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Gentrification and Identity: A Historical Pattern of Exclusion

(Question 2)

Gentrification is a complex topic that often manifests with intention from policymakers (Davidson, 2008). While the ultimate goal of gentrification may be to improve the neighbourhood, the adverse effects on existing populations are pushed aside in the pursuit of 'growth' for a 'revitalized' neighbourhood. Growth and revitalization in this context mean the redefinition of the neighbourhood's identity as gentrification itself makes the case that the existing neighbourhood and its population are not good enough. This essay will explore how historical patterns of gentrification are nearly always interlinked with the neighbourhood identity.

In the mind of policy makers they are very keen on the idea of gentrification to improve the neighborhood (Davidson, 2008), because after all, who wouldn't want to live somewhere nicer? The issue lies within how gentrification displaces the historical communities and erases the identity of the inhabitants. Most neighbourhoods that face the effects of gentrification attempt to resist them, as brownfield sites can cause a gentrifying spillover effect from redefining the identity of the neighbourhood and which residents feel the sense of belonging in the

neighbourhood (Davidson, 2008) despite only adding to the housing supply. People are very social beings and a sense of identity itself is often intertwined with where one lives and gentrification is an erasure of this identity. The goal of gentrification is most frequently one of commodification of the neighbourhood into a place of consumption and real estate, ignoring the historical context of the neighbourhood in favour of development. Those seeking to development and transform the neighbourhood often have means to and thus there is already an existing inequity from the beginning of the neighbourhood

Gentrification is a tactical use of policy by the government and companies to reshape a place into something to consume. It cannot simply be a place to live in for any community but also a cultural commodity that other people can experience through tourism or invest in through real estate. This erasure of community has very clear roots in colonialism as many racialized neighbourhoods face less significant efforts of gentrification. The case of the VSP borough in Montreal is a prime example of this as there are three neighbourhoods with very similar characteristics with the exception of racial demographics. Parc Extension for example is the most racially diverse neighbourhood on the island as the most common mother tongue is neither French nor English, but Punjabi. Saint-Michele is similarly diverse with a higher percentage of visible minorities whereas Villeray falls more in line with the white Quebecois working class identity. Villeray is more affected by ongoing gentrification efforts than the other two parts of the borough despite having many similar characteristics. This

Boyd introduces the concept of ‘defensive development’ (Boyd, 2008) in which racialized groups strategize to prevent gentrification of their neighbourhood by external (white)

communities. This approach highlights how most western scholars of gentrification ignore class. In countries such as the United Kingdom, your social class is not necessarily based on your race but your upbringing; the way you speak can be far more important than skin colour. Historically, class has always been the great divider, with race being more relevant to colonization. There are countries such as South Korea that experience gentrification without the aspect of race, but rather economic or social class as the main factors (Lee et Al. 2022). In North America race tensions play a massive role in city dynamics because of colonial era inequality that has persisted to the current day which has turned many instances of gentrification into a racialized issue from the very first step, as settlers came to Canada quite literally displacing Indigenous people to a 'reservation'. However, as the example of South Korea demonstrates, socioeconomic class dynamics still prevail as housing and neighbourhoods have become intertwined with our economy forcing them to be seen as drivers of growth. This is clearly demonstrated in patterns of gentrification first consuming more marginalized neighbourhoods, like Soho in New York or Goose Village in Montreal, as gentrification will then touch the more market appealing neighbourhoods like the Plateau or Villeray. The long lasting impacts of institutionalized racism and its policies have shaped our cities to this very day.

One of the clearest examples of this exists in the United States and the policy of 'red-lining' where non white people were deliberately excluded from neighbourhoods through banking policies that restricted loans to white people. Even though this is no longer policy, it can very clearly play out when trying to sell a home as black families can lower the estimate of their home compared to a white family meeting with the realtor (Hernandez, 2021). This systematic effort, conscious or not, retains wealth in the hands of a white ruling class which gives them

more political power to shape cities that best suit their needs. ‘My kids are moving out and need a place to live but housing costs are too high downtown because of my own investments? Time to gentrify a new neighbourhood!’ may as well be a slogan for the white upper class. The ongoing effort for people to live beneath their means so they might invest in their own future displaces communities at a routine rate, over and over throughout history as decades of neoliberal policy lined the pockets of property owners with little incentive. Neighbourhoods remain divided not only based on economic class but also race. Poles of influence for certain communities exist such as Parc-Extension or The Gay Village despite segregation no longer being a policy.

Cities are a collection of separate communities that have unique identities with few being alike. People are going to want to be with those whom they identify with. First wave gentrifiers are often young professionals in search of a neighbourhood they can call home for the first time and yet they take away the meaning of home for others. Identity cannot simply be adapted from as social cohesion does not happen overnight, and this first wave of gentrifiers happens to cause social tectonics (Slater, 2005). Home is not defined strictly by housing but also the amenities the neighbourhood has to offer. This can mean certain shops or restaurants become tied to the neighbourhood identity as cultural capital, and gentrifiers are a threat to this identity. Gentrifiers bring a different cultural context into the neighbourhood and often seek to shape the neighbourhood in their own world view rather than adapt to what exists historically in the neighbourhood. When looking at upper class neighbourhoods there is very little cultural capital, yet an abundance of economic capital. This is what drives people to gentrify as they suck up the

neighbourhood's cultural capital with their economic capital in the hopes of gaining an identity through vampirism.

As the neoliberal world has created such an economic divide between neighbourhoods, urban inequalities have nowhere left to hide. These divides are clear in cities around the world, often at the boundaries of race, yet always under division of class. Resistance to gentrification and displacement has become an identity in itself as the commodification of identity has exploded. Job opportunities and housing costs are secondary to the cultural erasure of these neighbourhoods. Hochelaga's short lived rebrand to HOMA only ended when it did not suit the gentrifiers, nor historic inhabitants outwards identity. Gentrification takes place when the upper class feels they can subjugate the neighbourhood, often over decades. The consumption of a neighbourhood's identity does not happen overnight but through the slow replacement of its people, its cultural history and the identity that makes it unique. Eventually a neighborhood is left a husk of its former self as the traits that once made it desirable have been erased by everything but the urban fabric itself. Neighborhoods that were once distinct such as Pointe St-Charles or St-Henri have diminishing remnants that are historically recognizable as gentrification has cut them up and sold them for the parts (as buildings). Development plays a role in bringing in new identities to a neighbourhood, which while not directly replacing and displacing existing inhabitants, changes the course of the neighbourhood's identity into the future. This imbalance of influence has its roots in colonialism, industrialization, neoliberalism and more, to state otherwise would ignore history. The dynamics therefore are simply a constant battle of assimilation and those who attempt to resist it as gentrification threatens their entire sense of being. While a globalized and less segregated world means smaller communities such as

the queer community rely less on their own neighbourhood, their continued existence demonstrates the importance of identity to cities. There will always be dynamics of inequality that force people of all backgrounds with some shared traits to form a community with each other. In many cases it causes political turmoil or outright erasure. The encroachment of these issues onto the middle class brings gentrification into the forefront of modern history, while the whitewashing of history continues to ignore that these issues of identity have always been present and actively pushed for.

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