

The Transplant and the Native: Urban Symbolic Nativism in New York

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Abstract

Contemporary New Yorkers increasingly use “transplant” rhetoric to negotiate belonging in a rapidly changing city, a discourse that reflects urban symbolic nativism. Through a case study of the Dimes Square rebrand, analysis of TikTok discourse, census data, and urban policy scholarship, this essay demonstrates how native New Yorkers construct cultural boundaries not against immigrants, but against affluent domestic migrants. Drawing on Hanz-Georg Betz’s typology of nativism, this analysis reframes symbolic nativism in an urban context where immigrants are imagined as cultural natives and transplants as threatening outsiders. While domestic in-migration to New York is not new, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified perceptions of sudden invasion and displacement, amplifying resentment toward young, white, post-graduate newcomers associated with gentrification. The argument identifies three functions of transplant rhetoric: articulating anxieties over affordability and power, unifying a New Yorker in-group around cultural fluency rather than ancestry, and deflecting structural blame from housing policy failures onto a visible migrant class. Ultimately, urban symbolic nativism reveals how city identity is negotiated rhetorically under conditions of inequality, mobility, and cultural change.

Introduction

In 2022, a new neighborhood, born from a *New York Times*-spurred rebrand, emerged: Dimes Square. A few blocks on Manhattan’s Lower East Side transformed from a working class, immigrant neighborhood to a post-graduate, indie hotspot and gained a new name to pair with these demographic changes. Dimes Square—its name a play on *Dimes*, a trendy restaurant in the area, and the infamous *Times Square*—attracted influencers, writers, and downtown creatives who called its blocks the “Next Big Thing.” Bon Appétit editor Serena Dai (2022) even described Dimes Square as “always filled with young and unreasonably attractive people”; seemingly overnight, Dimes Square became the hub for creative young New York residents (para. 1). Long-time New Yorkers were furious: they saw Dimes Square not as a neighborhood rebirth, but as a cultural hijacking. On TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter, they mocked “Dimes Square” as a “transplant” invention. One TikTok and Instagram creator, @myles_toe, joked that Dimes Square had turned the Lower East Side—once “a battleground of survival”—into “a photoshoot for white girls with septum piercings and trust funds” (Myles Toe, [@myles_toe], 2025). What began as a small cultural rebrand—a few streets and a catchy name—sparked a much bigger debate: who gets to permanently etch themselves onto the city’s map. For New Yorkers, the outrage was not contained to Dimes Square; it was a struggle over belonging, ownership, and who gets to define the city’s identity.

What might appear as an internet squabble points to something deeper: native anxieties over a changing New York City (NYC). NYC is facing a continuous wave of migration: upper middle class, mostly white Americans arriving from white suburbia, whom New Yorkers have aptly named transplants. New Yorkers fiercely reject these transplants. They are not just complaining about recent movers but also asserting who has the moral right to claim a New Yorker identity. That question—who gets to belong in NYC today—lies at the heart of my

research. The term “transplant” skyrocketed due to social media. By adopting “transplant,” Native New Yorkers answer this question of belonging and voice their opinion: *transplants, scram—New York is for New Yorkers*. While extensive studies exist on NYC’s evolution and urban displacement, few have examined how residents themselves rhetorically resist this transformation. Herein lies the role of my research. The word “transplant” isn’t just slang. In a city defined by its immigrant identity, “transplant” language is a powerful rhetorical tool that New Yorkers use to defend urban symbolic nativism—a form of belonging that positions transplants as outsiders and real New Yorkers as cultural natives.

New York City: The Melting Pot

NYC has long defined itself as an immigrant city. From Ellis Island to vibrant ethnic enclaves and tenements, the city’s mythology tells a clear story: immigration isn’t just part of New York’s history—it encompasses New York’s past, present, and future. Scholars support this foundational view of immigration: in “Immigrants in New York City: Reaping the Benefits of Continuous Immigration,” sociology professors Mary C. Waters and Philip Kasinitz (2013) argue, “young people grow up amidst many institutions that were built for past generations of immigrants and their descendants” (p. 94). These institutions include everything from universities to sports leagues, demonstrating that immigration is built into NYC’s very DNA (Waters & Kasinitz, 2013). Scholars aren’t the only ones who agree—NYC mayor, Zohran Mamdani, orated in his mayoral acceptance speech, “New York will remain a city of immigrants, a city built by immigrants, powered by immigrants, and as of tonight, led by an immigrant” (Mamdani for NYC, 2025, 18:51).

Numbers back up this immigrant identity: about 38% of New Yorkers are immigrants, according to the NYC Mayor’s Office, making NYC one of the biggest immigrant hubs in the United States (NYC Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs, 2023, p. 7). More notably, roughly 60% are either immigrants or the children of immigrants (Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs, 2023, p. 8). Moreover, even families who have been in New York for generations identify with an immigrant story; as Waters & Kasinitz (2013) argue, New Yorkers “continue to define themselves in ethnic terms—even three, four, or five generations past Ellis Island” (p. 97). Today, according to the co-director of the Endangered Language Alliance, NYC stands as the most linguistically diverse metropolis in not just the country but the entire world (Perlin, 2025). Undeniably, the immigrant narrative is central to NYC’s identity. New Yorkers see an immigrant story as the making of an authentic New Yorker; the immigrant and New York identities are one-in-the-same. However, these old-school immigrant roots now clash with a new archetype: the transplant.

The Transplant

Transplants have descended upon NYC. Curious onlookers merely need a TikTok account to follow a “day in a life” of these transplants: upper-middle class, mostly white Americans arriving from white suburbia who flock to downtown Manhattan and the shores of Brooklyn. Post-grad and well-off, these transplants embrace a narrow-minded view of NYC. They don’t just flock to the money (i.e., the wealthy Upper East Side), they also instead try to wholly redefine what is considered “cool.” Transplants brand the city as a backdrop for their personal reinvention, defining NYC not by its diversity but by its trendiness; in fact, one New Yorker on TikTok, @siennacanela, makes this clear, saying, “these people have no interest in contributing to the community aside from the community that they’re building, which is not the culture of NYC”

(Canela, 2025). Unlike earlier waves of newcomers, these transplants don't see themselves as joining New York's mosaic—they see themselves as remaking it.

Native New Yorkers have turned transplant-fueled frustration into mockery, particularly online. A scroll through TikTok reveals how New Yorkers, particularly native New Yorkers of color, feel about transplants. Specifically, social media illustrates how Gen Z and young millennial New Yorkers feel about transplants; on TikTok, transplant discourse is a battle of peers—a battle between recent college graduates. One video, captioned “it's the most wonderful time of the year,” celebrates the peace that descends “when transplants go home for the holidays” (sophieming_, [@sophieming_], 2023). Another TikToker complains, “My biggest transplant pet peeve is when they call everything a bodega—even the corner store with a hijabi lady behind the counter” (Anthony, [@anth0nie], 2025). One skit titled “POV: you run into that one NYC transplant” jokes about a newcomer who confuses East New York with the Lower East Side and flinches at the mention of Brownsville (Ieke, [@lekeyeh], 2025). These TikToks demonstrate transplant trends: their misuse and fundamental misunderstanding of NYC vocabulary, unfamiliarity with the city, and mass conglomeration.

To New Yorkers, the rise of the transplant signals not only cultural change, but a shift in power. The Dimes Square case makes this conflict between “clueless” transplants and “grounded” locals visible. Tension between New Yorkers and transplants erupted over the transplant-coined Dimes Square as the neighborhood demonstrated how transplants overlay their identities onto long-standing NYC neighborhoods. To New Yorkers, this was not a natural neighborhood evolution, but a transplant hijacking: on TikTok, one interviewed New Yorker says, “Most people that live here hate that its called ‘Dimes Square’ because I think it's some lady from the *New York Times* who's like, ‘It's Dimes Square,’ and then every rich kid came here” (NewYorkers, [@newyorkersofficial], 2025). One comment, receiving almost 6,000 likes, reads, “dimes square should be a dog whistle for racist poets in nyc” ([@electricmaggots] via [@snoop.nogg], 2025). Even Dai (2022), who upholds that “Dimes Square” is not *actually* all that important, writes, “This is how new neighborhood identities form—block by block, corner by corner, underemployed young transplant who knows a *New York Times* writer by underemployed young transplant who knows a *New York Times* writer” (para. 9). She directly correlates Dimes Square's new identity with transplant culture snobs and clout chasers. Moreover, to Dai and young New Yorkers, the *New York Times* (NYT) holds no cultural authority despite being a NYC institution; the right to define the city's streets belongs not to the NYT or transplants, but to New Yorkers. Nevertheless, transplants land in NYC and proceed to claim ownership over its neighborhoods.

However, this concern is not only abstract: New Yorkers and their businesses are being priced out of the city. New Yorkers are feeling the cost-of-living crisis, specifically the rising cost of housing. The Urban Displacement Project found that wages for low-income residents and housing policies have failed to keep pace with surging housing prices, driven in part by increased demand (Chapple et. al., 2021). In 2016, over one-third of low-income households were in neighborhoods already vulnerable to gentrification, and that number has only grown (Chapple et. al., 2021). The city's physical landscape reflects this transformation. Rent hikes have forced out small, locally owned businesses, swiftly replaced by corporate chains or venture-backed “indie” cafés like Blank Street (Martucci, 2024). As “From Bodegas to Boutiques: The Changing Face of Retailing Shows Gentrification's Effects” reveals, real estate developers deliberately market to these young, wealthy transplants, signaling who the city is being rebuilt for (Martucci, 2024).

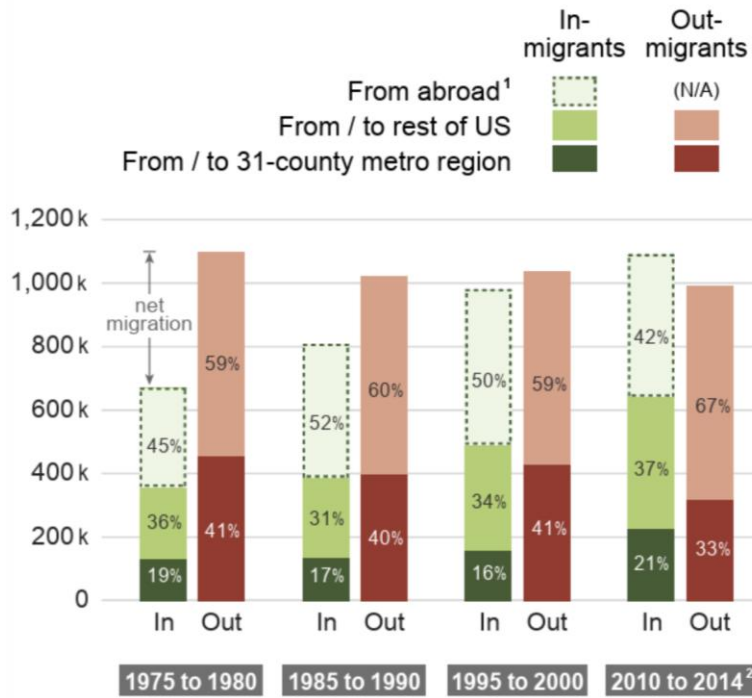


FIGURE 1: Historical migration flows to and from NYC. Data from *Migration to and from NYC* by NYC Department of City Planning (2017).

These financial pressures lead New Yorkers to connect the dots between gentrification and the transplants they see as responsible. Once again, a scroll on TikTok makes New Yorker’s connection between gentrification and transplants evident: one user records himself yelling “you people are destroying Brooklyn,” out of a car window, with the caption “THESE TRANSPLANTS ARE DESTROYING BROOKLYN” (Criscnyc, [@criscnyc], 2025). Another user complains about transplants almost hitting him with a bike, directing his rant to “the gentrifying transplant couple on City Bikes not wearing helmets” (Dutch, [@dutchdeccc], 2025). For many New Yorkers, transplants are not just clueless newcomers; they’re symbols of a deeper economic and cultural takeover. They feel like a new, imminent threat.

However, the New York Census shows that Americans moving to NYC is far from a new phenomenon, obscuring the true source of this transplant rhetoric. NYC has seen a steady increase in domestic in-migration since 1975; while out-migration from NYC has remained consistently high, total in-migration has slowly caught up to it (Figure 1). Thus, despite transplant rhetoric exploding during the 2020s, this in-migration has been a constant, ongoing trend. But the demographics of this in-migration have changed: from 1975 to 1980, 300,000 more white people left NYC than entered it, resulting in net white out-migration, while from 2010 to 2014, 100,000 more white people entered NYC than left, resulting in net white in-migration (Figure 2). Thus, the census does support the local view of transplants as a distinctly new force; rather, NYC is seeing an increase in white affluence. In contrast, the city is seeing increasingly more Hispanic and Black out-migration (Figure 2). It thus appears that white migrants may be outpricing New Yorkers of color.

This demographic change is decades in the making: white in-migration has been steadily catching up with white out-migration (Figure 2). This in-migration refers to both domestic and

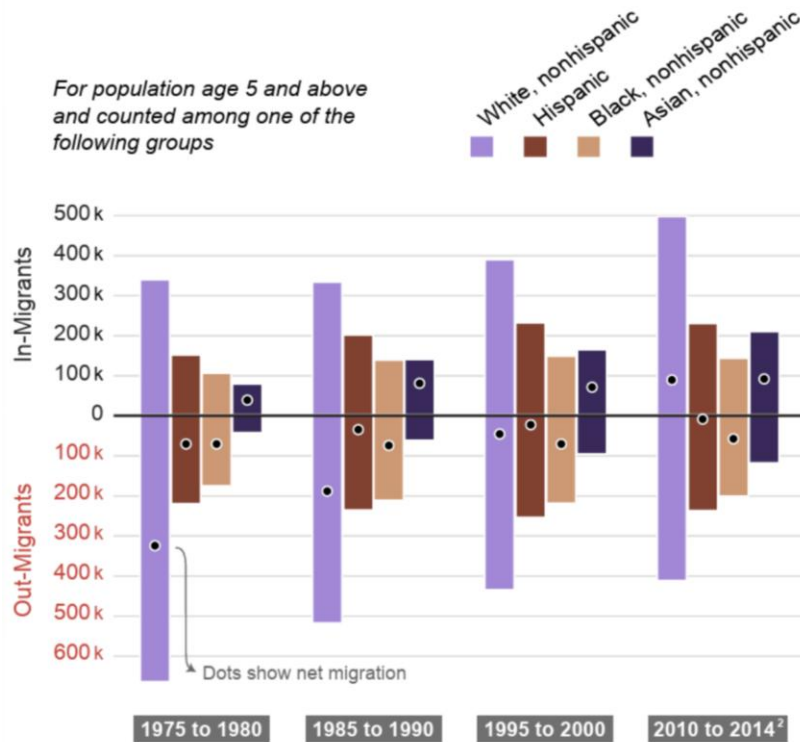


FIGURE 2: Migration flows by race and Hispanic origin. Data from *Migration to and from NYC* by NYC Department of City Planning (2017).

international in-migration; transplants are not explicitly the cause of this increased in-migration. Thus, this rise in transplant rhetoric may appear unfounded in real statistics. In fact, transplant rhetoric may appear as an arbitrary social media trend, removed from NYC realities and thereby not illustrative of New Yorkers’ economic pains or cultural anxieties. But these views fail to consider the urban agitator of the 21st century: the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted mass migration out of NYC, resulting in glaring net domestic out-migration (Figure 3). July 2020 to July 2021 saw net domestic out-migration reach a record high: over 300 thousand more people left NYC than entered it (Figure 3). Apartment complexes vacated, and Broadway Avenue felt like a ghost-town. However, after a two-year decrease, NYC’s population finally began to grow again in 2022 (Figure 4). This growth was rapid and stark, as NYC became desirable again post-pandemic. Because the pandemic drove so many people out of the city, the return to a pre-pandemic “normal” and the accompanying renewed influx of domestic migrants felt unfamiliar and striking. This new sense of in-migration, coupled with economic blows, fueled transplant rhetoric, which spread via social media. New Yorkers do not care that this in-migration is not new because it *feels* new, particularly to young TikTok users who came of age during the pandemic.

Post-pandemic, internet-speak began to permeate everyday NYC lexicon. While attending my NYC high school from 2020–2024, transplant rhetoric bounced off the walls. Running late to school: *those damn transplants don’t know how to walk*. Wondering why a line has formed around a SoHo block: *I guess there’s a new transplant attraction*. Oftentimes, the complaints were even more minute: *there is no more good thrifting in the East Village because the transplants have picked through it all!* Although I attended a well-resourced, college-

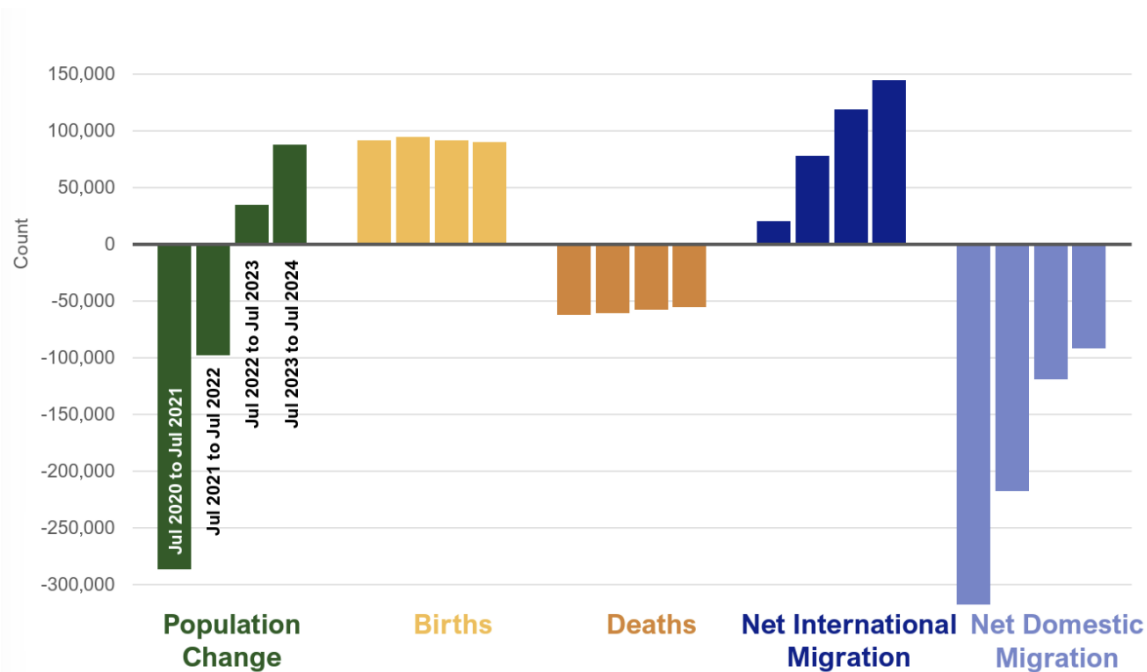


FIGURE 3: Population Estimates Program components of change in NYC from July 2020 to July 2024. Data from *New York City’s Population Estimates and Trends* by NYC Department of City Planning (2025).

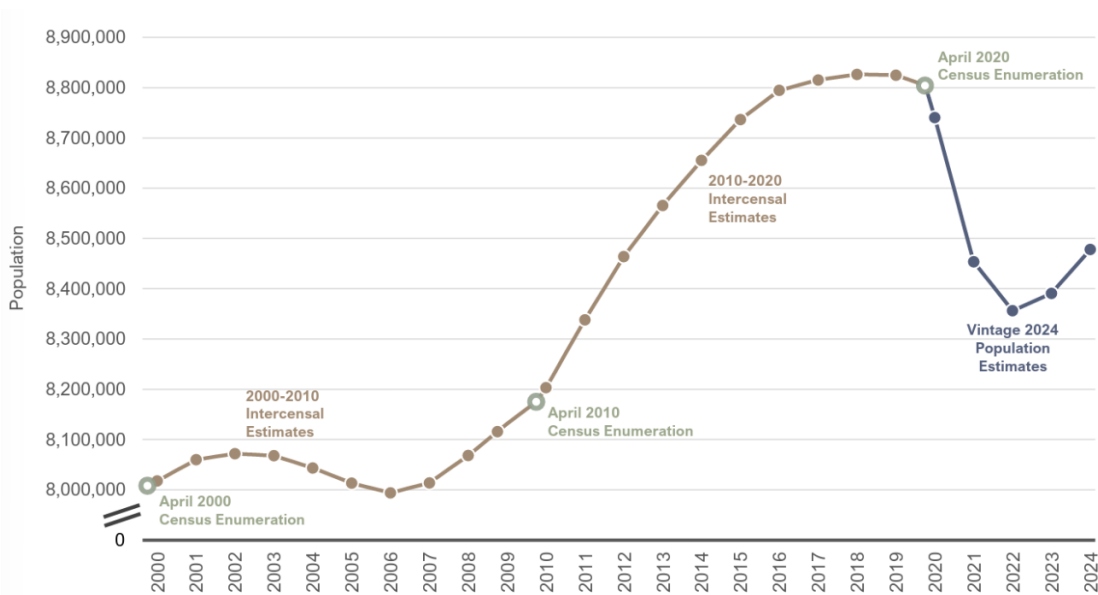


FIGURE 4: Intercensal estimates from 2000 to 2020 and vintage population estimates in 2024 in NYC. Data from *New York City’s Population Estimates and Trends* by NYC Department of City Planning (2025).

preparatory, private high school—where students were not at risk of transplant-spurred displacement—transplants still posed a cultural threat. I was initially hesitant to use transplant language: I myself moved to NYC at eleven years old. However, I soon learned that an African

American family of four that had moved from overseas and had children who commuted by bus to their NYC elementary, middle, and high schools were not the aforementioned transplants. I soon followed suit and adopted the same transplant language. Clearly, there is a fixed understanding of who counts as a transplant and the specific harms they produce. Regardless of what the census suggests, to New Yorkers, transplants threaten NYC. Thus, “transplant” language serves as everyday rhetorical resistance.

Urban Symbolic Nativism

I thereby propose that New Yorkers’ transplant rhetoric is illustrative of a phenomenon I am calling urban symbolic nativism.

Nativism refers to the policy of protecting the interests of native-born or “real American” inhabitants against those of immigrants (Betz, 2019). This sociopolitical policy depends on the existence of a foreign, othered out-group; it positions native and immigrant existence at odds, defining each identity against the other. For example, if immigrants are criminals, then “natives” are civilized; if natives are hard workers, then immigrants are lazy job-stealers. Nativism imagines upward mobility and success as a zero sum game: immigrant success comes at the cost of native-born success. Thus, nativism forces competition and an us vs. them mentality.

Nationally, nativism is on the rise. Politicians, especially those under the Trump administration, spread nativist rhetoric to secure political capital. Trump claims that the United States is under “invasion” and currently “occupied” by immigrants (Trump as cited in Ulloa, 2024). He positions this perceived “foreignness” as a scientific, existential threat: ahead of 2024’s general election, Trump said, “Many of them murdered far more than one person, and they’re now happily living in the United States ... it’s in their genes. And we got a lot of bad genes in our country right now” (Trump as cited in Ulloa, 2024). Trump conveys that immigrants not only pose a risk to “true Americans,” but also degrade the country’s character as a whole; immigrants are an existential threat. This rhetoric both ignites nativism and capitalizes on pre-existing nativist sentiment, fears about safety, and economic anxieties. Moreover, as Trump’s social-Darwinist rhetoric makes clear, nativism is often intermixed with racism. However, nativism is still its own distinct force; Waters & Kasinitz (2013) found that NYC exhibits little to no nativism despite exhibiting racism, demonstrating the separateness of both forces (p. 102–103). Thus, although racism and nativism are often interrelated—as seen in the case of Donald Trump—nativism can act as a lone driver, solely concerning “the native.”

I am not arguing about nativism, but rather *symbolic* nativism. Nativism manifests in differing ways. Hans-Georg Betz, the author of several books on right-wing populism, identifies three facets of nativism: economic nativism, welfare chauvinism, and symbolic nativism (2019). Economic nativism refers to the workforce, founded upon fears of immigrants stealing jobs from “real inhabitants,” while welfare chauvinism posits that immigrants abuse social benefits, thus disadvantaging natives and degrading the welfare state (Betz, 2019). In contrast, the United States now sees the rise of “symbolic” nativism, which defines the “native” as an “imagined cultural identity” rather than a literal birthplace (Betz, 2019, p. 111). For example, when fighting for the rights of “real Americans,” far-right politicians do not refer to disenfranchised Indigenous Americans who live on reservations, low-income Black Americans in urban food deserts, or NYC born-and-bred Muslim Americans targeted after 9/11. Instead, they construct a largely white, Christian (re)imagining of “real Americans” to fit their political narratives. As Betz (2019) explains, symbolic nativism is grounded “in a defence of national cultural identity” (p. 111). Symbolic nativism thus exists to validate identity against imagined foreignness.

However, in NYC, the typical nativist framework is inverted: NYC sees the rise of urban symbolic nativism. In the NYC melting pot, immigrants become the natives, and transplants are the perceived outsiders. Since New Yorker identity is predicated upon immigrant identity, to be “native” to New York is—ironically—to be an immigrant. Both the born-and-bred Bronx local and the Haitian newcomer who arrived at age twenty can claim a legitimate New York identity. Belonging is not determined by birthplace or citizenship, but by cultural embeddedness in the city itself. And New Yorkers have made it clear: transplants do not belong.

Transplant Rhetoric as Urban Symbolic Nativism

“I’m originally an immigrant from Ohio, and I’ve noticed that New York is a very accepting place if you’re from another country. But, if you’re from a different part of this country—get fucked.”

—Self-proclaimed “immigrant” from Ohio on TikTok
(cited in Adivunsolicited, [@adivunsolicited], 2025)

New Yorkers use transplant rhetoric to articulate belonging in NYC—a belonging informed by urban symbolic nativism. Transplant rhetoric illustrates this urban symbolic nativism, creating a clear outsider: the aforementioned transplant. They are out-of-the-loop culture hijackers who push New Yorkers out of their own homes and are marked by dangerous imagined foreignness. At the heart of transplant rhetoric and urban symbolic nativism lies this us vs. them mentality. New Yorker identity is about community-based connection, from shared subway grievances to shared immigrant backgrounds. Transplant rhetoric unifies New Yorkers against transplants, further solidifying this NYC identity. Cyclically, urban symbolic nativism fuels transplant rhetoric, which then supports NYC identity, in turn fueling urban symbolic nativism. Meanwhile, transplants are sidelined and mocked. A self-proclaimed “immigrant” from Ohio on TikTok argues this exact point: in NYC, if you’re from a different part of the United States, you’re screwed (cited in Adivunsolicited, [@adivunsolicited], 2025).

Urban symbolic nativism follows the same logic of typical nativism: one based on the fear of increased competition (since transplants allegedly price up housing) and the perceived threat of diminishing cultural hegemony (since transplants hijack and redefine NYC neighborhoods). However, unlike national nativism, the fears driving NYC’s urban symbolic nativism are magnified by the valid threat of power “transplanting” into the city, defying typical immigration power dynamics. Nationally, the immigrant class holds little to no power, making them easy political pawns. But, in NYC, the assailant transplants wield actual financial power over “natives.” Thus, transplant rhetoric in NYC lies closer to populism than xenophobia, pitting “real New Yorkers” against a powerful elite migrant class.

Clashes between national nativism and urban symbolic nativism further reveal the underlying logic of New Yorker identity. National symbolic nativism concerns itself with gatekeeping bloodlines, hoping to preserve white Anglo-Saxon identity and purity uncorrupted by assailing immigrants. Trump states this explicitly when he claims that foreignness and aggression lie in immigrants’ genes (Ulloa, 2024). In contrast, NYC urban symbolic nativism is about cultural fluency, not bloodlines. Dimes Square serves as a useful case study: New Yorkers gatekeep their identity from transplants because they do not attempt to join or contribute to the existing NYC cultural mosaic, instead opting to overlay their identities onto pre-existing ones. Since transplants seek what’s cool and trendy, not what’s “real,” they cannot be true New Yorkers. Thus, urban symbolic nativism does not hinge on ancestry or birthplace but rather on

cultural fluency, or knowing the unwritten codes of movement, speech, and respect that hold the city together. While national nativism imagines belonging as genetically inherited, NYC imagines belonging as performed and embodied. Transplants become outsiders not solely because of where they are from, but because they do not speak or attempt to learn the city's language.

However, national nativism and urban symbolic nativism do overlap. Transplant rhetoric allows New Yorkers to deflect structural blame around affordability towards transplants and away from those actually responsible: their elected officials. New York's affordability crisis is a supply problem decades in the making. As NYU housing scholars note, building new homes would moderate price increases and make housing more affordable (Been et. al., 2023). Yet for decades, NYC has failed. Elected officials have not built enough housing, creating a chronic undersupply and fueling gentrification (Been et. al., 2023). Moreover, as illuminated by census data, these domestic transplants are outnumbered by international immigrants (Figure 1). Clearly, transplants are neither the main nor sole source of urban displacement. Moreover, the census shows that domestic transplants have been steadily and predictably migrating for decades, leaving plenty of time and notice to build more housing. Nevertheless, New Yorkers blame the transplant class instead of holding policymakers accountable. In this sense, urban symbolic nativism mirrors national nativism: problems of policy become problems of culture, and the migrant class is the scapegoat. From transplants to immigrants, nativism blames foreigners instead of addressing policymakers, impeding much-needed progress.

Recognizing transplant rhetoric as urban symbolic nativism also reveals that NYC identity supersedes national identity. As illuminated by urban symbolic nativism's contrasts with national political trends, New Yorkers are New Yorkers before they are Americans (if they self-identify as Americans at all). A popular apparel brand says it perfectly: *It's New York or Nowhere*. Ultimately, New Yorkers negotiate their urban identity against a turbulent national backdrop, and they use urban symbolic nativism to do so. By calling an Ohio native a transplant, othering Midwesterners instead of Middle Easterners, New Yorkers protest national nativist sentiment and political trends. Thus, nativism allows New Yorkers to dissociate from a national identity and develop a collective, cultural, New Yorker identity and in-group. At the end of the day, urban symbolic nativism serves to affirm New Yorkers and validate their fears—all by calling Dimes Squares' newest residents "transplants."

Conclusion

A common joke formula riddles social media: *What is the difference between a New Yorker and a transplant?* At face value, the difference between a New Yorker and a transplant may seem trivial—an accent, a bus route, a bagel order. But beneath those differences lies a profound question: *Who gets to belong in the city that belongs to everyone?* To New Yorkers, the difference between a New Yorker and a transplant is a stark difference in power. This power difference fuels urban symbolic nativism, which is spread digitally through transplant rhetoric.

Arguing whether this nativism is entirely valid—whether transplants should feel welcome in New York—is not the goal of my paper. Instead, I focus on what transplant rhetoric does: capture how ordinary New Yorkers articulate belonging in a changing city. As affordability declines and wealth consolidates, the "transplant vs. New Yorker" outlook, mentality, and rhetoric speak to New Yorkers' fears of being pushed out of their own homes. Studying this urban symbolic nativism reveals how the rhetoric of belonging in NYC parallels and defies national xenophobic discourse, all while affirming New Yorkers' identities. This rhetoric thus

becomes a form of survival language—New Yorkers’ attempts to retain a stake in a city that threatens to forget them. Understanding this phenomenon helps explain how cities negotiate identity under the pressures of globalization, mobility, and inequality.

Transplant rhetoric and urban symbolic nativism also serve as an urban protest, allowing New Yorkers to push back against national trends. Zohran Mamdani himself echoes this; in his mayoral acceptance speech, he affirms, “In this moment of political darkness, New York will be the light” (Mamdani for NYC, 2025, 13:36). By calling out “transplants,” New Yorkers aren’t just mocking newcomers—they’re reclaiming their city while teaching the country a lesson. In a country defined by walls and borders, New York’s fight over who counts as a “real New Yorker” calls to attention that identity is often symbolic and always political. Above all, transplant rhetoric reminds us of a fundamental human truth: people hunger to belong somewhere that truly feels like theirs.

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