This zine collects two short essays from the website *If The River Swells* that explore the definition of gentrification and the displacement that comes with it.

DEFINING GENTRIFICATION

&ON

DISPLACEMENT

Two Essays

Sources

1. Caitlin Cahill, "Negotiating Grit and Glamour: Young Women of Color and the Gentrification of the Lower East Side," from *City & Society* (2007), in Loretta Lees, Tom Slater and Elvin Wyly, eds., *The Gentrification Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2008), 305.

2. "Introduction to Part Four," *The Gentrification Reader*, 319.

3. "Introduction to Part Four," 318-319.

4. Tom Slater,"The Eviction of Critical Perspectives from Gentrification Research" from *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (2006), in *The Gentrification Reader*, 578.

5. Kathe Newman and Elvin K. Wyly, "The Right to Stay Put, Revisited: Gentrification and Resistance to Displacement in New York City" from *Urban Studies* (2006), in *The Gentrification Reader*, 544.

6. Michael Chernoff, "Social Displacement in a Renovating Neighborhood's Commercial District: Atlanta", in Japonica Brown-Saracino, ed., *The Gentrification Debates*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 295.

7. Ibid., 295.

8. Cahill, 307.

9. Peter Marcuse, "Abandonment, Gentrification, and Displacement: The Linkages in New York City" from *Gentrification of the City* (1986), in *The Gentrification Reader*, 335.

Defining Gentrification

The term "gentrification" was first coined in 1964 by sociologist Ruth Glass to describe changes happening in London:

> "One by one, many of the working class quarters have been invaded by the middle class – upper and lower ... Once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district it goes on rapidly until all or most of the working class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed."

Since that time, "gentrification" has been a constantly evolving term, with the sociologists, geographers, and other academics debating how to define the term, how to quantify the effects of gentrification, who causes it, and analyzing what it all means.

Unfortunately, while there has been a vibrant academic literature that has explored the concept of gentrification, popular definitions of the term tend to be rather simplistic and often fail to build on research that has been done over the last fifty years. For example, the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary defines "gentrification" as:

> "the process of renewal and rebuilding accompanying the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas that often displaces poorer residents"

In popular discourse, gentrification is reduced to a process in which a specific formula (direct displacement by new residents) must be enacted for something to be gentrification. A comment on an article published by *The Grand Rapids Press* is typical of much of the popular discourse around gentrification:

> "This is ABSOLUTELY NOT gentrification – it is a building build ON AN EMPTY LOT. You need to

consult the definition of gentrification – which involved displacement of an established population – there is no population in empty lots and abandoned buildings."

While one would certainly not want to take the comments on Mlive.com as being representative of much of anything (and it's worth noting that "new build gentrification" is real), it does show the ways in which popular myths about gentrification continue to exist.

By contrast, some far more nuanced definitions of gentrification include the following.

> "Gentrification – the transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city into middle-class residential or commercial use." [1]

And another:

> "...an economic and social process whereby private capital (real estate firms, developers) and individual homeowners and renters reinvest in fiscally neglected neighborhoods through housing rehabilitation, loft conversions, and the construction of new housing stock. Unlike urban renewal, gentrification is a gradual process, occurring one building or block at a time, slowly reconfiguring the neighborhood landscape of consumption and residence by displacing poor and working-class residents unable to afford to live in 'revitalized' neighborhoods with rising rents, property taxes, and new businesses catering to upscale clientèle." [2]

Lastly, gentrification takes place in a variety of different places and in different ways. Kate Shaw describes gentrification as:

> "...a generalised middle-class restructuring of place, encompassing the entire transformation from low-status neighbourhoods to upper-middle-class playgrounds.

displaced at any given moment. When a family sees its neighborhood changing dramatically, when all their friends are leaving, when stores are going out of business and new stores for other clientele are taking their places (or none at all are replacing them), when changes in public facilities, transportation patterns, support services, are all clearly making the area less and less livable, then the pressure of displacement is already severe, and its actuality only a matter of time… We thus speak of the 'pressure of displacement' as affecting households beyond those actually currently displaced." [9]

If we're going to be honest, we must acknowledge that displacement due to gentrification and development has happened in Grand Rapids, it is happening, and it is going to happen in the future. There is no way around it. It's more a question of what type of displacement—physical or cultural—is happening. And of course, the even more difficult question, what can be done about it?

by outsiders as the legitimate spokesmen for the area." [6]

This works in many different ways:

"For example, the loss of political control in an area can lead to demoralization, or a sense of one's lifestyle being threatened. At some point, residents or businesses may feel compelled to leave the area; thus physical displacement may stem from social rather than economic pressure. Social displacement might be marked by a gradual withdrawal from neighborhood activities of the displaced. They drop out of local organizations or remove themselves from political activities. Thus, they complete their own displacement by relinquishing attachments to the associations which were formerly the bases of their power." [7]

"Cultural displacement" is another important aspect of the displacement debate. It concerns the effect that gentrification has on those who are able to stay in a gentrifying neighborhood. What does it mean to live in a neighborhood that is being transformed by outside forces?

"The neighborhood context is being taken over and changed beyond recognition. Displacement is experienced in this regard as a process of effacement at the neighborhood scale, where the signs personal and cultural heritages are erased. What does it mean when the salon where one's mother had her hair done every two weeks closes down?
…
In short, gentrification is experienced as a loss of self, community and culture. The threat of erasing of 'my grandmother's house,' 'my history', and 'my neighborhood' is accompanied by feelings of anxiety and anger. 'I don't belong here': this anger expresses a sense of not feeling welcome in one's own community." [8]

This creates an environment where existing residents beyond those immediately displaced, feel an acute "pressure of displacement":

"…displacement affects many more than those actually

Gentrifiers' residences are no longer just renovated houses but newly built townhouses and high- rise apartments. Their workplaces are as likely to be new downtown or docklands office developments as warehouse studios. Gentrification extends to retail and commercial precincts, and can be seen in rural and coastal townships as well as cities ... Designer shops, art galleries, bars and restaurants form the background to a landscape of people in semi-public space (tables on the footpath they must pay to occupy) watching the passing parade and sipping chardonnay from a boutique winery, beer from a microbrewery, coffee from organic beans grown in the developing country *du jour*." [3]

Gentrification is a term that encompasses a wide-rage of changes. The gentrification scholar Neil Smith wrote that:

"The crucial point about gentrification is that it involves not only a social change but also, at the neighborhood scale, a physical change in the housing stock and an economic change in the land and housing markets. It is this combination of social, physical, and economic change that distinguishes gentrification as an identifiable process…" [4]

Building on this concept of gentrification as a multifaceted process that involves a number of different but related phenomena, other researchers have argued that gentrification involves much more than just physical displacement. Among these are the cultural and economic shifts that happen in a neighborhood as the characteristics of the neighborhood change. Jason Hackworth captured this well, defining gentrification as "the production of space for progressively more affluent users." Others have written that:

"We do not consider residential displacement as a litmus test for gentrification. Neighbourhoods, especially those with considerable disinvestment and *de facto* forms of housing abandonment, could experience waves of gentrification

for decades without extensive displacement. When we consider the negative impacts of gentrification, we can think not only of residents who are immediately displaced by gentrification processes but also of the impact of the restructuring of urban space on the ability of low-income residents to move into neighbourhoods that once provided ample supplies of affordable living arrangements." [5]

It is also worth considering that gentrification isn't just—although it certainly can be—a localized phenomenon. While *Saturday Night Live* recently captured the proliferation of boutiques, breweries, and bars that often reflect the tastes of many gentrifiers (who, scholars agree tend to be educated, mobile, white, and ideologically motivated [6]) it's important to situate gentrification within a context of changes happening within capitalism. Neil Smith understood this well writing in the 1980s:

> "... gentrification is integrally linked to the redevelopment of urban waterfronts for recreational and other functions, the decline of remaining inner-city manufacturing facilities, the rise of hotel and convention complexes and central-city office developments, as well as the emergence of modern 'trendy' retail and restaurant districts. Underlying all of these changes in the urban landscape are specific economic, social and political forces that are responsible for a major reshaping of advanced capitalist societies: there is a restructured industrial base, a shift to service employment and a consequent transformation of the working class, and indeed of the class structure in general; and there are shifts in state intervention and political ideology aimed at the privatization of consumption and service provision. Gentrification is a visible spatial component of this social transformation." [7]

While there has been debate over the exact meaning of the term, an area where there has is less debate is on its effects. Most research shows that gentrification is detrimental for the existing residents

track down individual households who have moved out of neighborhoods over time as gentrification proceeds, and to ask them detailed questions about their reasons for moving. This is extremely expensive and time-consuming." [2]

Put simply, tracking displaced people is largely an impossibility because they are gone from the places where one would look for them. Those affected by gentrification tend to be poor, which makes tracking them all the more difficult. Surveys and studies that focus on "households" miss those who move in with friends and family, while the fact that many people frequently move in and out of neighborhoods for any number of different reasons further complicates the matter. [3]

Other academics studying gentrification have pointed out that there is often "a substantial time lag between when the subordinate class group gives way to more affluent users" [4]. Displacement isn't always immediate, leading some researchers to argue that what is key is that it involves the construction of space and the creation of an environment hostile to existing residents. Kathe Newman and Elvin K. Wyly argued that we shouldn't "… consider residential displacement as a litmus test for gentrification" and that we should consider "…the impact of the restructuring of urban space on the ability of low-income residents to move into neighbourhoods that once provided ample supplies of affordable living arrangements." [5]

Social and Cultural Displacement

In academic discussions of displacement, there is a lot of debate around how gentrification displaces people culturally and/or socially. The idea of "social displacement" as a key aspect of gentrification was articulated by Michael Chernoff who described it as:

> "…the replacement of one group by another, in some relatively bounded geographic area, in terms of prestige and power. This includes the ability to affect decisions and policies in the area, to set goals and priorities, and to be recognized

However, the focus on physical displacement is in many ways exceedingly narrow and ignores the complexity of how people are displaced due to gentrification. That said, people are certainly directly displaced by gentrification. This has occurred in Grand Rapids, witness the demolition of homes on the Westside, the sale of homes in the Belknap neighborhood, and the recent proposal to demolish a block of homes for apartments along Michigan Street. Physical displacement is a consequence of gentrification, and it happens regularly as buildings are bought and sold once developers and individual homeowners move into a working-class areas and start spending large amounts of cash to acquire land and buildings.

Tracking Displacement

Measuring displacement is difficult. While one can count the number of houses demolished, developing more complex accounting methods is often difficult. For example, if the homes being demolished were owned by landlords—as is often the case in low-income neighborhoods—it's easy to talk about "willing sellers" and to minimize the displacement as leases are quietly allowed to expire at the end of their term. In the case of neighborhood level change, academics have long discussed the difficulty of measuring displacement due to gentrification:

> "…it is nearly impossible for independent researchers to design small, targeted studies of displacement effects in gentrifying neighborhoods: poor and working-class people displaced by gentrification have disappeared from precisely those places where researchers go to look for them. Accurate measurements of displacement are impossible with after-the-fact surveys conducted in the *origins* of displacement; instead, the researcher must find households in the *destinations* where people are forced to move. Since those displaced from a single gentrifying neighborhood may wind up in a wide variety of places – nearby poor neighborhoods, more distant low-cost suburbs, or even distant cities or regions – the only definitive way to measure gentrification-induced displacement is to

in an area that is being gentrified. One review of 114 studies on gentrification found that:

> "... the majority of research evidence on gentrification points to its detrimental effects … [R]esearch which has sought to understand its impacts has predominantly found problems and social costs. This suggests a displacement and moving around of social problems rather than a net gain either through local taxes, improved physical environment or a reduction in the demand for sprawling urban development. (Atkinson, 2002: 20-1)" [8]

In the same paper, Slater asserts that "qualitative evidence establishes beyond dispute that gentrification initiates a disruption of community and a crisis of affordable housing for working-class people."

Despite fifty years of research, popular debates around gentrification tend to focus on an incredibly narrow definition where direct and documented physical displacement must have immediately occurred. We see this all the time in Grand Rapids, where developers, the city government, cheerleaders for gentrification, and others claim that the changes happening in the city are not gentrification because an overly specific conception of the idea is not happening. By focusing on such a narrow definition, it has hidden the gentrification that is happening on a much wider – and increasingly generalized – scale throughout the city.

Sources

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5. Kathe Newman and Elvin K. Wyly, "The Right to Stay Put, Revisited: Gentrification and Resistance to Displacement in New York City" from *Urban Studies* (2006), in Lees, et al., *The Gentrification Reader*, 544.

6. Japonica Brown-Saracino, "Who are Gentrifiers and why do they Engage in Gentrification?", in Brown-Saracino, *The Gentrification Debates,* 186.

7. Neil Smith and Peter Williams, "Alternatives to Orthodoxy: Invitation to a Debate" from *Gentrification of the City* (1986), in Lees, et al., *The Gentrification Reader*, 10.

8. Tom Slater, "The Eviction of Critical Perspectives from Gentrification Research" from *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (2006), in Lees, et al., *The Gentrification Reader*, 584-585.

On Displacement

In debates around gentrification, the issue of displacement is often brought up. It's a core component of definitions of gentrification, with most agreeing that displacement is a consequence of gentrification. However, within the academic world, there is a lot of debate about what exactly "displacement" means and how it should be defined. It's something that needs to be considered, as how we conceptualize displacement is essential to understanding gentrification.

First, it is important to understand that "the displaced" aren't an abstraction. They are real people and they have lives that matter. Similarly, displacement is a real threat. Caitlin Cahill captured this well writing:

> "The pressure of displacement is not an abstract threat but experienced in material ways: slips under the door offering a buy out in public housing, family members relocating temporarily never to return home, personal experiences of being harassed by landlords, doubling up of families in tiny apartments, and seeing friends displaced. Narratives of deceit, betrayal and loss characterize the 'war stories' of displacement, offering an inside perspective on the social costs of gentrification (Alicea 2001: Muniz 1998)." [1]

As it stands, the relationship between gentrification and displacement is complicated. Proponents of gentrification often cling to the idea that if there isn't immediate and verifiable evidence of displacement, then there is not gentrification. For example, if a development is built on a vacant piece of land—perhaps including market-rate apartments and a ground-floor brewery—many won't consider it gentrification because they argue that nobody was living on that piece of land, and nobody was forced out. The lack of evidence for direct and immediate displacement is often used as a way to silence critics and dismiss discussions about gentrification.