

Magazine

When 'Gentrification' Isn't About Housing

First Words

By WILLY STALEY JAN. 23, 2018

Last winter, midway through my hourlong commute into Midtown Manhattan — having traversed part of Queens and all of chic north Brooklyn — I found myself reading about how a dish called a “chopped cheese,” a sort of cheese steak made with hamburger meat, had been gentrified. Once a specialty of uptown bodegas, the sandwich had caught the attention of novelty-seeking foodies: Whole Foods was selling them for twice what they cost in the Bronx, where they went for \$4 and still do.

The story of how we came to use an urban-theory concept like gentrification to talk about food might actually begin with Whole Foods. In 2014, when the company called collard greens “the new kale,” Mikki Kendall, writing in *The Grio*, labeled this “food gentrification” — the first step in a process whereby collards would become the sort of thing that smoothie shops pulverize into drinkability for well-heeled consumers. Kendall wondered if the greens might become pricier as a result. Some responded that there was little to worry about — kale’s cost had hardly budged over a decade of trendiness — but as the conversation progressed, it became clear that the issue wasn’t really commodity pricing; it was cultural ownership. Soon just about any traditional dish that found itself subjected to the enthusiasms of white foodie-dom was said to be “gentrified”: guacamole, egg creams, soup dumplings, burritos, pho. (This last one produced the unforgettable Huffington Post headline “This Food-

Bro Is Gentrifying Vietnamese Pho.”)

This usage proved awkward when it returned, twisted about itself like a Möbius strip, to questions of housing and economics. In 2016, BuzzFeed published an article by Doree Shafrir on the “tiny house” phenomenon — a vogue for living “simply” in minuscule, movable homes. The trend manages to cram a tremendous number of tedious affectations into tight quarters: design fetishism, ostentatious minimalism, costly self-abnegation. Shafrir points out that it’s “not new for people to be living in R.V.s or mobile homes; it’s just that there’s a new vocabulary to gentrify living in a small space.” A recent article in *The New Republic*, by Sarah Jones, connected tiny houses to two other lifestyle trends: “raw water” (unfiltered drinking water, often collected from the natural environment) and “#vanlife” (living in a van, but on Instagram). Those who collect their drinking water, Jones writes, have “adopted a hardship that poor people suffer, and stripped it of its association with poverty.” She adds: “Raw water is a way of gentrifying that poverty.”

The poor are still gentrification’s victims, but in this new meaning, the harm is not rent increases and displacement — it’s something psychic, a theft of pride. Unlike housing, poverty is a potentially endless resource: Jeff Bezos could Hoover up all the wealth that exists in the world, then do nothing but drink rainwater collected from the roof of his ’79 Vanagon, and it wouldn’t stop the other seven billion of us from being poor. What this metaphorical gentrification points to instead is dishonesty, carelessness and cluelessness on the part of the privileged when they clomp into unfamiliar territory. When they actually profit from their “discovery” and repackaging of other people’s lifestyles, it’s a dispiriting re-enactment of long-running inequalities. But what seems most galling isn’t that they’re taking dollars off the table. It’s that they’re *annoying*.

It’s not surprising that “gentrification” has become a more capacious idea lately: The phenomena it describes seem inescapable. But there’s something in this new usage that obfuscates as much as it reveals, lending cover to the much larger forces that shape our lives. Minority communities are being dismantled as macroeconomic winds transform urban America. Researchers are now concerned that the high cost of housing is a drag on our whole economy, with young people either trapped spending too much on rent or fleeing overheated urban markets altogether for places

with worse jobs but cheaper housing. Some of them, I've heard, are even living out of vans.

The word “gentrification” was coined almost offhandedly in 1964, by the British sociologist Ruth Glass, in an essay about postwar London. Looking around her, she saw a city becoming more modern and affluent. This came with certain ills: Commutes were getting longer, traffic worse, middle-class jobs more specialized (“project engineer”; “system analyst”) and menial ones more scarce. And something striking was happening in the working-class parts of town. They were being “invaded by the middle classes — upper and lower.” These newcomers were buying up the “shabby, modest mews and cottages” and turning them into “elegant, expensive residences.” “Once this process of ‘gentrification’ starts in a district,” Glass writes, “it goes on rapidly until all or most of the working-class occupiers are displaced, and the whole social character of the district is changed.”

Her coinage contained within it an ambiguity that persists to this day. The root of “gentrification” — “gentry” — can refer either to those of not-quite-aristocratic birth or to those who profit from land ownership; either to the well-off in general or to the *rentier* class in particular. This lack of clarity is fitting: In a gentrifying neighborhood, title to the land is transferred first in the literal sense and then in the spiritual one, as local businesses and institutions change to serve the tastes of wealthier arrivals. To use “gentrification” to describe lifestyle trends is to focus on that second step rather than the first one — to focus on class signifiers instead of class itself.

Last year, the academics Jason Patch, John Joe Schlichtman and Marc Lamont Hill published a book about gentrification that examined their own roles in the process, branding themselves right in the title: “Gentrifier.” This is another fascinating new twist on Glass’s term. After all, Britain’s rigid class system made it easy enough for her to clearly identify the people doing the gentrifying: It was the gentry. Here in the States, though, we’ve adopted a novel word meaning “one who gentrifies” — the *active* colonist, someone who tries on neighborhoods like shirts at a thrift shop. This turns gentrification into a lifestyle choice. Hence the scores of listicles that have cropped up on websites that cater to well-meaning millennials, working either to steer the budding gentrifier in a noble direction (Thought Catalog’s

“10 Rules for Being a Good Gentrifier From an Urban Planner in Brooklyn”) or to suggest that she might avoid the epithet while still participating in the process (AlterNet’s “20 Ways Not to Be a Gentrifier”). Invariably these articles suggest shopping locally, talking to your neighbors and, above all, being self-aware about your impact. Befriending your bodega guy is a great thing to do, but it’s of limited assistance when the landlord triples his rent.

If the logic of conscious consumerism has come to infect what we mean by “gentrification,” perhaps it’s because the process always begins with people who are expected to know better: the “creative class.” In a 1979 book called “Neighborhood Renewal,” the urban theorist Phillip L. Clay outlined four stages of gentrification: In the first, “pioneers” — often bohemians and artists — move to dilapidated or abandoned areas in search of cheaper rents; in the second, the middle classes follow; in the third, their numbers displace the original population; and in the final stage, the neighborhood is fully turned over to banks, developers and the wealthy. By this point, the artists are being priced out to another subway stop or another city — where they will be greeted as though they’ve come seeking adventure.

But the journalist Peter Moskowitz, in the 2017 book “How to Kill a City,” suggests a fifth stage should be added to Clay’s list, so we can accommodate arrangements like those in Midtown Manhattan, where multimillion-dollar condominiums are built and sold to shell corporations, presumably owned by foreign billionaires, and often left vacant. “The fifth and last phase of gentrification,” he writes, “is when neighborhoods aren’t just more friendly to capital than to people but cease being places to live a normal life.” New York’s skyline is erupting with buildings like these — stacks of cash-stuffed mattresses teetering in the wind. And The Times reported last year that the West Village’s Bleecker Street had fallen victim to “high-rent blight,” with commercial space becoming so expensive (\$45,000 a month) that even Marc Jacobs couldn’t keep his stores open; shops that once catered to the wealthy now sit empty, waiting for a tenant who can foot the bill. When the heist is done and it’s time to split the loot, capital snuffs out culture.

And yet it’s culture — and its perceived appropriation — that has ingrained itself in the way we think about gentrification. It’s almost as though, in the face of unstoppable, invisible forces, we’ve grabbed hold of what we can see and control.

Investors could buy and sell every building on your block without your ever noticing, but the coffee shop where the staff is mean to everybody is right in front of you. All the while, global flows of capital course through your metropolis, wearing down every bump and cranny. They will continue until the day it's finally as smooth and featureless as a river rock — and you're shopping around for a reasonably cozy van.

Correction: January 24, 2018

An earlier version of this article misstated the year that an article on the “tiny house” phenomenon appeared in BuzzFeed. It was 2016, not 2015.

Willy Staley is a story editor for The Times Magazine. He last wrote about the writer and director Mike Judge. He has also written for New York magazine, California Sunday and The Fader.

Sign up for our newsletter to get the best of The New York Times Magazine delivered to your inbox every week.

A version of this article appears in print on January 28, 2018, on Page MM11 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: First Class.