

GENTRIFICATION BOOKS IN SEARCH OF A
GENTRIFICATION THEORY: RACIALIZATION
AND AESTHETICS IN THE MAKING OF
CONTEMPORARY SPATIAL INEQUALITIES

Erualdo González ROMERO, Michelle E. ZUÑIGA,
Ashley C. HERNANDEZ and Rodolfo D. TORRES, eds, *Gentrification,
Displacement, and Alternative Futures* (New York, Routledge, 2022, 158 p.).

Christoph LINDNER and Gerard SANDOVAL, *Aesthetics of Gentrification:
Seductive Spaces and Exclusive Communities in the Neoliberal City* (Amsterdam,
Amsterdam University Press, 2021, 295 p.).

The literature and debate on gentrification have witnessed steady growth since the late sixties, with a sharp increase after 2010, as one can see by consulting Google's n-gram viewer (books.google.com/ngrams/). One can interrogate the recent increase with several hypotheses, and I will briefly discuss two of them here. The first relates to the spread of the phenomenon: according to this hypothesis, the expansion of gentrification around the world calls for rising attention from scholars and has led to an increased output of published works on this topic. It is hard to test this hypothesis, mainly because there is no definition of gentrification that may serve as a basis for measuring such an expansion. It is certainly the case that gentrification scholars think that the field they've devoted their intellectual effort to is burgeoning, and they might be right in thinking so; nonetheless, it is still hard to prove. Being one of those scholars, albeit a minor one, I also believe gentrification is everywhere and that and that in order to counter its effects, we should all study it; but the previous objection applies nonetheless.

The second hypothesis is tied to the renewed popularity of the topic, and has a more ambiguous relationship with this hard-to-specify phenomenon; it identifies an "industry of gentrification", whereby authors, publishers, readers, institutional and political actors, grassroots organizations and citizens all participate in a global public debate around the pros (of which there are very few, to be honest) and cons of gentrification. This second hypothesis is not at odds with the first, and I cautiously

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suggest that both may play a part in the general explanation of this rise in interest.

The two books I will discuss in the following pages might be able to tell us something about that interest. I shall first examine the commonalities between the two and then express some observations on what makes them different, which is also a method that we commonly apply when we analyze examples of gentrification worldwide: they are the “same but different”.

Gentrification, Displacement, and Alternative Futures (from now on, *GDAF*) is an edited volume by four different authors (Erualdo González Romero, Michelle Zuñiga, Ashley Hernandez and Rodolfo Torres), who are based in the Greater Los Angeles area and whose backgrounds are rooted in critical urban planning and racial studies. Most of the case studies are USA-based, with areas of study ranging from New Orleans to the LA area and following the US–Mexican border, with further studies of Houston and Tucson; however, a notable exception to this is offered by a chapter on Santiago de Chile. Two rather interesting contributions provide a different view of gentrification studies by paying attention to community organizing and critical pedagogy and to the often-debated issue of art and artists as the “shock troops” of gentrification.

The second volume, *Aesthetics of Gentrification: Seductive Spaces and Exclusive Communities in the Neoliberal City* (from now on, *AG*), is also an edited collection (by Christoph Lindner and Gerard Sandoval) but with a wider geographical scope, ranging from the Americas to Europe and Asia, and investigating nine urban areas; a cluster of papers investigate Los Angeles more deeply. This book is more interdisciplinary than the previous one, with authors’ backgrounds ranging ranging from art and literature critical studies to geography, sociology, history and planning.

Both books offer wide-ranging and comparative studies of the expansion of gentrification and of its underlying logics. While both contributions recognize the seminal work by Glass, they often have to adopt a wide variety of perspectives on gentrification in order to reflect its multiplicity. So, for those who prefer a strict analytical delimitation of gentrification, both volumes might be a little disappointing, as they mix Loretta Lees with Sharon Zukin, David Harvey with David Ley, Tom Slater with John Logan and Harvey Molotch, and these thinkers with many other theoretical understandings of gentrification. My position here is that a blurred definition of a concept calls for blurred theoretical interpretations and positions, and therefore leads to blurred and mixed results. To quote a famous intervention by Bob Beauregard, this is the

“chaos and complexity of gentrification”, and there is little we can do about it. That said, once we step aside from a common definition of what is actually to be considered as gentrification, we might profit from the richness of the case studies, examples, visions and information available to us. In this respect, both volumes offer stunning evidence of how organized capitalism (often regarded as neoliberalism [...] but here again the “chaos and complexity” might take us further away from clear definitions) operates across continents, countries, regions and urban areas in rather similar ways: by investing in real estate activities, often with no protection for residents, commuters, communities and marginalized people, and resulting in deepening social and spatial inequalities. Per se, this is what critical scholars expect from capitalism, but the evil nature of the only option we have so far to live with, capitalism, is, in a way, reassuring. Please note that my sarcasm here should be read carefully: while I do believe evil is necessary in order for us to think in terms of some common good, I also imply that capitalism is often understood as a gigantic black box within which a multitude of contradictory processes take place. The field of gentrification studies has the merit of providing a spatial ground for most of them, as these books clearly show.

To me, the main common element between these volumes is the politics of representing gentrification. While in *GDAF* this representation works more through planning and multiple resistances that are activated by policies, in *AG* representation is viewed through the lens of aestheticization, a process that was famously captured by Benjamin himself with the concept of “strategic embellishment”, à propos of the Haussmann’s interventions in 19th-century Paris (which has also been the subject of study in other work by David Harvey). The two books show how gentrification is put into effect both by an investment in words and discourses and by visual elements that provide an urban text that can be read as seductive while (or because) it is also exclusionary. One of the chapters of *GDAF*, written by Luis Mirón and Mickey Lauria, would be pertinent to mention here. It deals with post-Katrina New Orleans and its system of neighborhood schools, a system which was completely canceled in favor of a 100% charter-school system (a unique example of this in the USA) that was able to break the ties between place identity and the school system. As the authors clearly show, this rupture was utterly disastrous for poor and racialized communities. The seduction of neoliberal educational institutions goes together with the exclusionary effect of diminishing “culture and community character” [141].

While policies aimed at increasing efficiency in schools, such as zoning or transport policies, are often marketed as neutral vis-à-vis racial and

social inequalities, *GDAF* offers several examples that demonstrate the contrary and in so doing calls for major attention to be paid not only to the “market” side of neoliberalism but to the state and public arenas behind neoliberalism.

The other common element shared by the two books deals with the role of art, artists and the visual aspect of gentrification. The debate on artists as tools of gentrification has been vibrant over the last 40 years, showing not only how galleries and events have fostered the rebranding of places but also how ambiguous the position of artists themselves has been, given that the vast majority of them have always held an anti-gentrification attitude. Many chapters in *AG* discuss this issue, but we can here briefly mention the case study that compares Boyle Heights with Little Tokyo, both in LA. As the author Jonathan Jae-an Crisman shows, art itself can play opposite and oppositional roles depending on its roots in place and time. Boyle Heights is a clear example of art as a means of gentrification, as the new galleries that arrived were aesthetically not in tune with either the previous and still-existing aesthetic façade of the neighborhood or with the local artists. Their arrival was countered by loud protests and local conflicts of a kind that one does not witness, according to Jae-an Crisman, when looking at the case of Little Tokyo, where the local art-based milieu kept on doing its radical and oppositional aesthetic work within the local community. One might say that art that is imposed from outside is different from art that is born and raised locally. This perspective is very close to that advocated by David Trend, writer of one of the chapters in *GDAF*. Being himself “an art administrator, writer, and activist working for 30 years with artists and their organizations” [119], Trend adopts an insider’s perspective in his discussion of, the ambiguity of the art world showing how a multitude of artists do their own creative work “as a secondary pursuit” in combination with institutions and market forces. While he does not provide a strict sociological account of the art world (à la Becker, for example, or à la Bourdieu), it is nonetheless an intriguing contribution to the general discussion. Do the artists in such cases succeed in remaining part of the community they belong to, while also being helpful to its members by providing imaginative sources? Is there an anti-gentrification art? One potential answer is given by Susanna Newbury in her chapter in *AG* on the work of artist Susan Stilton. According to Newbury, “Her practice consists of conceptual projects that gather collaborators and audience members as co-authors for durational, site and temporally-responsive performances” [156], as in the case of *A Sublime Madness in the Soul*, for which Stilton organized a sound and light performance around Sixth

Street Bridge, which was about to be destroyed for a new redevelopment project designed by Frank Gehry. Reparatory and temporary art pieces, conceived and enacted in a collaboration with local communities, may help in providing a sense of belonging, place-attachment and voice in contexts where silence and decay often meld to create a death-like atmosphere (as the area prepares for gentrification to come).

As I have said, the two books have various elements in common, but they also differ from one another. They are both coherent per se, although I do admit that *AG*, with its almost 300 pages, is much more solid. With its clear target, the aesthetics of gentrification, *AG* can become a reference for all those scholars who struggle to investigate what Zukin once defined as the “symbolic economy” of the city. It has become evident decade after decade how art and architecture, often fused in the character of the Starchitect, are structurally related to real estate gentrification, tourism and displacements. In this respect, this collected volume offers a variety of empirical cases that are all theoretically grounded in critical theory. Rancière’s work on the *Distribution of the Sensible* is often quoted, while, surprisingly, we don’t find Sloterdijk, and very little Zizek. Still, while a thoroughly theoretical chapter is lacking, the overall impression we gather is of a very helpful book on one of the most interesting aspects of planetary gentrification. *GDAF* is much shorter at 145 pages, and is kept together by a common understanding of racialization and segregation processes rather than by theoretical perspectives. It reflects the authors’ origins as well and, in a way, might be less readable from a European perspective. To put this differently: while I firmly believe that racialization processes occur globally and are therefore not a specificity of the American continent or the Atlantic area, it is also true that the deep historical and spatial shapes that those processes have taken are very specific, like the debates that stem from them. For instance, all across *GDAF* the very notions of community, organizing and preserving are crucial, which is completely understandable given the role that these aggregates have had in US culture. Gentrification’s role in disrupting communities is, then, a key critical element in debating this phenomenon. For European readers, in my view anyway, since race and community have had rather different treatments, significance and roles in the past, they are somehow less present in the debate, even if we are nowadays witnessing their resurgence following the making of “white and Christian Europe” discourse.

To conclude, both books offer fresh empirical accounts of variegated forms of gentrification worldwide. However, they fail if we can put it this way, to provide a clear account of what gentrification actually is, given

that the scope and depth of both books is so wide that the reader can easily lose the sense of a unified perspective. Planetary urbanization, à la Brenner and Schmid, is so dispersed and universal that gentrification may be at risk of being simply its main instrument of diffusion. It is an instrument associated with structural inequalities, as shown mostly in *GDAF*, but also with aesthetic and visual radical elements, as in *AG*. The Hegelian approach is probably too out of fashion right now, so a synthesis is hard to find in either book, or in the gentrification literature as a whole. Still, it might be the beacon we are looking for in such a tumultuous world.

G I O V A N N I S E M I 