Often these mega-malls will feature thematic elements designed to maximize their attractiveness to consumers.

**Themed Environments & Signs**

Themed environments have assumed a dominant position in American shopping culture and social life. “As our society progressively shifts from an economy dependent on manufacturing to one in which service industries predominate, the jobs held by the bulk of the population are increasingly associated with thematic experiences” (Gottdiener 2005, pp. 304). Gottdiener points to such conspicuous examples as themed malls or retail experiences such as Niketown (Gottdiener 2005). Indeed, the expansive gallerias that contain not only shops but a vast array of other entertainment features (Gottdiener & Hutchison 2006) function to transform the shopping experience into something of an entertainment destination; consumption is conspicuous. Gottdiener (2005) also describes “production in consumption.” Utilizing fashion as
an example, he notes that people “often seek self-actualization and pursue certain distinct lifestyles through the medium of appearance. People in our society spend a great deal of money on clothing—much more than they could possibly need for purely protective purposes. They use these materials symbolically in many ways… They often seek identification with particular groups by dressing like them” (pp. 305). He concludes that “production and consumption…. are so interrelated in the daily behavior of dressing” (pp. 305). Indeed, consumption produces personal and social dynamics. Group identification is manifest through displays of consumption. In such arrangements, the use of signs is paramount.

The use of signs is twofold: signs denote a specific meaning, but also connote associations defined by societal context (Gottdiener 2005). Gottdiener utilizes the bank as an example. The bank denotes banking: savings accounts, financial transactions, deposits, etc. Yet it also connotes a variety of other socially ascribed associations: “wealth, power, success, future prospects,” etc. (pp. 306). Thus, signs and symbols have the power to convey messages that must be understood within social context, and may be understood differently by different people. The connotations of a specific sign may be interpreted differently depending on one’s perspective or contextual background (Gottdiener 2005). Signs can also manifest themselves spatially. Gottdiener points to Disneyworld as a massive sign vehicle of Disney ideology (2005, pp. 306). The implications that the use of signs has for displays of counterculture and marijuana symbolism on South Broadway is extensive; furthermore The Green Mile itself assumes a spatial manifestation as a sign of marijuana culture.
Gentrification

Treatments of the causes and effects of gentrification are extensive. Gentrification is typified by the renovation of old and decaying urban landscapes and in influx of new, affluent residents (Lees, et al. 2008). Additionally, gentrification is often associated with rising property values (Lees, et al. 2008), which in turn can lead to the exodus of longtime inhabitants of an area and result in a loss of neighborhood authenticity as gentrified places all become similar (Zukin 2009). In New York, gentrification has transformed vast areas of the city, including Times Square, Union Square, or countless neighborhood districts that once catered to the needs of a community but are now the home to global corporations like IKEA (Zukin 1995; Zukin 2009). As New York struggled financially in the 1970s, Times Square took on an “adult” aura; peep shows and porno houses saturated the area (Zukin 1995). However, as is often the case with urban renewal, these vice-themed businesses were targeted for removal, and replaced by major corporate firms including Disney and MTV (pp. 19). In the case of Union Square, the role of public-private entities such as “business improvement districts” (BIDs) was fundamental in transforming Union Square into a safe space for middle-class consumption. Indeed, the historic reputation of Union Square as a site of civic discourse was utilized by developers and BIDs to market Union Square as an authentic locale. However, the environment that created the historical context for such discourse was all but obliterated by gentrifiers to make way for a marketable site of consumption. Undesirables and those who did not conform to the new norms of the area were removed, often by private security guards employed by the BID (Zukin 2009). The goal of BIDs is straightforward: money. Rising property values and establishments that cater to the middle- and upper-classes can transform an area from a run-down site of urban blight into a site of safe mass consumption. Often publically subsidized and functioning as quasi-governmental entities,
BIDs played a crucial role in gentrifying New York (Zukin 2009). Gentrifiers can capitalize on what is known as the “rent gap,” (Smith 1987), wherein the going rental rate for a given site is different from what the market dictates the potential rent of that site should be. Through renewal efforts, this discrepancy can be eliminated; the downside is that doing so often displaces previous tenants.

The relationship between legal marijuana and gentrification is starting to become apparent. In Seattle, on the heels of a wave of gentrification caused by the tech boom, “there’s no question that the Central District is changing, dramatically, and the legal weed business is the latest symbol of the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood. Fancy condo complexes and artisanal shops are in, people without wealth — and often, people of color — are being priced out” (Bernard 2016). Seattle’s busiest dispensary (whose owner is a career entrepreneur- protesters say “developer”- who has previously dabbled in phone sex, ringtones and zero-calorie soda) is located on a corner in a primarily black neighborhood that has been plagued by crime for years (Young 2018; Bernard 2016). Nonetheless, the clientele is largely white and seemingly affluent (Bernard 2016). In this instance, legal marijuana has acted simultaneously with gentrification to push out longtime neighborhood inhabitants and in their place lure a whiter, wealthier crowd to the space. Indeed, there is an inequitable irony in the fact that while Blacks are more likely to be incarcerated for marijuana-related crimes, the legal marijuana market is largely dominated by White men (Fox 2017). While projects like Oakland’s Hood Incubator have provided opportunities for minorities to enter into the legal marijuana business by providing training, expertise, and assistance (Fox 2017), the legal marijuana-gentrification paradigm continues to be one typified by White-owned businesses dominating the marketplace. While gentrification has been studied and understood at length, the introduction of legal marijuana to the equation...
presents a new aspect of gentrification, and a unique twist in marijuana-legal jurisdictions to a scenario that has played out in cities across the country in recent years.
Methodology

The methodology for this research was largely qualitative, including historical and document analysis as well as participant observations and personal interviews. To create the contextual background for the introduction of legal marijuana onto South Broadway, it was essential to understand the evolution of South Broadway itself through a brief historical analysis. To this end, Denver historian Phil Goodstein’s book *The Spirits of South Broadway* proved especially useful. Other accounts of South Broadway were available from a variety of local news outlets, with more information available for more recent developments. To situate the developments on South Broadway within the greater framework of the United States, a brief analysis of the social trends that have shaped shopping behavior and dynamics for the last several decades was important. Understandings of deindustrialization, suburbanization, gentrification and the impact they have on urban shopping areas (such as South Broadway was, and is, in varied forms) have been shaped through the lens of authors such as Mark Gottdiener and Sharon Zukin.

While these sources created the framework within which the body of the research would take place, the research into the goings on of contemporary South Broadway were largely dependent upon a content analysis of contemporary new reports from local news outlets such as *Westword* or *The Denver Post*. Other contemporary facts, such as zoning requirements, were available from the City of Denver. However, at the heart of this research were a series of brief interviews conducted during March and July 2017. These interviews were largely the direct result of my physical presence on South Broadway and were conducted on-the-spot without the interviewees’ prior expectation of being interviewed. However, the basis of the project was explained to all participants before consenting to being interviewed. All interviewees were
promised complete confidentiality before being interviewed, and as such, any personally identifying information about interviewees has been altered to protect interviewees’ identities, including names, workplaces, and other descriptive information. Between both periods of study, approximately 20-25 interviews of this sort were conducted, all of which took place on South Broadway. Additionally, these informal interviews were buttressed with a limited number (4) of longer, purposive interviews with persons possessing expert, insider knowledge about South Broadway, the legalization of marijuana in Colorado, and the opening and operation of dispensaries on South Broadway. As I was raised in the Denver area and was already somewhat familiar with the South Broadway area, I had a degree of pre-existing insider access to several persons interviewed in this study. Over a year before I began work on this project, upon a trip to Denver I visited the area with an acquaintance who would go on to serve as one of my contacts for this project. Utilizing these pre-existing connections as a basis for access, I was able to connect with additional persons possessing insider’s knowledge of the South Broadway area.

Additionally, I spent a significant amount of time on South Broadway during the course of the interviews. During the several weeks I spent in Denver in the spring and summer of 2017, my days typically began with a drive to the South Broadway area. Typically I would park on one of the numerous side streets connecting South Broadway to the adjacent Baker residential neighborhood, as parking on Broadway itself can be something of a hassle at times. The remainder of my time was typically spent perusing the South Broadway scene. I made the walk from Ellsworth to Evans numerous times, simply taking in the ambiance of the area and noting the visual appearance of the district. I used these walks as a chance to photograph aspects of South Broadway that seemed particularly relevant to my research, and also compiled notations about the prevalence of certain types of shops or vacant storefronts on the street. The time I spent
walking the district would also serve to familiarize myself with the geographic nature of South
Broadway. As the project progressed, I would go into various shops, bars and restaurants,
sometimes strictly as a consumer, although often these stops would lead to an interview if the
proprietor (or in some cases, customers) seemed amenable to it. I had my coffee at several
different South Broadway coffeehouses, I ate at numerous restaurants on the strip, and I drank in
several of the bars. I visited several recreational marijuana dispensaries (although the controlled,
medicinal nature of dispensary operations generally precluded any interviews). I shopped a little
here and there (even procuring a very sharp 1960s-vintage United Airlines advertising poster at
one of the rare books sellers who operates on South Broadway) and, at the behest of one
merchant who encouraged me to do so to gain an appreciation for who solicits the dispensaries,
at times simply sat on one of the recently streetscaped benches and watched people come and go
from dispensaries and antique stores. Some days I would trade in the hassle of traffic and parking
and instead take public transit to get to South Broadway, disembarking from the light rail at the
I-25 & Broadway RTD station. In its totality, the time I spent on South Broadway was incredibly
beneficial in guiding my understandings of the area.
A Brief History of South Broadway

Perhaps the history of South Broadway would be best described in terms of perpetual evolution, resulting in manifestations of the drag over time that may seem juxtapositionally opposed. The main street of a town founded on Prohibitionist values became the site of many bars; the social center of a morally-based community became a hotbed of porn houses, and later, marijuana. Few works devoted to the history of South Broadway offer a more authoritative examination than *The Spirits of South Broadway* (2008) by Denver historian Phil Goodstein. Indeed, Goodstein’s series of books on Denver history offer a coverage that is largely unparalleled. Goodstein’s works, including *The Seamy Side of Denver* (1993), are vital in uncovering the historical relationships between vice and community in South Denver.

The beginnings of South Broadway reflect in many ways the early history of Denver, the Queen City of the Plains and a frequent destination for those seeking to find wealth and prosperity in the burgeoning American West. Denver’s beginnings as a town can be largely traced to the Pike’s Peak Gold Rush of the late 1850s, an event that brought the first great influx of European-Americans into the region. In search of the instant riches that a gold strike could provide, as many as 100,000 settlers descended upon the Front Range during this time. Prior to the gold-driven influx of white American settlers, the Arapaho Indians had long made encampments in the area that would become Denver, often situating themselves at the confluence of Cherry Creek and the South Platte River. Situated at the meeting of these waterways, along the base of the Rocky Mountains and not far from the important Santa Fe Trail, the land Denver came to occupy was a natural choice for settlement.
As the 19th century drew to a close, South Denver was a largely residential area. Some of the more palatial abodes found in the Denver area at this time were located along South Broadway. For those with the means, South Denver was an ideal suburb of Denver. Many local politicians and preeminent businessmen lived in the area (Goodstein 2008). However, as was typical of many boom and bust Western towns of the late 19th century, Denver had something of a rough and tumble frontier-town atmosphere, replete with saloons and women of “ill repute”. It is important to note that, at this time, South Denver was not part of the City of Denver; nor was it an incorporated municipality itself. Rather, it was an unincorporated part of Arapahoe County, located directly south of Denver proper. To escape the municipal regulations of the City of Denver, vice-oriented businesses began to congregate along South Broadway, just south of the city limits of Denver. Before long, South Broadway was checkered with bars, saloons, and other “houses of ill repute.” Many locals believed such establishments were simply fronts for prostitution and gambling, and South Denver leaders sought to rid their community of such businesses. After Arapahoe County officials were ineffective at controlling the overspill of vice from Denver into the South, in 1886 the Town of South Denver was officially incorporated. Largely created as a result of Prohibitionist forces, the town took aggressive steps to eliminate the liquor element from within its boundaries. Municipal codes were designed to make it nearly impossible to operate an establishment that served liquor. Other undesirable aspects of society were also targeted for expulsion. In addition to prostitution, public intoxication and vagrancy, ordinances forbade “gambling, dog fights, cock fights, gunfights, human fights, lewd dress, vulgar language, reckless operation of a horse, dancing on Sundays, or selling liquor to anyone ‘insane, idiotic, or distracted’” (“South Denver History Runs Deep”).
While created out of the stated desire to establish a morally-guided city free of the vice and degeneracy witnessed directly to the north in Denver, South Denver was never itself free from vice. Rather, vice was situated in South Denver in a manner constructed upon class lines. Just to the west of South Broadway, Jewell Park (later Overland Park) opened in 1883. Like many amusement parks of the era, it featured fireworks, a bandstand, and balloon exhibitions. However, the preeminent draw of the park was horse racing. Within a few years, high class events such as weddings and parties were frequently thrown in the racetrack’s grandstand, while less elite members of society would be permitted to picnic on the lush greeneries of the park. Overland Park became a community feature situated primarily for elite consumption. The Colorado Derby was claimed by local backers to rival the storied Kentucky Derby. Within a few years a golf course, with golf quickly emerging as a feature of high society, was built on the property. Soon thereafter a country club would follow. Although South Denver had incorporated based upon the ideals of a safe, clean suburban community juxtaposed against the immorality and filth of the city, liquor flowed freely and gambling on races was permitted at Overland Park. While municipal ordinances and taxes had forced the lowbrow establishments that catered to the working classes out of South Denver, such enforcement of moral values was conspicuously absent at Overland Park.

Within a few years, the costs of running a city caught up with South Denver. Rising municipal costs were exacerbated in 1893 by an economic downturn that hit the Denver area especially hard. At the same time, and despite the economic hardships of those years, the City of Denver was growing and engaging in a process of annexing the surrounding communities. Despite concerns from locals (including the administration of the then-sectarian University of Denver) that annexation would bring with it the immorality of the city that South Denverites had
sought to escape, Denver annexed South Denver in 1894. While the annexation alleviated the fiscal struggles that had doomed the Town of South Denver, a provision allowed South Denver to remain a dry area, free of bars and saloons. Throughout the Prohibition era of the early 21st century, South Denver would remain a largely dry area.

Religious groups have a lengthy history in South Denver, as is evidenced by the presence of many historic churches in the Baker, Overland, Platte Park, and Washington Park West neighborhoods which surround South Broadway. Often, these congregations were openly Prohibitionist. As Denver evolved into a major metropolis in the early decades of the 20th century, parts of the Baker neighborhood began to become populated by increasing numbers of Hispanics. Many of the original settlers in South Denver envisioned the area as an idyllic, morally-guided Christian-American community. The increasing Hispanic presence in the area led to fears that such changes would pose a challenge to the economic and social standing of existing residents. For some time in the early 20th century, the Ku Klux Klan was highly influential in Denver politics and had a strong following in South Denver, one that was often clandestinely supported by affiliates of South Denver’s numerous churches. Many blue collar workers at the nearby factories also supported the Klan’s efforts, fearing the competition for jobs that immigrants would bring (Goodstein 2008).

As Denver grew dramatically after recovering from the economic struggles of 1893, South Denver developed as a fundamental part of the city. Around the turn of the century, the nature of South Broadway evolved from a largely residential area to a thoroughfare typically featuring commercial storefronts with residential quarters located above or behind the stores. The development and growth of the surrounding residential neighborhoods matched the ever-increasing population of Denver. As Denver grew, a booming industrial district developed in the
area that is now near I-25 and Broadway. Crucial to this industrial growth was the Gates Rubber plant. During the second decade of the 20th century, Charles Gates built the company from a small, local firm into a major corporation. Originally producing tires (before eventually expanding to a wide range of products and ultimately, years later, abandoning tire manufacturing in favor of other rubber products), Gates was a major employer in the area. At its mid-century peak, Gates employed approximately 5,500 workers in Denver (Peterson, “Gates Demolition Underway”). Samsonite, the luggage manufacturer, also has roots on South Broadway. From the 1920s through much of the 1960s, Samsonite (originally known as Schwayder Brothers) manufactured a host of products in an 80,000 square-foot factory along South Broadway near the Gates plant. Both firms would flourish during the Second World War as military contractors before suffering setbacks and eventually leaving South Broadway in the latter decades of the 20th century. Both manufacturers were major employers in the area and workers would often live in the surrounding neighborhoods and do their shopping on South Broadway. Additionally, numerous other industrial employers existed nearby including creameries, a can company, a Ford assembly plant (which flourished during World War II before being largely abandoned), a General Motors distribution center, and even several potato chip makers (Goodstein 2008).

Another feature that served a particularly significant role in the development of South Broadway as both a major thoroughfare and a center for social life in South Denver was the advent of streetcars on the stretch. Starting as early as the 1870s with horse carriages, South Broadway was a site of public transit. During the National Mining and Industrial Exhibition, the Denver Circle Railway transported curious exhibition-goers to and from the event (Goodstein 2008). Overtime streetcars and trolleys would come to fill the needs of mass transit. The role of the streetcar in developing South Broadway, as well as South Denver in its entirety, is
paramount. This was a common feature of urban development in many other cities as well, such as Los Angeles, where early development followed trolley lines before being replaced by the supremacy of the automobile (Gottdiener & Hutchinson 2006). Writing about the development of South Denver, Goodstein notes that, “From their beginnings in the 1870s well into the 1940s, public transit routes helped determine the character of neighborhoods. People shopped and settled close to where street cars… ran” (Goodstein 2008, pp. 11). Furthermore, only the affluent could afford horses or carriages, and even those who did often preferred mass transit, as stabling of horses could prove problematic in downtown Denver. The four mile distance between downtown and South Denver made travelling by foot a daunting task, and effectively made South Denver residents dependent upon mass transit (Goodstein 2008). Goodstein continues: “South Denver developed as a model streetcar suburb. The trolley routes determined neighborhood shopping districts and socialization patterns. Well into the 1940s, upwards of 90 percent of all trips to and from the area were made by mass transit. Remnants of the trolley’s influence are omnipresent” (Goodstein 2008, pp. 12).

By the 1920s, South Broadway was firmly established as South Denver’s main street, the area’s chief retail destination and a center for social life. No longer a chiefly residential drag, South Broadway emerged as South Denver’s premier retail shopping district, rivalling downtown Denver and earning it the moniker “The Miracle Mile.” Although initially developed as something of an early residential suburb, South Denver had now become fully absorbed into a flourishing part of Denver itself, both civically and socially. Nearly any type of business imaginable- laundromats, groceries, hardware stores, ice cream parlors- emerged along the strip, all serving the daily needs of the surrounding neighborhoods and their residents. For the employees of the nearby rubber plant, anything from a cut of meat to new shoes for their children
could be purchased on South Broadway. Local department stores emerged, soon followed by larger national chains such as Montgomery Wards. Wards in particular established itself as an integral part of the shopping district and became closely tied to the surrounding community. Located just to the north of the industrial district, Ward’s opened in 1929 and was the area’s largest retail outlet, featuring an eight-story tower with retail spaces as well as a catalog order distribution center on the premises. Trolleys and streetcars in no small way assisted in the development of South Broadway as a retail center. With streetcars providing affordable, easy access to South Broadway, the area was a natural fit for development as a center of retail commerce in an era before many could afford an automobile.

However, the immeasurable impact of the automobile on American culture was not lost on South Broadway. Although the streetcar remained a frequent mode of transportation until its demise in the 1950s, the automobile became more and more prevalent on South Broadway. Sidewalks were narrowed to widen the street for turn lanes and parking spaces. As the automobile industry boomed in the roaring ’20s and more and more Americans hit the highways than ever before, South Broadway became a center for the auto trade in Denver. In addition to the manufacturing of tires, belts, and hoses that took place at Gates, a flood of car dealers arrived on South Broadway during the decade. In the 1920s, nearly any type of automobile could be found for sale on South Broadway, often in grandiose showrooms designed to display the seemingly limitless potential that the automobile represented to Americans at the time.

The Miracle Mile was not only a center for retail commerce and shopping, but a significant site for social life in the South Denver community. Merchant’s Park, adjacent to Montgomery Wards, hosted professional baseball from 1922 until the 1940s. Fraternal organizations had halls on the street. Dancehalls, roller skating rinks, and bowling alleys existed
along the thoroughfare (Goodstein 2008). However, what South Broadway may be best remembered from this era are the magnificent theatres constructed along the street. While a bevy of theatres populated the thoroughfare, two are of special significance: The Webber, opened in 1917 with lavish features, ornate architecture and Aztec-inspired art, and The Mayan which opened in 1930 and replaced another theatre in the same location (Goodstein 2008). Built in the art deco Mayan revival style, the theatre still exists (unlike its former competitors on South Broadway) and over the years has hosted numerous live events in addition to cinematic displays, including a fashion show in the 1930s that was unsurprisingly sponsored by Montgomery Ward (Goodstein 2008).

Although development along South Broadway stagnated in the 1930s as the nation struggled through the Depression, South Broadway flourished in the post-war years. Many workers had arrived in the area during World War II as Gates and Schwayder increased production to meet wartime demands. These new arrivals combined with veterans returning from the war caused the population of the area to boom. Parking, traffic, and congestion began to emerge as daily concerns along South Broadway, and remain as such to this day. The automobile further asserted its dominance as the premier method of personal transportation in post-war America. Many historic buildings were demolished so that parking lots could be constructed. These post-war years again featured South Broadway as a flourishing center for retail commerce and social life in South Denver. Industrial manufacturing flourished at the plants and factories of Gates, Schwayder, and others. South Broadway’s retail shops served as the chief shopping district for South Denver, and the theatres, restaurants, and attractions along the street provided a thriving forum for social life. It seemed as though The Miracle Mile was living up to its name.
However, the following decades would see South Broadway’s eminence on the southside wane as the area was not immune from trends impacting all of America.

In the 1950s and 1960s, as the American populace largely moved from urban to suburban realms, South Broadway became an area on the decline. As automobiles became accessible to individuals across class lines, the primacy of the streetcars became obsolete, and they were removed by the end of the 1950s. Sprawling suburban shopping malls replaced the role of the neighborhood shops; the Denver area saw numerous such suburban malls go up in this era. Illustrative of such was Cinderella City, opened in Englewood in 1968 and often referred to as “the largest mall west of the Mississippi” (Trembath 2017). The forces of suburbanization and the reformation of the American shopping paradigm would take their toll on urban shopping districts across America, including South Broadway. Penney’s left Broadway by the end of the 1960s, and Montgomery Ward was closed in the mid-1980s and the building demolished several years later. This exodus of major retailers from South Broadway was coupled with the simultaneous exodus of major industry from the area. Schwayder was completely gone from South Broadway by the end of the 1960s, moving most of their operations to the Montbello industrial park north of the old Stapleton Airport. Gates continued to grow as a corporate firm; however, their presence on Broadway would increasingly diminish before ceasing plant operations in 2001. In 2007, demolition began on the majority of the former Gates complex. The Ford assembly plant that had employed nearly one thousand workers during the war was shuttered and acquired by Gates in 1945, who used it as a print shop for their garden hose division before being renovated into corporate office space in the 1970s (Goodstein 2008). The old assembly plant still stands and has been repurposed as part of neighborhood redevelopments, unlike most other industrial structures from this era.
Not unlike other urban districts that experienced decay in a suburbanized post-industrial American landscape, South Broadway experienced decline beginning in the 1960s. However, as major retailers and industrial employers vacated the area, new individuals and industries moved onto South Broadway. Without question, the evolving paradigm of American society during this era proved to be a fundamental shift in the nature of South Broadway. From its inception, South Denver and South Broadway had been envisioned as an idyllic, morally-based locale; the antithesis to the sleaze and corruption of downtown. However, as American society experienced a confluence of deindustrialization and suburbanization with rapidly evolving mores and the social revolutions of the sixties, this conceptualization of South Broadway was shattered. The large supermarkets, department stores and symbolic facets of idealized post-war American society faded into memory. In their wake the realities of post-industrial urban life became apparent. It was in this shift that South Broadway started to come to resemble what it does today.

As the area declined, so did rents. Lured by cheap rents, hippies began to appear on South Broadway. Hippie boutiques, head shops vending drug paraphernalia and food cooperatives sprang up along Broadway and elsewhere in the area (Goodstein 2008). Bars catering to such a crowd found a willing clientele in the area. Folk music could routinely be heard in such establishments. Simultaneously, as homosexuals began to become more visible in the 1970s, South Broadway was a site of visible displays of gay culture. Numerous gay-oriented establishments such as bars, a gym, a coffeehouse and numerous others opened along South Broadway (Goodstein 2008). Many gays moved into the surrounding neighborhoods and often took a leading role in sprucing up old, historic houses. Although older, conservative residents of the surrounding area expressed dismay at the changing demographics of South Denver and South
Broadway, it was clear that neither was the same conservative, Prohibitionist, highly-religious site it had been decades earlier. South Broadway was getting funky.

During this time in American history, the federal government offered money to municipalities for urban renewal projects. Denver’s leaders took advantage of this subsidization to institute the Skyline Urban Renewal Project, which aimed to rid downtown Denver of its unseemly elements. After being chased from downtown, many found homes on South Broadway (Goodstein 1993). These included sleazy and rough bars, liquor stores, and sex-oriented businesses. Once again, this purge of vice-related businesses coincided with liberalizing mores about many vice-related topics. Illustratively, pornography became to be more accepted and accessible in American society. Playboy was first published in 1953; Penthouse in 1969; and Hustler in 1974 (Wosick 2015). During the “Golden Age of Porn” in the 1970s South Broadway was a flourishing site of the pornographic industry. Numerous porn theatres, sex shops, and “massage parlors” opened along the drag, at times in the same locations that had previously been occupied by hippie establishments; some employed hippie women as live dancers in glass booths in porn theatres (Goodstein 1993; Goodstein 2008). In a historical coincidence, it was just as the porn industry boomed in the 1970s that such establishments were removed from downtown by the Skyline Urban Renewal Project. Such a confluence of factors created the fertile soil for porn to boom on South Broadway.

Perhaps most symbolic of the evolution of South Broadway is the former Webber Theatre. Opened in 1917, it was a longtime exhibitioner of non-pornographic cinema and one of the jewels of The Miracle Mile. Set against the backdrop of South Broadway’s decline, in the mid-1970s the space was acquired by Kitty’s South, a chain of pornographic establishments. The building’s marquis was redone to resemble a cat’s tail, wagging in a sexually suggestive manner
At its height in the 1970s, Kitty’s was a frequently visited venue. However, with the proliferation of home video in the 1980s and the rise of the internet a decade later, the porn theatre gave way to more private viewing behaviors in consumption of pornography (Wosick 2015). Nonetheless, Kitty’s remained a veritable emporium of the sex industry until finally closing in 2007. While recognizing the ever-decreasing patronage of the establishment, media accounts describe what was available to Kitty’s customers well into the 21st century: blow-up dolls, dildos and other sex toys; an “arcade” for the viewing of pornography; an extensive library of porn-for-purchase, including copies of the 1970s-vintage Deep Throat (Calhoun, et al. 2005).

By the time of its closing, Kitty’s was in a dilapidated condition and had become an eyesore on the boulevard. The space sat vacant for a decade before in 2018 reopening (after the building was granted non-historic status to permit renovations) as a high-end distillery that intends to also include an art gallery and event space and will cater to the sophisticated tastes of small-batch gin and vodka connoisseurs (Jackson 2017).

Kitty’s was not alone as a proprietor of sex on South Broadway. After Kitty’s demise at 119 South Broadway, a Pleasures Adult Entertainment store opened next door at 127 South Broadway and continues to operate 24 hours a day into the present. During Kitty’s tenure as a porn theatre and sex emporium numerous other such businesses existed along South Broadway. Indicative of South Broadway’s position as a site of both vice and homosexuality is the story of The Ballpark, an elaborately designed gay bathhouse that featured extensive opportunities for homosexual social and sexual interactions. Located next door to Kitty’s at 107 South Broadway, the interior of the facility was lavish, although the exterior of health club’s building was often in a state of visible decay; its true nature was intentionally obscured from street view, and patrons were encouraged to enter through the rear (Goodstein 2008). Nonetheless, the club was derided
by local opponents as a seedy site that anchored other unseemly businesses nearby. As efforts to clean up Broadway became more and more prevalent throughout the 1980s, The Ballpark was shuttered. The building remained as an abandoned eyesore until its demolition in 1997 (Goodstein 2008).

As long as there has been business on South Broadway, there have been business associations on South Broadway. Over the years, the number of specific organizations active in promoting various versions of South Denver and South Broadway is extensive. Some have been short lived, while others have lasted. However, a few bear certain significance. The South Denver Civic Association can be traced to the 1920s, and was especially important in the promotion of South Broadway during the glistening Miracle Mile years, envisioning itself as something of South Denver’s chamber of commerce (Goodstein 2008). However, amidst the decline of the area by the 1970s, the SDCA’s functionality had largely evolved from sponsoring community events and promoting the variety of “legitimate” businesses on South Broadway. Instead, the SDCA now focused largely on “cleaning up” South Broadway by removing- or preventing the arrival of- undesirable businesses and the lowbrow clientele they attracted. In 1968, when as part of the Skyline Urban Renewal Project, Denver closed the pawn shop district on Larimer Street, the SDCA was crucial in preventing zoning modifications that would have allowed the pawn shops to relocate to South Broadway (Goodstein 2008). Naturally, the SDCA was a firm opponent of the porn theatres, sex shops, and gay bathhouses that came to populate South Broadway after the deterioration of the once shimmering Miracle Mile.

The SDCA was joined in their clean-up efforts by the Broadway Metropolitan Denver Local Development Corporation, a publicly-subsidized partnership of business and property owners. In cooperation with the Denver Urban Renewal Authority, the MDLDC set about...
removing undesirables from South Broadway. In one instance, the city acquired a block that had previously contained several low-rent residential hotels, a laundromat, and several houses that had since been converted into multiple low-income apartment residences. The block was razed, and in its place more appropriate structures were constructed, including a fancy Chinese restaurant, a Dairy Queen, and thirty-eight townhouses that—despite promises that the architecture would resemble historic Broadway—looked, in Phil Goodstein’s words “far more like they were part of a suburban condo village than something out of the history of Broadway Terrace” (Goodstein 2008, pp. 235).

One thing that most of these groups had in common was a stated desire to not only rid South Broadway of its unseemly elements (which included not only vice-oriented businesses, but also drunks, loiterers, drug dealers, and panhandlers), but to also revitalize the area as an upscale retail destination, a site that would rival Rodeo Drive or Fifth Avenue (Goodstein 2008). For these groups, not only were the vice oriented businesses and their clientele detracting from the area’s potential, but upscale establishments needed to be lured to South Broadway to fully realize that potential. Such was the case of the Denver Design Center. In the 1980s, the mayoral administration of Federico Pena envisioned Denver as a world-class city; but to fully realize that potential, work needed to be done. Private
groups seeking to revitalize South Broadway found support from the mayor’s office; one of these was developer Allan Reiver. The Montgomery Wards building had experienced multiple arsons in the previous years, and the Pena Administration heartily backed Reiver’s attempts to revitalize an area suffering from “boarded-up warehouses and weed-covered lots” (Savage 1986), utilizing the Wards building as his headquarters. Merchants Park Shopping Center, which had been a major retail destination during the Miracle Mile years and had featured stores catering to the mid-income residents of the surrounding areas, was renovated to include upscale retailers and elegantly designed landscaping and statues. The project was designed to exude luxury, and international boutique retailers such as Printemps and Laurent/Rive Gauche were courted to the new retail center, which Reiver hoped to cater to both wealthy urbanites and suburbanites due to the strategic location in South Denver near I-25 (Savage 1986). Although envisioned as an elite shopping destination featuring internationally-renowned retailers, The Denver Design Center was a boondoggle. Within a few years many of the elite retailers that had been lured to the area had closed their doors and Reiver was facing accusations of financial, ethical, and sexual improprieties (Goodstein 2008). In the wake of the Denver Design Center disaster, the Denver Urban Renewal Authority doubled down on their commitment to revitalize South Broadway. The result was the demolition of the historic Montgomery Wards building in 1993 and many of the surrounding edifices as well to make way for Broadway Marketplace, a major development that currently includes such retailers as Sam’s Club and T-Mobile.

Into the twenty-first century, South Broadway remained a shadow of its former Miracle Mile incarnation. South Broadway south of the Gates complex had always been something of a little sister to the stretch north of the site, and it was in this stretch just to the south of Gates that in the latter decades of the twentieth century a number of antique shops began to cluster.
Goodstein (2008) describes the part of Broadway which would house Antique Row as such: “Stores and residences intermingled along it. Car lots were seemingly omnipresent with a few remaining motels. A wide variety of drinking and dining establishments dotted the street. They have ranged from former hippie watering holes to biker gathering spots to family restaurants to drive-ins. Thrift stores, furniture showrooms, and auction houses complemented them” (pp. 200).

While some antique stores in the area can be traced back as far as the 1930s, no clustering of such shops began until the 1960s and became more prevalent in the 1970s, when the merchants consciously began to consider the place as “Antique Row” (Goodstein 2008). By the twenty-first century the antique merchants would have their own business association and be immediately recognizable with the street, but soon many would face pressure from the effects of gentrification and a declining market for antique shops.

In contemporary times South Broadway is at the crux of a changing Denver. As Denver’s population swells, South Broadway is an epicenter of gentrification. Already, the old Merchant’s Park has become the generic, corporate Broadway Market. Most of the industrial buildings have been torn down and replaced by upscale apartments and offices; the old Ford assembly plant still stands, but it has been repurposed (Goodstein 2008). In 2009, the Windsor at Broadway Station apartment complex was constructed a stone’s throw from the light rail station at the intersection of Broadway and Mississippi and another recently sold part of the property is intended for use as primarily residential units but will likely include a Sprouts Farmers Market (Garcia 2017). In 2017 a proposal was presented that would possibly determine the fate of the remaining undeveloped former Gates property just south of I-25 and west of South Broadway. The proposal would declare an 85-acre urban renewal area for the site, which would give DURA the power to
collect property taxes to pay for infrastructure improvements in the area (Garcia 2017). The site would ultimately be turned into multipurpose residential, office, and retail space.

South Broadway’s history has mirrored Denver’s for over a century, and the fates of South Broadway merchants have reflected pervasive trends in American society for the last several decades. Already awash in the effects of gentrification due to an influx of educated, middle class people to Denver combined with the cheap availability of rents in a geographically desirable area (rent-gap) in the aftermath of deindustrialization, South Broadway is now the destination for a large cluster of marijuana dispensaries, both medicinal and recreational. Indeed, at least seventeen dispensaries currently operate on the strip, and a visitor to the area walking southbound on Broadway would pass ten dispensaries in the four-block walk from Mexico Avenue to Evans Avenue alone. There is an unavoidable irony that a place that was once the main avenue for Prohibitionist South Denver is now “The Green Mile,” an epicenter of legalized vice and a pioneering site of the new marijuana industry. Yet at the same time, this is a different vice. Marijuana dispensaries are not the porno shacks of the 1970s, in as much as the clientele they attract is not the same. Due to the prices at which legal weed is sold for, the clientele of dispensaries is remarkably middle-class. Nothing about the customers of The Walking Raven (a contemporary dispensary) suggests the sleaze that would be associated with the old Kitty’s South. As they appeal to the educated, middle-class drivers of gentrification, the dispensaries themselves become multidimensional in the role they occupy in the new South Broadway landscape. Legal marijuana presents a new chapter for South Broadway, at a time when the area is already situated at the center of a changing Denver.
Contemporary South Broadway: From Antique Row to The Green Mile

It’s a mild late winter day in Denver in March 2017, with the first signs that springtime is poised to arrive in the Rocky Mountain West beginning to appear. The sun’s out, and shortly after lunchtime the temperature is just right to make the decision about donning a winter jacket impossible to make. It’s a weekday afternoon, and along South Broadway (or “SoBo” as it is often colloquially referred to) the sidewalks are relatively clear of pedestrian traffic. Every minute or so a hustle of vehicles whir by on the street, a product of the traffic regulation of the light cycles that control the more significant intersections along the north-south thoroughfare. From Antique Row looking north, Broadway goes under the I-25 overpass before splitting into Lincoln (northbound) and Broadway (southbound) for the approach into downtown Denver, the skyline of which is just barely visible from the street, roughly four miles away. Once Broadway reaches Ellsworth, it will become North Broadway (Ellsworth and Broadway are Denver’s “zero” streets) before continuing straight through downtown Denver’s diagonal grid. To the south, Broadway continues straight out of the City of Denver proper, serving as a major thoroughfare connecting Denver to the southern suburbs of Englewood, Littleton, and further south, to Douglas County and the incredibly affluent unincorporated
community of Highlands Ranch. As one travels south out of Denver and into the suburbs along Broadway, the used car lots that inhabit SoBo become new car lots; the dive bars and liquor stores give way to businesses that cater to the middle-class tastes of well-to-do suburbanites; locally owned small businesses give way to national chains; the antique shops dissipate; the dispensaries and the countercultural reflections present in the surrounding area wane. Two lanes of traffic flow each direction along Broadway, with a median separating the two flows along the majority of the street. The South Broadway Streetscape Local Maintenance District, created in 2011 and one of twenty-seven local maintenance districts in Denver, has ensured the maintenance and continuing care of a variety of streetscaping spectacles along the thoroughfare, including the medians and sidewalks. Trees, decorative pedestrian lights, benches and public art projects, some described as resembling “space portals” (Peterson, “A New Era Dawn on The Green Mile”), pepper the sidewalks and contribute to an atmosphere that many locals call “Bohemian,” “funky,” or “eclectic.” Although vacant storefronts continue to exist, they are outnumbered by a wide array of businesses of various sorts, from small coffee and tea spots to vinyl record dealers and tattoo parlors. As it’s a weekday afternoon and the pace of business appears to be slow, free parking is readily available on both sides of the street, or along the side streets that crisscross South Broadway, although come the weekend parking will be at more of a premium.
Perhaps the most prominent current inhabitants on South Broadway are the multitude of antique dealers and, since the legalization of marijuana in Colorado, the recently spawned ensemble of marijuana dispensaries. In addition to the operation of the dispensaries themselves, the surrounding area has started to significantly reflect their presence in the community. A visitor need not search long to find murals or graffiti depictions of the ever-emblematic marijuana leaf or countercultural icons such as Bob Marley; hippie boutiques selling merchandise emblazoned with the image of the marijuana leaf are readily accessible; secondary businesses such as glass and pipe shops or hookah bars are easily found. Visually, South Broadway immediately presents itself to the observer as an epicenter of countercultural lifestyles and practices. It is not merely a place to purchase legal marijuana; SoBo has entered into an era of its history where it is presented (and by many, interpreted) as a celebratory site of marijuana culture. While the dispensaries represent the economic vehicle for creating this change, perhaps the most significant changes to South Broadway in the wake of marijuana legalization should not be measured by the amount of marijuana sold by the dispensaries, but rather by the artistic and cultural reflections presented on the walls of SoBo’s

aged buildings: even if the dispensaries evaporated into thin air, their impact on South Broadway would remain in the reflections of their presence expressed in the community.

To best comprehend the geographic nature of South Broadway as it pertains to Antique Row and The Green Mile, perhaps it is prudent to conceptualize the current incarnation of SoBo as one that has been divided into two halves, separated by I-25 and the deluge of development centered around I-25 and Broadway. Several blocks north of the interstate (approximately between south of Ellsworth and north of Alameda), South Broadway is home to an array of bars, restaurants, and an assortment of other businesses. While this section of Broadway is a site of night life and a flourishing music scene, it does not have the same reputation as a unique shopping destination that Broadway south of the interstate does. While bars and restaurants are certainly present south of the interstate (albeit in a reduced number than north of I-25), the section of Broadway south of Arizona and north of Evans is better known for the prevalence of antique shops, rare book sellers and import dealers that have for years contributed to the area being known as Antique Row, and in recent years the prevalence of dispensaries that have led to the moniker The Green Mile. While as of March 2017 at least one dispensary operates on Broadway north of the interstate and south of Ellsworth, the vast majority of SoBo dispensaries operate south of the interstate. Thus, while many South Broadway locals interviewed conceptualize SoBo as comprising both the stretches north and south of the interstate, it is the southern sector south of I-25 in which Antique Row lies and the surge of dispensaries has opened.

Geographically central to the north-south schism of South Broadway is the epicenter of redevelopment present in the blocks surrounding I-25 (approximately south of Alameda and north of Arizona), the former site of Gates Rubber. Unlike the northern and southern realms of
SoBo which continue to be overwhelmingly populated by local businesses, the blocks of SoBo extending north from the interstate to Alameda and south to Arizona are instead populated largely by the products of redevelopment and gentrification. In the blocks of South Broadway directly north of the interstate, several large shopping centers have been constructed on the west side of Broadway containing national chains such as Safeway, Sam’s Club, and Starbucks. In the blocks directly south of the interstate, South Broadway is a mix of recently constructed upscale apartments and condos, and, as of 2017, an array of construction equipment primed to develop more upscale residences. For-sale condos in the area are expected to fetch between $300,000 and $550,000 (Peterson, “A New Era Dawns on the Green Mile”). The west side of South Broadway directly south of the interstate is essentially a construction site awaiting further development, a result of the demolition of the Gates factory in 2014 and plans for redevelopment of the former industrial site. Indeed, in the immediate vicinity of the interstate, the eclectic charms of SoBo seemingly dissipate and become replaced by the expensive, shiny new products of gentrification.

All along South Broadway, rents are skyrocketing. In the series of interviews I conducted, rising rents were a common experience to all merchants who leased their space, and many feared that their rents would continue to increase. One merchant I spoke to described how that some years ago (he could not specify exactly how many), he rented his space for $6-7 per square foot, per month but that nowadays his monthly rent exceeds $30 per square foot per month, resulting him having to spend nearly $5000 monthly on rent to operate his store. Other merchants described similar cases, or told stories of former neighbors forced to relocate. Emblematic of the current fears of many South Broadway retail merchants is the recent case of IndyInk, an artistic screen printing shop that opened at 84 South Broadway roughly fifteen years ago. Described by Westword writer Susan Froyd as “pioneers on a changing retail strip that’s
since blossomed up around them with bars, eateries and independent shops for a hip demographic” (Froyd 2018), the entrepreneurs who started IndyInk recently left South Broadway for a more affordable location. Noting that few of the businesses that were there fifteen years ago remain on a changing South Broadway, the owners describe rents that have more than tripled. They fear that their space will become yet another of the seemingly countless bars now populating South Broadway, the same fate that met the space next door to theirs, which recently became a bar after the pizza restaurant occupying the space closed after 43 years (Froyd 2018). Although numerous vacant storefronts continue to exist on South Broadway, especially south of the interstate, the influx of new money to the area is apparent. In 2007, the 419-unit Windsor at Broadway Station apartment complex opened on the former Gates site, and more than 20 consumer-facing businesses opened between I-25 and Yale (the southern boundary of Denver) in 2013 (Peterson, “Gates Demolition Underway”). Such establishments include multiple breweries, restaurants, skate shops, and a variety of other businesses. Construction has been a
major hassle for many existing merchants on the drag as South Broadway has undergone extensive construction, streetscaping and renovation projects in recent years, including a $28 million renovation project that wrapped up in 2013 (Peterson, “A New Era Dawns on The Green Mile”), as well as additional renovations that took place after the conclusion of that project. During this period, sidewalks in front of one local merchant’s store were placed under construction, making parking and access to her store nearly impossible. Although that wave of construction has passed, she fears that more construction is soon to come as the city attempts to further renovate the area.

While South Broadway had been gentrifying independently of marijuana due to Colorado’s economic situation and Denver’s ballooning population, the legalization of marijuana and the clustering of dispensaries in the district has fueled this redevelopment and caused the gentrification of South Broadway to take on a decidedly different manifestation from that in other areas. To be certain, neither gentrification nor marijuana dispensaries in Denver are unique to South Broadway. Gentrification has been pervasive in Denver in recent years, and dispensaries exists throughout the city. However, what makes South Broadway unique is the extensive clustering of dispensaries along South Broadway, to the extent that it has become known as The Green Mile or Broadsterdam. This
is not dissimilar to the spatial distribution of prostitution in European cities such as Amsterdam or Frankfurt, where prostitution is clustered in red light districts, but brothels or sauna clubs may exist elsewhere in cities. In Denver, legal marijuana exists throughout the city, but is extensively clustered on South Broadway to the extent that South Broadway comes to be identified with the vice. In Amsterdam, prostitution exists in various forms throughout the city. However, the extensive clustering of window-rooms in The Wallen has functioned to establish The Wallen as an immediately visible- and marketable- site of vice. Importantly, in both cases the spatial construction of vice districts has not been accompanied by the deterioration of the area as is often associated with vice. Indeed, South Broadway’s marijuana district a site of safe, gentrified vice. Instead of being targeted by BIDs for extermination, in this form the vice of marijuana gets commodified- it gets reviewed in hip, alternative publications like Westword, it draws tourists, and importantly, it makes money and generates taxes.

Dopedirectory.com, a website that features reviews of cannabis outlets in Colorado includes the following review of The Green Mile:

“The legalization of recreational marijuana has created quite the stir here in Colorado. No place has witnessed this noticeable “stir” more than on Broadway Boulevard’s (sic), aptly named, Green Mile. Denver’s Green Mile is the stretch of Broadway running South of I-25 down to Yale Avenue, where Denver ends and turns into Englewood. This area, also known to some as Broadsterdam, is peppered with medical and recreational dispensaries on every corner, and if you’re looking to experience the full array of Colorado’s dispensary experiences, then this area should be your starting point. Every desire any cannabis user has will be met along this stretch. With dozens of dispensaries
to choose from, whether you want buds, topicals, edibles, or concentrates, you’ll find it on Broadway’s Green Mile.”

-jesse grove, Dopedirectory.com

As the above review demonstrates, South Broadway’s Green Mile has come to occupy a paramount location in Denver’s legal-weed landscape. So much so, in fact, that marijuana-industry actors have attempted to formally organize the district through the Green Mile on Broadway Trade Association. A would-be collective comprised of local dispensaries, the group has yet to formally organize (no website or business listing exists for the group as of 2018) but organizers envision South Broadway as a marijuana-themed business district (Peterson, “A New Era Dawns on The Green Mile”). Efforts to rebrand the area as The Green Mile have led to
backlash from some preexisting merchants on the stretch, primarily those affiliated with the Antique Row Merchant’s Association (Raabe 2014; Roberts 2014).

Antique dealers on South Broadway have been struggling for some time, for a variety of reasons. Although some own the space they occupy on South Broadway, many lease their space and have been subject to the drastically increasing rents in the area. Additionally, the antique industry has been struggling mightily in recent years (“Out With the Old”). Industry troubles mixed with rising rents in an increasingly gentrified district have functioned to push numerous antique dealers out. Some have left South Broadway for other locations, but many have simply closed. Other longtime antique merchants are simply aging out and not being replaced by younger counterparts.

“I’m your answer,” one longtime South Broadway merchant tells me one afternoon in his store in March 2017. “How many young people do you see in these (antique) shops?” This merchant is a former antique dealer, who roughly a decade ago abandoned the antique business and now operates an unrelated store on the stretch. The owner of the space he operates (as well as another retail edifice on the road and several houses in the surrounding area), the recent wave of gentrification in the area has been beneficial for him. Now, he tells me, he can rent these spaces for significantly greater sums than previously. Additionally, the value of the space he occupies has
increased ten-fold since he first purchased it, compounding his gains. Although he has no formal relationship with the Antique Row Merchants Association, he still takes no pleasure in seeing longtime friends and neighbors displaced. “The issue isn’t the opening of dispensaries, it’s the closing of the antique stores,” he tells me in reference to the problems associated with the gentrification of the area. The dispensaries have proven beneficial, he tells me. With increased persons in the area, he can rent his other spaces for higher prices and increase his incomes. “Anything that brings people is good,” he says. He quickly points out that, unlike many other older members of the South Broadway community, he welcomed the tattoo parlor that recently opened nearby. (Indeed, one other older antique merchant I interviewed rhetorically asked me, “And what comes after marijuana?” before gesturing to the location of the tattoo parlor.) Pointing out that neither a tattoo nor marijuana can be purchased on Amazon, and as such necessitate a physical presence that brings people to the area, he welcomes the dispensaries.

Interestingly, even many of those vehemently opposed to rebranding the area as The Green Mile are not necessarily opposed to the dispensaries themselves. “I’m very proud of Colorado for being so progressive,” says Henrietta, an Antique Row member who has been vocally opposed to the attempted rebranding of Antique Row to The Green Mile, in reference to Colorado’s legalization of recreational marijuana. Despite Henrietta’s approval of legalized marijuana in
Colorado, she has been adamantly opposed to the development of The Green Mile. “It’s disrespectful,” she says, describing the process of marijuana industry actors attempting to rebrand the district, “We had no voice in the process.” Of particular concern for Henrietta was the suggestion that non-marijuana businesses, such as SoBo’s antique merchants, financially contribute to the rebranding efforts, the logic being that all would benefit from a rejuvenated district. “They want to make it a Disneyworld for potheads,” she told me one afternoon in her store on South Broadway. “It was pitched to us as ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’, but that’s not the case. [Marijuana consumers] don’t stay to go antique shopping. We’ve got no benefit from it.” Furthermore, she has felt excluded from the process. The actors working to rebrand the district as The Green Mile have, in Henrietta’s opinion, demonstrated “no respect for local culture, arts, or heritage. There was no consultation with us before rebranding the neighborhood.”

For antique merchants such as Henrietta, The Green Mile has caused some concern. However, their fears largely mimic those associated with gentrification as opposed to marijuana. The displaced merchants have been pushed out by skyrocketing rents caused by a confluence of factors far greater than simply marijuana dispensaries, and Henrietta’s criticism of a lack of respect for local culture mimics the criticisms of gentrification opponents everywhere. Zukin suggests that gentrification replaces local heritage (such as Union Square) with a generic sameness. However, for South Broadway’s antique merchants, they are not fearing displacement by gentrification manifest through IKEA or Disney or Walmart, but rather in the form of a new, legalized vice- marijuana. South Broadway antique merchants are not being replaced by generic sameness, but rather by something entirely new and different.

In this case, the typical displacement-replacement gentrification storyline is played out somewhat differently. Whereas in Zukin’s New York, low-income vice merchants (such as adult
theatres and peep shows) were replaced by high-income corporate mega-firms, in the South Broadway paradigm low-income mom-and-pop antique shops are being replaced by high-dollar vice emporiums. The introduction of the vice of marijuana on South Broadway has been met with surprisingly little resistance. Although many antique merchants have been adamantly opposed to rebranding the area, this resistance is framed primarily as practical opposition to change and not ideological opposition to marijuana. Indeed, it is completely foreseeable that merchants such as Henrietta would display equal opposition to attempts to rebrand the Antique Row area as anything else. Her resistance is not necessarily resistance to marijuana, but rather resistance to the replacement of Antique Row- it just so happens that legal marijuana has functioned to occupy that role. In my series of interviews one of the central themes to emerge was that preexisting merchants preferred to view the dispensaries simply as “new neighbors.” As one merchant told me, “a good neighbor’s a good neighbor, and a bad neighbor’s a bad
neighbor” regardless of industry. Thus, although many antique merchants are displeased with rebranding attempts, they are ambivalent or even supportive of legal marijuana and the dispensaries themselves. Perhaps this is indicative of a generally permissive attitude towards marijuana use in Denver, comparable to Amsterdam’s generally permissive attitude towards prostitution (Weitzer 2012).

However, South Broadway merchants represent a group as differentiated and eclectic as the smorgasbord of shops they operate. One such outlier I interviewed was Maxwell. When I first walked into Maxwell’s store and inquired to him about his opinions about what was going on on his street, he snappily told me he had nothing to say, then went on to rail against marijuana, drugs, and a multitude of other social issues. After complaining about the smell of marijuana, not just on South Broadway but all over Denver, he went on to disparage drug users, noting that “dope addicts” were now “laying in the street” outside his store on a regular basis. He also complained of increases in vagrancy on South Broadway in the post-legalization era, and imparted to me his strong desire that “[marijuana dispensaries] would just go away.” As our conversation wound to a close, Maxwell let loose with his coup de grace against the marijuana industry, blaming marijuana legalization on “the homosexuals that want to strike back at the common man.”

It should also be noted that many of Maxwell’s assertions were not corroborated with similar experiences by other merchants, nor by any empirical observations I conducted in my time on South Broadway. Although I observed numerous vagrants on South Broadway, the area has been notorious for vagrants and drunks since the ’70s porno boom. Furthermore, with the exception of one instance of what appeared to be a drunk (slurred words, smelling of alcohol), I did not observe any seemingly drug-addled persons “laying in the street.” Nonetheless,
Maxwell’s statements raised several significant points. First, as noted by Weitzer in relation to prostitution, legalization does not necessarily indicate universal acceptance. Although the criminality of marijuana has been removed in Colorado (for the sake of state law, that is—federal law is yet to legalize marijuana), certain people remain adamantly opposed to marijuana in any form. Secondly, Maxwell’s complaint about the smell of marijuana (which was also noted by several other merchants, to with varying responses from ambivalent to annoyed) speaks to a potential consequence of the introduction of an extensive marijuana presence to a district. For South Broadway to develop into The Green Mile, it has taken, in a very literal sense, a lot of marijuana. This wealth of marijuana produces a smell that has been noticed by many persons in the district, and would be a likely side effect in any other district where marijuana becomes pervasive. In my empirical observations on South Broadway I did indeed smell marijuana on the street several times. However, this was a far from pervasive experience. Furthermore, I did not smell marijuana while inside any shop that did not sell marijuana. Although the substance could be smelled—on relatively rare occasion—from the street, this was the exception as opposed to the rule during my time on South Broadway.

Although marijuana dispensaries are still outnumbered by antique shops on South Broadway, dispensaries have come to occupy the most visible position in the cultural space of SoBo. Despite the resistance of some antique merchants, South Broadway is becoming increasingly recognized as a site of marijuana, from Bob Marley murals on SoBo’s buildings to dispensary reviews in publications such as Westword. “It’s exciting,” says Dante, a twenty-something employed in a local CD shop. “It’s definitely different,” he continues. “People know the area now.” Like many South Broadway workers, Dante does not live in the area, and commutes from one of Denver’s southern suburbs to work on a daily basis. He tells me that he
and his contemporaries knew little of “Antique Row” growing up but that “The Green Mile” is recognized within his social circle. Additionally, he seems to think the dispensaries are reinvigorating the district. “The best thing for the area is more foot traffic,” he says, recognizing the customers brought to the area by legal marijuana. “Music and pot go hand in hand,” he says, speaking to the potential for overflow business from the dispensaries to increase business in the CD shop. However, he notes that “Mostly we get people coming in late in the day looking for something specific or we get people during the day browsing. But I can’t really say we get customers from the dispensaries. But there are no negatives.”

Dante’s experience with the dispensaries of The Green Mile is similar to the experiences of many area merchants I interviewed. While merchants largely had few problems with the dispensaries (often preferring to simply view them as new neighbors), the majority of merchants I interviewed also reported few tangible benefits to their day-to-day lives and business operations. A common theme in the course of my interviews was that non-marijuana merchants received little spillover business from the presence of dispensaries in the area. While dispensaries may bring droves of people to the area, it appears that these people typically solicit the dispensaries and then leave the area without visiting any of the other businesses in the district. “I’m on an island over here,” says Rick, the proprietor of a fashionable clothes store along the drag. “People think ‘Green Mile’ and they think that’s all it is,” he says with a hint of annoyance. “But the dispensaries are outnumbered by other stores. Like mine.”

Rick, a middle aged white man dressed in jean shorts and a metal band t-shirt, opened his store in a space that had been occupied by a popular drug store during South Broadway’s post-War heyday. Opening his door shortly before recreational marijuana legalization, Rick has seen a number of dispensaries pop up along South Broadway since 2014. While telling me that he
supported marijuana legalization in the state, he dislikes some of the side effects the dispensaries have brought to the area. Although he says his store has received little additional business thanks to the dispensaries, he has seen his rent increase drastically in the last two years. The biggest problems about South Broadway are traffic and parking, he tells me, noting that each has been exacerbated by the increased flow of people into the district to visit dispensaries.

After speaking with Rick in his store for several minutes, he steps outside to smoke a cigarette and I follow him outside onto the sidewalk. He complains about the traffic some more, and it is indeed quite noisy on the sidewalk in front of his store. After pausing, he motions up the street to where a dispensary operates a little over a block away. “If you want to see the kind of people who go to those places, just watch for a while. BMW, Mercedes, Lexus. It’s rich old white people. They pull up in their fancy cars, they buy their weed, they’re out in ten minutes.”

After a few more minutes speaking with Rick, I take his advice and park myself on one of the recently streetscaped benches that line the sides of South Broadway. While Rick may have overemphasized the apparent luxury of marijuana customers, he is not fundamentally incorrect. By and large the people I observed soliciting the dispensaries, on that afternoon on that bench as well as throughout my time on South Broadway, where overwhelmingly white and seemingly middle class. Indeed, on the occasions on which I visited a dispensary the clientele- and employees- appeared to be largely white and middle aged as well (although employees tended to appear younger). This trend was also noticed by other interviewees, one of whom described most of her fellow marijuana customers- and herself- as “aging hippies.”

South Broadway is largely a white area. The merchants operating antique shops along the stretch are nearly exclusively white. Additionally, non-antique shops (including dispensaries) are a predominantly white domain. The surrounding residential areas reflect this white majority to
the east, while to the west the population is largely Hispanic, including residents of blue-collar
industrial areas along Santa Fe Drive. To the east of South Broadway the Platt Park and Washington Park neighborhoods are both over 90% white (United States Census Bureau). To the west, the Overland and Baker neighborhoods take on a more Hispanic hue. The 80223 zip code (which is differentiated from 80210 and 80209 by South Broadway and includes the aforementioned industrial areas along Santa Fe Drive) to the west of Broadway is 53% Hispanic. However, the entire surrounding area is becoming increasingly populated by white people. While the aggregate population of zip codes 80209, 80210, and 80223 has increased in the area by nearly 10,000 since 2000, it has also gone from 82.9% to 86.3% white. To the west of South Broadway, the Hispanic population has dipped from a 60% majority in 2000 to the current 53%.

The following table displays the aggregate racial makeup of the 80209, 80210, and 80223 zip codes since 2000 (United States Census Bureau):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pop.</th>
<th>%White</th>
<th>%Black</th>
<th>%Hisp.</th>
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</thead>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>71393</td>
<td>82.9</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>73459</td>
<td>84.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>80907</td>
<td>86.3</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
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As it shows, the area has become ever-more white since the turn of the century. This is not necessarily unexpected, as gentrification is often associated with the return of white middle-class residents to urban areas. Of interest is the severe divide in racial composition to the east and west of South Broadway. While the areas to the east are overwhelmingly white, the area to the west is predominantly Hispanic. However, it should be noted that to the east of South Broadway Denver’s landscape is chiefly residential and commercial, including the affluent Cherry Creek area and the respected University of Denver. To the west of Baker and Overland, railroad tracks
and industrial areas intermingle with low-end commercial properties along Santa Fe Drive. Yet even this largely Hispanic area has become increasingly white as the area has become more and more gentrified. While the population of the area has become increasingly white, the introduction of marijuana dispensaries along South Broadway has further brought white people into the area. As noted in Seattle and Oakland, legal marijuana is dominated by white men. This holds true on South Broadway’s Green Mile, where the vast majority of dispensary employees I observed were white men. Although I observed some white women working in dispensaries, they were largely outnumbered by male counterparts.

The legal marijuana dispensaries I visited were hyper-regulated. A typical visit to a dispensary would involve entering a small waiting room reminiscent of a dentist’s office, at times feeling cold and medical, and having ID checked before being permitted into the restricted area where the marijuana is kept. At one dispensary I had to wait several minutes before being permitted into the sales area, as customers were not permitted in the back until a personal “budtender” became available to guide them through their experience. Once into the sales area, the dispensaries I visited offered a breadth of products from edibles and oils to traditional marijuana buds for smoking. This extensive array of products would require even the most experienced of marijuana customers to seek advisement from a professional; here the budtenders...
have their chance to shine. With the wisdom and expertise that a sommelier uses to select the perfect wine, these cannabis experts possess an extensive knowledge of all-things-marijuana. Whatever type of experience the dispensary customer is looking for, the budtenders possess the knowledge to select the appropriate strains of marijuana to do the job. A customer seeking a strain that will put them to sleep can have the budtender pair them with the perfect match; alternatively, a customer looking for a strain to enjoy some music to can be matched with the perfect cannabis to do the trick. The variety of edibles, oils, and other products is also subject to the budtenders’ expertise. On one visit to a dispensary, I observed a budtender recommend chocolate edibles for a female customer who did not want to inhale smoke. The budtender went on to recommend what foods to eat/not eat whilst “high” so that the customer could maximize her marijuana experience.

By and large, the legal marijuana dispensaries on South Broadway deal in grades and quantities of marijuana that may be prohibitive to those from financially restricted backgrounds. The colloquial “nickelbag” (a $5 amount of typically low grade marijuana) is not for sale at SoBo’s dispensaries. Rather, the types of marijuana sold in dispensaries are grown by licensed producers and in accordance with extensive regulatory oversight (all marijuana legally grown in the state is tracked from “seed to sale”). As such, the potency and chemical makeup of the various strains sold in the dispensaries are known quantities prior to purchase. Without exception, marijuana consumers I spoke to described the types and grades of marijuana sold in the dispensaries as “good” or “high-level” marijuana (as well as several other colloquial terms such as “dank” or “fire”). As such, the pricing of the marijuana sold in dispensaries reflects this, and in turn may be prohibitive to consumers from socioeconomically challenged backgrounds. The pervasiveness of regulatory oversight extends to the very end of the marijuana transaction,
as upon leaving the dispensary the purchased marijuana is typically contained in a pill bottle with a medicinal label attached to it, indistinguishable but upon the most scrutinious examination from what one may receive their prescription antibiotics in from the pharmacy. The label contains the name of the strain (such as “Hong Kong Diesel” or “Wuppa”) as well as additional information about the strain including chemical data. Expectedly, the containers are child-proofed.

The dispensaries are not alone as conveyors of marijuana-culture to South Broadway. Along the street numerous other marijuana-themed establishments operate, including glass and pipe shops and hookah bars. Such establishments do not sell actual marijuana, but may sell marijuana accessories such as pipes, bongs, or rolling papers. They frequently also sell other tokens of marijuana culture, such as t-shirts, posters, or tapestries displaying marijuana imagery. Tie-dyed merchandise is commonplace. It is also common for such establishments to display posters for upcoming concerts by local bands in their windows (as Dante said, “music and pot go hand in hand”). In other stores marijuana merchandise is equally available. Numerous clothiers display merchandise emblazoned with marijuana leaves, Rastafarian color schemes, or peace signs. Far beyond simply marijuana, South Broadway has become a site of consumable alternative culture.

For marijuana to occupy such a spatial position, its normalization was critical. Ideologically repositioned as legal and safely accessible, marijuana is also commodified and marketed for mass consumption, largely by the same middle class citizenry associated with gentrification. The marijuana-themed experience of South Broadway, reflected not just by dispensaries but also by the presence of themed merchandise in other shops, is an entirely consumable experience. The transformation of South Broadway into a marijuana-themed destination has the potential to speak to the possibility of similar districts developing in other
marijuana-legal jurisdictions. Vice-themed districts have developed around other vices such as gambling or prostitution. Legal marijuana presents the opportunity for similar developments. However, vice districts have to be the “right” vice to function cooperatively with gentrification as South Broadway’s dispensaries have done. The peep shows of old Times Square and the

A store selling smoking accessories on South Broadway. March 2017.

porno theatres of old South Broadway were not conducive to urban renewal, and had to be removed for renewal to take place. Legal marijuana’s potential for urban development lies in its ideological normalization and it commodification. Legal marijuana is a big money-maker and attracts a clientele composed largely of White, middle class consumers- the same people associated with gentrification. Thus, as gentrification consumes more and more urban spaces, marijuana dispensaries may appear common in such places, providing a forum for consumption for gentrifiers. The commodification of marijuana fits nicely into an economic paradigm defined by consumption, and forms the foundation of legal marijuana’s appeal in gentrified districts.
The Normalization of Marijuana: South Broadway

Marijuana on South Broadway is marketable largely because it has been normalized; it has been made “safe” for middle class consumption. As Hebdige notes, the mainstream incorporation of previously deviant behaviors involves contours of both ideology and commodification. The legalization of recreational marijuana has served to ideologically relocate marijuana, to relabel it within mainstream parameters. Removed from the underground, marijuana has been redefined as something safe and accessible to middle class consumers. This ideological relocation of marijuana from outside to within the bounds of legality has numerous functional implications that may prove practically impactful to marijuana consumers. Indeed, instead of purchasing marijuana from a criminal drug dealer, customers now purchase marijuana from regulated establishments. Instead of transactions being conducted outside of public view, marijuana deals are now conducted in the safe environment of South Broadway’s dispensaries. In fact, nearly the entire dispensary experience exudes the security that comes with regulation. Even the marijuana itself comes in a pill bottle, labeled and secured to instill confidence in the buyer that they know what they are getting.

Hebdige’s second aspect to normalization addresses commodification. South Broadway’s Green Mile represents a spatial manifestation of the commodification of marijuana. Now legal, marijuana is safely available for purchase in an almost medically-clean environment. Yet not only is marijuana itself for sale; rather, the entire marijuana experience is marketable. Customers can delight in a wide array of marijuana strains or marijuana-infused products, can adorn themselves in themed attire, or can check out groovy bongs in a nearby glass shop. Nearly any
item imaginable is available with some sort of marijuana theme. A recent edition of Westword underscores the commodification of marijuana. Advertisements for dispensaries populate saturate the publication, advertising everything from “$99 ounces” to “Wax Specials.” One place is having a “$5 Joint Blowout.” Indeed, in 2009 Westword employed the country’s first medical marijuana critic (Brethes 2012).

The entire culture surrounding marijuana is now a buyable, consumable experience; it can be purchased with regularity, or perhaps just for the occasional weekend release. Middle-


class consumers can experiment with something new, or perhaps even get a little adventurous; for the right price, they can experiment with a deviant behavior. But importantly, they can do so safely. They risk no legal repercussions in doing so. All it takes is the money and a trip to the marijuana store. Through commodification and regulation, marijuana becomes less of an exotic unknown, and more an understood product. In addition to the obvious legal implications, the
marijuana itself is presented as safer. The labelling on the pill bottle containers is reminiscent of medicine, suggesting safety. Indeed, the labelling’s descriptions of the contents furthermore suggests complete regulatory control, complete safety. Furthermore, if something horrible were to happen, the legality of marijuana allows customers to seek recourse or medical attention in the event of an incident. The illegality of marijuana no longer disincentivizes participation in legitimate social institutions such as courts or hospitals.

The relative ambivalence of many of the merchants I interviewed in regards to the dispensaries speaks to the normalization of marijuana in Denver. Although Maxwell provided his criticisms, he represents a minority in the South Broadway community. The vast majority of merchants I interviewed preferred to judge the dispensaries on their merits as neighbors, with little regard for their industry. Indeed, negative reactions to The Green Mile from antique merchants likely are more reflective of the fact that rebranding someone’s neighborhood without their approval is not very “neighborly” than they are of negative attitudes towards marijuana or dispensaries, especially given the support for legalized marijuana expressed by many of the merchants who opposed rebranding attempts. While marijuana dispensaries represent something new for South Broadway, their presence was not so alarming for existing merchants that it prevented them from seeing dispensaries objectively as neighbors. As one longtime merchant told me, “a good neighbor’s a good neighbor and a bad neighbor’s a bad neighbor” regardless of industry. Marijuana has become normalized to an extent on South Broadway that marijuana dispensaries represent little more than a new neighbor to existing merchants.
Signs and Symbols

The production of consumable experiences has replaced the production of tangible goods as a driver of the American economy. Mark Gottdiener suggests that this move towards a consumption-based economy will result in consumable thematic experiences becoming increasingly prevalent in the American cultural marketplace. It is hard to envision a better example of the move from a production to a consumption based economy than South Broadway. Whereas South Broadway was once a neighborhood street in the shadow of a major industrial district, often serving the everyday shopping needs of the surrounding community (many of whom had ties to Gates), it has since evolved into a site of consumption. Whereas SoBo once functioned largely as a site of washeterias, groceries, and the other sorts of shops vital to a neighborhood community, the area is now a site of consumption developed along the thematic contours of marijuana, catering largely to people who do not reside in the immediate vicinity. The Green Mile is a site of themed consumption. Symbols and signs throughout the district (such as marijuana leaf imagery or murals) immediately identify The Green Mile as such a space.

Gottdiener also notes that consumption can become social production: people “often seek self-actualization and pursue certain distinct lifestyles through the medium of appearance. People in our society spend a great deal of money on clothing—much more than they could possibly need for purely protective purposes. They use these materials symbolically in many ways… They often seek identification with particular groups by dressing like them” (2005). He concludes that “production and consumption…. are so interrelated in the daily behavior of dressing.” If we are to substitute marijuana for fashion, marijuana functions comparably to construct “certain distinct lifestyles” and “identification with particular groups.” Countercultural and alternative lifestyles have been associated with the use of marijuana since no later than the 1960s. Thus, it follows
Gottdiener’s logic to say that consumption of marijuana in turn produces “self-actualization” or “identification with particular groups” for individuals who want to build identities tied to alternative, countercultural lifestyles in a post-industrial age. For a more explicit example, consider the multitude of marijuana-themed merchandise available for purchase on South Broadway. South Broadway and The Green Mile exists both as a site of consumption and also a site of production of alternativeness and countercultural lifestyles.

The use of signs and symbols is crucial in constructing thematic environments such as The Green Mile. Consider the marijuana leaf. Much as a rainbow flag may immediately identify The Castro as a site of gay community or Vegas Vic may symbolize the glamour of Las Vegas, the image of the marijuana lead if synonymous with counterculture and alternativeness. As utilized by dispensaries on South Broadway, its denotative meaning is explicit: buy marijuana here. However, the symbol can be interpreted is in a multitude of connotative ways by various persons with different perspectives, experiences, and varying contextual understandings. Indeed, for marijuana customers the marijuana leaf means something drastically different than it does for Maxwell. For customers, it holds a positive connotation: cool, open-minded vibes and good times. For Maxwell, it connotes dirty, undesirable individuals, deviance and crime. Gottdiener (2005) utilizes the bank as an example. The bank denotes banking, deposit money at this location. It also connotes a variety of other socially ascribed associations: “wealth, power, success, future prospects,” etc. Equally, the dispensaries of South Broadway convey varying socially constructed connotations, perhaps including changing times, progressivism, evolving norms, folkways and mores, deviance, money, vice, and a near limitless number of other potential meanings depending on the one’s perspective and the social context.
Marijuana and Gentrification

The relationship between marijuana legalization and gentrification is beginning to appear. As was the case in Seattle, legal marijuana dispensaries were a driver of gentrification in one of the city’s rougher neighborhoods, and dispensaries in Oakland have been associated with the redevelopment of downtown. On South Broadway marijuana dispensaries are furthermore a feature of gentrification. As South Broadway is redeveloped into a hip, gentrified district, longtime merchants like antique dealers are being pushed out and replaced by high-dollar marijuana dispensaries. Middle class customers who can afford legal marijuana’s prices flock to the district to purchase marijuana. Many of these customers may never have come to South Broadway for the antique shops or the dining—but marijuana lured them to SoBo.

The redevelopment of South Broadway is multidimensional. North of the interstate is already heavily gentrified. Hipster bars and trendy coffeehouses are prevalent. Restaurants catering to fashionable “foodies” are likewise present. In the immediate vicinity of the interstate and the RTD light rail station exists perhaps the most garish monument to redevelopment. Just north of the interstate Broadway Marketplace exists where the Montgomery Wards building used to stand; just south of the interstate high-rise condos (some fetching close to a half-million dollars) and office space has replaced the Gates factory. Now, south of the interstate is beginning to rapidly gentrify, largely driven by legalized marijuana and the development of a themed marijuana-district: The Green Mile. Dispensaries have moved in and redefined the area as a destination for marijuana and marijuana culture. Legal marijuana has attracted people to the area, but perhaps more importantly, it has brought large sums of money to the area.

To be sure, legal marijuana’s relationship with gentrification is also intertwined with consumption. As America has deindustrialized, spaces to produce have been replaced with (often
themed) spaces to consume. The Green Mile, standing in the shadows of the former Gates site, serves as a relatively conspicuous example. Furthermore, legal marijuana is a commodity largely available for middle-class consumption. The pricing of legalized marijuana (often over $100 per ounce) may limit participation in this market to those with relatively handsome incomes. Legal marijuana represents a new commodity for people with money to consume, and The Green Mile is the spatial manifestation of this consumption. As well-off middle class people move back into urban areas, legal marijuana presents a new forum of consumption and social life. Young, trendy urbanites are perpetually looking for places to consume, and as such, marijuana dispensaries may come to look perfectly natural side-by-side with trendy hipster bars in gentrified districts.

Marijuana’s normalization (through legalization) was necessary to create a harmonious relationship between marijuana and gentrification. By removing marijuana from the domain of illicit criminality, it became commodified and marketable for mass consumption. This commodification and mass consumption creates the foundation for the relationship between marijuana and gentrification. Gentrified districts are typically sites of mass consumption. Times Square or Union Square were revitalized into destinations consumer spending. Such areas attract people with money, and incentivize them to spend, and then spend more. Money is invested to incentivize more spending through initiatives like BIDs. Broadway’s Local Maintenance District ensures a safe, clean environment along South Broadway to entice maximum spending. Although businesses like struggling antique shops can’t keep up, through legalization marijuana has been ideologically repositioned from an illicit vice into a commodified money-maker, and in this form becomes associated with gentrification. Gentrification often creates districts that drive consumption. As marijuana becomes repositioned from an illicit vice into a commodity for mass
consumption, it has the potential to intersect with gentrification to create urban districts centered on the consumption of (legal) vice.

**Legal Marijuana and Urban Space: A ‘Green’ Light District?**

As South Broadway’s evolution into The Green Mile demonstrates, marijuana legalization has the ability to impact urban space. Legalization enabled the construction of a cluster of marijuana dispensaries along South Broadway, and the impact thereof is expressed extensively in the surrounding area in the form of related businesses (such as hookah bars or glass and pipe shops) and the visual representations of marijuana culture in the community (murals, etc.). While South Broadway has clearly become a site of marijuana culture, can it be truly declared a “marijuana district”? Using comparisons to European red light districts as guidelines, some insight can be gained.

First, South Broadway can potentially be seen as a *mixed-use* marijuana district, comparable to red light districts such as Amsterdam’s Wallen that feature a breadth of businesses beyond the respective vice in each district. While The Wallen’s window rooms are complemented by bars, clubs, and marijuana cafes, South Broadway’s dispensaries are likewise located within close proximity to numerous bars, music venues, and other sites of social life. Comparisons of South Broadway to centrally-planned, single-use red light districts (such as Antwerp) may bear fewer similarities. While South Broadway may have come to be nominally associated with marijuana, the breadth of businesses operating on the street demonstrates the diversity of life on the stretch. Although marijuana culture is pervasive in the area, it is far from exclusive.
Additionally, the construction of the space as a themed area of vice occurred somewhat organically, as opposed to a centrally-planned initiative. In several of the European cities analyzed by Weitzer, red light districts were designated specifically as zones of prostitution by the respective cities in which they lie. In essence, certain areas were specifically zoned for this purpose by the city, and the instance of such districts in such locations is largely a product of deliberate, directed zoning by the cities. The Green Mile is also the result of zoning, however in a much less deliberate way. South Broadway was, unlike red light districts in several European cities, never zoned specifically for the purpose of marijuana dispensaries. However, the presence of the cluster of dispensaries on South Broadway is nonetheless the result of zoning ordinances. Denver prohibits marijuana operations near schools, playgrounds, etc., drastically restricting the locations where dispensaries can open and operate. South Broadway meets these criteria, as well as serving as a beneficial site for other (non-zoning) reasons. Thus, both in European cities where prostitution is legal and in Denver where marijuana is, the prevalence of sites of these respective vices in said cities is the result of zoning ordinances related to that vice, albeit in different ways. As regulation of vice is instrumental in normalizing it, it is unsurprising that the spatial construction of sites of vice has been controlled by local governments. By specifically directing vice to a certain location (prostitution in Europe) or by preventing the proliferation of vice to locations deemed socially unacceptable (marijuana in Denver), governments have controlled and managed the pervasiveness of specific forms of vice in their respective cities.

South Broadway can be called a marijuana business district in the sense that it is a site where numerous dispensaries and other marijuana-related businesses operate and marijuana culture has become prevalent; where themed vice has taken a commodified and spatial form. However, it has not developed into a marijuana-themed entertainment district in the vein of The
Wallen or Fremont Street, although it may have the potential to do so if certain ordinances were changed. Namely, marijuana cannot (legally) be consumed in public in Denver. The customers of South Broadway’s dispensaries are legally prohibited from smoking the marijuana they buy at Green Mile dispensaries on South Broadway. As described by the South Broadway merchants interviewed in the course of my research, the typical Green Mile transaction involves only a cursory stop in the area. Marijuana customers come, purchase marijuana, and leave. By and large, they do not stay and mingle in the bars along the avenue, they do not visit the shops and boutiques nearby. Thus, while marijuana legalization has created a site of marijuana culture, this site is yet to develop into a bona fide marijuana-themed entertainment district (in the vein of other vice-themed entertainment districts) due to prohibitions about the consumption of the vice. Technically, it is still illegal to actually consume the vice of marijuana on South Broadway. It is foreseeable that in the event of a change to the prohibition of public consumption that such a district could develop, however. In the event that public smoking were permitted (at least in a theoretical “tolerance zone” such as The Green Mile), customers would not be forced to leave The Green Mile to partake in their marijuana purchases. If buyers were permitted to smoke in, theoretically speaking, marijuana cafes similar to Amsterdam’s, more marijuana customers would be incentivized to stay on South Broadway and the full development of a marijuana-themed entertainment district could occur. This in turn presents the potential for more spillover business from marijuana customers into the other businesses in the district. However, the potential side effects of publicly permitted smoking (smell, public intoxication) could create a host of problems of its own, and may sour other merchants (who have remained largely ambivalent to dispensaries) due to such problems. Public consumption of marijuana presents the potential to become an ecological problem similar to “street” prostitution. In the current
paradigm, while non-marijuana-themed businesses on South Broadway have received little benefit from the prevalence of dispensaries, such merchants likewise failed to report widespread instances of “stoned” people causing problems in the area. While some merchants complained of the smell of marijuana becoming increasingly prevalent, such complaints were not widespread; however, public smoking would all but guarantee the district becoming saturated in marijuana smoke. This would seem to be intolerable to the ambivalent merchants; dispensaries may have been “good neighbors” to this point, but a surge of people publicly smoking marijuana would seemingly violate the tenets of being a good neighbor. Thus, while permitting public consumption of marijuana seemingly enables the creation of a bona fide marijuana-themed entertainment district, it also may necessitate the creation of such a district (or tolerance zone), as such behaviors may not be generally tolerated outside of the designated area.

In the current paradigm, the spatial contours of legal marijuana take on a different manifestation than in other vice-themed districts. Namely, the actual consumption of the vice takes place outside of the district. Nonetheless, the space has come to culturally reflect the vice. The other businesses of South Broadway may sell wares reflective of counterculture (such as tie-dye) or may service the needs of marijuana customers (such as pipe sellers). It is important to point out that many businesses—like most of the antique stores—do not participate in selling themed wares. Naturally, such merchants have reported little additional business from The Green Mile. It appears that consumption of marijuana and marijuana culture is contained within such establishments on South Broadway, and that by and large, has had little impact on non-themed businesses. Nonetheless, even stores that do not necessarily cater to marijuana customers (i.e., clothiers) often display marijuana-themed apparel in prominent street-facing displays, suggesting at least some impact from The Green Mile for such businesses. Indeed, the spatial contours of
legal marijuana are inextricably linked to consumption. Even if the actual consumption of marijuana takes place outside of the district, legalized marijuana and the introduction of dispensaries to South Broadway has created a site for mass consumption of marijuana culture. Marijuana enthusiasts may find new strains at SoBo’s dispensaries, while more casual consumers can take in the experience of visiting a legal dispensary, buy some tie-dye, maybe even buy a little weed- they can celebrate alternativeness all while doing so in a safe, regulated environment. Middle class consumers are sold sanitized versions of the thrills of deviance without the risks or repercussions of illegality. The experience of being a “pothead” is now a buyable product, available to consumers as a weekend activity if they like. This experience is bought and sold on The Green Mile.

Importantly, The Green Mile demonstrates that a marijuana district can exist without destroying a neighborhood. Vice is often a harbinger of urban decline; the porno theatres of South Broadway did not reflect the avenue’s best days. However, The Green Mile is the complete opposite. Far from urban decline, legalized marijuana is associated with urban renewal. Indeed, it may shock legalization’s opponents to find that one of the biggest problems of a marijuana district is the rising property values associated with it drive out other merchants. Furthermore, the relative ambivalence of the non-themed South Broadway merchants reflects a compatible relationship with the surrounding community. Yes, the Antique Row merchants are resentful of rebranding attempts. But these objections are not unique to the marijuana district. Antique merchants represent a sunset industry struggling to hang on in a rapidly gentrifying district, whereas marijuana dispensaries are a sunrise industry spatially replacing many of the disappearing antique stores. However, for the vast majority of other businesses along South Broadway, the introduction of dispensaries to South Broadway and the development of The
Green Mile has been of little impact. They continue to go about their lives and they continue to have the same fears and concerns of any urbanite: traffic, noise, rising rents. A legal marijuana district can exist in harmony with the surrounding community— as long as the dispensaries act like good neighbors.

The Green Mile may represent an early incarnation of the marijuana-themed district. Already, additional such districts are emerging (see Oakland’s Oaksterdam) and as more states legalize marijuana this number is likely to grow. As the development of red light districts in Europe demonstrates, the spatial contours of legal marijuana will likely vary from place to place and be shaped largely by the specific nature of legalization in each location. As stated, one of the largest factors potentially differentiating marijuana districts from other vice-themed areas is the prohibition of publicly consuming marijuana, as is the case in Denver. This aspect of legalization has shaped the development of South Broadway as a marijuana district, causing it to become a highly transitory site of retail purchases as opposed to an entertainment destination like other themed areas of vice (Fremont Street, The Wallen, etc.). As more jurisdictions continue to legalize marijuana, the spatial manifestation of marijuana in urban space will largely be shaped by the specific dimensions of legalization in each place. Whether or not marijuana districts develop largely as themed business districts or entertainment destinations similar to other themed areas of vice will depend greatly on these contours.

Although marijuana is immediately identifiable with South Broadway, it is unlikely any further dispensaries will open in the area. Current regulations prohibit the opening of a dispensary within certain proximity to other dispensaries; likewise, the city can restrict the opening of new establishments in the parts of the city already home to the most dispensaries. As such, the City of Denver is unlikely to permit any new dispensaries to open on South Broadway.
Indeed, some current dispensaries were grandfathered in to be in compliance with such regulations. Nonetheless, South Broadway is already a site of marijuana. And while it may be a frontrunner as a “marijuana district,” it likely will not be the last. Already, such districts are observable in other cities, such as Oakland’s Oaksterdam area. As more and more states move towards marijuana legalization, it is likely that other cities will experience the growth and development of marijuana-themed areas in their cities as well.
Conclusion

The Green Mile represents only the most recent incarnation of South Broadway. There is an unmistakable irony in the fact that Prohibitionist South Denver’s main boulevard is now synonymous with legalized vice. Nonetheless, this legalized vice represents a new twist on an old phenomenon in urban spaces. While districts of vice have long existed, from gambling to alcohol to prostitution, marijuana districts can now also develop, shaped by the contours of legalization in their respective jurisdictions. The development of such marijuana districts is likely to be constructed along the dimensions of both legalization and existing urban space. The contours of legal marijuana in Denver have been shaped by the specificities of legalization: where dispensaries can operate, where marijuana can be smoked, etc. The development of the Green Mile has also been dependent upon the existing urban space it now occupies. Set against the backdrop of deindustrialization and decay followed by gentrification and urban redevelopment, The Green Mile’s position on South Broadway reflects the potential for normalized vice to transform urban spaces in a post-industrial, consumption-driven economy. On South Broadway, the normalization and commodification of formerly illicit vice, manifest as legalized marijuana, has intersected with the post-industrial return to the city of the middle class-gentrification. As gentrified districts such as South Broadway are redeveloped, The Green Mile demonstrates that legal marijuana can appeal to gentrified, middle class tastes. Its position as a desirable commodity situates legal marijuana perfectly for mass consumption.

Just like other legalized vices, legalized marijuana has the potential to create urban districts centered on the vice. Red light districts (in various forms) have developed with legalized prostitution, and legalized gambling has allowed for the creation of Las Vegas’ Strip of Fremont Street Experience. South Broadway’s Green Mile, although in its infancy, demonstrates that
legalized marijuana can also reorganize urban space thematically around vice. However, for this to occur, the vice in question must first become normalized. A receptive cultural environment (like Amsterdam’s tolerance of prostitution) is helpful, but ideological normalization through legalization is absolutely essential. Additionally, commodification of deviant behaviors not only normalizes them, but makes them marketable occupants of urban space, allowing for the development of vice-themed districts. As tax-generating money-makers, marijuana dispensaries (or marijuana districts) are a natural fit for vice-themed urban developments. Thanks largely to the marijuana industry’s mammoth economic impact, this legal vice is likely only to become more normalized and tolerated in the future and occupy an even more significant spatial presence.

Legalized marijuana has become an emblem of gentrification and urban renewal. Largely a white domain, the legalized marijuana industry has been associated with gentrification in places such as Seattle and Oakland. South Broadway further demonstrates this. As skyrocketing rents have forced many merchants to relocate out of the district or outright close, marijuana dispensaries and ancillary businesses such as glass and pipe shops have come to increasingly populate the area. Serving the same middle-class clientele that is typically associated with gentrification, the legal marijuana industry’s occupation of urban space coincides with the gentrification of areas. Furthermore, by bringing more people into districts and in turn increasing revenues and tax revenues, legal marijuana can become a driver of further gentrification. However, marijuana gentrification represents a different manifestation of gentrification. Legalization does not remove stigmas from deviant behaviors or vice, and some community members will invariably be opposed to marijuana for ideological reasons. However, as South Broadway demonstrates, if marijuana industry actors conduct themselves as good neighbors and
conscientious citizens, communities may be surprisingly receptive to their presence. Although some conflicts over the branding of space may arise, the urban marijuana business district can form a compatible relationship with the surrounding community.

The impacts of legalized marijuana on urban space and the relationship between legalized marijuana and gentrification offer a new wrinkle to existing understandings of gentrification and the renewal of urban spaces, such as Zukin’s analysis of gentrification in New York. While gentrification in Union Square and along South Broadway may share many similarities, they are equally distinct forms of urban renewal. South Broadway demonstrates that in marijuana-legal jurisdictions, gentrification may take on a unique form, influenced by marijuana commerce and culture. The example of South Broadway offers an extension of the understandings of gentrification, shedding light on the unique contours to the phenomenon in a specific context: marijuana legalization. The findings of this study also add to the understandings of vice and urban space. Just as other vices have shaped urban spaces around them, marijuana also has the potential to do so in emerging marijuana-legal locales. Like other vices, the contours of both the normalization of vice and the nature of place are fundamental in constructing the manifestation of vice in urban spaces. The unique nature of marijuana and marijuana culture creates a new type of urban space thematically structured along the contours of vice.

South Broadway’s Green Mile may be an early example of a marijuana district, but it surely won’t be the last. Legal marijuana’s gargantuan economic impact all but guarantees a further saturation of legal marijuana throughout urban landscapes as more and more states move to legalize the substance. What can be learned from The Green Mile? It serves as another example of the emerging relationship between marijuana legalization and gentrification. It demonstrates the potential for commodified vice to become marketable for mass consumption.
However, perhaps the most significant lesson of the Green Mile is its demonstration that legal marijuana districts can peaceably exist in urban areas. While the rebranding of the area has not been without conflict, the existence of an extensive cluster of dispensaries along South Broadway has not resulted in the deterioration of the neighborhood. Indeed, quite the opposite appears to be the case. Marijuana dispensaries along South Broadway have been associated with increasingly rising rents and an influx of both people and money to the area. Some area businesses have piggybacked on this, selling themed wares in their shops. Other businesses do not participate in the thematic experience, and have largely gone without any benefit from the redevelopment. However, they have equally not incurred any harm from the dispensaries. It appears that marijuana has been normalized to the extent that the largest requirement of marijuana-industry actors in developing such districts may be to simply be decent, respectful neighbors. If marijuana industry actors in other cities do as such, more “Green Miles” are likely to appear on the heels of further legalization.
References


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Vita

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