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Introduction

TODAY, MANY rely on *gentrification* to evoke a variety of feelings, meanings, and messages. People use *gentrification* to communicate ideas unrelated to neighborhood change. Indeed, there are increasing references to how individuals, politics, and even food and flags "gentrify."

The liberal use of *gentrification* in everyday discourse is unmistakable. According to the *New York Times*, Burning Man has "gentrified" (Jones et al. 2023), and, according to *New Yorker* writers, so too has polyamory and penile enhancement.[1] Ava Kofman writes for the *New Yorker*: "Prominent urologists had long seen penile enlargement as the remit of cowboys and regarded Elist [a urologist] as such, insofar as they regarded him at all. As part of Penuma's *gentrification campaign*, Elist got the F.D.A. to explicitly clear his implant for the penile region in 2017 . . . his company also began to recruit 'key opinion leaders,' . . . to advise the company and join its new board" (2023, 30; my emphasis).[2]

In Kofman's rendering, to "gentrify" is to take something once unrarified and to render it elite. The *New York Times* writes similarly of how the Burning Man festival has changed: "Many said the unexpected rain had brought out the gritty, self-reliant roots of a festival that has sometimes been *criticized for gentrifying* into a destination party for tech moguls and social-media influencers" (Jones et al. 2023; my emphasis).[3] Here, grit is exchanged for glamour, and the economic and media elite replace the everyday artist.

I encountered these examples of *gentrification* as a metaphor not as I researched this book, but, rather, as part of my ordinary, daily news

media diet. To be sure, I am a member of what the sociologist Wendy Griswold terms the "reading class."[4] That is, I am more likely than some others to consume sources like the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times* that deploy *gentrification* to communicate the elite appropriation of the everyday, average, and humble, and that, crucially, subtly position that appropriation—or "gentrification"—as negative. At least in the corner of the world that I—a forty-something Boston professor—occupy, this symbolic deployment of *gentrification* is unmistakable, and even unavoidable.

This book is an exploration of that symbolic deployment. It explores what *gentrification* means today and charts its new, symbolic life across a variety of realms of contemporary popular culture, scholarship, and activism. The book also offers an argument about how and why *gentrification* has entered the mainstream. I believe that this work is crucial and timely because we live with *gentrification* now. Not just in cities across the globe, and not even just in our rural hamlets, but also in our cultural life. *Gentrification* is an idea that we have latched on to; it is a lens through which some present the world and through which some of us, increasingly, interpret things—from sandwiches to sculpture to our own selves.[5]

More and more people are familiar with what the Showtime series *The Curse* calls the "G Word." At the same time, more and more people increasingly assign a collection of different meanings to the term—meanings that both play off of and extend beyond brick-and-mortar, or what I refer to as "literal gentrification," following the example of Sarah Schulman, the author of *The Gentrification of the Mind* (2012).[6] Most prominently, these include generalized upscaling; the appropriation by elites of something that once belonged to the working class, particularly to working-class ethnic and racial minorities; the loss of "authenticity" and of community; and involuntary change. This book reveals how *gentrification* has come to occupy space rendered vacant by the absence of a shared language for directly addressing structural inequalities and concomitant social changes. That is, the pages that follow document how cultural actors rely on *gentrification* to help them communicate messages about how unequal opportunity structures shape our lives, as well as about the feelings of loss that many associate with social change.

We will see that *gentrification* is at the nexus of contemporary cultural currents. It captures enduring ambivalence and anxiety about social change, as well as about navigating social heterogeneity (can we all live together?!). *Gentrification* knits those long-standing concerns together with pressing worries of our times about deepening inequalities and attendant social divisions and conflict. Recognizing these currents helps us to understand how and why *gentrification* works well as a communication device. It also reveals how *gentrification* is a window into the problems that weigh on cultural producers and that they turn to *gentrification* to explore, if not to solve.

Literal gentrification continues apace. In my own city of Boston, nearly everyone, from the poor to the upper-middle class, grapples, in distinct ways and to varying degrees, with the consequences of several decades of intensive reinvestment and subsequent severe affordable housing shortages, sky-high rents, and commercial vacancies borne of unaffordable storefront leases.[7] As chair of my department, I must tell faculty job candidates how professors navigate a remarkably expensive housing market, and I field emails from new graduate students stymied by the search for an affordable place to live. Here, we are so in the grasp of literal gentrification, or the kind of brick-and-mortar upscaling and demographic turnover that is so recognizable in so many contemporary cities, that hardly a day goes by when, setting my own scholarship aside, I do not think of literal gentrification and of how it shapes life around me.

But this book calls on us to acknowledge how the symbolic power of the term has stripped it of the original meaning sociologist and urban planner Ruth Glass assigned *gentrification* in 1964 when she coined the phrase. Glass defined *gentrification* as the movement of the middle classes into working-class city neighborhoods. According to Glass, the middle class renovated existing housing stock, raising prices, and, subsequently, displaced the original, working-class residents.[8]

"One by one," Glass famously wrote, "many of the working class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle classes—upper and lower Shabby, modest mews and cottages—have been taken over, when their leases have expired, and have become elegant, expensive residences. . . . Once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district, it

goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working class occupiers are displaced, and the whole social character of the district is changed" (Glass 1964). Eventually, the neighborhood becomes the domain of the gentry, with working-class residents, their businesses, and the "character" that both lent to the neighborhood (Glass 1964) increasingly vanished.

Today, the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times* echo Glass not only by using the term she coined, but also by using *gentrification* to convey changed social character or status. However, the changed character and status that they aim to communicate is not that of a city neighborhood, but rather that of a desert festival and a penile implant company. *Gentrification* has been loosed from its original meaning. We might say that *gentrification* has a new life as a metaphor.

Gentrification's New Life

Today, talk of *gentrification* is not limited to urban settings or issues; *gentrification* has a life that extends well beyond the traditional parameters of urban change. More and more, *gentrification* is used to evoke a broad set of transformations, from the personal to the collective and the political; from the spatial to the immaterial. A prominent example is the aforementioned *Gentrification of the Mind*, in which the author Sarah Schulman deploys "gentrification" as a metaphor to explain how, partially as a result of material changes, some urbanites' mentalities have changed (2012). *Gentrification* no longer narrowly refers to urban residential change; that specific connotation has perished in favor of more flexible and nimble evocations of the term that are increasingly detached from urban political-economic transformation.

References to *gentrification* are abundant, heterogenous, and cut across a range of realms, including literature, activism, artwork, scholarship, and everyday conversation. As an idea or term, *gentrification* is also increasingly flexible. The writers, artists, scholars, and activists whom this book features have come to wield *gentrification* to communicate a range of ideas, experiences, and processes. In other words, *gentrification* is a resource they leverage for a variety of purposes, from supporting

social movements to calling together a sense of community to signaling that viewers ought to be critical of how a television character has transformed or upscaled.

As the four chapters that follow reveal, *gentrification* has become a staple shortcut for talking about a range of social issues and dynamics, including growing income inequalities. It has, equally, become a way of *talking around* or dodging issues pertaining to inequality that make many uncomfortable.[9] Sometimes, talk of *gentrification*, or communication that occurs in conversation, print, or other media that evokes *gentrification*, serves to avoid direct engagement on issues related to race, class, and sexualities; other times, it works in exactly the opposite manner, serving as a kind of signal or wink that inequalities are afoot.

This book provides a cultural map of the idea of *gentrification*; it reviews how *gentrification* operates in contemporary discourse and entertainment. It documents how cultural producers rely on *gentrification* to cultivate social ties; to describe the transformation of place-based communities forged in shared space; and to describe the evolution the self. It also reveals how *gentrification* is a tool that movement activists and scholars alike deploy to diagnose the structural roots of social inequalities and cultural appropriation. Put differently, this book explores the new territories that *gentrification* has taken, migrating from its original home in urban studies to the realms of art, television, literature, film, social media, and social movement activism.

If *gentrification* doesn't just mean literal gentrification anymore, what does it mean? Above all else, *gentrification* has been reborn as a catch-all term to indicate elite appropriation of something significant to a lower status group, and the transformation of a person, group, or object to a more elite or rarified version. *Gentrification* also often implies that something "authentic" has been lost, in favor of something more upscale. In this sense, when cultural producers rely on *gentrification* as a metaphor, they often do so to leverage subtle criticism of how something has changed or to communicate a sense of loss that they believe such change produces.

While scholars increasingly attend to how *gentrification* operates in novels, television shows, or in the media, few take a bird's eye view of *gentrification* as a symbol to which a variety of actors assign meaning and

leverage for their own purposes across a variety of domains of contemporary life.[10] This book looks across genre and form to document the heterogeneous manner in which *gentrification* operates as a metaphor, as well as patterns apparent across a broad assemblage of usages. I do not, as my terrific colleagues in the humanities do, trace in fine detail precisely how plot lines and character development rely on *gentrification*. Instead, my analysis is sociological or, one might say, more meta; I look across genres and fields to provide a portrait of *gentrification*'s new life and to document what *gentrification* reveals about how contemporary cultural producers frame social issues, such as racial and economic inequalities, segregation, and the problems of contemporary neoliberalism and corporate capitalism.

Scholars of brick-and-mortar gentrification have not yet directly acknowledged the vivid, independent life of *gentrification*.[11] I write this book from the vantage point of a longtime scholar of literal gentrification. I have, for almost a quarter of a century, studied gentrification on the ground via ethnographic research. I have also mapped scholarly debates about literal gentrification, and examined newspaper coverage of brick-and-mortar gentrification. As a result, I am keenly attentive to how usages of metaphorical *gentrification* relate to scholarly representations of literal gentrification, and I aim to start a conversation about the implications of *gentrification*'s new life as a metaphor for the study of literal gentrification, as well as for the development of policies that might help us to predict and address its consequences for residents and for the places in which they live.[12]

I am also a cultural sociologist drawn to questions of how meanings and concepts take shape and influence social life. As a result, while I bring the conversation back to literal gentrification more than some humanists might do, this book does not advocate for a single shared definition of *gentrification* that is narrowly wedded to how urbanists conceive of the term.[13] Above all else, this book is guided by my abiding curiosity about *gentrification*'s new life, and, secondarily, by questions about the implications that new life has for its old one.

In the chapters that follow, I draw attention to *three primary ways* in which *gentrification* is deployed, relying on examples from a range of

cultural forms. These are just a few items from an archive that I have collected—at first by accident, and then with intention. My concern is not that they are representative, nor that they capture the full range of variation in how *gentrification* works as a symbolic device. Instead, I rely on them as illustrative examples of the patterns evident in my archive of cultural objects, from art to songs to television series to novels, that rely on *gentrification* as a metaphor or communication device.[14] I also hope that they operate as a call for others to constitute an even broader and more heterogeneous archive. I aim for this to be the start of a conversation and for the examples that I rely on to serve as benchmarks for readers as they contemplate the broader landscape in which *gentrification* operates as a symbol and device.

First, some deploy *gentrification* to *rebuild community*, such as artists who use anti-gentrification installations to express nostalgia for White working-class communities and dyke bar commemorators who use talk of *gentrification* to regenerate community without relying on extant identity politics.[15] *Gentrification* works in this way because it evokes vulnerability and marginality; gentrification harms, largely by displacing and disrupting a way of life.[16] For some, talk of the threat of *gentrification* or nostalgia for how a community was before literal gentrification works to help a group remember what it shares—or once shared—and therefore to find the common ground on which identity-based community rests. *Gentrification* can denote a sense of shared loss that has the potential to be generative of a sense of commonality or "groupness."

Second, cultural producers rely on *gentrification* to *express and examine the transformation of the self*.[17] These accounts present individuals from traditionally marginalized groups who have achieved mobility, such as a Black playwright, and they position the "gentrification" of the self as severing one's original authenticity. In this rendering, to "gentrify" is to become upscale and to become less real and less connected to one's natal community. Like a refurbished home, the new self bears a resemblance to its original state, but it has been remade for a more elite audience. Here, *gentrification* again denotes loss, but a loss borne by an individual, specifically by the "gentrifying" subject who

leaves community, authenticity, and originality behind as they become more upscale.

Third, *gentrification serves as a shorthand for the systemic roots of social problems and issues.* A variety of actors deploy *gentrification* in this manner, from Black Lives Matter activists to journalists and academics; these cultural producers rely on talk of *gentrification* to underline the problems of late-stage capitalism and neoliberalism. Even gentrification scholars sometimes rely on *gentrification* as a metonym to build arguments about endemic racial and economic inequalities and cultural appropriation. When *gentrification* is used in this manner it works as a metaphor for—and sometimes simultaneously as an illustration of—the structural roots of broad social problems and inequities.

I first explored the themes of this book in an article in the *American Journal of Sociology*, which traces how dyke bar commemorators in four US cities rely on talk of *gentrification* to bring disparate LBQT+ individuals together to reestablish community.[18] My ethnographic research revealed that commemorators neither aim to revive bars, nor to forestall literal gentrification. Instead, they use the memory of bars and talk of *gentrification* to create a sense of shared marginality among a heterogeneous collection of LBQT+ individuals. Disdain for literal gentrification and nostalgia for bars serve as a "social glue" that facilitates connection and commonality, despite differences along the lines of race, class, age, and gender.[19]

This drew my attention to *gentrification* as a symbolic device. When commemorative activists placed literal gentrification front and center—despite the fact that they did not aim to advocate against literal gentrification—the research questions that are central to *The Death and Life of* Gentrification emerged: What does *gentrification* mean today, within and beyond the academy?[20] How does that meaning vary? How do activists and cultural producers use talk of *gentrification*; what work does it accomplish for them?

The pages that follow chronicle how *gentrification* functions in contemporary culture, at least as it appears in my archive—or the collection of cultural objects that rely on *gentrification* as a communication tool that I analyze in the book's chapters. They also explore how six decades

of fractious scholarship have contributed to the ambiguity that freed *gentrification* to become a device that activists, novelists, playwrights, and screenwriters deploy, as well as how abundant deployment of *gentrification* as a metaphor begets more of the same, creating new opportunities for the meaning and role of *gentrification* to proliferate and to coalesce around several dominant usages.[21] Finally, I discuss the consequences of this abundant usage of *gentrification* for scholars and policymakers.

While humanities scholars are increasingly attentive to *gentrification* as a storytelling device, perhaps in the interest of maintaining scientific authority and a related commitment to treating literal gentrification as a measurable empirical process, scholars of gentrification as a brick-and-mortar process have habitually looked away from *gentrification* as a concept or symbol to which a variety of actors assign meaning and leverage for their own purposes.[22] We have devoted too little attention to *gentrification*'s vivid, independent life.

How *Gentrification* Was Reborn

The Death and Life of Gentrification maps how and why *gentrification* is so easily adopted for a wide array of aims. First and foremost, both literal gentrification and *gentrification* as a term are *abundant and enduring*. This ubiquity and familiarity render the term increasingly recognizable and retrievable.

Second, gentrification is *deeply associated with the "urban,"* which is, in its own right, weighty and charged. Because of its association with the city, *gentrification* is especially evocative of urban racial and economic inequalities and sexual heterogeneity; it has become a shorthand that allows us to, in some cases, efficiently reference these subjects, and, in others, to dodge direct conversation about them, while, at the same time, indirectly signaling their relevance. As literal gentrification has advanced in recent decades in many neighborhoods that were historically home to racial minorities, the notion that literal gentrification is a process of racial turnover or replacement—with White gentrifiers replacing Black and Latinx residents, for instance—has become

widespread.[23] This partially enables *gentrification*, as a term, to evoke ideas about race, racism, and displacement. In this sense, *gentrification* can be a wink. We might say, for instance, that San Francisco's Mission neighborhood has *gentrified* rather than explicitly acknowledging the substantial displacement of Latinx populations and an influx of White tech workers. In other words, *gentrification* evokes racial, economic, and sexual differences and related inequalities that we associate with the urban; by using the term one can gesture to these issues without talking about them directly.

Third, *gentrification* evokes not only the urban but also *change itself*.[24] Because change is such a general and inclusive experience, this association renders *gentrification* a nimble and resonant concept. It is this conflagration with change that partially allows *gentrification* to evoke personal and collective transformations, from a person's evolving class status to changing sexual identities. Popular culture presents the "gentrified" self as bourgeois and inauthentic; thus, novels and TV series present upwardly mobile Latinx and African American women as "gentrified" and increasingly divorced from their cultural roots.

Fourth, *gentrification* is multivocal, in part because it is a concept that is hotly contested by experts; among literal gentrification experts there is much discord about literal gentrification's causes and consequences, and even about how to define and measure it.[25] The prolific and fractured scholarly literature, which seeps into the news media, helps liberate *gentrification* from any narrow meaning. Partially as a result, *gentrification* can be deployed to tell a range of stories and to accomplish an array of aims. As I've suggested above, this is not the only reason that *gentrification* operates as a metaphor, but it is one piece of the explanation for why we can find *gentrification* on our television screens, in the novels that we read, in the songs that we listen to, and on Reddit.

Gentrification has become a holding container—for scholars and everyday actors alike—for so many anxieties and hopes and political positions that it has come to mean, more and more, very little. Consider, for instance, that some scholars define literal gentrification as Ruth Glass did in 1964: as the movement of the professional classes into working-class neighborhoods. Consider, that, at the same time, others define it

specifically as a process of racial turnover, with White gentrifiers moving into the neighborhoods of racial minorities.[26] This way of thinking about literal gentrification has proliferated in recent years, as the gentrification of Black, Latinx, and other racial minority neighborhoods has intensified (after several decades of upscaling in White immigrant neighborhoods); this is, in a sense, literal gentrification's new "frontier," and definitions of brick-and-mortar gentrification are adjusting in real time as the frontier moves.[27] Consider that some, like Glass, insist there is no literal gentrification without displacement. Consider that others contend that in some instances, literal gentrification occurs without engendering significant, direct displacement.[28] As these impasses illustrate, literal gentrification is, conceptually, a moving target—within the academy, and, as this book reveals, well beyond it. Consider also that positions on these academic debates relate not just to how one thinks about *gentrification*, but also to how one thinks about a broader set of dynamics and concepts, such as the role of racial inequalities in shaping cities.

But that is not all. In October of 2023, with my colleague, the geographer Loretta Lees, I organized an international conference on literal gentrification at Boston University. Some of our keynote speakers—at a conference titled "Gentrification and Displacement"—suggested that they are not comfortable with the term *gentrification*. They are not alone in this. This view is particularly abundant among scholars of the Global South, some of whom resist applying a Global North concept to explain a region that experienced intensive colonization.[29] But discomfort with the term is by no means limited to such scholars. This theme cut across the conference.

Some scholars prefer to speak and write of colonization; they regard literal gentrification as an extension of an enduring imperialist project. Others prefer financialization, intentionally connecting literal gentrification to broader processes of capital accumulation. Still others suggest that racial capitalism works as well as anything else to describe what has been called *gentrification*.[30] By stepping back from *gentrification* they situate neighborhood upscaling in a broader set of processes and dynamics—and gesture more overtly to the broad causes of neighborhood

reinvestment and displacement. In this rendering, literal gentrification is a symptom, rather than a direct cause, of enduring racial and economic inequalities, capitalist dynamics, and many decades of urban planning and policy. Thus, some scholars who study literal gentrification are ambivalent about the term *gentrification*, in part because they worry that it distracts from underlying processes and histories that facilitate what Ruth Glass termed *gentrification*.

I agree with many of these scholars that one of the problems of *gentrification*, as an idea, is that it evokes the end of a process, the tip of the iceberg, if you will, rather than the full history and set of forces that will literal gentrification into being.

I don't say this lightly. I have spent much of the last two and a half decades writing and thinking about literal gentrification. I impugn myself, as much as anyone else, when I write these words. As I gestured to above, and as other scholars argue, we omit oceans upon oceans when we call literal gentrification the cause of anything, which is why contemporary scholars increasingly rely on racial capitalism, colonialism, or financialization to explain the dominance of literal gentrification.[31]

I suspect that there is a relationship between the broad adoption of *gentrification* in popular culture and the two features of gentrification scholarship that I highlighted above: the enduring debates that characterize the literature on literal gentrification and ambivalence among *gentrification* scholars about allegiance to the term and concept of literal gentrification. When experts on a concept become ambivalent about that concept and openly debate its meaning and significance, that ambivalence and those debates are unlikely to stay in a vacuum.[32] The reader will find that I believe they have bearing on *gentrification*'s new life.

But just how much bearing do they have? How can we be certain about which came first—scholarly debates about *gentrification* or popular adoption of *gentrification* as a metaphor? Do scholars become increasingly ambivalent about terms once they are taken up by the masses and lose some of their specificity? Perhaps. Do endless academic debates about literal gentrification—what it means, when to apply the term, whether gentrification is singular or multiple—help to create a certain haziness about *gentrification* that has freed the term for expansive and creative popular adoption? Perhaps. I won't make a neat causal

argument, claiming that this ambivalence has a clear root or time stamp, but I return to these questions again in the conclusion.[33] Throughout the book, I entertain the possibility that scholars and other cultural producers are, directly and indirectly, co-creating *gentrification*'s new life.

Still, I want be clear that scholarly debate is not the only explanation for *gentrification*'s new life. *Gentrification*'s strong association with other powerful concepts, such as the urban and change, also plays a crucial role. Moreover, the ubiquity and durability of brick-and-mortar gentrification renders the term highly recognizable and retrievable. And the more we rely on *gentrification* as a metaphor, the more available the term becomes for adoption and, with it, evolution.

However, as a scholar of literal gentrification and as one who has devoted significant attention to scholarly debate on the subject, I have an obligation to consider how academic debates about literal gentrification are at play in *gentrification*'s new life as a metaphor. Nonetheless, I would not want the reader to mistake the fact that I task myself with considering the influence of literal gentrification on metaphorical *gentrification* as constituting the book's core argument, nor as an effort to narrowly impugn scholars of literal gentrification for the term's new role.

I should also be clear that I believe that conceptual messiness about how to define and explain literal gentrification is useful. It is useful, in no small part, because it pulls back the covers on how literal gentrification emerged from a long-standing and interconnected web of policies, practices, and planning, and how gentrification is but one face of contemporary capitalism and other political and economic processes and dynamics that shape the unequal world in which we live. In general, scholarly debates are generative because they refine and advance ideas. At the same time, this conceptual messiness, however clearsighted it is, may, alongside the other factors that I mention above, have helped to open the door for *gentrification*'s rebirth as a symbolic device.

Gentrification Hits Newstands

As I mentioned at the outset, over the last several years I have, by chance, stumbled upon news media reports that rely on *gentrification* as a metaphor. That is, they evoke *gentrification* not to capture

brick-and-mortar gentrification, but to encapsulate a different kind of transformation.

To get an idea of the scope and contours of such reporting, with a team of student researchers I conducted a targeted search of a decade of references to the "gentrification of" in a database of articles from eight major US newspapers, eliminating references to the "gentrification of" neighborhoods so that I could zero in on references to the "gentrification" of things that have little to do with literal gentrification. What does *gentrification* mean today? How do some people use *gentrification* to talk about things that have little to do with cities or brick-and-mortar upscaling? Answering these questions will provide us with a shared landscape of the range of meanings and purposes that cultural producers assign to *gentrification* and, from the book's outset, will provide the reader with a sense of the breadth and diversity of usages of *gentrification*—as well as of some of the patterned ways in which cultural producers deploy the term.

As is true of much of this book, I won't offer a full recap of that research, such as the frequency of references per newspaper or over time (although our analysis did capture those patterns). Instead, I provide illustrative examples of the patterned ways in which the news media relies on *gentrification* to describe the transformation of entities that are not urban neighborhoods. I do so to sketch a portrait of just how abundant and broad-ranging this liberal use of *gentrification* is, as well as to signal the work that *gentrification* accomplishes as a communication device.

As the rest of the book will reveal, the patterns apparent in newspaper coverage extend beyond print media—to Reddit, literature, scholarship, television shows, documentary, and sculpture. I begin with newspaper coverage to introduce the patterned deployment of *gentrification* as a metaphor that this book's chapters trace and develop. There is more and more talk of *gentrification*, but that talk is, less and less, merely about literal gentrification. Instead, literal gentrification has become a powerful reference point that enables *gentrification* to serve as an abundant and powerful metaphor.

Journalists use *gentrification* to describe the upscaling and appropriation of a broad range of entities, particularly those that once belonged to racial minorities. Take a *Boston Globe* article that quotes a Twitter post:

"'Dunkin' Donuts 'inventing' donut fries is the gentrification of the churro'" (Nanos 2018).[34] In another article, the *Globe* writes, "Thus began the gentrification of cable."[35] In a *New York Times* op-ed, Ginia Bellafante asks, "Must We Gentrify the Rest Stop?"[36] For its part, in a long article on changes to military commissaries, the *Chicago Tribune* makes a casual claim about *gentrification*, writing: "The gentrification of the commissaries began in the name of efficiency" (Chandrasekaran 2013).[37]

This is not the only example in which it is food—or the venues that sell food—that "gentrify." A *Chicago Tribune* journalist writes that "the real story in barbecue in the last several years has been the gentrification of the genre—spareribs and long smoked brisket repositioned as totems of the artisanal food movement" (Gold 2013).[38] A *New York Times* article laments "the gentrification of the sandwich" (Rosenberg 2016).[39] Similarly, another article captures anxiety about the upscaling of a longtime, affordable New York food market: "Alarms went off after the *Times* reported on the planned makeover [of Grand Central Market]. . . . The news bounced around the blogosphere, drawing complaints about the loss of authenticity. *Times* staff writer Joseph Serna denounced the gentrification of the 'people's market'" (Holland 2013).[40]

It is not just food that "gentrifies." Reflecting on an upscale marijuana dispensary near a remodeled Erotica Museum with "a sleek steel and stone exterior," the author of a *Los Angeles Times* article suggests that the museum, together with the fancy dispensary, embodies, "the gentrification of vice" (Montero 2018).[41] Echoing this, a *Los Angeles Times* theater critic suggests that the themes of a show include "the gentrification of cannabis" (Lloyd 2019).[42] Seven years earlier, the *New York Times* referred to "the gentrification of contemporary art" (Cotter 2012)[43] and, a year after that, "the gentrification of conventional pickups, including Chevy's own Silverado" (Tingwall 2013).[44] According to the same paper, the self can "gentrify,"[45] as can addiction (Roller 2016).[46]

Music "gentrifies," too. A *Boston Globe* article describes an "idealistic community grappling with a 21st-century gentrification of concert going" (Borrelli 2015).[47] Another says, "It's largely thanks to a global commercial interest in [Puerto Rico's] musical output, namely reggaeton, that Bad Bunny was able to launch his career in the first place; as a

result, many a mainstream pop heartthrob has been rebranded in the image of Bunny and other Caribbean artists, furthering the gentrification of their sounds" (Exposito 2022).[48] Here, something specific and special to a particular group becomes available for consumption by a broader group, and, in so doing, becomes less exceptional. There is loss associated with becoming more upscale and mainstream, or so this deployment of *gentrification* suggests.

Building on this sense of lost exceptionality, newspaper accounts suggest that when entities "gentrify," they become more upscale, less distinctive, and less authentic. Consider a *Chicago Tribune* article, in which the author engaged in a conversation about English pubs: "'But, wait, I said, there's no gentrification of the English pub?' Wright: 'Absolutely, there is! Our joke about them looking the same now is right. Our pubs are being streamlined, like your bars. The rough edges are coming off . . . The signage, menus, all exactly the same. It's sad. . . . Pubs, down to their names, once had a florid eccentricity. Occasionally, an actual historical link. Now it all seems pulled out of a hat somewhere else'" (Borrelli 2013).[49] Pubs, like neighborhoods, are losing their distinction—but not because the places where pubs are located are literally gentrifying. In this rendering, to "gentrify" is to upscale regardless of how the city itself is transforming. Corporatization and literal gentrification are synonymous, and the end result is stultifying sameness and a loss of authenticity. Here, *gentrification* again communicates how change produces feelings of loss, this time of distinction and authenticity.

Sometimes media accounts build connections between literal gentrification and the "gentrification" of culture. For example, an article in the *Boston Globe* draws parallels between the literal gentrification of the seaside resort, Provincetown, and the "gentrification" of gay culture: "Ten years before the Supreme Court ruling, and just one year after marriage equality arrived in Massachusetts, Andrew Sullivan famously lamented 'The End of Gay Culture' (or, more specifically, the gentrification of Provincetown) in *The New Republic*, bemoaning the erosion of 'distinctive gayness' in the wake of a fresh wave of acceptance" (Brodeur 2015).[50] However, my research reveals that this type of usage—which evokes the brick-and-mortar gentrification of a specific place as

occurring in tandem with cultural "gentrification"—is rare. Much more frequently, journalists deploy *gentrification* as a metaphor to describe the transformation of entities that changed independently of place-upscaling.

Occasionally, those who deploy *gentrification* as a metaphor take pains to be clear about the specific meaning they assign to the term. Take, for instance, a 2018 *Chicago Tribune* op-ed about collard greens. The author, Clarence Page, writes, "Collard greens are 'the new kale.' So say the chic eaters. But some concerned cultural guardians fear a new social and economic menace: 'food gentrification.' *Gentrification, simply defined, is when something that you used to buy because it was cheap suddenly turns fashionable—which makes it too expensive for its original consumers to afford*" (Page 2014; my emphasis).[51] Another *Tribune* article takes similar pains to explain why *gentrification* works to explain the problem of chefs seeking culinary awards. "There's also the potential gentrification of fine-dining (the *tweaks made to conform to a better rating*); the chefs who grow *more business oriented*" (Borrelli 2014; my emphasis).[52]

While this type of specificity about the meaning that journalists assign to *gentrification* is relatively rare, certain assumptions about *gentrification*— and why it works as a symbolic device—are apparent in other journalists' accounts. For instance, a *New York Times* article reveals the author's presumption that the reader will recognize that *gentrification* harms; the author deems the absence of harm to be noteworthy, writing: "The gentrification of Kickstarter doesn't seem to be hurting its original inhabitants" (Lapidos 2013).[53] Somewhat more subtly, the author of an article on the creation of a charter school in a Los Angeles neighborhood in which parents are dissatisfied with the quality of public schools seems to assume the reader will recognize that literal gentrification is known to generate conflict: "But it's a *charged situation*, the educational equivalent of the gentrification of housing" (Banks 2012; my emphasis).[54]

In these elaborations on what they mean by *gentrification*, we see that journalists ascribe certain meaning to the term. They tend to assume, for instance, that literal gentrification—and therefore its metaphorical extension—is charged or is a site of conflict; that it harms the original inhabitants, owners, creators, or users; that it operates in pursuit of

profit, at the cost of authenticity and other intangible values; and that it takes something affordable and places it out of reach for the average person. They also imply that something, usually authenticity, community, accessibility, or distinction, is lost when something "gentrifies."

Crucially, more often than not, journalists don't bother to spell these associations out for readers; they assume their audience is in the know about literal gentrification and the harm it causes. This illustrates at least some contemporary cultural producers' confidence in *gentrification*'s resonance and retrievability.

On *Gentrification*'s Utility

The certainty that literal gentrification is a problem—and a recognizable one at that—is part of why *gentrification* works as a communication device for journalists and for the activists, academics, artists, and others whom this book engages. *Gentrification* also works as a device because it is evocative of feelings of loss and of appreciation for "authenticity." As is clear in newspaper articles, by evoking *gentrification* journalists effectively tip their hat at a (loosely defined) political and moral position; one that roots for the underdog and decries systems of power, whether corporate or governmental, that favor the elite. However, *gentrification* also has symbolic purchase because it is a nimble word; *gentrification* is a noun that implies action, specifically change, and it is a word that can be used to describe the transformation of a broad diversity of people, places, things, and even ideas. *Gentrification* is catchy (both in the literal sense, and as a term). As the chapters to follow reveal, *gentrification* is also adaptable and flexible, in part because scholarly debate and discord have rendered it so, and because literal gentrification is so prolific and recognizable and emotionally and politically evocative. In short, *gentrification* is multivocal, recognizable, and highly resonant. For all of these reasons, in the current zeitgeist (Krause 2019) the term solves problems for those who deploy it, whether by providing a metaphor that captures the meaning they wish to evoke, or by serving as an efficient metonym for a tough-to-communicate idea (McDonnell et al. 2017, 7).[55] As with certain other terms and ideas, *gentrification*'s

problem-solving utility only expands the more we put it into circulation.[56]

Personally, I am not certain that this adoption of *gentrification* as a symbolic device is a bad thing—as long as we acknowledge the conceptual messiness that this adoption creates and do the work of unpacking it. This is a theme that I explore in the book's conclusion. For now, I will note that if we acknowledge and harness the idea that *gentrification* doesn't just mean neighborhood upscaling anymore, we can garner insights about myriad facets of social life, not just those pertaining to cities and not just pertaining to literal gentrification. This endeavor is also valuable because it pulls back the cover on assumptions about literal gentrification, such as we've already seen, about how it causes harm to the marginal, threatens authenticity, and is, at heart, a conformist practice that reduces the variety and novelty of individuals and communities. By tracing how cultural producers rely on metaphorical *gentrification*, we see, for instance, how frequently they associate literal gentrification with loss and the specific types of change they believe to be generative of loss. At the same time, it sheds light on so much more, such as how cultural producers frame the upward mobility of racially and economically marginalized individuals; how some grapple with what it means for sexual and gender minorities to gain new legal, cultural, and political victories; and the confidence of a growing body of movements in the effectiveness of a metonym that gestures to some of the problems of capitalism. In short, we have much to learn by tracing how cultural producers deploy *gentrification* in a variety of contexts.

That's just what this book aims to do. It traces what cultural producers mean by *gentrification* and documents how they deploy it. In so doing, we learn much about what worries contemporary actors today, how they understand themselves, conceptualize community, and what facets of contemporary life they regard as fragile and in need of protection (from "gentrification"). Looking at how people rely on talk of *gentrification* is a window into contemporary orientations to change, capitalism, racial inequalities, sexual and gender identities, and other social issues.

We learn, for instance, that contemporary social actors seek external explanations for how they and the communities they are a part of

change and evolve. We also learn that some are ambivalent about or even downright uncomfortable with the upward mobility of traditionally marginalized individuals. Still others worry that such mobility and other sources of increased heterogeneity will weaken communities predicated on shared traits. More generally, by closely reading how people rely on *gentrification,* we discover the degree to which many struggle with processing and accepting all kinds of social change, particularly changes that upend the social order and that are not equally distributed across members of a social group. *Gentrification* works to express and encapsulate all of these anxieties. If it sounds like we ask a lot of *gentrification,* that's because we do.

Could we garner insights about contemporary anxieties, yearnings, and ambivalences by looking at any term? After all, *gentrification* is not the first, nor will it be the last, academic term adopted by those outside of the academy with the aim of solving certain problems or carrying certain related meanings (Hallett et al. 2019; McDonnell et al. 2017).[57] Others have written about how media elites and others take up academic concepts, such as social capital, precarity, and the creative class, popularizing them, and, sometimes, altering their meaning (Hallett et al. 2019; Lamont 1987). This book does not, as some works do, compare and contrast the careers of a set of academic concepts; that is, I do not systematically compare *gentrification* to other scholarly terms that have entered the mainstream, nor do I mean to suggest that *gentrification* is the only academic concept that has a new life. My goal, instead, is to specifically explore *gentrification*'s position in the public sphere.

Yet, for reasons I have already mentioned, without formally comparing the term to others, I argue that *gentrification* possesses qualities that make it available for adoption by cultural producers and resonant for a broad audience.[58] These reasons include, but are not limited to, close associations between *gentrification* and other charged concepts such as *urban* and *change*; the ambiguity of scholarly definitions of literal gentrification; the fact that the term, as a word, evokes a process ("ion"); and the reality that literal gentrification is so widespread and so recognizable in a wide array of settings. In addition, literal gentrification is commonly regarded as a social problem that harms marginalized groups

and affects quality of life for many, rendering the term politically and emotionally charged—without gesturing to a specific political position or emotion. Finally, *gentrification* seems to entertain more than most academic concepts that get batted around by the mainstream media. After all, *gentrification* is evident in television series' titles, newspaper headlines (that aren't about literal gentrification), song lyrics, and catchy protest chants. I suspect this is because *gentrification,* unlike an academic concept like *social capital* or the *creative class,* implies interaction, conflict, and a process that unfolds over time; it is even suggestive of character types (longtimers and gentrifiers) and of a semi-predictable plotline (invasion, resistance, and, sadly, inevitable transformation).[59] We might say that *gentrification* was made for television. Again, I build this argument not because I have systematically compared *gentrification* to other terms, but from my close reading of how the term operates in my archive.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence then that the way that *gentrification* is used bears some resemblance to the adoption of *colonization* and *decolonization* as metaphors. This is a trend that has been quite famously—and, in my estimation, rightly—critiqued.

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang point out that *colonization* is frequently used "as a metaphor for oppression" (2012, 20).[60] They go on to suggest that "decolonization" has also been adopted as a metaphor, writing that "'internal colonization' reduces to 'mental colonization,' logically leading to the solution of decolonizing one's mind and the rest will follow" (2012, 20).

Tuck and Yang regard the abundant metaphorical adoption of *colonization* and *decolonization* as deeply problematic, for this adoption fundamentally alters the meaning of the original concepts, partially stripping them of their significance and power. They write that "decolonization specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life. Decolonization is not a metonym for social justice" (2012, 21).

Thus, *gentrification* may be particularly ascendant as a metaphor right now, however, if we take a longer view, we can see that *gentrification* belongs with a few other highly evocative and politicized terms, such as *colonization* and *decolonization.* This class of terms has been liberally

deployed to advance a range of causes, some of which take us far from the meaning of the term as first conceived. While, in contrast to Tuck and Yang, I take a more curious than critical position on how *gentrification* operates in contemporary American culture, throughout the book's chapters and in its conclusion, I ask the reader to think with me about some of the risks inherent in *gentrification*'s new life.

On Metaphor, Metonym, Heuristic, and Parable: A Primer on the New Language of *Gentrification*

At a talk in late 2023, the historian Jules Gill-Peterson made a passing reference to the "gentrification of lesbians" in the 1980s. Sitting in the audience, I assumed she did so to signal that in the 1980s, because of reduced barriers to women's labor force participation and broader access to higher education, some (mostly White) lesbian couples experienced newfound access to the middle class. Notably, Gill-Peterson used the term *gentrification* unselfconsciously and did not pause to ensure that an audience who had gathered to hear a talk on transgender history was certain of her intended meaning. I can only presume that, like so many we will encounter in this book, Gill-Peterson was confident that the audience, which was composed of faculty and students at Boston University, would be familiar with *gentrification*.

This is significant, because Gill-Peterson was not using the term to refer to literal gentrification. Thus, at least to this audience member, it seemed that Gill-Peterson was confident not only that the audience would have a working image of literal gentrification, but that the audience would also understand her use of the term to refer to the transformation of a traditionally marginalized social group to a higher economic position.

What did Gill-Peterson mean by *gentrification*? Why did she adroitly use it to describe lesbians? On first glance, it seems that the historian was deploying the term as a metaphor to illustrate parallels between neighborhood gentrification and the upscaling of lesbians as they achieved economic mobility. On closer examination, though, we can see she was also using *gentrification* as a *metonym* for upscaling—a core

feature of both neighborhood gentrification and of the type of personal upward mobility her language conjured. After all, her sentence would have communicated much of the same meaning if she had said that "lesbians became more upscale" in the 1980s as they entered the professional classes—or became members of the gentry—in greater numbers. In this instance, *gentrification* and *upscaling* work interchangeably.

But to say that lesbians became more upscale in the 1980s would carry a lot less punch than to claim that they *gentrified*. To my ear, the claim that lesbians *gentrified* carries a modest critical edge. When neighborhoods gentrify, many (although not all) will agree, something is lost in the transition; usually, a grittiness and "authenticity" that some mourn once a neighborhood becomes upscale. Cue nostalgic recollections of Times Square pre-Disneyification; of Greenwich Village as a bohemian enclave; of Le Marais as a humble gay enclave. Such neighborhoods may be cleaner and more status-secure now that they are highly gentrified, but many would say they've lost a great deal of character and accessibility as a result.

As we will see in some of the chapters to come, Gill-Peterson—consciously or not—was, at least to my mind, evoking the trope of the lesbian who traded in her lesbian housing collective, protest signs, and natural foods co-op membership for a briefcase, a mortgage, and monogamy. For me, her words brought to mind a 1980s lesbian subject as tidy and unobjectionable as Boston's contemporary Back Bay, but also far less distinctive and engaging than the 1970s version of each. Metaphor and metonym bleed into each other here.

My point here has little to do with either the Back Bay neighborhood or 1980s lesbians. I offer this example to signal that the chapters to come zero in on the new language of *gentrification*.

As my description of Gill-Peterson's talk suggests, in the chapters that follow the reader will find that I closely attend to language. That is, I care very much about how cultural producers—whether a historian or a sculptor—talk about or present *gentrification*. I am not just interested in what they mean by *gentrification* but also in identifying the type of work that the word *gentrification* accomplishes. To get at this, I find it is

helpful to think not only about the content of cultural producers' language, but also about its structure.

To be sure, I am not a literary scholar. Long ago, I imagined I might be an English major, but it has been more than twenty-five years since I became permanently rooted in sociology. Nonetheless, I find it useful to rely on certain literary terms to think about how *gentrification* works for cultural producers. I am not overly concerned with formal or elaborate definitions of the terms I turn to, such as metaphor, metonym, heuristic, and parable. However, I find such terms to be helpful for considering some of the similarities and differences in how people use *gentrification* as a symbolic device.

I've noticed patterns in how cultural producers deploy talk of *gentrification*. Most abundantly, and as we've seen above, they rely on *gentrification* as a *metaphor*—to draw out similarities between two things that are not obviously related to one another. I never once thought of *gentrification* as relevant to penile enhancement, for instance. But once Ava Kofman wrote about it in those terms for the *New Yorker*, I could see how evoking neighborhood upscaling shines a light on how an emerging medical procedure is on a path toward acceptance and respectability.[61] Likewise, before I read an article by Karen Halnon and Saundra Cohen, I hadn't thought of tattoos as "gentrifiable." Yet the authors so successfully rely on the metaphor of "gentrification" to underline how a traditionally working-class form—the tattoo—has been adopted by affluent people, that it permanently altered how I think about tattoos. When I walk by the tattoo shops in my gentrified neighborhood, I can't help but think about how tattoos have traveled from the working-class to the affluent, upscaling in the process.[62] Here, the use of *gentrification* as a metaphor made me see tattoos differently; I now recognize the tattoo as a cultural form that has crossed traditional class barriers, taking on new significance and meaning (and a heftier price tag!).

Still others rely on *gentrification* as a *metonym* that is interchangeable with certain other words. Here, *gentrification* typically stands in for upscaling, as we see above with 1980s lesbians. Often, although not always, this usage implies a critical edge or a subtle stance of judgment about what is lost when something or someone becomes more upscale.

Relatedly, some turn to *gentrification* as a heuristic or a kind of communicative shortcut that efficiently conveys meaning. For instance, the communications scholar Jessa Lingel can tell her reader that the internet has become more elitist and corporatized by simply suggesting it has undergone *gentrification*.[63]

There are certain lessons to be learned from each manner in which cultural producers leverage *gentrification*. From metonyms, we get a close view of the precise meaning *gentrification* holds for cultural producers. For instance, we might see, as I've suggested, that, for many, *gentrification* references a generalized upscaling—to take something previously associated with the working class and make it over for the affluent. By attending to metonyms, the book will reveal that upscaling is the dominant alternate meaning of *gentrification*. Sometimes, *gentrification* still refers to neighborhood upscaling, but sometimes *gentrification* simply refers to upscaling, bracketing neighborhood entirely.

Metonyms matter for an additional reason, too—which is that they reveal the degree to which, for many, the meaning of *gentrification* has drifted away from literal gentrification. I don't mean to suggest that *gentrification* has become entirely divorced from the urban; we will see that literal gentrification is still the most dominant point of reference. However, *gentrification* now evokes more than the urban; its meaning has become diffuse, circulating around upscaling almost as much as around the urban.

Another common way in which cultural producers evoke *gentrification* is as a *parable*. That is, they rely on *gentrification* to convey a moral lesson. Most often, the moral lesson that such stories convey is that to "gentrify" is to engage in a morally questionable act that can separate a person from their "true" community and their "true" self.[64] There is much to learn about how people evaluate the ethics of literal gentrification by paying attention to how they use *gentrification* as a parable. Here, especially, we see how many who deploy *gentrification* as a symbol presume their audiences will agree that *gentrification* is a bad thing; they present *gentrification* as a process that diminishes authenticity, uproots communities, and severs ties. By tracing how *gentrification* works as a parable, we have a powerful reminder that evocations of *gentrification*

are almost never value-neutral. This is even more the case when it comes to evocations of metaphorical "gentrification" than of literal gentrification. Even some who regard literal gentrification in nuanced terms—as providing historically economically disinvested neighborhoods with certain valuable resources, while also problematically displacing long-time residents—will recognize that metaphorical "gentrification" presents the process in starker or more black and white terms. In the realm of metaphorical "gentrification," there is no gray zone when it comes to the morality of *gentrification*. In parables of *gentrification*, something precious is irrevocably lost as it changes.

For those of us who study literal gentrification on the ground, and even more so for those who organize to mitigate literal gentrification and to protect affordable housing, paying attention to these parables reveals a kind of tipping point when it comes to perceptions of literal gentrification. Plenty of cultural producers seem confident that they can present moral problems through the lens of *gentrification*, and that means they are reasonably confident that a large share of their audience will not only recognize *gentrification* as a concept, but that they will also recognize that literal gentrification is problematic—or at least that many regard it as problematic. We can learn a lot about cultural attitudes about literal gentrification from tracking how cultural producers leverage the term to accomplish other kinds of work, including to tell stories that offer moral lessons.

In short, we learn different things from the different ways in which *gentrification* operates as a communication device. I don't explore these usages in any formal sense, but I gesture to them throughout the book, because I think they are useful tools for thinking about the shape that *gentrification*—as an idea—takes in contemporary popular culture. By attending to how cultural producers talk and write about and otherwise depict *gentrification*, we see the precise communicative work that *gentrification* is doing and the meaning it carries today.

The meaning of *gentrification* is not totally random or endlessly heterogeneous either. If one narrow way of thinking of *gentrification*—as strictly referring to neighborhood upscaling—has died, several others now flourish. The book at once underlines the diversity of meanings of

gentrification today and elucidates clusters of meaning and significance associated with *gentrification*. Throughout, I will signpost the most common clusters of meaning. These include, as we've begun to see, upscaling; the appropriation of something belonging to working-class racial and ethnic minorities by the affluent; the loss of authenticity; and the fracturing of community.

Notes on My Own Language

Gentrification

To create order in what might sometimes seem to be a sea of discursive heterogeneity and ambiguous meaning, I want to be clear from the beginning about how I approach the term *gentrification*. Throughout the book, I use *gentrification* in three primary ways. First, as the reader may have noticed, borrowing language from the author Sarah Schulman, I use "literal gentrification" to refer to neighborhood gentrification or to the economic and demographic makeover of neighborhoods along the lines of what Ruth Glass outlined in her original definition (2012).[65]

Schulman coined the phrase "literal gentrification" to distinguish between what she termed "the gentrification of the mind" and "literal gentrification" or the class turnover of Lower Manhattan. Making this distinction neat was imperative for Schulman, as, for her, literal gentrification and the "gentrification of the mind" exist in a causal relationship. Specifically, she argues that the literal gentrification of Manhattan called forth a "gentrification of the mind" or an upscaling and professionalization of creative and experimental populations who had to remake their lives to survive in an increasingly expensive and neoliberal city. Lesbian poets and gay artists, for instance, had to adapt to find a way to live in gentrified Manhattan; they sought degrees and professionalization to survive. Later, they relied on legal marriage to access health insurance and other forms of security in an increasingly neoliberal society that individuates protection and well-being. As result, their perspective changed; in Schulman's terms, their minds "gentrified." In this sense, Schulman has it both ways—she attends both to literal gentrification and to metaphorical "gentrification"—building an argument

about how one (literal gentrification) produced the other ("gentrification of the mind"). Indeed, Schulman's book is a prominent example of the deployment of metaphorical *gentrification* to make a point that extends beyond literal gentrification and to evoke a sense of collective loss. In fact, Schulman's book may have inspired others to wield *gentrification* as a metaphor.[66]

While I follow Schulman by using the term *literal gentrification* to refer to the process that Ruth Glass first described, occasionally I use three other terms interchangeably to capture literal gentrification. I occasionally refer to literal gentrification as neighborhood upscaling, neighborhood gentrification, or as brick-and-mortar gentrification. I do so to signal that I am referring to a place-based process in which one class of people is replaced by another, more affluent, class of people, and to emphasize that literal gentrification produces material changes.

I contrast this with "gentrification"—that is, *gentrification* in quotation marks—by which I mean to refer to metaphorical *gentrification*. I will use "gentrification" to convey that the term is working as a symbolic device to describe the transformation of something that is *not* a neighborhood. We have already encountered several examples of this. We know that penile enhancement has "gentrified" and that, in the 1980s, lesbians did, too. We know that journalists are following the "gentrification" of collard greens and reggaeton and that some films and TV series offer parables that suggest that we ought to guard against our own, personal "gentrification."

Finally, when I mean to refer to *gentrification* as a word or a term, I italicize it. In so doing, I wish to remind the reader that *gentrification*, like any other term, does not have any inherent or stable meaning. It is, after all, not just a process, but also, in simplest terms, a word.

Many of the objects from my archive that we will encounter tell stories of metaphorical "gentrification" set against the backdrop of literal gentrification. Sometimes, like Schulman (2012), they present a relationship between the two things, suggesting that literal gentrification can lead to other "gentrifications." More often, I suspect that they situate metaphorical "gentrification" against the backdrop of literal gentrification because it makes their metaphorical usage more obvious; look,

these two things are changing at once, even though change in one did not directly produce change in the other. This shines a light on how personal or community change shares some of the characteristics of literal gentrification. Take the Starz series *Vida* as an example. The idea that a Latinx character is "gentrifying" is all the more obvious because her personal upscaling is set against a neighborhood undergoing literal gentrification. Even if, in this instance (at least as presented by the show-runners) literal gentrification did not produce metaphorical "gentrification," the changes reflect back on one another, convincing us of the appropriateness of *gentrification* as a metaphor for the primary character's personal transformation.

Cultural Objects

This book analyzes what I will refer to as "cultural objects," from books to television shows to sculptures to academic articles. I borrow the term and concept from the sociologist Wendy Griswold. For Griswold—and for me—a cultural object is, in simplest terms, "shared significance embodied in form" (Griswold 1987, 4), or cultural material that we can see, touch, hear, feel, read, or otherwise engage. A cultural object does not have to be material, although often it is. Cultural objects include beliefs, doctrines, poems, songs, hairstyles, and quilts (Griswold 1987, 4–5). The cultural objects I analyze in this book include television shows, Reddit conversations, newspaper reports, memoirs, nonfiction monographs, novels, academic articles and books, songs, sculpture, and films. In a sense, *gentrification* is itself a cultural object—or a set of cultural ideas encapsulated in a term. Indeed, it would be fair to say that I rely on the analysis of a diverse set of cultural objects to better understand the cultural object at the heart of this book, which is, of course, *gentrification*. I seek to better understand *gentrification* not as a material process, but as an idea, to which many attach significance and meaning.

Cultural objects, of course, do not exist in a vacuum.[67] They are created by cultural producers living in a world full of myriad other cultural objects (Griswold 1997). Whatever meaning a cultural producer, whether a writer, a painter, or a musician, presumes to assign to cultural

objects, the meaning they have is, in large part, shaped by how cultural receivers—or audiences—interpret them (Griswold 1997). Other cultural objects can shape audience reception, such as an advertisement in the midst of a television show or a set of beliefs that a person brings to their engagement with a sculpture or a book.[68] There is also a long pathway between the intentions of the creator of an object and the form the object ultimately takes. This is, in part, because so many different people and processes have a hand in the production of any cultural object. This book, for instance, has been read and commented on by my writing group; it has been the subject of questions and engagement at talks I've given; it has been edited and, later, copyedited. Whatever my original intentions were for this cultural object, it has been shaped along the way by many people, ideas, and institutions.[69] This long winding pathway, and the myriad individuals and institutions that influence the final shape a book takes, is brilliantly captured by Clayton Childress in *Under the Cover* (2017).

Some scholars busy themselves studying the intentions of cultural producers or the reception of cultural objects, or, in the case of Childress, they study all of these things. This book only engages such questions in a passing manner. I do not make claims about the intentionality of representations of *gentrification* in the cultural objects I analyze. I cannot state with any confidence that those who wrote the screenplays and memoirs that I feature, for instance, consciously thought of *gentrification* as a device to communicate a morality tale, nor can I determine whether producers or editors nudged authors or screenwriters to make such devices more prominent. I also cannot be certain that audiences have received or interpreted a film or book—or any other cultural object—in a specific manner, for I have not systematically studied reception.

To make those claims would be to speak beyond the archive that I have assembled and the questions that I have asked. For instance, I do not mean to claim that people self-consciously extend *gentrification* as a metaphor. Instead, I pursue questions about the circulation and diffusion of a concept. My aim is to present a reading of the cultural objects in my archive; to reveal how the objects I've assembled *can* be read or interpreted. Ultimately, I want to reveal what they, collectively, can

(continued...)

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