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# Introduction

Newburgh's gentrification story is all too familiar. Relatively affluent, well-educated professionals move to a place with low-income residents and low housing values. And the more they do so, the more they signal the place's value to progressively affluent people, higher-end businesses, and deeper-pocketed real estate investors. They transform spaces primarily for themselves and others like them and, in turn, reproduce inequalities. The process runs the risk of escalating tensions with existing residents and, indeed, displacing them or saddling them with further housing and social burdens.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, gentrification results from structural conditions, making it a structural process. It cannot be boiled down to a collection of individual decisions. Pinning total blame for the process on specific people is a fruitless task.

At its most basic telling, this version of the story applies to Newburgh, but certain particularities set this city's story apart. These have much to do with Newburgh's size. As a small city, gentrification here is unfolding differently than it does in big cities, which provide the model cases for urban theory.<sup>2</sup>

What's fascinating about small American cities is how their histories often resemble large ones, except in miniature. Many of the same urban forces that shape metropolises also shape small cities—racism and racial inequality included. Gentrification in a small, majority-minority city with deeply entrenched poverty is defined by its proximity to a large city, its diminutive scale, and its legacy of racialized poverty. In Newburgh, these characteristics combine to reorient newcomers' relationship to

space, reposition their roles in gentrification, and reconfigure the actors behind the process.

They also force a reckoning with the moral dilemma at the center of gentrification, with its crucial racial component. Moral, as this book uses the term, refers to the shared meanings of what is good and bad that motivate people's behavior and shape their ideas and choices.<sup>3</sup> In this case, the focus is on the orientations people adopt and use as guides for navigating an urban environment where they face a problem of how to do the right thing where they live. Examining a small city presents new opportunities for making sense of how this complex form of urban change occurs, gets justified, and impacts vulnerable groups.

But before beginning to address the topics under investigation—how small cities grow despite few resources, and how urbanites reconcile appreciating diversity with knowing their strong embrace may be putting it at risk—it's important to note Newburgh's remarkable history.

### A River Town's Rise and Fall

The Lenape were the original settlers of the land that would become Newburgh. For millennia, they flourished in a rich and complex society, hunting the local woodlands, fishing the waters, and growing vegetables. They made their homes in wigwams built from bent saplings and bark. It wasn't until 1609, after Henry Hudson sailed the river that would come to bear his name, that the land was drawn onto European maps. Hudson noted while aboard his ship, the *Half Moon*, that the location at "the northernmost of the mountains" looked like "a very pleasant place to put a town."<sup>4</sup> He was sixty miles from the harbor and the future New York City.

The first major group of Europeans to put down roots in what would become Newburgh were refugees from the Palatinate region in Germany, in 1709.<sup>5</sup> Their settlement grew steadily through the eighteenth century and was named Newburgh in 1750, after a municipality in Scotland. In 1782, Newburgh became the headquarters of General George Washington's Continental Army. Perched atop a bluff, the headquarters overlooked the Hudson while being strategically located near West Point, the oldest continuously operating army post in the country. Washington

stayed in Newburgh longer than in any other place during the Revolutionary War. There, he rejected the suggestion of creating a new monarchy, quashed the Newburgh Conspiracy (a brewing rebellion among his soldiers over back pay), established what would become the Purple Heart, and, in 1783, made his Proclamation of Peace, ending the war.<sup>6</sup>

During the nineteenth century, Newburgh grew wealthy thanks to successful mills and factories that sent their goods downriver. The city's wealth also produced a treasure trove of architecture. The city boasted an unparalleled array of styles—Federal, Greek Revival, Italianate, Carpenter Gothic, Queen Anne, High Victorian, Second Empire, Romanesque Revival, Gothic Revival, Picturesque, and Shingle Style—much of which can still be found today in the city's historic district. It was home to some of the first professional architectural partnerships and firms in the country, including the famed architects Andrew Jackson Downing, who was born in Newburgh and is credited with founding American landscape architecture, and Calvert Vaux, who with Frederick Law Olmsted designed Central Park.

In 1884, Thomas Edison's company built the country's second municipal electric power station in Newburgh, the first having been built in Manhattan two years prior. The electricity it generated was used to light every room at the Palatine Hotel, built in 1893, which became a point of civic pride. The state's governors and New York City's mayors, celebrities of stage and screen, and the business elite all went to stay, dine, dance, and drink at the Palatine. With its stunning river valley views, it demonstrated to the world that this thriving industrial city had arrived.

Newburgh was built from the Hudson River out. The city's location on the western shore of Newburgh Bay—at nearly two miles, one of the widest points on the Hudson—helped it become a thriving port in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Inland farmers also shipped their goods south, mostly to New York City. Teeming with businesses, merchants, and residences, the waterfront was Newburgh's downtown, its heart.

During the twentieth century, however, the waterfront, along with the rest of the city, declined. The gradual fleeing of people, capital, and jobs was set in motion by businesses and various levels of government.<sup>7</sup>

Deindustrialization, or the disappearance of manufacturing businesses and jobs, became a reality in the 1950s. What's more, two interstate highways, I-87, which opened in 1957, and I-84, in 1963, along with a bridge built across the river the same year, created arteries just outside Newburgh's limits, allowing commerce to bypass the city. In another blow, the cross-river ferry service to Beacon, Newburgh's sister city, where residents could catch the closest train to Manhattan, ended in 1963 after 220 years in operation.<sup>8</sup> Disinvestment in Newburgh and investment in its nearby suburbs caused the city's population to shrink while its neighbors' exploded.<sup>9</sup>

In 1956, urban renewal came to Newburgh. The postwar program of federally subsidized demolition in American cities was designed to destroy (then, ideally, revitalize) inner city neighborhoods.<sup>10</sup> In Newburgh, the plan was to raze most of the waterfront—approximately 1,330 buildings—and eliminate part of the street grid under two planning phases.<sup>11</sup> The Palatine Hotel, which went bankrupt in 1957, was demolished under the program in 1970.<sup>12</sup> But, as in many cities tagged for urban renewal initiatives, the revitalization part of the program was not as advertised. Most of the redevelopment projects planned for the city fell through. In response to the demolition, a group of preservationists created the historic district in 1973, saving a good number of its buildings. But fires, weathering, and neglect have claimed their share over the subsequent decades. Much of the land remains vacant today.

By 1980, the city's population had dwindled to 23,000 from a peak of 32,000 in 1950, and the poverty rate had reached 25 percent. By the early 2000s, 20 percent of the building stock, nearly 700 properties, was vacant or abandoned. Many streets today are pockmarked with empty buildings and lots. The city comes to possess abandoned properties, which means it loses their potential tax revenue and must also pay school and county taxes on them. Newburgh's growing poverty paved the way for a crime rate that rose so high in the 2010s that the city became known as the "Murder Capital of New York."<sup>13</sup> In 2015 the number of shooting victims reached a recent peak of 55 while the number of annual gun deaths reached a high of five the next year.<sup>14</sup> (This equates to approximately 18 gun deaths per 100,000 residents. New York City's

during this time was under five per 100,000 residents.) These numbers decreased for a few years but went up again in 2019 (23 shooting victims and three gun deaths) and have remained high in the 2020s.

Newburgh's decline and negative reputation are fully intertwined with its history of racism. Factories, businesses, and White residents did not leave Newburgh's waterfront and downtown in great numbers in the mid-twentieth century spontaneously; they left at a time when Black newcomers were moving in. This period was known as the Great Migration, when Black migrants from the rural South fled Jim Crow policies and a discriminatory agricultural economy for a better quality of life and work opportunities in the urban industrial North.<sup>15</sup> With its factories and proximity to both farmland and New York City, Newburgh became an attractive destination.<sup>16</sup> In the late nineteenth century and through the first half of the twentieth, Newburgh's Black population was around 2 percent, reaching 3.6 percent in 1940. By 1950, it had doubled, to 6.4 percent of the population.<sup>17</sup> Then, from 1950 to 1960, it more than doubled again, to 16.5 percent of the population.<sup>18</sup> By 1970, Black residents represented 30 percent of Newburgh's population, a figure that remains today.

Once Black residents became more than a small minority of the population, the city changed.<sup>19</sup> Many of Newburgh's White residents reacted to Black migrants moving in by leaving for the suburbs—what is known as “White flight.”<sup>20</sup> Factories and businesses began closing at an accelerated rate just as Black workers arrived seeking employment.<sup>21</sup> And many White residents who remained responded to the influx of Black residents with apprehension and resentment.<sup>22</sup>

In 1960, the city council hired the ultra-conservative Joseph Mitchell as city manager, which is a role with greater responsibility than the mayor.<sup>23</sup> Two of his chief assignments were to prevent more Black migrants from coming to Newburgh and to curb spending. City council blamed Black newcomers for driving out businesses and expanding “slums,” and it blamed the city's welfare program for attracting them. Following through on his mandate, in 1961, Mitchell implemented a racialized policy against welfare recipients.<sup>24</sup> It forced people in need to work civic jobs and pick up their paychecks at the police station—a shaming tactic. The new policy also removed mothers with “illegitimate

children” from the rolls. Mitchell’s office hoped to push Black residents out and deter new ones from coming in.<sup>25</sup>

Black in-migrants were being racially segregated into the city’s declining waterfront, where White residents, leaving for the suburbs in droves, no longer cared to live. Racist real estate practices, like redlining—when banks refused to lend in areas with large Black populations—limited Black homeownership.<sup>26</sup> City leaders and their hired consultants drew the urban renewal maps around the city’s predominant Black area. Eighty-five percent of the people slated to be displaced by demolition under urban renewal were Black.<sup>27</sup> The Newburgh Urban Renewal Agency hired local real estate appraisers to conduct acquisition appraisals on the properties within the urban renewal map’s boundaries. At a time of racial tension, they used boilerplate language to convey the valuelessness of a Black neighborhood:

Area generally undesirable. Majority of properties in poor state of repair. Many possibly structurally dangerous and constitute a menace to health and/or safety. Current neighborhood has no identity except as a slum area. Conventional and institutional mortgage money financing difficult. Lack of interest of present owner to reinvest in their respective properties. Gradual deterioration and a steady decline in values.

It is perhaps not surprising that Newburgh’s landlords deferred maintenance on their properties once they were slated for demolition. It is surprising that they did so while tenants still occupied apartments. The appraisals and subsequent deterioration of properties with Black residents furthered disinvestment in downtown Newburgh, justified the urban renewal decision politically, and reinforced the city’s racialized spaces as valueless slums. City council blamed Black migrants for creating slums and then enacted anti-welfare policies against them. But city government-imposed urban renewal, White disinvestment and depopulation from majority-Black spaces, and racialization were integral to downtown’s decline.

The official end of urban renewal in Newburgh, in 1974, was a coda to decades of economic decline and systemic racism which would have lasting impacts.<sup>28</sup> Today, Newburgh’s Black population has a poverty rate of



36 percent, double the national figure, with homeownership at 19 percent, less than half the national rate. Black residents have the lowest education rates and highest unemployment rates in the city and are most impacted by crime. Race may not have been the sole reason for deindustrialization, suburbanization, and urban renewal in Newburgh, but it was central to how each process unfolded. Given this racial legacy and the city's lack of resources, how has Newburgh revitalized? And perhaps a more important question, how has race been operative in its recovery?

## How Small Cities Grow

Newburgh today is an example of a small, under-resourced, majority-minority, postindustrial city that has struggled to transition into the new global service, technology, and knowledge-based economy. And yet, despite decades of disinvestment and significant poverty, it's now home to a gentrifying historic district, including the cool amenity-filled strip of Liberty Street and an influx of middle-class creative professionals as residents and business owners.<sup>29</sup> But the documented reasons in the urban literature on how small cities grow fall short in explaining what has happened in Newburgh.

Small city leaders in the United States have tried several strategies to revitalize. A rather common one has been to redevelop and promote the historic parts of town, including downtowns, Main Streets, and waterfronts.<sup>30</sup> The aim is to attract new residents, businesses, and visitors. Another strategy has been to follow the lead of bigger cities and engage in large-scale development projects, like casinos or sports stadiums, that restructure the local economy around entertainment and tourism.<sup>31</sup> Yet another approach involves restructuring a small city's economy even more dramatically around a niche offering that serves a global industry.<sup>32</sup> Such economic growth strategies generally recruit business owners, investors, and consumers from outside a small city's borders rather than building from within.

Certain small cities also have positive legacies from their industrial eras, like actual manufacturing businesses, as employers and economic foundations. In some places this "old" economy is not dead, and

restructuring is, for the time being, unnecessary.<sup>33</sup> Others have anchor institutions, such as universities, hospitals, or museums, providing employment and civic activity even as the surrounding economy has contracted. Small cities with factories or anchor institutions that offer some economic stability may make more entrepreneurial decisions, like redeveloping their downtowns.

Newburgh fits within these small-city growth strategies but in limited ways. Because of urban renewal's destruction, it didn't have much of a charming, historic downtown to restore and promote. Three decades after urban renewal, in the late 1990s the city sold some of the vacant and deteriorating properties it still owned along the Hudson River to local developers, who opened restaurants, spas, and hair salons. But this project was a highly segmented form of economic revitalization. The for-profit developers received a favorable PILOT (Payment in Lieu of Taxes), which limited the development's economic impact for the city and was heavily criticized by residents.<sup>34</sup> And it didn't lead to further development in other parts of the city, including the historic East End. Perhaps most significant is the physical isolation of the redeveloped waterfront—an elevated train track, parking lots, a busy through-street, and a large swath of lawn serve as barriers, separating it from the rest of downtown. White residents from the region may visit this removed part of Newburgh, but neither the city's existing residents of color nor newcomers go there much. It lacks the cool factor that characterizes Liberty Street.

There are some local actors who encourage new development. In 2016, Rhinebeck Bank created a \$3 million loan fund specifically for businesses to open in what was termed the "Newburgh Creative Neighborhood," referring to Liberty Street and its environs. Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress, a local nonprofit policy, planning, advocacy, and research organization, was responsible for the catchy moniker, a nod to gentrifiers already moving in and opening businesses.<sup>35</sup>

In the decades prior to gentrification, Newburgh's government did little to encourage economic growth. A novel, if unsuccessful, "shop-steady" program in the 1980s, for instance, tried to find small entrepreneurs to open businesses in empty storefronts in the historic district. But the city has mostly failed to capitalize on assets like its architectural

legacy, which might have been used to develop a tourism economy.<sup>36</sup> Aiming to capitalize on early gentrification, in 2013, city government launched a marketing campaign for the historic district to lure boutique manufacturing and creative newcomers, naming an economic development-focused nonprofit started by local entrepreneurs to manage it. Lacking any formal experience in urban planning or development, the campaign promotes Richard Florida's controversial "creative class" thesis of enticing artists and makers as a central growth strategy.<sup>37</sup> It's unclear if the initiative has had any significant, measurable impact.<sup>38</sup> City government also made a zoning change in the historic district in 2015 to form-based code, which more easily allows for mixed-use like live-work spaces and light manufacturing near residences. But both this change and the outsourced marketing campaign were reactions to gentrification and investments already taking place rather than proactive growth strategies.

When it comes to jobs in existing and new manufacturing businesses, as well as from legacy anchor institutions, Newburgh has both. As was the case historically, the local industrial sector makes a wide range of mostly specialized products, from hospital linens to tortillas, strings for musical instruments to sheet metal. While jobs in this sector rank fourth in amount by industry in Newburgh, it represents only 5.6 percent of all jobs.<sup>39</sup> A nonprofit hospital, Montefiore St. Luke's Cornwall, and two higher education institutions—Mount Saint Mary College, a small private liberal arts school, and a two-building branch campus of SUNY Orange, the county's public community college—provide some stable employment. The healthcare and social assistance industry is the city's biggest employer, representing 27 percent of all jobs.<sup>40</sup> Educational services in general are second, at 19 percent.<sup>41</sup> But these institutions are small, with limited research capacities or economic opportunities.

Most vital to Newburgh's economy is the array of transfer payment programs, public welfare programs, and nonprofits that serve the city. Medicaid, SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), SSI (Supplemental Security Income), TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), and federal and state-funded affordable housing programs provide residents with both employment and assistance for everyday survival.

The need for assistance is real. Newburgh has a poverty rate of 31.2 percent, with 25 percent of households on food assistance (compared to 12 percent and 10 percent, respectively, for the county).<sup>42</sup> The median household income is \$47,952 (compared to \$85,640 for the county and \$75,157 for the state), and only 20 percent of the population has a bachelor's degree or higher. Housing insecurity is a severe concern. The federal government considers 30 percent of one's monthly gross income to be the maximum amount a household should spend for housing to be "affordable"; any more is considered "cost-burdened."<sup>43</sup> In Newburgh, 61 percent of renters and 44 percent of homeowners pay at least 30 percent of their income on rent (rental units make up 69 percent of all occupied housing).

The numbers for Newburgh's communities of color are worse. The poverty rates among Black and Hispanic residents are 36 percent and 30 percent, respectively. (Among White residents, the rate is 23 percent.) The high school graduation rates for Black and Hispanic students are 67 percent and 68 percent, respectively, compared to 88 percent for White students. And Black and Hispanic residents are far more likely than White residents to live in a census tract with a high rate of cost-burdened housing.<sup>44</sup>

The Newburgh Housing Authority, the local public housing agency, operates an apartment building with 65 units and a collection of 70 townhouse-style units and manages 326 active housing choice vouchers ("Section 8"). Along with this assortment of federally funded subsidized housing, other apartment buildings take advantage of state subsidies, like the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit. Given the city's majority-minority demographic profile and high poverty rate, the large amount of transfer payments and collection of social services and subsidized housing have fueled racialized images of Newburgh within the region. These include the cultural inferiority of its minority residents and the association of urban decline with Blackness.<sup>45</sup> People in the region often speak of Newburgh as an undesirable and devalued "ghetto," a place to be avoided.

And yet, despite the large segment of the population struggling with poverty and housing affordability, especially among communities of

color, the largely unskilled workforce with access to few major employers, the blight and neglected streetscapes and lack of investment in new development, the high crime rate, the meager tax base and reliance on public funds for social welfare services, health services, and housing—despite *all* this—Newburgh is growing.

## City-Regions and Small-City Gentrification

To be clear, Newburgh did not revitalize because of downtown or waterfront redevelopment, marketing campaigns, or the perfunctory initiatives of city leaders or regional growth organizations, although each of these pieces has played its part. City government has not successfully planned any economic restructuring or large-scale projects. The city boasts certain marketable assets, including its historic architecture, scenic river valley views, and easy access to nature, all of which have helped its turnaround. But one essential factor explains Newburgh's revitalization: its location within a city-region, in this case the largest in the country.

Newburgh is at the northernmost boundary of the New York City metropolitan area, which has hundreds of smaller municipalities with varying levels of connection to and dependence on the center. While New York City is the most likely hub for Newburghers working outside the county, only 17 percent of working residents have jobs based there. The rest work in Newburgh or the county.<sup>46</sup> And most jobs in Newburgh are held by people who commute from elsewhere, like the surrounding suburbs.<sup>47</sup> It is therefore both part of New York City's metropolitan region and a local urban center of its own in the Mid-Hudson Valley.<sup>48</sup>

Most gentrification research assumes that newcomers to a gentrifying neighborhood arrive as part of a typical in-migration to a large city because of its employment or lifestyle opportunities or that they are from another neighborhood within the same city. What Newburgh is experiencing can be described as a small-city gentrifying because of dynamics within a city-region—namely, migration from New York City. The broader urban turnaround has been characterized by the middle-class returning to the places their parents' generation fled. But recently

middle-class urbanites have been fleeing large cities once again. Only, their reasons differ from those of the last generation of White flight. Fear of racial minorities and urban decline are not motivating factors. Instead, they are driven out by a shrinking number of middle-income neighborhoods.<sup>49</sup>

Wealth and capital have flooded many neighborhoods and districts in New York City and other cities in the United States, contributing to skyrocketing housing costs.<sup>50</sup> Most big-city governments have not adequately addressed their affordable housing shortages.<sup>51</sup> The urban poor and working class are, oftentimes, “stuck in place,” lacking the resources to move out of areas where poverty is highly concentrated.<sup>52</sup> The well-educated, well-resourced middle class, especially those with flexible work arrangements and entrepreneurial interests, are far more mobile. They are increasingly leaving dense urban cores for more space and homeownership opportunities, as earlier generations did.

While the suburbs remain a top destination for such urban out-migrants, many are also drawn to smaller cities with more affordable real estate and cost of living.<sup>53</sup> In addition to allowing people to cement a middle-class status through homeownership, small cities allow them to continue living the urban lifestyles they cultivated in large cities. These places still provide the degrees of size, density, and diversity many urbanites enjoy and have grown accustomed to.<sup>54</sup> Older small cities also tend to have historic architecture, walkable streets, and a “gritty,” industrial texture to the built environment, which privileged urbanites often interpret as part of an “authentic” city.<sup>55</sup> More importantly, cosmopolitan urbanites understand these characteristics—diversity, density, grit—as qualities to pursue, not problems to avoid. And the closer the small city they move to is to a large one geographically, the more they can continue to benefit from the large city-region’s resources.<sup>56</sup> This flight from large cities is both an economic choice and a lifestyle migration.

New York City is full of good jobs in leading industries and cool, amenity-filled neighborhoods. But it has become too expensive for many in the middle class to settle down, buy or upgrade a home, start or expand a family or business, or eventually retire comfortably. By comparison, small cities like Newburgh have hardly any good jobs in

leading industries or hip amenities, have less (but still some) demographic diversity, and have unavoidable urban problems. But Newburgh's aesthetic, affordability, and proximity to both New York City and nature make it an attractive destination. New York City is driving the middle class away. Newburgh, affordable after decades of disinvestment and racist policies, is primed to welcome those displaced. While not all newcomers and returners to Newburgh are coming from New York City, this regional proximity has enabled and shaped the small city's gentrification.

In small cities like Newburgh, we see gentrification processes unfold in several ways that are distinct from how they unfold in large cities. The distinctions relate to who the gentrifiers are, their roles in the process, their structural position in urban space, and their relationships with existing residents.

To begin, the typical image of the first wave of gentrifiers is of young artists who gamely confront harsh conditions out of a need for cheap rents and a buzzing environment, without much thought about ownership or investment. They often live in substandard housing, open businesses on the cheap, and sometimes squat.<sup>57</sup> As renters, these gentrifiers are themselves at risk of being displaced as gentrification advances, housing costs increase, and wealthier residents move in. That wave never happened in Newburgh. Newcomers who mostly rented in New York City have been able to become homeowners, landlords, business owners, investors, small-scale developers, and, collectively, influential placemakers. Working artists and creative professionals like those moving to Newburgh aren't typically in such positions of privilege and power.<sup>58</sup> And in a small city, ownership gives these urbanites a strong degree of protection from being displaced.

In addition, given the small scale of Newburgh and the relative ease with which newcomers can become stakeholders, a number of them have turned to civic and political action in their new city. They join and volunteer for existing community groups and city government bodies, attend and participate in public meetings, and mobilize to support desired policies or protest undesired ones. Many were never previously active in the dealings of local government or community issues. Their

homeowner status and the city's small scale combine to spur involvement and the feeling that they have an opportunity to make a tangible difference.<sup>59</sup>

Based on these two important differences, Newburgh's newcomers simultaneously occupy four distinct social roles, which are often addressed separately in the gentrification literature. They are both displaced from their former city *and* gentrifiers in their new one. In addition, they are both well-educated appreciators of urban life, or "consumers of urban space," *and* property owners, small-scale developers, and civic actors, or "producers of urban space," whose activities, relationships, networks, and investments change the city socially and physically. In Newburgh, they can leverage their relative power to become stakeholders, accumulate more wealth for themselves, enjoy a diverse urban environment, and shape space to further their own economic and social aims.

Another distinct way gentrification unfolds in a small city versus a large one builds upon the second. The structural position of gentrifiers as locally active, privileged property owners puts them in close contact with those existing residents who own property and businesses and share their interest in achieving growth. In Newburgh, these residents, who are mostly White and from the city or region, have been wanting to see it revitalize for years. Gentrification is giving them the chance to help make it happen. Newcomers form loose coalitions with these structurally similar actors, forming a group this book calls "gentrification stakeholders." They collectively organize to produce and promote events, policies, and developments that economically and culturally benefit them, and to oppose those that do not. While they sometimes disagree on the type of growth they'd like to see in the city, newcomers and real estate actors as well as lifelong residents and those who've returned all work toward furthering gentrification in ways that suit their own needs. The economic and cultural interests of existing, more privileged residents and newcomers usually don't align.<sup>60</sup> In small cities like Newburgh, they do.

The final distinction that characterizes small-city gentrification in a city-region is how it connects places like Newburgh to places like New York City in new ways. Just sixty miles apart and connected by the Hudson River and the I-87 highway, Newburgh and New York City have a



centuries-long economic and social relationship. Since the aftermath of urban renewal in the 1970s, New Yorkers have been active in Newburgh through historic preservation and real estate speculation. It was not until the 2010s, however, that well-resourced and well-networked New York City residents began moving to Newburgh in large numbers for the purposes of both investment *and* settlement. In the process, they launched a regional chain migration and alerted a new set of business and real estate investors to the city's market, and also attracted consumers to its cultural amenities.

The orbit of New York City, where people are leaving without wanting to leave the region or move on from city life, has helped restructure Newburgh's economy in the twenty-first century for high-end cultural production and consumption, and real estate investment to boot. Being a gentrifier in Newburgh means more than being a savvy consumer. It means accumulating wealth and being civically active at the community and city levels around issues that primarily serve the interests of gentrification stakeholders. And it means helping shape what the city looks like and how it grows, and to reposition it socially and economically within the region.

But the distinctions of small-city gentrification present a puzzle. Like many gentrifiers, Newburgh's newcomers pride themselves on living in a diverse place and appreciating social difference.<sup>61</sup> However, they also are inclined to act out of their own self-interest as property owners. This puts Newburgh's existing lower-income residents of color at risk of displacement. For instance, indicators of gentrification like historic home restoration, the introduction of high-end businesses, and marketable uses for public space (think arts festivals, farmers' markets) reflect newcomers' tastes, raise housing costs, and attract wealthier residents and further investment.<sup>62</sup> But such activities can exclude existing residents, who don't feel welcome in these new spaces or can't afford them. Newcomers' actions within these distinct roles, therefore, threaten the very racial diversity they appreciate.<sup>63</sup>

Most importantly, Newburgh's newcomers, returners, and even lifelong residents know about the risks. Many of them have prior experience with gentrification from living in places like New York City. Many

are even intimately familiar with its impacts having themselves been displaced. Appreciating diverse urban spaces while knowing their appreciation causes harm presents them with a real conflict. They are all too aware of the privilege and power they wield in their role as producers of space, particularly given that most of them are White in a majority-minority city. The salience of race in gentrification and real estate in general, plus the progressive political attitudes of many gentrifiers, put them in a challenging position. They are loath to displace residents of color but want to live in the same community. To understand how these groups who orchestrate and support Newburgh's gentrification reconcile these conflicting motivations, the framework must expand to include how race operates and gets invoked in this small city.

### Navigating Race, Justifying Gentrification

Race is central to gentrification.<sup>64</sup> Statistics show that most examples of gentrification involve higher-class White residents moving to lower-class, majority-White places.<sup>65</sup> Yet, much qualitative research focuses on White gentrifiers moving to majority-non-White places.<sup>66</sup> White residents rarely move to neighborhoods with existing large concentrations of either Black residents or Hispanic residents or Asian residents. They are more likely to move to majority-minority places with a demographic mix.<sup>67</sup> In terms of thresholds, White residents tend to avoid low-income neighborhoods with Black populations greater than 40 percent.<sup>68</sup> New immigrants have been shown to serve as buffers that enable co-residence between Black and White residents in demographically mixed neighborhoods.<sup>69</sup> This demographic mix offers positive signs of cultural authenticity and diversity in historically Black neighborhoods that suit the preferences of many White gentrifiers. It cannot be overstated that race and racialization in a place—specifically its racial composition and the racial meanings associated with it—play key roles in whether, how, and how fast it gentrifies.<sup>70</sup>

This pattern plays out in the New York City metropolitan area, including the Hudson Valley region. Middle-class White urbanites who have left New York City but stayed in the area have mostly relocated to

segregated, majority-White suburbs, towns, and small cities. Newburgh's sister city of Beacon, as well as Kingston and Hudson, small cities farther north, each declined in the twentieth century along with Newburgh. But those majority-White places started gentrifying and revitalizing from an influx of higher-class New York City out-migrants before Newburgh did.<sup>71</sup> As a group, such migrants chose these more racially homogenous places before majority-minority ones like Newburgh and Poughkeepsie.<sup>72</sup>

The pattern also plays out in Newburgh. White newcomers have been moving to the historic district and its close environs, where Black and Hispanic residents and businesses are highly visible. The racial composition of these areas has shifted since 2000 in ways that, on average, make gentrification more favorable. In the three contiguous census tracts composing most of the gentrifying historic district,<sup>73</sup> Black residents went from representing 58 percent of the population in 2000, to 37 percent in 2010, then to 30 percent in 2020.<sup>74</sup> Hispanic residents in those same tracts went from 39 percent of the population in 2000 to 52 percent in both 2010 and 2020.<sup>75</sup> The total White-identifying population in the historic district went from 31 percent in 2000, to 34 percent in 2010, and to 39 percent in 2020, while the "Non-Hispanic, White alone" population grew from 11 percent in 2010 to 18 percent in 2020.<sup>76</sup> In short, the historic district's ethnoracial population shifted significantly in the twenty-first century. The Black population declined, dipping well below the key 40 percent threshold for White urbanites to show significant interest and investment by the 2010s and the onset of the 2020s, while the Hispanic population expanded enough to create a buffer.

This time period corresponds with two key events. First, in the late twentieth century Newburgh became one of many "new destinations" for migrants from many Latin American countries, a more affordable alternative to traditional gateway cities with a less competitive labor market.<sup>77</sup> These residents have repopulated Newburgh's buildings and schools, opened new businesses, and revitalized many streets.<sup>78</sup> Their presence meant that by the 2010s the ethnoracial composition of the historic district suited the preferences of people in search of a "diverse," "authentic" urban place to live.

Second, the twin foreclosure and financial crises of the Great Recession period (2007–9) and its aftermath wreaked havoc on Newburgh’s economy and homeownership patterns. The city’s unemployment rate nearly doubled, from 6 percent in 2007 to 11 percent in 2009. The real estate market became quite depressed. Housing became even more affordable and more properties became available. In the years prior to the crises, there was an average of fifteen bank foreclosures on homes in the city per year. The figure doubled twice in successive years, to 33 in 2007 and 64 in 2008, and continued a steady rise to 125 in 2016. In short, in the 2010s, Newburgh was primed for aspiring homeowners looking to expand their search into new markets on the upswing and investors looking for new opportunities. But while cost as well as the small city’s ethnoracial mix made it an appealing destination and enabled gentrification, these conditions also raised the possibility of displacement.

Like other White gentrifiers of majority-minority places, Newburgh’s newcomers confront and respond to racial and social class differences and gentrification’s moral dilemma from their positions of relative privilege. They also possess the knowledge of the process’s potential harms. Gentrifiers in other places try to resolve gentrification’s moral tensions in different ways. For instance, they use rhetorical strategies of reframing gentrification as good, such as for increasing diversity, and “other gentrifiers” as “bad” based on their daily habits. They also shift blame for any harms onto more powerful actors like those in real estate.<sup>79</sup>

In other cases, gentrifiers deploy social, cultural, and political strategies like volunteering, supporting minority-owned businesses, and staging community events that promote inclusion to actively resist more advanced gentrification.<sup>80</sup> However, through such activities, they end up reinforcing middle-class values toward urbanism, signaling further gentrification, and excluding the existing low-income groups they aim to protect.<sup>81</sup>

Newburgh’s newcomers offer a new explanation for resolving this moral dilemma. By virtue of the city’s small size and the multifarious roles its newcomers play, they find themselves in a structural position that inhibits them from shifting the moral blame for gentrification’s harms. *They* are the more powerful actors, the real estate investors,

business owners, and developers. Instead, they form close communities with other newcomers and connect with those existing residents and business owners, returners to the city, and nonresident real estate and business investors who usually share their values regarding urban space and growth.

The overlapping communities thus created are shaped by gentrification stakeholders' social and structural positions in Newburgh, which include their White racial identity and relatively high social class status. One is a "spatial community," based on residency and compounded by real estate ownership. Another is an "elective community," or a community of choice, specifically newcomers' and returners' choice to move and invest in a place in need of revitalization.<sup>82</sup> A third is an "occupational community," or one based on the same kind of work, in this case within the creative economy.<sup>83</sup> And a final one, distinct to people who are originally from Newburgh, is a pride-filled place community that is based on their personal experiences with the city's spaces and history. In conjunction with their privileged racial background and social class position, gentrification stakeholders' memberships and positive associations with these communities provide the social foundation for the moral orientation they adopt to make sense of their active role in urban change.<sup>84</sup>

Newburgh's gentrification stakeholders justify the process and resolve their moral dilemma by reframing gentrification as morally good. Specifically, they understand gentrification as creating a variety of opportunities that will help realize the city's potential to revitalize, reduce poverty, and prevent the displacement of vulnerable groups. These opportunities include employment through the creative economy (like Lodger and the "culinary arts"), higher-quality and market-rate housing through historical restoration, and a better quality of life from exposure to art and culture. This "moral frame of opportunity" assigns value to actors and policies that advance gentrification processes. It positions gentrification stakeholders as positive rather than negative forces in Newburgh. Under their control, the process will benefit existing residents, not harm them. Stakeholders' reframing can be called "conditional gentrification," or a positive version of the process that

emphasizes their ownership and cultural activities as universal benefits. The positive economic logic of “revitalization for all” within this moral frame of opportunity is shaped by social and cultural logics of benign diversity and marketable creativity as universal goods. It provides moral support for forms of “urban curation,” or acts of spatial production and policy intervention that expand the creative economy and strengthen its relationship with real estate.

Importantly, justifying gentrification by reframing it as morally good entails invoking race through racial discourses, or ways of communicating about race. For one, this means invoking race and racial hierarchy as diversity, which gentrification stakeholders interpret as normative and express in moralistic terms as positive.<sup>85</sup> They laud racial difference when it can be repackaged as diversity. Newcomers invoke these positive racial meanings, or “happy talk,” when discussing their role as consumers of urban space and appreciators of city life.<sup>86</sup> Under this discourse, “Newburgh is diverse” is both a description and a moralistic statement that reinforces living with racial difference as a normative value.<sup>87</sup> Gentrifiers use it to frame Newburgh as an ideal urban environment to live and invest in, naming themselves as progressive residents and legitimate members of the diverse community.

Gentrification stakeholders talk about race in terms other than as positive diversity. By reframing gentrification as morally good because it’s equitable, they also use a more explicit discourse of colorblindness in their justification.<sup>88</sup> This discourse asserts that if race is not a factor that impedes one’s potential to benefit from gentrification’s many opportunities, then it can be overlooked as a problem. By not overtly excluding anyone based on race, the process is open to everyone. They invoke these racial meanings when discussing their role as producers of urban space, potentially liable for its harms of displacement and exclusion. Within this new framing, gentrification becomes a race-neutral form of economic growth and urban development, inclusive and beneficial to all regardless of racial, ethnic, or social class background.<sup>89</sup> This discourse helps remove the liability.

Invoking racial meaning through a distinctly colorblind racial discourse is how gentrification stakeholders morally justify gentrification.

Doing so through a diversity discourse, on the other hand, is how they make sense of Newburgh as an ideal place to live and of themselves as urbanites. The shift in emphasis on race's salience within these discourses serves to further their self-interest and achieve their moral, social, and economic goals.

These discursive approaches that gentrification stakeholders use do not, however, recognize the importance of racial distinctions and inequalities in the city. They emerge from a common impulse of reinforcing power structures, in which stakeholders occupy dominant positions, not challenging them.<sup>90</sup> Instead of paying explicit attention to racial distinctions, these stakeholders embrace the idea of a generic, controlled diversity, one that furthers their social, political, and economic aims (not to mention their aesthetic ones).<sup>91</sup> But treating race as diversity ignores racial hierarchy and structural inequality and treats a variety of forms of social difference as analogous.<sup>92</sup> Meanwhile, claims of color-blind, race-neutral growth through gentrification recast the city's racial and social class differences as part of an innocuous cosmopolitanism.<sup>93</sup> Stakeholders flip on its head the risk of gentrification excluding groups and exacerbating inequalities, largely through displacement and culturally specific, market-based activities. By justifying gentrification as morally good for being equitable, its proponents link their own class-based interests as owners, investors, and entrepreneurs to those of the city and its low-income, minority groups. But they render race and racism and their importance in shaping market outcomes invisible. Invoking race for gentrification stakeholders serves the twin purposes of promoting the process that they are behind and benefit from, *while also* protecting it from moral scrutiny. These racial invocations—as positive “diversity” that revalorizes urban space and moves gentrification along, as neutral and inconsequential in gentrification's opportunities and impacts—are integral to reframing the process as a potential good.

Meanwhile, existing residents of color who are at risk of being displaced have their own perspectives of gentrification. These include ambivalent feelings and a more race-conscious attitude toward it. They, too, are in a position to shape how the process unfolds and can resist its expansion. And of course, Newburgh's gentrification stakeholders are not a

monolithic group. Not all invoke race in the same ways and make the moral argument of gentrification being equitable and, therefore, positive. Placing analyses of racial meanings at the center of these narratives and actions reveals exactly how a controversial process of urban change gets morally justified.

\* \* \*

With this framework in mind, the story this book tells may proceed. Newburgh may be a single, distinct case. It may even be an extreme one, with its rich history, long-standing state of privation, and location near New York City. But its story still has many key ingredients for understanding small-city gentrification in the twenty-first century. Stakeholders in gentrification are in positions they've never occupied before. They know the process's reputation as morally problematic and its potential to harm underprivileged groups. And they both appreciate the social distance between themselves and these groups and acknowledge how their appreciation and investment put the latter at risk. Analyzing the moral dilemma at the center of gentrification processes by including the role of racial meanings in expressions and acts of power and inequality reproduction has broad implications beyond the case of Newburgh. At the same time, this analysis reveals a lot about what's happening in a small river town in the Hudson Valley.



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