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DEBATES AND DEVELOPMENTS

Gentrifier? Who, Me? Interrogating the Gentrifier in the Mirror

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Abstract

Schlichtman and Patch suggest that there is an elephant sitting in the academic corner: while urbanists often use 'gentrification' as a pejorative term in formal and informal academic conversation, many urbanists are gentrifiers themselves. Even though urbanists have this firsthand experience with the process, this familiarity makes little impact on scholarly debate. There is, Schlichtman and Patch argue, an artificial distance in accounts of gentrification because researchers have not adequately examined their own relationship to the process. Utilizing a simple diagnostic tool that includes ten common aspects of gentrification, they compose two autoethnographic memoirs to begin this dialogue.

The mirror

At the 2009 RC-21 conference in São Paulo, a young scholar began her presentation with the premise 'we all know that gentrification is bad'. Urban scholars rail against the process of gentrification and its destruction of working-class communities. We read about the waves of gentrifiers and the kinds of cafes, boutiques and new amenities that they bring. We express worry to our peers that the city is going to become a bastion of elitism or a generic suburb stripped of diversity. Often, we treat gentrification as a contemporary form of urban class and racial warfare (Smith, 1996). As urbanists, however, we increasingly notice an elephant sitting in the academic corner: many (dare we say *most* — 'mainstream' *and* critical) urbanists are gentrifiers themselves. As Brown-Saracino (2010: 356) suggests, 'many of us have firsthand experience with gentrification'. But what difference has this made on our research? Very little. We have created an artificial distance in our analysis because we do not examine our own relationship to the data.

The last few years have witnessed lively debates among urbanists on the topic of gentrification. Some of these debates have seemed quite personal. The truth is that those of us situated in the phenomenon of gentrification carry suppositions on the issue that are deeply rooted in our personal biographies. We agree with Maso (2001: 137) that the

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notion that we can carry out the 'strict bracketing' of our 'presuppositions about phenomena must be considered a myth'. We must not attempt to artificially 'bracket' our own biographies from our scholarly debate. Because 'perception and interpretation are inseparable', our interpretation of others' gentrification (be they ethnographic field members or colleagues) is inevitably inextricably tied to our own housing choices (*ibid*.). Assuming that we are free to go on our way after we have socially located ourselves in relation to our research (in terms of class, race/ethnicity, etc.) can be 'benignly patronizing at best, and oppressive at worst' (Nygreen, 2009: 19).

With this in mind, we provide a comparative pair of ethnographic memoirs, or autoethnographies, that emplace ourselves in the phenomenon of gentrification. We each seek to combine our 'personal story' with our 'scholarly story' to create an account that 'is not strictly scholarly because it contains the personal, and . . . not strictly personal because it contains the scholarly' (Burnier, 2006: 412). The argument that emerges from autoethnography can offer 'a more full acknowledgement of the self than is usually found in social sciences' (Krieger, 1991: 15). It is founded on the idea that our 'stories can and do theorize' (Ellis and Bochner, 2006: 443). Marcuse (2010: 187) warns that 'if we do not understand and do not intuitively put ourselves in the place of those whose problems we examine, we will not understand them — either the people or the problems'. We believe that the *most* difficult work in gentrification research is not putting ourselves in the place of 'victims', but honestly putting ourselves in our *own* place. That said, we heartily sympathize with some of autoethnography's strongest critiques (Anderson, 2006). We agree that it can lead (indeed, *has* led) to 'self-absorption' (Davies, 1999: 5) and 'author saturated texts' (Geertz, 1988). Certainly, we are not advocating a sea change in which we all begin studying ourselves, but we do believe it is one tool that can be useful for the purpose at hand.

Second, we understand that structural pressures enable gentrification and that these pressures are part and parcel of a capitalist economy. A structural approach provides us a very sharp understanding of the macro-level but gets a bit more fuzzy as one 'zooms in'. Consumption patterns, on the other hand, are very sharp on the street level and get a bit more fuzzy as one 'zooms out'. The 'consumption versus production' debate, like the 'culture versus structure debate', should be relegated to its proper place as a lifeline for graduate students who did not prepare for class. We agree with what Slater (2006: 747) seems to conclude: this was settled long ago and the answer is both. In taking the structural facts as a given here, we are not, then, ignoring the structure in which gentrification is embedded: capitalist labor and housing markets, neoliberal planning strategies, economic restructuring, etc. Rather, we are focusing on the meso- and micro-levels where our own choices and their support or resistance of this structure is readily visible. While economics has traditionally over-privileged choice (Slater, 2010: 298), critical sociology must not respond by failing to interrogate individual choice. Deeming all things structural allows us to ignore our own agency. Our critical eye must follow us home.

Third, as people share housing biographies in light of the literature, there is a tendency to make appraisals of their ethics. It is for this reason that Slater (2006: 752) felt the need to reiterate that his goal is not to 'demonize gentrifiers', because this is what we so often do. For instance, the smug appraisal that the authors receive in discussing this topic is that this whole thing is really very simple: the authors' class positionality (singular) has determined who we (plural) are: we are rather homogeneous Americans with unyielding middle-class tastes who are less than concerned about larger issues of injustice and more concerned with where the middle class is to live (see Slater, 2006: 296). Elegantly stated; but if this is who we are in your broad-brush stokes, then who are *you* in your broad-brush strokes? In this essay, we resist addressing such sweeping speculations. We will not interrogate the grounds on which they are made (e.g. that we have 'middle-class' backgrounds; that 'middle-class tastes', geographies, biographies, etc. are uniform; that 'middle-class tastes' drive gentrification), simply because they would require a different literature and another paper. Nor will we try to disprove them by justifying ourselves

with progressive resumes. Instead, we will note that it is instructive when discussions of gentrification tend to take on this tone, a tone that leads many scholars to be 'secret gentrifiers' and that, in the words of one of our wonderfully-insightful referees, 'sucks the air out of the room'.

Related to the third potential critique is a fourth: that there are other pressing urban issues that we should be worrying about. In short: of *course*. While Slater (2010: 306), for this reason, suggests that scholars must cease in giving attention to 'the consumer preferences of middle-class gentrifiers' and focus on the displaced, we believe that understanding the motivations of gentrifiers (especially *us*) could be a way to affect displacement *today* outside of the revolutionary structural change that would bring 'social ownership of housing . . . the social control of land, the resident control of neighborhoods' and other just allocations (Achtenberg and Marcuse, 1986: 476). By giving attention to our individual decisions in light of our awareness of structural processes, we are only seeking to be reflective and to encourage reflectivity and honesty. Let us be clear: we are in no way suggesting that our conundrums as housing consumers compare to the detriment of unregulated gentrification to those displaced by it. We are arguing merely that it is productive to pause and take stock of our own emplacement in gentrification (rather than 'bracketing' it) and, furthermore, to discuss that emplacement in light of the literature.

On that note, Slater (2006: 294) suggests that 'urban scholars' are 'in a far more comfortable position than those standing up to successive waves of gentrification'. Yes, but what is that position? Whether as a graduate student looking for affordable housing, a young urban scholar looking for a first apartment to match a first job, or a tenured faculty with family, an urbanist uses her knowledge of urban processes to choose a neighborhood. The social mixers at international conferences of urbanists suggest that these scholars are no stranger to the gentrifier's taste for quality coffee, quality food, and an edgy style of clothes. We often find ourselves in the very economic and cultural class positions we analyse from a safe distance in our work. While Slater (2006: 752) echoes one smug Berlin researcher that 'the only positive to gentrification is being able to find a good cup of coffee when conducting fieldwork', we believe that many urbanists can get good coffee closer to home. And if they can't, that probably means (by the critical formulation) that they themselves are 'pioneers' (Smith, 1996). (A-*ha!*)

This essay reflects upon how our personal lives have engaged the gentrifier's dilemma in New York, San Diego, Providence and Chicago. In the next section, we outline a simple method that structured this reflection. We do not know exactly where this exercise in reflectivity will lead, but we are committed to the notion that it must be done. We feel that *any* response that our memoirs and this essay incite (e.g. anger, empathy, etc.) will be valuable because a more reflective gentrification scholarship will have effects on the complexity of our work and on the integrity of the literature. We cannot create honest, street-level interventions if we divorce our scholarly formulations from our own lives.

The gentrifier's diagnostic tool

Our goal in this section is not to provide another definition of gentrification (see Patch and Brenner, 2007), but to provide a tool to place oneself in context. Our tool includes six interrelated 'pulls' — *economic*, *practical*, *aesthetic*, *amenity*, *social* and *symbolic* — that gentrifiers express feeling and one extraordinary 'flexibility' — that for *inconvenience* — that they seem to possess. These seven indicators are accompanied by what are understood to be three interrelated effects on longer-term residents: *displacement*, *signaling* and *cultural change*. The reality, of course, is that all of these phenomena are concomitant (Giddens, 1984). We diagnose ourselves using this tool in our two memoirs. Here, we discuss them in a rather detached manner.

The gentrifier's locational decision is characterized by an *economic pull.* They are pulled, first, by the affordability of housing. 'Much of what are alternatively referred to as "alternative lifestyles", reduced to exogenous "fashions" by neoclassical theorists and viewed pejoratively by some Marxists' states Rose (1984: 63), 'in fact symptomize attempts by educated young people, who may be unemployed, underemployed, temporarily employed (or all three simultaneously), to find creative ways of responding to new conditions'. Second, if the gentrifier is a buyer, she may be pulled by the potential for stability or increases in housing values. Housing, historically, can be a key household investment, especially in the United States.

The gentrifier's decision is characterized by a *practical pull*. Gentrifiers enjoy neighborhood centrality. They are conscious of 'the advantages of living close to the center of the city' (Anderson, 1989: 29). As Butler's (1997: 113) respondent noted, 'our reason for coming here was very specific, we were living in south-east London and the year we married my mother died; my father was living in north-west London and we needed to be in-between the two'. Another stated how commuting time affected family life and decided 'if we had to pay £1,000 on a mortgage that was better than paying £1,000 on travel expenses' (*ibid*.). Moreover, gentrifiers appreciate the size of home they can afford in a gentrifying neighborhood. They may appreciate the extra square footage due to the ease with which they could entertain friends and family, as a function of a desire to have a live-work space, or due to anticipating a growing family.

The gentrifier's decision is characterized by an *aesthetic pull.* Some gentrifiers have a desire to live in a particular (e.g. historic) type of home. This appreciation is often associated with valuing particular architectural styles. Zukin (1982: 58) states, for instance, 'that people began to find the notion of living in a loft attractive'. Anderson (1989: 50) discusses 'the big old Victorian townhouses' of Philadelphia as being a draw to early gentrifiers. Butler (1997: 108) notes the 'architectural significance' of the De Beauvoir neighborhood in London and particularly the 'architectural integrity of the whole area'.

The gentrifier's locational decision is characterized by an *amenity pull*; the proximity to museums, parks, waterfronts, schools and other urban amenities. Scholars like Lloyd (2006: 102) believe that 'bars, restaurants, and coffee shops' can also be 'crucial'. When we talk about an amenity pull, we mean the pull of amenities for their *use* value only: using the park, using the cafe, using the waterfront, etc. These amenities, besides having practical uses (e.g. the cafe is a useful, low-rent work space for workers in the service economy and for students), also help 'people to make new social contacts and thus extend the local community' (*ibid*.).

This is an important component of the next pull, the *social*. Some gentrifiers appreciate being immersed in a diverse neighborhood that includes immigrants, working-class residents, older people, etc. 'The biggest reason that I like living in this area is the ethnic diversity and the range of incomes and social classes' wrote one gentrifier (Brown-Saracino, 2004: 272). Some suggest that gentrifiers desire — in addition to the aforementioned desire or perhaps to the exclusion of it, depending on who you ask — to be part of a common bohemian community (Lloyd, 2006). The first type, we might say, are pulled to the longer-term residents, the second to other gentrifiers. Either way, in a Facebook world, gentrifiers seem to seek materially-derived social capital: relationships with their neighbors that come from being a 'user' of their neighborhood rather than commuting to other parts of the city for different needs or wants. Appropriating the words of Jacobs (1961: 152), gentrifiers want to be among a community of 'people who go outdoors on different schedules and are all in the place for different purposes, but who are able to use many facilities in common'. They tend to believe that 'if a city's streets look interesting, the city looks interesting; if they look dull, the city looks dull' (*ibid.*: 29).

The gentrifier's locational decision is characterized by a *symbolic pull*. Some suggest that certain gentrifiers feel an attachment to local history. They desire to 'save' a

neighborhood and return it to its heyday. Others say that gentrifiers desire to live alongside longtime residents with whom they associate 'authentic' community (Brown-Saracino, 2004). This results in a concern for longtime residents that we separate from the 'social pull' above. While the 'social pull' involves wanting to be around and interact with different types of *people*, the 'symbolic pull' seeks to preserve a *heritage* of the place of which those people are a necessary part.

Gentrifiers exhibit a flexibility and *willingness to accept gentrification's inconveniences*. First, they are willing to — or perhaps desire to — live in a disinvested neighborhood with less infrastructure (Rose, 1984; Sassen, 1991). They are willing to accept the personal financial risk that comes with living in a less stable neighborhood. They are willing to invest time, labor and money in renovation. They are flexible enough to reside in places where local amenities and services are not the best available. Second, they may express a cultural flexibility. They may see themselves as 'flexible' enough to live among people with whom they are unfamiliar (at least for the moment) and from whom they are culturally and linguistically separate. Some may even appear to be 'flexible' to live among people whom they *fear*, such as young people they suspect to be gang members. Overall, this type of social flexibility may be expressed as a willingness to live amidst crime and 'grit' — or as a more general 'streetwise' attitude (Anderson, 1989; Lloyd, 2006).

Gentrifiers' locational decisions influence *economic displacement*. Quite simply, it is widely argued that gentrifiers' presence causes rises in rents, increases in property values, upward pressure on property taxes, and an increased cost of living, all resulting in the displacement of lower income residents. This is accomplished both by rental property being converted for sale and an increasing demand for limited housing stock. For every more-affluent resident that moves in, acknowledges (even) Florida (2008: 247), 'it is likely that a lower-income family, or part of that family, has been driven out' and that 'lower- and working-class households struggle to find affordable rental housing that will allow them to raise their families and make ends meet'. Moreover, this displacement is usually desired by real estate entrepreneurs and municipal leaders. Properties in a gentrified neighborhood, suggests Anderson (1989: 29), 'have attained a value that depends not simply on the racial makeup of the present residents, but on the racial and class attributes of potential residents, and thus on the future of the area'.

Gentrifiers *signal neighborhood change* to potential residents and investors. Via social networks and new uses of space, early gentrifiers serve as a signal to other groups that had not in recent times been interested in the neighborhood (Patch and Brenner, 2007). 'Young white students', states Anderson (1989: 36), 'live in areas that yuppies would never consider' and 'their numbers help claim the streets for whites'. Less flexible potential residents, the story goes, see the new residents and assume that the neighborhood must be decreasing in 'grit' and may even empirically observe some new threshold of convenience in the neighborhood — 'less litter, more glitter' as stated by one later gentrifier (Frech *et al*., 2004; see also Carpenter and Lees, 1995; Bondi, 1999). These potential new residents would compose, it has been said, the 'second wave' of gentrification. Eventually, all of this new activity also signals to real estate capitalists that this land may be generating enough interest to warrant investment and even large-scale development of condominiums, large chain businesses such as Starbucks or Trader Joe's, office condominiums, or art supply stores. Often, in this 'commercial' stage, the 'eccentric, believable, and vulnerable remains' of the neighborhood are 'distorted and vulgarized by marketing formulas' (Huxtable, 1997: 97).

Gentrifiers influence *socio-cultural change* in a neighborhood. For instance in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Hasidic Jews, Dominicans and white hipsters compete over the cultural landscape. Nuevo Latino restaurants and diners serving fine wine neighbor bodegas and older Puerto Rican and Dominican men playing dominoes (Patch, 2004; 2008). Long-time homeowners who are reaping huge rises in property values or

huge returns in rents (by converting portions of their homes to apartments) begin to cash in by selling their properties for 300, 400, or 500% returns — pulled out by the inviting windfall to be sure, but also *pushed* out by the new unfamiliarity of their neighborhood.

Connecting the meso and the memoir: the accounts of Schlichtman and Patch

Schlichtman's account

Over the last 15 years, I have lived in three clearly-gentrifying neighborhoods. In all three gentrifying neighborhoods, as with four other residences that I will not discuss, an *economic* pull has been a key impetus in my residential decision. In Fort Greene, Brooklyn, in 1998, I rented a $500/month room in a subdivided brownstone of single rooms with kitchenettes where residents on each floor shared a bathroom. In Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, from 2006 to 2007, my wife (who grew up in the neighborhood) and I rented an $800/month apartment on the top floor of my in-laws' brownstone. In 2009, my wife and I purchased a home in Golden Hill, San Diego. At this writing, we are in the process of a move to Chicago.

In Fort Greene and Bedford-Stuyvesant, I feel that I was an unwitting gentrifier. I use the term 'unwitting gentrifier' to express the fact that I chose to live in these two neighborhoods for *economic* and *practical* reasons alone, two considerations that play into every voluntary re-location choice made by any consumer. I moved to New York for graduate school in the late 1990s and lived at Long Island University in downtown Brooklyn (although I attended New York University) because it was the most inexpensive housing arrangement available. After one year, my friend Kevin — a black Brooklyn native who sang in my predominantly black church choir — suggested that I should live in his 'rooming house', which was owned by a West Indian family that lived on the first floor. My landlord was a wonderful character named Clyde — the family patriarch — who owned buildings all over the neighborhood.

For a year, Kevin (who was not West Indian) and I lived on this mostly West Indian block of Vanderbilt Avenue when we began to notice a change in the residents around us. A multi-racial group of three female students from London moved into the West-Indian-managed building next door to us. Although the building was structured similarly, this group was paying $850 for their renovated room — 70% more than us. A gay white couple moved in on the other side of us. While Kevin and I were both experiencing the marked change in our neighborhood, the new residents assumed that I was one of 'them'. Until this point, I had been rather ignorant of the ramifications of the gentrification in which I was emplaced, but yet I began to feel uncomfortable, liminal, betwixt and between (Turner 1967).[1] (Was my feeling of liminality based on race, social class, or social network? Looking back, am I allowed in urbanist circles to call this 'our' neighborhood: was it in some way Kevin's but not mine?)

When my wife (who is a black Brooklyn native, of West Indian heritage) and I married in 2006, my in-laws invited us to rent on their block where four generations of her family have lived in three brownstones for decades. I spent time with my new 'uncles-in-law' as they washed their cars; I visited 'Granny' and attended backyard cookouts across the street; I sat on the steps and talked politics with my father-in-law as he smoked his cigar and long-time residents greeted us. But as white and Asian gentrifiers began to move into the neighborhood, I once again felt liminal, betwixt and between: I did not enter the neighborhood by any of the pulls of gentrification yet I was undoubtedly serving as a

1 'Gentrification' was a term that I did not fully understand as I was not yet studying the city: my now co-author actually explained it to me at that time.

signal of neighborhood change to long-time residents and to current and potential gentrifiers. My ties and my identity were with the family with whom I shared the block, but my race suggested otherwise. My wife and her siblings joked that 'my people' were on their way.

Again, as in Fort Greene, I felt the discomfort of being grouped with a new critical mass of the 'threatening' 'white' 'influx'. I was joined on the subway station platform by other white people on a regular basis for the first time, white people bearing the marks of gentrifiers: Whole Foods grocery store bags, art supply bags, expensive mountain bikes, anti-capitalist tee shirts, small dogs in bags. The ways that long-term residents made sense of the neighborhood changed. At one time people saw a white man in isolation and assumed 'he *must* have a reason for being here'. Now, I felt the stare of 'it is only a matter of time before *they* change *our* neighborhood'. As my position changed in the eyes of other residents, I found myself peering into the looking-glass of gentrification (Cooley, 1902). Who I was changed with the changes in the neighborhood.

At times, a black resident would mutter at me under his breath (e.g. 'cracker') as I walked the eight blocks from the subway to my apartment. When this occurred, I would oftentimes go to shoot the breeze with the mutterer as if I had not heard: somehow my anger usually drew me *towards* people. I refused to consider myself separate from the community. If not here, where? I oftentimes thought about what the urban literature would say about me: that I did not belong, that my 'privilege' was overwhelming my neighbors and would soon displace them. *Hogwash*, I thought: this is my family and I have as much right to be in this majority-black neighborhood as my wife would have in being in the majority-white neighborhood of the suburb where I was raised.

'Residents are residents' is what I felt, seemingly casting all of my training aside. Of course, I completely understood the scale at which the critical urban literature examined the issue. And I agreed, more or less, with the assessment. I also understood the long-time residents' perspective: as I descended the subway stairs, it was clear that I appeared to fit in more with the interchangeable black-adorned art student with a one-year lease, an uncommon hair style, and an instrument case than I did the middle-aged West Indian women in their long-sleeve blouses and long skirts.

And *I* (to add to the complexity) was concerned about the *cultural change* signified by that music student too. Was I just a first-wave gentrifier concerned by the presence of a second wave? Was I just a 'social preservationist' (Brown-Saracino, 2009) hoping to preserve the unadulterated purity of my exotic black environment? Was I just slumming? All of these perspectives portrayed me as a self-interested voyeur. I did not really believe any of them. I wondered how other urbanists situated themselves in the literature. Are some accepting of the literature's simplistic portrayal of the gentrifier because they assume themselves to be outside of the phenomena or to be an exception to the stereotype?

It seemed to my wife, interestingly, that the meaning attached to her had changed as well. Before the influx, I imagined that it was clear that I was 'with' her and that *she* belonged. I was aware of many white spouses who lived with their mates in black communities in every region of the country; there was what seemed to be a value-neutral 'conceptual category' for this. Since the influx, however, we felt that my presence with my wife caused some people to view her as a *gentrifier* who was 'with' *me*.

From 2007 to 2009, after a move to San Diego, my wife and I lived on my institution's campus at no cost. When it came time to move, we had an extremely difficult time finding a neighborhood in San Diego where we felt comfortable (see Erie *et al*., 2011; Davis *et al*., 2003 for discussions of San Diego's peculiarities). It was important to us to have a place that we could afford. However, that said, with two incomes and two years-worth of savings, we had more purchasing power than we had ever possessed. For me, for the first time, there was much more to a neighborhood than its *economic* pull and its *practical* pull. We had the financial flexibility and buying power to be conscious of other pulls. The look of the housing unit mattered more than in the past: this was a place that

we, for the first time in our adult lives, would be calling home. It was where we hoped, in the near future, to raise children (and, thankfully, would.)

Most important was the *social* pull of a neighborhood. We had long felt it would be most healthy for our children to understand their multiracial heritage in the context of either a black or a multiracial neighborhood. Besides, these were the contexts where we were most comfortable. It struck me that there have always been individuals who have had socially healthy reasons (i.e. not 'slumming' or 'social preservation') to live among people who are unlike themselves in some way (e.g. in race, ethnicity, class, religion, etc.), including *before* Glass (1964) coined her term. (In the United States, there have long been, of course, lone white folks in black neighborhoods, black churches and black political organizations.) It seems, today, that all of these pulls get subsumed into a gentrification framework, especially if the 'pulled' also enjoy coffee and walkability.

The *amenities* did matter to us. We wanted to be able to take walks, perhaps in a park, on a trail, or near a waterfront. As a professor, I valued nearby places such as cafes where I would be able to put in an eight or ten hour day of writing or grading away from my students for $2 or $3 (as I am now.) And yes, the *aesthetic* of the unit and of the neighborhood mattered: we wanted our home to be an extension of us as a family. I also felt a new *practical* pull that I had not in the past: square footage. As San Diego was not feeling like home to us after 2 years, it sweetened the deal if we could have space to put up friends and family from back East.

We were disoriented by the race and class dynamics in San Diego. Looking for what we knew as the complex 'black neighborhood' in other cities — which often evidence *some* class diversity on the ground (e.g. high-income blue-collar workers, retirees, young lower-income families, etc.) even when aggregate statistics suggest a dearth of such diversity — we were struck by the seeming lack of vibrancy within black neighborhoods in San Diego proper.[2] We had a hunch that the white-dominant, 'post-racial', and 'colorblind' San Diego culture was playing a role in this perceived dynamic. But whatever the root cause, despite looking for a home in these neighborhoods, we could not understand them well enough *socially* to live in them, or — in an *economic* sense — invest our income in them.

When exploring the large-scale gentrified downtown we, in the words of Lynch's (1960: 41) Los Angeles respondent, 'discovered there was nothing there, after all'. It was a bright, shiny, free-market architectural hodge-podge that had no past and, to us, very little substance in the present. We also visited small apartments in San Diego's higher-end neighborhoods. We looked at huge subdivided historic homes in poorer neighborhoods, stepping over the twin size beds of the six people we would be displacing as the real estate agent asked us to envision the shell of a home that existed beyond the fabricated walls of a rooming house. We considered sub-divided homes in gentrifying neighborhoods adjacent to the city's Little Italy that we would be able to *keep* subdivided and rent to Section 8 (federally funded housing subsidy programme) voucher holders. Then one day, we found Golden Hill, San Diego while looking at an over-priced home in a clearly gentrified part of the neighborhood adjacent to downtown (there was a women's museum, a tattoo parlor, and a media arts non-profit within two blocks.) As we continued to walk the neighborhood, we found a clear race and class diversity that we had not seen in San Diego. We were energized.

I learned that while the neighborhood had changed over the previous 20 years, it had proven to be rather resistant to some of the rapid displacement found elsewhere. Nevertheless, after we moved in, it became clear that any urbanist would label our neighborhood 'gentrifying'. There is a rise in certain types of 'middle-class' cafes,

2 Incidentally, in our final year in the city, we did find some black communities in the outlying areas of the county that we considered to be vibrant, communities with strong community activity and some class integration.

restaurants and other businesses, such as a wine bar that some business owners seem to view as a flag marking this 'frontier' as gentrified territory. I have overheard residents discussing the wine bar, seeming to echo Butler's (1997: 123) respondent (also discussing a wine bar) who breathed 'a sigh of relief that "my god, you didn't put all of your money onto a dud and something is happening[,] is changing" '. 'Good for property values', a Golden Hill resident said to me of the wine bar one morning as I walked with my daughter.

As I move to a new professorship in Chicago, my wife and I are once again looking for a home in the city. I have asked critical geographers at my next institution their opinion on what neighborhoods I might move to in Chicago that would be a 'responsible' choice (i.e. where a tsunami of displacement is not on the horizon), but this query is almost humorous, as their positions are, of course, also fraught with complexity. This time, my wife and I come with a 2-year-old, a 4-month-old, and a desire to adopt more children.

Unfortunately for my wife, who ascended from lower-working-class neighborhoods to a stable middle-class position (none of our four parents went to university), she has not only her academic husband to deal with, but also the consciousness of urban processes that he carries. She wants her daughters to be safe from gun violence and educated in schools that are not failing. I want both of these things, of course — and in a way that I *never* imagined before being a parent. But I also do not want us to, residentially-speaking, turn our backs on Chicago's greatest challenges, namely its deteriorating public schools and the escalating violence among the youth that has touched people in our circle of friends and family. Our criteria — notably, the *practical* pull of being on transportation lines, the *social* pull of being in either a black or mixed-race neighborhood, and the *economic* constraints of my professor salary — will once again likely lead us to a gentrifying, near gentrifying, or already gentrified neighborhood such as Bronzeville (Pattillo, 2007), an area that also has an *aesthetic* 'architectural integrity' that energizes us (Butler, 1997: 108).

My wife, by chance or by effort, chose a real estate agent with whom I could openly discuss my perspective. He comes from a real estate perspective to be sure, but has also lived in Bronzeville all of his 50-plus years and clearly respects the social fabric. As it turns out, we have mutual acquaintances, which helped us to speak openly about my position. When I told him that I was not comfortable with the wave of speculation that appeared to be occurring in one particular area, he stated 'Yes, in this neighborhood, you would be a pioneer'. My wife cringed, knowing that the conversations of the afternoon were going to shift after his use of the 'P' word.

With our first home purchase has come, three years later, our first home sale. As a black and white couple who are often wearing semi-professional dress on San Diego's major downtown thoroughfare with a toddler in tow, we have surely provided a *signal* for another type of consumer, one who wants to live in the neighborhood in some imagined, more class-homogeneous, bohemian future rather than in its complex present. In my urbanist mind, all potential buyers are guilty until proven innocent. My wife, of course, points out the hypocrisy in this being a 'progressive' perspective, a hypocrisy that I feel is reflected in our literature.

My hunch is not completely unfounded: our realtor has mentioned consumers' concerns about the neighborhood. And the two times we have run into people viewing our San Diego home, they asked us what we think of our neighbors, one using the term 'riffraff', another pointing at the restored 1980s Oldsmobiles in front of the cheaply-built but tidy apartments across the street. But exactly what am I to do in this situation? All of the possible anti-gentrification options (e.g. subdividing and renting it for cheap, selling it for 1/3 less than we paid) are not *feasible*: they involve selling the home at a loss, which our family cannot afford. At this moment, what options are available to me besides cursing the system? Or do I simply divorce my residential choices from my scholarly life, fighting structure while enjoying my agency?

Patch's account

As with Schlichtman, I spent a series of years in New York City during my graduate work and for a visiting teaching position. In many ways my trajectory seemed to follow Gans' (1962) typology of inner-city residents. I have seen myself as a 'cosmopolite' and 'unmarried and childless'. I arrived in New York in the mid-1990s with a pre-existing social network of great-aunts and college friends. I remember drinking coffee with my aunts and explaining to them that I was going to live in either Park Slope or Williamsburg.

Over the course of my first four years in New York I lived in a sublet within a partially converted Williamsburg factory, then a brownstone in Fort Greene, then over a store in Park Slope, then back to Williamsburg to live in an illegal basement apartment lacking windows, before moving to the Hamilton Heights section of Harlem. Each of these neighborhoods was going through a stage of gentrification. Fort Greene and Hamilton Heights were heavily black and Latino areas. The sections of Williamsburg and Park Slope I lived in consisted of Latino, Italian and Polish families; and (in Williamsburg) Hasidic Jews. Three of these moves entailed sharing an apartment or a building address with friends. Each place had a density of my friends already living there and recommending I move in. My goal was to 'dwell among friends' (Fischer, 1982). It seems a mistake to treat gentrification as strictly a set of class-determined consumption practices or as dictated by the labor needs of capital. In my life, as with others, neighborhood selection depends on social network effects.

As with Schlichtman, getting married altered my connection to gentrification, by making gender more visible (Warde, 1991). My wife moved in with me in Harlem. The *economic* and *practical* needs of two were different from a single, twenty-something graduate student. Small quantitative and life stage changes in relationships make for significant qualitative changes (Gans, 1962; Simmel, 1964). The gender dynamics of Harlem — the unwanted catcalls on the way to the subway directed at my wife — were increasingly uncomfortable; we needed more female eyes on the street (see Duneier and Carter, 1999; Patch, 2008).

The constant moving, small spaces, and rotating roommates that had defined my housing demanded a *flexibility* for inconvenience. Inconveniences that are acceptable for one person do not make sense for a couple. After a year, my wife and I returned to Brooklyn where most of our friends were living. This time we moved to Sunset Park, which was euphemistically being labeled by real estate agents and gentrifiers as the South Slope because of its proximity to the symbolically-charged and long-gentrified Park Slope (see Carpenter and Lees, 1995). Sunset Park was a largely Latino neighborhood with Polish remnants and spillover gentrification from Park Slope. We spent 3 years there. We loved that time in our lives. We were close to friends, made new friends (also white and gentrifiers), and had access to a mix of bodegas, an old Polish grocery store, taquerías, new cafes, and new restaurants.

After a decade in New York City we felt socialized, both as individuals and as a couple, to live in a city. The use of subways and buses, the space constraints, the close proximity to strangers, the sounds, the visual density all felt normal and comfortable to us. Our life seemed to be suited for the type of diverse, mixed-class, mixed-use, mixed-ethnic urban neighborhood that Jacobs (1961) celebrated. We were also enveloped by the friendly, quasi-primary relationships that Gans (1962) described between urban neighbors.

The academic job market took us away from New York to the state of Rhode Island. This move created a wide-open opportunity to reconsider where exactly we would live: city, suburbs, or small town. Moving to Rhode Island, where the entire state population was less than Brooklyn's, we wanted *city life*. And by city life we meant the diverse ethnic, class, and economic urban village we previously knew. We decided to live in Providence, the state's largest town, as it would offer the best opportunity for my wife to also find employment and use public transportation. We found a rental apartment in a

large pink Victorian-era house via Craigslist, in a neighborhood historically considered the little Italy of the city, but speckled with Guatemalan restaurants and Vietnamese Pho restaurants. When the tattooed young women in a rockabilly/punk outfit came out to greet us, it confirmed that we had *socially* and *aesthetically* found our place: diverse residents, diverse stores, and diverse uses. We saw the types of people and places that reminded us of where we had formerly lived.

Aesthetically, *socially*, *amenity*-wise, and *practically* we wanted to live in the city. We know we are not alone in this *and* we know the aggregate challenges this can pose for the city. As a family, we wanted to stay in the city and in *our* neighborhood. This was the place where we lived, planned on continuing to live, and felt an allegiance to. We purchased our own house in a historic district of Providence, a place with an increasing *symbolic* value. Our home was originally built in the 1870s, but by the 1970s it was boarded-up, covered with graffiti, and filled with outdated wiring and plumbing. In Providence in the 1980s, the Providence Revolving Fund designated the neighborhood around Dexter Training Ground park on the West Side as the key site for their plans to redevelop an architecturally significant district (see Smolski, 1978). Working with the city government, the Revolving Fund made investments in abandoned or derelict houses in the area. For our house, a swath of ceiling between the second floor kitchen and a converted attic was cut out to create a loft-like open space. A quarter of a century later, it was a certain type of 'loft living' and, having just arrived from New York, it appealed to us (Zukin, 1982).

And here, as for Schlichtman, is where the diagnostic moment intensifies. Buying a house entailed making a different type of commitment. We consciously wanted to live in a *socially* diverse neighborhood by race/ethnicity, class, age and family type.[3] We looked at census data, walked around neighborhoods with an ethnographer's eye, and talked with shop owners and residents. The methods I had used in my dissertation research I was now using to determine where to purchase a house. In thinking through the variables of our lives, we felt we had three living choices: life as gentrifiers, life as residents in a homogeneous white middle-class neighborhood, or life as suburbanites. We could not afford to economically, and perhaps socially, live in the wealthier (and whiter) neighborhoods on the East Side of Providence. The suburbs and the middle-class areas of Rhode Island feel segregated, undynamic, and unnatural to us. There is also the *practical* choice to live in this neighborhood, which was accessible via public transportation to my wife's job.

After *20* years of living in gentrifying neighborhoods, this type of place is still the pull for us. This is not about living on a 'frontier;' but rather within what we see as normal city life. However, something changed for us at this point. We became landlords. So we were not just thinking about paying our mortgage, but also thinking about rent. Our house purchase was *economically* premised on acquiring rental income from the first floor. We had become serendipitous place entrepreneurs (Logan and Molotch, 1987). How much rent did we *need* to bring in? How much rent *could* we ask for? Who did we *want* living with us? Here was a gentrifier-landlord's dilemma: did our *economic* and *social* goals match? We worried about whether we would upset the cultural and class dynamics of our block by our decision.

The terms of our mortgage required us to take a class on being landlords. The class, at a local housing non-profit, offered a primer in the politics of tenants and landlords. The dominant message of this class was that landlord-tenant relations are fraught regardless of class, race or how personable the landlord is. Strikingly, the central advice from the non-profit was to not befriend tenants, much less rent to a family member. One does not need to read Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money* (1978) to realize that financial transactions alter human interactions.

3 While in many circles education is praised because it increases one's appreciation of diversity, Schlichtman and Patch encounter critiques of this current work suggesting that we only *really* appreciate diversity because we are educated.

The class and racial tensions, the way price overlaps with power: these were issues I knew beforehand. But in determining who we would rent to we experienced them in a different manner. Now, I was watching this tension intersect with my biography by shaping who else could live in the neighborhood. Ultimately, we determined that stable interpersonal relationships trump any significant rent increase. We chose a tenant based on who we could comfortably live with. We used social class indicators. We advertised on Craigslist, appealing to people who search for housing online. Our rent was a bit lower than neighboring units. We described the apartment and neighborhood in terms that make sense to us — access to coffee shops, close to a park, gay friendly, and filled with children. But our advertisement targeted persons of roughly the same socio-demographic class with the same amenity and social needs: young families or couples, socially tolerant, and interested in a certain type of social spaces.

Is consumption the gentrifier's honey-trap (Mele, 2000; Lloyd, 2002; Deener, 2007)? Knowing local, independent coffee shops were in a location was a vital indicator for us that we could fit in, that there were eyes-on-the-street and public characters around. We could see postings for local events, suss out the names of local clubs, and most importantly see and be seen by other people. One way we considered neighborhoods was by where we could eat, drink and hang-out, as these indicators of third-places also indicated city safety to us (see Oldenburg, 1997). We were looking for places that we could not find in a mall (a gated, part-time zone), a small New England town, or the suburbs.

For instance, there were two restaurants we read about online, through a glossy local monthly magazine and in guidebooks: Julian's and Nick's on Broadway. Both are located on the West Side of Providence on Broadway. Both are destination spots for Providence diners. Julian's has a dark interior space filled with iron works, a rotating set of paintings by local artists, tattooed waitresses, Star Wars figurines in the restroom, and handmade fliers posting upcoming rock shows. Nick's on Broadway is a sleek, modernist space. But here is the rub: we also love the local Guatemalan restaurants. Is Mi Ranchito more 'authentic' because most of its customers are migrant day laborers? There are few things as 'authentic' to Rhode Island as its chains of donut stores such as Dunkin' Donuts, Sip' N Dip, etc.; what is at stake is not authenticity (see Grazian, 2003). Mi Ranchito is as distinct a restaurant as those above, but not indigenous or authentic to Rhode Island.

For us, the *practical* overlapped with the *social*. Places for consumption are tied to people. Like Benjamin and Tiedemann (1999), we want to walk and see people, to people-watch in the coffee shops, restaurants and in the park. Do we provide 'eyes-on-the-street' *à la* Jacobs or act as bourgeois imperialists *à la* Smith's (1996) critique? Or perhaps, as Jacobs preached, what we *all* love about city life is the opportunity to see friends and strangers on a daily basis, to have an interesting stream of human activity around.

Young children play soccer in the street. I find myself like one of the old heads described so often in the urban literature who look out from my window to make sure everything is alright — the kids are safe, passersby walk along unharmed, strangers are acknowledged (Jacobs, 1961; Anderson, 1989; Duneier and Carter, 1999). As neighbors we see each other at the local park and eating at the weekly farmers market. I spent a summer teaching a teenage, immigrant neighbor how to drive and lent him my car to take his driving exam.

Gentrification is not a single storming of the city. It is an ongoing, complicated project intertwined with other processes. For as much as white, middle-class gentrification is part of the West Side of Providence, working-class Latinization (and also a growing Asian population) is the larger urban process (Laó-Montes and Dávila, 2001). Together, both may be part of the economic and cultural pressure on longer-term Italian and African-American residents. So we live in a pocket of gentrification within a larger field of Latino population growth. The two define the neighborhood.

The majority of our neighbors are of the same social class as us, but they vary in age and family structure. We also have immigrant and low-income neighbors who rent in unrenovated buildings surrounded by asphalt-covered lots. Some of our neighbors are large families of refugees from Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Their rental housing units are the precarious leftovers of the pre-historic-district housing market. My

family has three people living in two stories; these neighbors are multigenerational families living in as much space. Our presence as gentrifiers creates *displacement* pressures on the rental market.

We like these neighbors *and* we hate seeing the housing conditions they live with *and* we charge a higher price for our own rental unit *and* we sometimes want someone to buy and renovate those buildings.

Critical and self-critical theory

Our residential pulls

It is clear in looking at our memoirs that we both felt a strong *social* pull to our home neighborhoods. Living in places with robust social capital, accidental encounters and an active street life strikes us as socially healthy behavior. We support such a neighborhood for all people and we do not feel that it is suspect to want this social good for our own families. After all, a home is extremely important. It is 'where sentiment and space converge to afford attachment, stability, and a secure sense of personal control. It is . . . an anchor of identity and social life, the seat of intimacy and trust from which we pursue our emotional and material needs' (Segal and Baumohl, 1988: 259).

There was an *aesthetic* pull of 'sentiment and space' to at least some of our neighborhoods: we have no desire to live in the *aesthetic* landscape of uniform subdivisions of postwar aluminum-sided ranches or post-Reagan McMansions nor the class homogeneity that often accompanies them. So forsaking this for a heterogeneous urban village (Gans, 1962) would be a good micro-level decision, it would seem. This is the combination of *social* and *aesthetic* that Jacobs (1961) so celebrated. Our locational decisions had *practical* pulls as well; we desired to be central to at least some of the 'identity and social life' of our biographies: workplaces, friends, etc. We felt an *amenity* pull: we mentioned parks, coffee houses, restaurants and schools in our memoirs. What we want for our families is a socially robust, aesthetically inviting, geographically central, amenity rich neighborhood.

Our 'reasonable' or even 'good' decisions on the micro-level produced negative results on the macro-level due to our class positions. Our knowledge of the structure has not helped us to circumvent these outcomes. In certainly has, however, helped us to respect the strength and durability of the structure.

A micro-level 'good' resulting in a macro-level 'bad' due to structural inequalities in power is certainly apparent in the social pull of class diversity. One, of course, can live among racial, ethnic and class homogeneity and not risk gentrification. However, we, like growing numbers of people, desire to live and raise our children in a social fabric of racial, ethnic and class diversity. The fact that the idea of 'social mix' has been corrupted in gentrification policy applications does not mean that the desire to live among a mix of different social groups should be looked at skeptically. The resistance to having neighbors with different life experiences was once viewed as the problem; the fact that these sentiments are changing can't now be *wholly* problematic.

Gentrification is where the middle class is

'MIDDLE CLASS SCUM F**K OFF! CLASS WAR!' states the graffiti in an artsy photo that situates a recent critically-minded article (Slater, 2010) in typical fashion. If avoiding gentrification is the end goal, the middle class (including the person who likely wrote this anti-middle-class graffiti) is trapped. Even when the middle class enter into a context in which other factors (e.g. race) are similar (see Taylor, 2002; Pattillo, 2007 for excellent work), it is understood as problematic. Brown-Saracino's (2009) *symbolic* gentrifiers considered the middle-class resident less authentic regardless of their

working-class roots: for instance, an Ivy League educated 'indigenous' resident is less 'real' than her less-educated counterpart. It seems to us that urbanists often unintentionally treat such residents in much the same way. We all seem to agree with the broad brush strokes: everyone with too much education, too much cultural capital, is the enemy, the problem, the gentrifier; unless, that is, they choose to live in the suburbs — and then they are a *different* kind of enemy.

We have come to see middle-class presence in class-diverse neighborhoods as the proof of gentrification, thus making it impossible for a middle-class person *not* to gentrify. So then, where does this leave us: is there anything that we as middle-class people can do — according to our literature — to have a legitimate place in a heterogeneous city? And if this question can only be met with mockery (e.g. 'oh, what is the middle class to do?'), don't we have a theoretical (and, by extension, practical) problem on our hands? Is it possible that the critical perspective has entered into such a penitential backlash from the 'natural' inequalities of the Chicago School that it has revoked the middle-class' 'right to the city'?

We were hopeful that the scholarly conversation might have moved beyond this reification of people and place that is 'stuck with the provincialism of a neighborhood' (Jacobs 1961: 116), but we were disappointed to hear at a recent RC-21 conference that both session panelists and discussants persisted in utilizing the term 'indigenous' (read: 'authentic'?) to describe the residents that had preceded the early gentrifiers and rightfully belonged. As professors, we are educating the children and even the grandchildren of gentrifiers: have *they* earned this 'indigenous' standing yet? (See Aronowitz, 2012, in which the child of an academic wrestles with some of these issues.) Are they marked just as children of the suburbs are marked? Sometimes it seems that for urbanists, as with Brown-Saracino's (2009) 'social preservationists', non-immigrant middle-class people without a strong ethnic identity have no authenticity and can only hope to dedicate their efforts to saving the authenticity of others. Isn't this line of reasoning getting a bit silly, at least theoretically if (again) not practically?

The idea that one ethnic, racial or class grouping has a 'natural' right to a neighborhood and that others are 'invading' it, as useful as it can be, is likely not one that most urban scholars would want to hark back to (Park *et al*., 1925). Yet we find it implicit in many of the current debates. We can learn a bit here from the Hamnett/Slater exchange. Slater (2010: 174) alleges that a project Hamnett discusses in which 'none of the existing residents have been displaced' encourages a 'displacement pressure' (*à la* Marcuse, 1985) nonetheless. Hamnett (2010: 480), in turn, suggested that such a conception of displacement has stretched 'so far as to make it almost meaningless'. Slater (2010: 175) responded that Hamnett's error in celebrating this project as a win-win was that his account does not account for the 'marginalizations, exclusions and injustices that allow some people to become luxury loft dwellers whilst others around them experience a loss of place'. This 'can't win' 'progressive' orientation is not lost on actors who are trying to make ethical decisions. As one acerbic commenter on the *Atlantic Cities* website (Aronowitz, 2012) exaggerated to make a point: 'you could . . . clean up an abandoned house . . . on a block which had been totally abandoned, and the minute you had it fixed up nicely, people would be picketing it'. This is a sentiment that Schlichtman often hears from on-the-ground activists in San Diego who are working tenaciously to bring regulated investment to their long-destitute neighborhoods only to have their work disrupted by outside agents coming to 'protect poor people' against investment. We have come to see this as *progressive*?

If anything that appears like a social 'good' on the micro- or meso-level is unmasked as deceptive when viewed through a macro-level structural view, then there can be no ethical actions by any of us. Can *any* project, any micro-level decision, stand up to this brand of critique? We are left wondering how the critical perspective would respond to a middle-class resident who wants to make a responsible housing decision. If indeed the very presence of middle-class housing results in 'a loss of place', as Slater suggests above, is there any room for an ethical housing choice by the middle class?

Reading this exchange in light of our biographies, the suggestion by Hamnett (2010: 481) echoed by one urbanist during a recent contentious RC-21/CUSS listserve debate, that the 'critical' perspective, as articulated by some, seems to leave few options beyond class segregation is especially poignant. Slater (2010: 176) calls this a 'preposterous accusation'. Yet we believe that both Slater and Hamnett are correct on this point. *Yes*, unregulated middle-class investment into a relatively poor neighborhood, when unchecked, eventually 'robs a city of its affordable housing stock, and banishes working-class households to peripheral locations'. And, *yes*, some proponents of the critical approach have implicitly denied us 'the possibility of middle class housing [or any housing] outside existing [middle-class] areas' (Hamnett, 2010: 481). So where do we go from here?

Gentrifier as a four letter word

Many gentrifiers are not driven by the socially-dysfunctional consumerist pulls that urbanists discuss. (For an example, refer to Slater's use of the term 'banish' in the previous paragraph along with ideas such as 'middle class colonization' elsewhere (2006: 752), which imply not only tremendous agency, but perhaps even malice.) Nevertheless, we realize that some *are*: let us consider for a moment the *symbolic pull* of 'grittiness' that is predicated on the presence of the 'other'.

Oftentimes this need for grittiness, the literature seems to suggest, is satiated by crime. Some gentrifiers, for instance, see it as essential that their neighborhood has a *little* crime and poverty, a grittiness and edginess, which according to one Bowery business owner 'keeps it from being SoHo' (Frech *et al*., 2004). Brown-Saracino (2009: 93 as quoted from Zukin, 1987) suggests that social preservationists, who she distinguishes from gentrifiers (we disagree), 'embrace the "background noise" of their neighborhood': crime, an informant said, is necessary to prevent the neighborhood from becoming 'too nice'. Being not 'too nice' and having a little crime keeps the neighborhood 'authentic' and keeps away the unwanted 'yuppies' who fear such grittiness. 'Not too nice' and criminal describe, apparently, the habitat of the 'indigenous' residents.

We are reminded of the interviewee in Florida's (2008: 173–4) gentrification self-help book *Who's Your City* who lives in what she calls 'the second toughest neighborhood in Minneapolis'. Her neighborhood, she explains, helps her to ensure that every day she sees 'someone that looks and acts different' from her and 'expose[s]' herself 'to as many different ways of life as possible'. Hers is a classic story of the courageous exploration of the urban frontier, complete with war stories of drug dealers, gunshots, prostitutes, 'people shouting and whistling', and the self-betterment that makes it all worth it. She would not have it any other way, she explains, because living in this neighborhood enables her 'to make the world a better place', to learn 'all about different kinds of people' and to explore how she deals with 'challenges and fear'. This is the type of 'gentrifier' that we may have in mind when we imagine the process of gentrification. Such a gentrifier, who we might imagine as 'a product of the suburbs' like Lloyd's (2006: 188) interviewee, seethe regarding the presence of suburbanites who 'wouldn't be caught dead in this neighborhood three years ago' — probably around the very time that they moved in. They do 'not so much [displace] the working class as simply [blank] out those who are not like themselves: they do not socialize with them, eat with them or send their children to school with them' (Butler, 1997: 2484).

When we think about all of the charges to the term 'gentrifier' we realize that 'sometimes we are not just talking about gentrification when we speak about gentrification' (Brown-Saracino, 2010: 356). The problematic authenticity (of 'different looking and acting' indigenous neighbors) and the grittiness (of 'the second toughest neighborhood') that is oozing from the account of Florida's gentrifier do not *characterize* the idea of 'gentrifier' although we realize that such problematic ideas often *accompany* it.

Ultimately, when urbanists use 'gentrifier' as a slur, we are often referring to a disposition of the heart. But the notion that the gentrifying middle class is hopelessly inauthentic and desperately seeks authenticity and grittiness has backed us into a theoretical corner. Even if middle-class gentrifiers (like us) denounce gentrification ('gentrification is horrible' said one in Brown-Saracino, 2009: 271) or express tolerance ('everyone has a right to be [here]' said another in Rose 2004: 300), or encourage residential integration in all neighborhoods ('why not make it possible for the poor to live in rich neighborhoods?' stated Blomley, 2004: 99), we are still emplaced in gentrification.

As we talk to our colleagues who are making residential decisions, we do not doubt that an urbanist in gentrification can be, in the words of Wacquant (2009: 129), 'a *beacon* that casts light on contemporary transformations'. But it seems we are falling short in his goal of 'reveal[ing] possible alternative paths, points of bifurcation in the road of history' (*ibid*.). We understand that we must pose a 'challenge to the commodity nature of housing and its role in our economic and social system' (Achtenberg and Marcuse, 1986: 475). But how can we when the discussion of an 'alternative path' for our personal housing choices, our home neighborhood's dynamics, or our home city's housing policy is unclear because of the vacuum of personal biography in our discussions?

Rose (1984: 62) suggested long ago that 'the concepts "gentrification" and "gentrifier" need to be disaggregated'. We agree. Just as we do not ascribe the agency-laden term 'capitalist' to all individuals within capitalist systems who do not actively resist the system, it is not useful to ascribe to all middle-class residents within gentrifying neighborhoods the agency of being a 'gentrifier'. We believe that this contradictory caricature developed concomitantly with the disconnect between our personal and scholarly lives. As we tried to fit the literature on gentrification into our own biographies here, we certainly embraced Beauregard's (1986) nearly 3 decade-old warning that gentrification is a 'chaotic conception'.

Closing thoughts

Our focus here was to use this limited space to locate ourselves — 'we live *here*'— and to urge our colleagues to do the same. Our interviewees need not be our only entree into the contradictions of gentrification. We must identify ourselves in the literature if that literature is going to make meaningful street-level value interventions.

Brown-Saracino (2010: 360) in her edited volume, a culmination of this chaotic sub-field, writes that the book is meant to inform 'our relations with one another'. One must be vulnerable in building relations, a task that was not always easy even for these old friends who were not exempt from finger-pointing. However, we must do this if we are to 'demarcate and . . . politicize the strategically essential possibilities for more progressive, socially just, emancipatory and sustainable formations for urban life', as the critical approach demands (Brenner *et al*., 2009: 179).

And so we ask you to join us: you're an urbanist, where do *you* live?

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