URBAN EXTINCTION:

GENTRIFICATION AND THE ERASURE OF THE HOME

Maya Kadirgamar

We sat down at the grubby table in Welcome to the Johnsons, a dive bar located on Rivington between Delancey and Essex on the Lower East Side of New York City. It was a bizarre collection of people: myself, my brother, his ex-girlfriend, his current girlfriend, and her friend Sean. The latter was a man I had never met before who was wearing a studded black leather jacket, Doc Martens, and a buzz cut. Welcome to the Johnsons is a cool place. It's an old punk bar that has a strong resemblance to a stoner's basement and doesn't look like it's been redecorated since the late 1970s. Tacky wooden paneling, multicolored Christmas lights, even a Ms. Pac Man, and old sports trophies are scattered around the place.

Sean is talking about yuppies (young urban professionals). He's annoyed that earlier today, a woman he's never seen at this bar before asked to take his picture because he looked like the typical "New York City punk." Sean has been coming to this bar for ages, he hangs out here a lot, and yet a woman who knows nothing about the history and culture of The Johnsons has come in here and made him feel like an object to be looked at. Young urban professionals are increasingly coming into the Johnsons for its "cool" factor -- it's grimy, plays loud punk music, and is located conveniently close to the F train. The neighborhood surrounding The Johnsons is similar- shabby, unkempt and dimly lit. But this area, nestled deep in the Lower East Side of New York City, is quickly shrinking. This grubby, spray-painted, dimly lit maze of streets and alleys that doesn't follow the rest of the New York grid system is falling prey to what you might call the plague of gentrification. The streets are getting cleaner, the apartment buildings are modernizing, and the people who live here are changing. Geographer Neil Smith writes that gentrification is a process that follows the following formula: 'Largely abandoned to the working class and postwar suburban expansion, relinquished to the poor and unemployed as

reservations for racial and ethnic minorities, the terrain of the inner city is suddenly valuable again, perversely profitable' (Smith 1996: 6).

This pattern of behavior is exemplified by what happened to Sean that night. Welcome to the Johnsons is his place and the Lower East Side is his stomping ground. But as artists, who make up the first wave of gentrification, come in and set up their lives here, the area changes -- its history is lost, its customs are forgotten, and its original inhabitants are forced out as rent prices increase. While some try to promote gentrification as a positive process, in reality it poses a threat towards many marginalized communities: 'Gentrification is violence…it is a systemic intentional process of uprooting communities…with gentrification, the central act of violence is one of erasure' (Older 2014: 1).

A Short Background on Gentrification

To explore the harmful impact of gentrification on identity and belonging, this essay will engage with ideas put forth by a variety of figures who have spoken or written on the topic. As its starting point, this essay will address the pattern of behavior that director Spike Lee has called the "Christopher Columbus syndrome" (Lee 2014). According to Spike Lee, as a neighborhood becomes gentrified, people move into an area, consider themselves first inhabitants, and do not respect the history and culture that have existed there for ages. We can see an example of this from Sean's encounter with the woman who wanted to take his picture. She was unfamiliar with the culture of Welcome to the Johnsons and attempted to objectify it.

Additionally, this essay will engage with the ideas presented by Neil Smith in his book *New Urban Frontier, Gentrification and the Revanchist City.* Initially, it is the cheap rent that attracts people to a neighborhood. As people realize that a particular area is affordable, they move in. Often, the people who first migrate to a neighborhood are artists and other young people, making the neighborhood more desirable and cool. According to Smith, 'Real estate values soar, yuppies consume, elite gentility is democratized in mass produced styles of distinction' (Smith 1996: 13). What happens over time is that the culture and way of life that

used to prevail in that neighborhood are rejected, especially as rent prices increase and the original inhabitants are forced to move to other more affordable areas.

My project is focused on the wave of gentrification that is taking over New York and the sense of belonging and identity that comes with it. There is more to living in a neighborhood than residency. Acceptance into a community and feeling connected to a neighborhood are cultivated through experience over time, and there is a sense of identity, culture, history, and belonging that grows along with that. As one of my informants, a woman named Vashti said of her neighborhood, 'Roosevelt Island is my home, I've lived here most of my life, I consider it to be a part of me.' To explore the effects of gentrification, I have conducted interviews with people from various neighborhoods in New York City. Additionally, in order to gain a more detailed insight into the phenomenon of gentrification, I have observed changes that have occurred in the past few years in an area of New York City called Roosevelt Island.

Gentrification, and the movement of people to previously forsaken areas results in a vast disconnect between people who originally inhabited an area, and the people who move in and introduce their own customs and values. While it can be studied from many different angles -- economic, cultural, or political -- in this essay, I will be addressing the violent effects of gentrification upon people's sense of identity and their social relations and interactions.

The Vocabulary of Gentrification and the Frontier Myth

Gentrification, on the surface, may not appear to be the worst thing that could happen to a place. Before starting this project, I had always thought that gentrification was a generally positive process. It creates more housing, sets up new businesses, and makes an area safer. But there are serious problems with the concept of gentrification at its core. As one of my informants, Allison, pointed out, the very word "gentrification" has negative implications of the landed gentry and feudalism. During our interview, she went on to say that, as she sees it, gentrification is the process by which a neighborhood that appears to be 'barbaric or uncultured because it's poor' is changed to become more palatable and acceptable to the better off, young urban professionals who are outsiders in that neighborhood. 'It's the poor,

"unruly" people in a neighborhood being forced to become more like the yuppies who are outsiders, just so that they can feel more at home… They're forced to change or they're forced out.'

Neil Smith (1996) presents another intrinsic problem with the vocabulary surrounding gentrification today and the way it is presented through the lens of the frontier myth. He further argues that the vocabulary surrounding gentrification is remarkably similar to the vocabulary of the frontier and is evocative of American Westward expansion. He cites phrases like 'urban pioneers' and 'the adventurous spirit and rugged individualism of the new settlers' that were used by publications to describe the phenomenon of gentrification in New York in the 1980s (1996: 13). In addition he discusses a 1988 article in *The New Yorker* which focused on a young couple and their recent move to Ludlow Street in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The woman's mother could not understand the couple's desire to move to such a grungy neighborhood, but the couple insisted that she should be proud of their "urban pioneering" and they likened themselves to American pioneers crossing the Rocky Mountains (Garrison 1988: 29). This tendency to selectively use vocabulary to positively promote gentrification is central to the phenomenon. It is a trend that is used by real estate agents in New York City today -- they have begun to change the names of neighborhoods in order to denote their proximity to safer areas. For example, Bushwick, Brooklyn, an area that is currently in the process of being gentrified, is now being called "East Williamsburg" in order to make it seem closer and more similar to that neighborhood (Older 2014).

What the interview with Allison and the frontier myth show us is that there is a strong tendency to selectively use vocabulary in order to portray a neighborhood differently from how it actually is in reality. As Allison said, the undertones behind the word gentrification are such that, when a neighborhood becomes "gentrified," there is an implication that it was previously somehow lacking, wild, dangerous, and generally substandard. As Neil Smith writes, 'The idea of "urban pioneers"…implies that no one lives in the areas being pioneered- no one worthy of notice at least' (Smith 1996: 33). This pattern of behavior can be linked back to what director Spike Lee has called the Christopher Columbus syndrome (Lee 2014). As Spike Lee (2014) said in

an infamous speech on gentrification in New York City: 'You cannot discover this... we've been here'. While the vocabulary used to describe an area may not seem violent in a physical sense, it still does harm to the people who are being described. Quite clearly, the assumption that no one of value exists in an area is detrimental as it is built upon the additional assumption that wealth is equated with worth. It follows that, as gentrification takes over an area, the people indigenous to that neighborhood are inevitably made to feel that their homes and their neighborhood are somehow below standard because of the manner in which they are described and treated. From this point, it is inevitable for a divide to exist between the original inhabitants of a neighborhood, who truly understand the history and culture of that community, and those who buy their way into a built-up, caricatured version of the same place.

The Gentrification of Roosevelt Island

The violent nature of gentrification does not solely manifest itself in the vocabulary that surrounds it. Gentrification also has the effect of creating tension between people living within the same community. As one of my informants, a man named Eli, said during an interview: 'Among the people who I had lived with for a long time, even though I didn't know them there was always some sort of social rapport. We'd always say what's up or nod or acknowledge each other in some way. But the new people who moved in have been completely forgotten. There's no interaction at all.'

In addition to altered social relations, as a neighborhood that was previously unpopular becomes attractive; the infrastructure of the neighborhood itself may change as well to make the area less welcoming or familiar to the original inhabitants. These claims are based on observations of Roosevelt Island, a neighborhood in New York City located between Manhattan and Queens.

Roosevelt Island was developed as a residential community in the 1980s and 1990s and has also become the location for two long-term medical facilities. The island is approximately two miles long, with a single street-Main Street -- running down the length of it, dividing it into two (Goodman). While these details may not seem important now, they are vital to the way in

which the population of Roosevelt Island is divided not only geographically, but also in terms of wealth and socioeconomic background. "The Island", as long time residents call it, is also home to many foreign diplomats due to its close proximity to the United Nations Headquarters in Manhattan. In addition to the hospital and the middle-income apartment buildings, there is another complex of buildings, called Eastwood, located on the east side of Main Street, which houses mostly lower income families. As such, the population of Roosevelt Island is highly mixed in terms of socio-economic and cultural background -- there are foreigners from wealthier backgrounds with jobs in international relations, residents of the lower income apartment buildings, as well as people who inhabit the long-term hospitals.

In recent years, Roosevelt Island has succumbed to the plague of gentrification that has taken over many mixed income neighborhoods in New York City. The catalyzing event that brought about this change is the purchase of two and a half acres of land by the prestigious institution Cornell University. The university has bought this land on the south end of Roosevelt Island to house the facilities for its new graduate-level technology and business programs. This project, which was referred to in several interviews with informants, has resulted in many changes in the buildings and infrastructure which have in turn made original inhabitants feel less connected to their homes and their neighborhood at large.

Roosevelt Island, An Endemic Perspective

The changes that have taken over Roosevelt Island in the past ten years have been dramatic and rapid. I know this because I have lived on Roosevelt Island almost my entire life. I have watched the new apartment buildings crop up on the north and south ends of the island, have seen the new Starbucks coffee shop being built close to the subway station and have noticed in the past five years an influx of new faces that I do not recognize.

According to one of my informants, a woman named Rasha who has lived on Roosevelt Island for twenty years, the population has always been segregated, with people coming from more impoverished backgrounds living in the lower income apartment buildings, and people who are wealthier living on the other side of Main Street.

'My mom would take me to ballet class and the theater was on "that" side. There were all these kids who had parents who were a lot younger than my mom. I never realized it then because I was so young, but if I think about it now I guess we came from different backgrounds.'

Another one of my informants, Vashti, has lived on Roosevelt Island for fourteen years. Her father is a diplomat who works in the United Nations and lives on Roosevelt Island, so she and her siblings grew up on the comparatively wealthier side of Roosevelt Island. 'I remember my mom would always say to me "Don't go on that side of Main Street by yourself"…I mean Eastwood [the lower income buildings on the east side of Main Street] looked sketchy, but people there are fine really.'

Rasha and Vashti have both lived on Roosevelt Island since childhood -- Rasha has never lived anywhere else, and Vashti has lived there for most of her life. When asked about how they personally felt about the changes in Roosevelt Island, the responses were similar. According to both, the influx of new people has drastically altered the neighborhood.

Rasha specifically spoke about the new inhabitants of Roosevelt Island, who don't understand and respect the history and culture of the place:

'I hear these annoying yuppies on the subway like, "Oh my god, this island is so quaint. Like, there's this nice pizzeria called Nono's" by my building…That's not the nicest pizzeria. The nicest one was that place across the street, do you remember? That was the only place where I could eat vegetables when I was a kid. And that place doesn't exist anymore. It closed and there's a health food store where it was.'

Rasha continued to talk about how, in the past, there was an unofficial socioeconomic divide on Roosevelt Island, but despite that people did know each other and there was a sense of community, history and a shared culture. Now, however, 'No one is connected anymore. Roosevelt Island has become like a mini-Manhattan…it's so busy and no one knows each other.' When asked specifically about how she felt about the unfamiliar people who have just moved in to her neighborhood, Rasha said 'There's a new segregation on the island between people

who have lived there for a long time and the people who just moved in…But I can't understand it, how do you move into a neighborhood and not integrate into your new community?'

Vashti also talked of the culture of Roosevelt Island and how it has changed rapidly as gentrification sets in. 'The new buildings and the construction that is going on to make this island look nicer is nice in theory but it takes away the "homey" effect that I remember.' She specifically recalls a certain moment which highlights gentrification and its effect of erasure:

> 'There was this park that I always used to go to behind River Road. It was my favorite because it had this spiral slide. But when I was walking around the Island the last time I was back from school I saw they tore it down and redid it completely to make it "nicer". And it was heartbreaking because that place was so important to my childhood… I mean I guess at the same time it is nice to see a change in certain areas. But it's like they're trying to make the island more similar to Manhattan. I liked the island the way it was.'

The anecdotes provided by Rasha and Vashti and their feelings on the destruction of certain local landmarks reveals the detrimental effects of gentrification upon a community. It is clear that, as people live in a neighborhood they become emotionally tied to it through their unique and individual experiences. Gentrification alters that neighborhood by erasing certain elements that used to characterize it. In doing so, it also alters the manner in which people connect to that neighborhood; people find that unique memories and personal experiences are erased and inevitably feel less connected to their homes. The influx of new people heightens this disconnect, and the neighborhood is made less familiar.

Conclusion

Gentrification is a subtle and sneaky thing. It's the rapid alteration of the infrastructure of a neighborhood, and at the surface that might not look so bad. But that is exactly what is most harmful about gentrification. It doesn't look like violence, but it is. It is not violence in the way we might normally think about it, but it might be worse. It is the violence of erasing the culture and silencing the voices of those who may not have the means to make themselves

heard. Institutionalized and disguised as being for the good of the urban public, gentrification works to create divisions within society, to alienate people from their homes, and to further marginalize those who are already at the brink of society's status quo.

References

Bridge, G. and Watson, S., eds., 2013. *The new Blackwell companion to the city.* West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

Goodman, G. *Roosevelt Island History.* Available at: <http://www.rooseveltisland10044.com/rooseveltislandhistory.html> [Accessed: 10 May 2014].

Lee, S., 2014. *Spike Lee on gentrification (live in Brooklyn)*. Available at: <https://soundcloud.com/daily-intelligencer/spike-lee-on-gentrification> [Accessed: 10 March 2014].

Older, D. J. *Gentrification's insidious violence: the truth about American cities*. Available at: <http://www.salon.com/2014/04/08/gentrifications_insidious_violence_the_truth_about_american_cities> [Accessed 11 March 2014].

Smith, N., 1996. *The new urban frontier: gentrification and the revanchist city.* London: Routledge.