

The Dynamics of Death and Replacement

We could argue about which American cities are the most gentrified, but high up on everyone's list would be New York and San Francisco.

The most gentrified neighborhoods of Manhattan? East Village, West Village, Lower Eastside, Harlem, and Chelsea.

The National Research Council's 1993 report on the social impact of AIDS recorded Manhattan's highest rates of infection in Chelsea (1,802 per 100,000), Lower Eastside East Village (1,434 per 100,000), Greenwich Village (1,175 per 100,000), and Harlem (722 per 100,000—clearly underreported). As compared to the Upper Eastside, for example (597 per 100,000).

As soon as the question is posed, one thing, at least, becomes evident. Cities and neighborhoods with high AIDS rates have experienced profound gentrification.

- By 2008, 22 percent of Harlem's new residents were white.
- By 2009, the average household income in Chelsea was \$176,312.

- By 2010, the median housing sales price in the West Village was \$1,962,500—even with the crash of the credit markets.
- The East Village has one of the lowest foreclosure rates in New York City.

How did this relationship between AIDS and gentrification come to be?

In 1964 the British sociologist Ruth Glass coined the term *gentrification* to denote the influx of middle-class people to cities and neighborhoods, displacing the lower-class worker residents; the example was London and its working-class districts, such as Islington.

Of course, enormous shifts in migration and urban demographics are rarely coincidental or neutral occurrences. Usually people don't want to leave their homes and only do so when forced or highly motivated. The impetus can be political events as well as aggressive policy changes that push one community out while actively attracting another to replace it.

After World War II, the G.I. Bill provided great impetus for urban ethnic whites to move to newly developed moderate income suburbs outside of the city. The bill provided low-interest loans for veterans that made home ownership possible for the first time, and racist housing policies often de facto restricted these benefits to white families. This period, often known as “white flight,” recontextualized many white families into privatized suburban lifestyles, with a much higher rate of gender conformity, class conformity, compulsory heterosexuality, racial segregation, and homogenous cultural experience than they had known in the city. Built into this was an increased “fear” of or alienation from urban culture, from

multiculturalism, gender nonconformity, and individuated behavior. Innovative aesthetics, diverse food traditions, new innovations in arts and entertainment, new discoveries in music, ease with mixed-race and mixed religious communities, free sexual expression, and political radicalism were often unknown, separate from or considered antithetical to suburban experience. An emphasis on new consumer products, car culture, and home ownership itself formed the foundation of values cementing many communities' ethical systems.

In the 1970s New York City faced bankruptcy. The remaining poor, working-class, and middle-class residents simply did not provide a wide enough tax base to support the city's infrastructure. It was a place of low rents, open neighborhoods, and mixed cultures. City policy began to be developed with the stated goal of attracting wealthier people back to the city in order to be able to pay the municipal bills. However, now in 2011 the city is overflowing with rich people and continues to close hospitals, eliminate bus lines, and fire teachers. So the excuse presented for gentrification forty years ago is revealed by historic reality to have been a lie. We now know that real estate profit was the motive for these policies. Tax breaks were deliberately put in place to attract real estate developers to convert low-income housing into condominiums and luxury rentals to attract high-income tenants. Among those most responsive to the new developments were the children of white flight—those who had grown up in the suburbs, with a nostalgic or sentimental familial attachment to the city: the place where they had gone to visit their grandmother, or to go to the theater, or—as teenagers—to take the commuter train and walk around the Village.

It is not a conspiracy, but simply a tragic example of historic coincidence that in the middle of this process of converting

low-income housing into housing for the wealthy, in 1981 to be precise, the AIDS epidemic began.

In my neighborhood, Manhattan's East Village, over the course of the 1980s, real estate conversion was already dramatically underway when the epidemic peaked and large numbers of my neighbors started dying, turning over their apartments *literally* to market rate at an unnatural speed.

As I watched my neighborhood transform, it was quickly apparent that the newly rehabbed units attracted a different kind of person than the ones who had been displaced and freshly died. Instead of Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Eastern European and Italian immigrants, lesbians, noninstitutionalized artists, gay men, and other sexually adventurous and socially marginalized refugees from uncomprehending backgrounds living on economic margins (in an economy where that was possible), the replacement tenants were much more identified with the social structures necessary to afford newly inflated mortgages and rents. That is to say, they were more likely to be professionalized, to be employed in traditional ways by institutions with economic power and social recognition, to identify with those institutions, to come from wealthier families, and to have more financial support from those families. So the appearance and rapid spread of AIDS and consequential death rates coincidentally enhanced the gentrification process that was already underway.

The process of replacement was so mechanical I could literally sit on my stoop and watch it unfurl.

The replacement tenants had a culture of real privilege that they carried with them. I know that's a word that is bandied about, and can be applied too easily in many arenas. But what I mean in the case of the gentrifiers is that they were

“privileged” in that they did not have to be aware of their power or of the ways in which it was constructed. They instead saw their dominance as simultaneously nonexistent and as the natural deserving order. This is the essence of supremacy ideology: the self-deceived pretense that one’s power is acquired by being deserved and has no machinery of enforcement. And then, the privileged, who the entire society is constructed to propel, unlearn that those earlier communities ever existed. They replaced the history and experience of their neighborhoods’ former residents with a distorted sense of themselves as timeless.

That “those people” lost their homes and died is pretended away, and reality is replaced with a false story in which the gentrifiers have no structure to impose their privilege. They just naturally and neutrally earned and deserved it. And in fact the privilege does not even exist. And, in fact, if you attempt to identify the privilege you are “politically correct” or oppressing them with “reverse racism” or other nonexistent excuses that the powerful invoke to feel weak in order to avoid accountability. Gentrification is a process that hides the apparatus of domination from the dominant themselves.

Spiritually, gentrification is the removal of the dynamic mix that defines urbanity—the familiar interaction of different kinds of people creating ideas together. Urbanity is what makes cities great, because the daily affirmation that people from other experiences are real makes innovative solutions and experiments possible. In this way, cities historically have provided acceptance, opportunity, and a place to create ideas contributing to freedom. Gentrification in the seventies, eighties, and nineties replaced urbanity with suburban values from the sixties, seventies, and eighties, so that the suburban conditioning of racial and class stratification, homogeneity of consumption,

mass-produced aesthetics, and familial privatization got resituated into big buildings, attached residences, and apartments. This undermines urbanity and recreates cities as centers of obedience instead of instigators of positive change.

Just as gentrification literally replaces mix with homogeneity, it enforces itself through the repression of diverse expression. This is why we see so much quashing of public life as neighborhoods gentrify. Permits are suddenly required for performing, for demonstrating, for dancing in bars, for playing musical instruments on the street, for selling food, for painting murals, selling art, drinking beer on the stoop, or smoking pot or cigarettes. Evicting four apartments and replacing them with one loft becomes reasonable and then desirable instead of antisocial and cruel. Endless crackdowns on cruising and “public” sex harass citizens. The relaxed nature of neighborhood living becomes threatening, something to be eradicated and controlled.

Since the mirror of gentrification is representation in popular culture, increasingly only the gentrified get their stories told in mass ways. They look in the mirror and think it’s a window, believing that corporate support for and inflation of their story is in fact a neutral and accurate picture of the world. If all art, politics, entertainment, relationships, and conversations must maintain that what is constructed and imposed by force is actually natural and neutral, then the gentrified mind is a very fragile parasite.

Eviction of the weak has always been a force in the development of New York City. First Native Americans were removed. In 1811, Manhattan was laid out in a series of grids in order to make real estate sales and development easier to control. Then farmers were displaced. Then African Americans who lived in what is now Central Park. Then working-class and poor

neighborhoods were eliminated to build the Brooklyn Bridge. The Depression produced mass evictions. And Robert Moses's highway systems replaced more working-class communities.

Of course, New York relies on new voices and visions. Our soul has always been fed by new arrivals from other countries and from around the United States who enrich and deepen our city. New York has also always been a utopian destination for heartland whites who were ostracized or punished in their conforming hometowns. Individuated young people came to New York to "make it," to come out, to be artists, to make money, to have more sophisticated experiences, to have sex, to escape religion, and to be independent of their families. No one is inherently problematic as a city-dweller because of his/her race or class. It is the ideology with which one lives that creates the consequences of one's actions on others. Many whites over the centuries have come to New York explicitly to discover and live the dynamic value of individuality in sync with community, instead of simply parroting the way their parents and neighbors lived in their place of birth.

As artist Penny Arcade wrote in her 1996 performance piece "New York Values," "bohemia has nothing to do with poverty or with wealth. It is a value system that is not based on materialism. . . . There are people who go to work every day in a suit and tie who are bohemian and will never have a bourgeois mentality like the loads of people who graduate from art school and are completely bourgeois. . . . There is a gentrification that happens to buildings and neighborhoods and there is a gentrification that happens to ideas." The difference between the refusenik Americans of the past, and the ones who created gentrification culture is that in the past young whites came to New York to become New Yorkers. They became citified and adjusted to the

differences and dynamics they craved. This new crew, the professionalized children of the suburbs, were different. They came not to join or to blend in or to learn and evolve, but to homogenize. They brought the values of the gated community and a willingness to trade freedom for security. For example, neighborhoods became defined as “good” because they were moving towards homogeneity. Or “safe” because they became dangerous to the original inhabitants. Fearful of other people who did not have the privileges that they enjoyed, gentrifiers—without awareness of what they were doing—sought a comfort in overpowering the natives, rather than becoming them. From Penny Arcade: “I often hear yuppies say that I and other artists were the ones who initially gentrified our neighborhood. But the truth is that we moved into these slums without ever having the need or desire to open a cute café or boutique. We lived among our neighbors as they did.”

Serving this domination mentality were new kinds of businesses, ones that opened up only to sell to these newly arrived consumers—something like the hard currency kiosks in the Soviet Union that sold Marlboros to apparatchiks and tourists. A gentrifying business might open on an integrated block, but only the most recently arrived gentry would use it. It had prices, products, and an aesthetic cultural style derived from suburban chain store consumer tastes that were strange and alienating to New Yorkers, many of whom had never seen a chain store. I know that when I grew up there was no fast food in New York City. McDonald’s, malls, shopping centers were all mysterious phenomena that belonged to someone else.

These new businesses were more upscale than most chains, but had interior designs that referred to deracinated aesthetics. For example, the foodie thing is in part a rejection of authentic,

neighborhood-based ethnic cooking. In the East Village there was the National, a café run by two Cuban lesbians, and the Orchidia, an Ukrainian/Italian place, run by Ukrainians and Italians. Leshko's, Odessa, and Veselka were Ukrainian owned; Veniero's and DiRoberti's served Italian pastries made by their Italian owners. Places to get Dominican rice, beans, chicken, and plantains abounded, all run by Dominicans, and the Second Avenue Deli was owned by Jews. And of course every New Yorker went to Chinatown, Harlem, Little Italy, Arthur Avenue, and the four corners of Brooklyn to eat. Eating food from "other" cultures meant going to businesses where people from those ethnicities were both the bosses and the other customers. It meant loving and appreciating their food on their terms, and happily, at their prices. Gentrification brought the "fusion" phenomena—toned-down flavors, made with higher quality ingredients and at significantly higher prices, usually owned by whites, usually serving whites. It was a replacement cuisine that drove authentic long-standing establishments into bankruptcy and became an obsession for the gentrifiers, serving as a frontline, propelling force of homogenization. The fusion yuppie restaurant would open, and the neighborhood would know it was under siege. The new gentry would then emerge and flock to the comforting familiarity of those businesses, with their segregating prices, while the rest of their neighbors would step around them.

I remember around 1980 when the first art gallery came to East Eleventh Street and Avenue C. They had an opening to which many attendees arrived by limo, reflecting the patrons' fear of the neighborhood and their knowledge that it would be hard to find a taxi at the end of the night. It was the beginning of Loisaida ("Lower Eastside" with a Latino accent) being

called “Alphabet City” (Avenues A, B, and C) and turned into a destination location for out-of-neighborhood whites wanting something besides drugs. The gallery owners served oysters and champagne. The residents of the block sat on stoops and watched, stared as the patrons stepped out of their cars in little black dresses, drinking champagne. There was no interaction between the two worlds. I too sat and watched with two lesbian friends, both painters with no relationship to this new gallery scene. Our reactions were benign. No sense of threat. No understanding that this was the wave of the future. At the moment it only seemed absurd, a curiosity. The next thing I remember was a restaurant called Hawaii Five-O opening on Avenue A between a bodega and a Polish pirogi place. It was the first time I was aware of a restaurant being named after a television show. We peeked through the window at the interior, which was a bit like the inside of a refrigerator. I guess that was industrial minimalism. Almost immediately it was filled with a kind of person unfamiliar to us, wearing clothes and paying prices that came from another place. We loved Avenue A because we could be gay there, live cheaply, learn from our neighbors, make art—all with some level of freedom. We did not understand why anybody would want to go to Avenue A and then eat at Hawaii Five-O. But surprisingly there were many people who did want to do this. People we did not know.

That was one of the bizarre things about these new businesses. They would open one day and be immediately packed, as though the yuppies were waiting in holding pens to be transported en masse to new, ugly, expensive places. Quickly the battle was on and being waged block by block until the original tenants had almost nowhere to go to pay the prices they could afford for the food and items they recognized and liked.

So the Orchidia got replaced by a Steve's Ice Cream, and then by a Starbucks. The used refrigerator store and Nino Catarina's Italian wholesale grocery were replaced by a series of expensive restaurants who put whirring motors on the roof of our building and made it impossible to sleep. The corner bodega that sold tamarind, plantain, and yucca was replaced by an upscale deli that sells Fiji Water, the emblematic yuppie product. Habib's falafel stand, where he knew everyone on the block and put extra food on your plate when you were broke—he was replaced by a "Mexican" restaurant run by an NYU MBA who never puts extra food on your plate. An Asian fish store was replaced by an upscale restaurant. The Polish butcher was replaced by a suburban bar. The dry cleaner was replaced by a restaurant. Wilfred, the Dominican tailor, was replaced by a gourmet take-out store. Now if I want to buy fresh meat or fish, I have to go to Whole Foods (known as "Whole Paycheck"), which is ten blocks away. Rents in my building have gone from \$205 per month to \$2,800 per month. And to add insult to injury, these very square new businesses that were culturally bland, parasitic and very American, coded themselves as "cool" or "hip" when they were the opposite. When they were in fact homogenous, corporate, boring, and destructive of cultural complexity.

There is a weird passivity that accompanies gentrification. I find that in my own building, the "old" tenants who pay lower rents are much more willing to organize for services, to object when there are rodents or no lights in the hallways. We put up signs in the lobby asking the new neighbors to phone the landlord and complain about mice, but the gentrified tenants are almost completely unwilling to make demands for basics. They do not have a culture of protest, even if they are paying \$2,800 a month for a tenement walk-up apartment with no

closets. It's like a hypnotic identification with authority. Or maybe they think they are only passing through. Or maybe they think they're slumming. But they do not want to ask authority to be accountable. It's not only the city that has changed, but the way its inhabitants conceptualize themselves.

Looking back, when gentrification first started, we really did not understand what was happening. I recall thinking or hearing that these changes were "natural," and "evolution" or "progress." Some people blamed artists, even though artists had lived in this neighborhood for over a hundred and fifty years. The theory behind blaming the artists was a feeling that somehow their long-standing presence had suddenly made the area attractive to bourgeois whites who worked on Wall Street. At the time there was no widespread understanding of how deliberate policies, tax credits, policing strategies, and moratoriums on low-income housing were creating this outcome. In 1988 Manhattan was 47 percent white. By 2009 it was 57 percent white—an unnaturally dramatic transformation over a short period of time. But these statistics don't really tell the story. My anecdotal lived experience tells me that surveys don't tell us what "white" means. There is a difference to the life of a city between low-income marginalized whites moving into integrated neighborhoods to become part of that neighborhood, and a monied dominant-culture white person moving to change a neighborhood. Does "white" mean working-class Italians, new immigrants from Eastern Europe, low-income artists, low-income students, low-income homosexuals who are out of the closet and don't want to be harassed? Or does it mean whites who are speculators, or who come to work in the financial industry, to profit from globalization, or who live on income other than what they earn?

Of course this was far from the first time that specific New York City neighborhoods were deliberately turned. The Bronx was famously burned to the ground for insurance money. In their brilliant 2009 (Drama Desk Award–nominated) theater work *Provenance*, Claudia Rankine and Melonie Joseph show how loyal Bronxites who stuck with their borough through the aftermath of the burnout made reconstruction possible. But now these residents were endangered by new developers ready to snatch the recreated neighborhoods back for resale. In his book *How East New York Became a Ghetto*, Walter Thabit shows how in Brooklyn, from 1960 to 1966, “two hundred real estate firms worked overtime to turn East New York from white to black.” In *From Welfare State to Real Estate* by Kim Moody, we can understand how developers used redlining, deprivation of city services, and block busting, and in six years transformed Brownsville/East New York (where my mother was born and raised, from 1930 to 1950) from 80 percent white to 85 percent Black and Puerto Rican, while trashing all the social services, including public education and hospitals. In gentrification the process was being reversed, with financial incentives and social policies designed to replace one kind of human being with another.