# "It wasn't always like this": Displacement and the Poetics of Gentrification in Ross Raisin's *Waterline* (2011) and Lisa Blower's *Sitting Ducks* (2016).[1]

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## Introduction

At one point early in Ross Raisin's 2011 novel, *Waterline*, two apprentices are observed crossing a contemporary Glasgow landscape where "the roads are near deserted"; but, it is noted: "It wasn't always like this […] These same streets a hundred years ago, sixty, forty even, mobbed with hundreds of workers starting out for the day shift […] A different story the now. Two lads in blue overalls walking through the empty streets like a pair of convicts who've just survived the end of the world" (sic.).[2] Similarly, Lisa Blower's 2016 novel *Sitting Ducks* opens by describing the Midland city of Stoke-on-Trent, once famous for its pottery production, in terms of its industrious past: "For this had been the Potteries. A once belching, smoking, grimy fug of high production and by royal design, A place that made things, did things, had things going on. Dreams? They made plenty." In the present, however, "It's a sorry old place, so sullen and sad."[3] Both novels, then, set out their stall by comparing a vibrant, industrial past with a desolate, hopeless, and in the case of *Waterline*, post-apocalyptic present through depictions of working-class life and culture embedded in landscapes of postindustrial transformation. As the novels develop, part of this transformation engages with depictions of gentrification and its relation to attempted (and sometimes failed) renewal and the promise of regeneration. In this article, I argue that such examples of contemporary literary fiction offer depictions of working-class lived experience that open up

[1] Thanks to James Peacock for reading an early draft of the chapter and for suggesting some additional references and lines of argument.

[2] Raisin, *Waterline*, 9. Raisin's novel uses dialect and regional phrasing; from this point on, sic. will not be used to indicate deviations from standard grammar and spelling when quoting the novel. Subsequent references are by page number in the main body of the text.

[3] Blower, *Sitting Ducks*, 8. Subsequent references are by page number in the main body of the text.

new understandings about the ways in which material policies and rhetorical discourses around urban planning, de-industrialisation and gentrification directly affect the people displaced and disrupted by those processes. As Tom Slater (2009) has argued, underneath the rhetoric of regeneration and renewal, gentrification often involves the economic and cultural displacement of established communities and individuals.[4] The sense of something changed and lost pervades both novels and each identifies gentrification as a crucial element in that process. Much of the sociological literature on gentrification identifies the broader economic, sociological and cultural process at play, but where these two novels excel is in articulating the affective response of people impacted by those processes. Indeed, what I also show is how literary fiction is ideally placed to offer representations of the lived experiences of gentrification through its use of narrative techniques and devices. Through its focus on the poetics of gentrification – which I define as the rendering of that economic and geographical process into imaginative characterization, settings, positioning of perspectives, and plotlines – that fiction can provide a nuanced representation of the affective experience of displacement which contributes to our overall understanding of gentrification as a social and cultural phenomenon.

Before looking at the two novels in detail it is instructive to survey some of the theories of gentrification with respect to working-class space and identity in a postindustrial context. Gentrification has garnered a number of approaches over the past half-century or so since the concept was first theorized by Ruth Glass in the 1960s.[5] Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly define it as "the transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city into middle-class residential and/or commercial use" (xv). They also note, however, that the original approach adopted by Glass and others has developed in a variety of

[4] Slater, "Missing Marcuse."
[5] Glass, "Introduction: aspects of change."

ways: “Gentrification has mutated over time, so that it now includes not just traditional, classical gentrification […] but also rural gentrification, new build gentrification, super-gentrification and many other derivatives” (159). Many of the later theorists of gentrification note that it is a process associated with deindustrialisation, and the subsequent reconfiguration of the uses of urban space. Neil Smith, in particular, has argued that gentrification is underpinned by neoliberalism and can be identified in the impact on previously industrial areas of urban environments; as he notes: “By gentrification, I mean the process by which working-class residential neighbourhoods are rehabilitated by homebuyers, landlords and property developers.”[6] More recently, Lindner and Sandoval have focused on the way “the aesthetics of gentrification […] are employed in neoliberal urban renewal strategies to create seductive spaces and exclusive communities.”[7] In this sense the theorization and analysis of gentrification has intersected with broader discussions of working-class geographies and identity reformation in the wake of deindustrialization primarily in terms of those who are excluded from those “exclusive communities.” Doreen Massey, for example, notes that the move to a postindustrial framework of economic and social structure in Britain since the 1960s has resulted in a major recomposition for the working class for which geographical reorganization has been central. Massey’s ground-breaking book, *Spatial Divisions of Labour*, on the importance of spatial contexts to this process, is primarily concerned with mapping new economic and social structures that have responded to these changes in industrial practices and organization. She sees space in this context as the “historical product of the combination of layers of activity” that change overtime with respect to an area’s differing “new economic bases of social organisation.”[8]

The focus on the economic grounding of working-class space has been developed

[6] Neil Smith, “Gentrification and uneven development,” 139.
[7] Lindner and Sandoval, “Introduction: Aesthetics of Gentrification,” 10.
[8] Massey, *Spatial Divisions of Labour*, 114.

through Massey's work into the discussion of postindustrial (or post-Fordist) reconstruction, taken up by the regulation school of theorists which, as Kirsteen Paton has noted, "provides an account of deindustrialisation which recognises the need for recomposition and regulation of social relations to be congruent with the economy."[9] In her 2014 study *Gentrification: A Working-Class Perspective*, Paton makes the case, however, for a move away from a macro focus on determinist neoliberal and post-Fordist economics to respond more directly to gentrification as lived experiences. Following Reay (1998), her ethnographic approach aims to uncover the hidden stories of the main recipients of the social policies of gentrification and how that has affected their sense of self, identity and location. As she argues, ethnography "is a powerful resource for exploring class, uncovering what class means to people, how it is experienced, how it is embodied, and the interplay between material, social and cultural aspects."[10] Paton adopts a Gramscian approach focused on hegemony and consent, which reveals complexities and nuances that more rigid class-stratification theory often sketches over. Following Raymond Williams's understanding of hegemony as a "way of life" with "structures of feeling," Paton argues "Hegemony becomes meaningful (for it is not a totality) as something that is lived in depth."[11] In carrying out a series of ethnographic interviews with residents of Clydeside in Glasgow, then, she identifies a mixture of coercion and consent reflected in the views of working-class people on the front line of gentrification. She also suggests that a kind of gentrification of the mind is attendant on the gentrification of space.

I will come back to this concept with respect to work by Sarah Schulman, but first it is important to note that Paton's approach resonates with a recent turn in the sociological study of the affective experience of working-class space (and especially postindustrial spaces) that has been identified by several critics (Edensor, Featherstone, Linkon, Thrift and Williamson).

[9] Paton, *Gentrification*, 24.
[10] Ibid., 54.
[11] Ibid., 21; Williams, *Marxism and Literature*.

Tim Edensor, for example, has looked at the haunting of contemporary (partly gentrified, partly derelict) spaces in Manchester. As he notes: "The haunted spaces represented here evoke the multiplicity of this temporal urban collage, highlighting the varied ways in which the past haunts the present by its absence, is everywhere folded into the fabric of the city, and especially possesses its mundane spaces."[12] Edensor's approach is an interdisciplinary combination of sociology and cultural studies and develops a form of working-class psychogeography whereby the sociologist traverses the urban space, picking up the traces and ghosts of the industrial past. This approach considers not only the material conditions of deindustrialization and gentrification, but also the imaginative and poetic discourses that surround them which can, nevertheless, produce material effects.

It is in this context of examining gentrification through lived experience and the poetics of gentrification that literary fiction can provide its own valuable and distinctive contribution. Although not having the direct authenticity and verbatim voices of ethnography, literary texts, through their combination and manipulation of point of view, internalization, authorial commentary, characterization, and plot development, can articulate those lived experiences of gentrification that are lost in the more structural, macro accounts focused purely on economics. As Simon Lee has noted with respect to the analysis of class and spatiality: "literature expresses the missing element of more abstract modes of class analysis – that of lived experience determined not simply by historical or ideological conditions, but as the direct result of environmental interactions and negotiations with this lived reality."[13] This poetics of gentrification – the deployment of literary techniques to portray the material processes and effects of gentrification in imaginative, fictional narratives – serves to dramatize the debates and oppositional forces at the heart of the experience for those

[12] Edensor, "Mundane Hauntings," 325. Mark Featherstone (2013) has identified a similar existential approach to discussion of the working-class life in Hull. Featherstone also carries out ethnographic interviews with people living on the Bransholme Estate in Hull.
[13] Simon Lee, "Introduction," 12.

involved. This is achieved, for example, through tracing the negative effects on characters in residential areas previously identified as vibrant working-class communities or (and often in the same text) registering the aspirational discourses of gentrification as a viable antidote to an area's deindustrialized condition. Several critics have developed a strand of gentrification studies around the analysis of literary expressions of the contexts and cultural politics involved in the process: James Peacock (2015, 2019), for example, has analysed the effects of gentrification in a selection of Brooklyn novels; Thomas Heise (2022) has detailed the way in which several examples of contemporary New York crime fiction play out their plots against a backdrop of gentrification in the city; while Hanna Henryson (2021) has focused on similar processes in fiction located in Berlin.[14]

It is in this context of an emerging poetics of gentrification that I want to turn to Ross Raisin's *Waterline* and Lisa Blower's *Sitting Ducks*, both of which resonate with many of the theoretical approaches to gentrification identified in this opening survey. Where both these novels offer an alternative view, however, is in the way they shift attention from the major metropolitan centres predominantly identified in the early work on gentrification (such as New York and London) to urban environments that are less often recognized and, as such, represent a double marginalization in terms of the public expression of those experiencing the negative effects of gentrification. This shift in focus mirrors that identified in recent studies of the movement of the gentrification process from metropolitan centres to smaller cities and urban areas; a process that Lees, Slater and Wyly refer to as "cascading down the urban hierarchy."[15] However, as Paul Dutton argues, the contexts and processes of gentrification in regional cities can be very different in the metropolitan centres; with specific reference to

[14] The articles contained in this special issue of *English Studies* can also be seen as extending this field of the literary study or poetics of gentrification.
[15] Lees et. al., *Gentrification*, 171. See also Lees, Shin, and López-Morales, *Planetary Gentrification*, which focuses on areas of gentrification in areas beyond the early focus in gentrification studies on New York and London.

Leeds, Dutton notes, "The uneven time-space geography of gentrification is particularly stark between London and second-tier cities with industrial urban structures."[16] Loretta Lees (2006) identifies three drivers at play in the movement of gentrification from the metropolitan centres to more provincial cities: economic, cultural and policy sharing. The economic driver refers to the way in which the gentrifying practices move once an area has been saturated, but it is perhaps the other two that have particular resonance in the portrayal of gentrification we see in Raisin and Blower's texts. Cultural drivers for the cascade effect relate to the ways in which lifestyle models developed in the metropolitan centres are communicated as aspirational lures for the rising middle classes and (so-called) "aspirational" working classes in an area.[17]

As we shall see, Raisin's novel registers these cultural factors alongside the economic. *Waterline* also registers aspects of Lees's third category of the cascade effect, that of provincial councils and local governments adopting the regeneration policies of metropolitan centres. The redevelopment of the docks and derelict shipbuilding areas of the Clyde in Glasgow, referred to by Raisin, mirrors similar projects in London, Liverpool and Bristol. Transferring policies in this way is not sensitive to the specificities of the people displaced in each of the cities and both novels discussed in this article identify the problems inherent in such kinds of gentrification. Indeed, they both register what might be called "failed gentrification,," whereby the promise of urban regeneration and renewal stalls through changes in the economic climate, or because of the manipulation of the rhetoric around aspiration by unscrupulous property developers and landlords. Although set in different parts of Britain with differing specific contexts, the two novels share an examination of the

[16] Dutton, 2559.

[17] I have always found the term "aspirational working class" highly problematic as it suggests that the cultural and lifestyle practices of working-class people that do not fit this category are deemed to be lacking ambition, or even lazy. See, for example, Imogen Tyler's *Revolting Subjects* on the way working-class lifestyles and identities are pejoratively portrayed in contemporary media.

affective experiences of individuals caught up in those changes. Indeed, their locations away from the metropolitan centres typically associated with gentrification offer a distinctive view of its development into a general feature of towns and cities across Britain in the late twentieth century and into the new millennium. The novels thus offer an opportunity to pursue the need noted by Loretta Lees for a "comparative urbanism" approach to the study of the specific contexts and meanings of gentrification for individual urban settings, albeit through fictional representations of those processes.[18] In what follows, I examine the ways in which each novel dramatizes these economic, social, and cultural processes through the perspective of characters on whom they impact detrimentally.

**Ross Raisin, *Waterline* (2011)**

Ross Raisin's *Waterline* chronicles the gradual decline in the economic circumstances and mental health of its central character, Mick Little, who, after losing his wife Cathy and his job on the Glasgow shipyards descends into alcoholism and homelessness. This narrative of personal decline is set against, and mirrors, postindustrial decline in Britain in the wake of successive Conservative governments' neoliberal policies of the 1980s and 1990s and the long process of deindustrialization. Mick worked in the now closed-down Glasgow shipyards and the novel opens on the day of his wife, Cathy's, funeral, who we learn has died of mesothelioma, a cancer caused by her breathing in the asbestos dust particles that Mick had picked up in the shipyards and brought into the house on his overalls. The novel, then, begins at a point of transition in Mick's life, one that intimately intersects with his lived experience, his sense of personal identity and his connection with place. It goes on to develop a series of

[18] Lees, "The Geography of Gentrification." Lees is particularly interested in the transferability of Western models of gentrification developed primarily in the cosmopolitan centres of to the Global South. However, her call for the attention of the distinctiveness of individual context can also apply to studies of those areas that lie outside the main urban centres within a Western nation such as Britain.

spatial metaphors that show the deleterious effects of deindustrialization on both the bodies and minds of those whose livelihoods had formerly depended on industrial practices.

Embedded in this narrative of individual and industrial decline is a series of references to gentrification identified in the changing urban landscape that forms a backdrop to Mick's experiences. Glasgow is, of course, a substantial urban area in Britain, although one that does not often register in the early sociological studies of gentrification.[19] Kirsteen Paton has more recently identified the area as a key location of this new wave of gentrification; in her study of the effects on gentrification on working-class communities she takes the combined Govan and Partick areas of Clydeside in Glasgow as one of her case studies. As she notes, the process of gentrification in Glasgow involved, "a neoliberal experimentation aimed at reversing the decline in the 1980s through a combination of aggressive place-marketing campaigns to attract people and capital to the city by eradicating its old working-class image." This state-led gentrification, "involves the economic development of derelict, disused, devalued land into areas of high consumption, including luxury new build housing developments." [20] As Paton notes, the process is at once economic and cultural; attempting to manipulate the economics of an area through active cultural policies and campaigns that combine material change in the landscape of a place with a concerted publicity drive to change attitudes, attempting what Sarah Schulman has identified as a "spiritual gentrification" alongside the "concrete replacement process."[21]

This context forms the backdrop for Mick's narrative in *Waterline*. The novel details several instances in Glasgow of the attempt to gentrify, under the name of regeneration, those areas previously occupied by the now derelict shipyards and residential areas that fed them.

[19] In this sense, it represents the way in which gentrification has moved from the metropolitan centres to smaller cities as identified by Lees and Dutton.
[20] Paton, *Gentrification*, 60, 36.
[21] Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind*, 14. I return to Schulman"s concept in the discussion of *Sitting Ducks* below.

This involves references to gentrified housing, the development of new cultural heritage sites and leisure areas catering for newly arrived middle-class pockets, and more broadly a reframing of the very constitution of what is regarded as cultural capital in the area. This corresponds to Paton's definition of policy- and state-led gentrification which "involves the economic development of derelict, disused, devalued land into areas of high consumption, including luxury new build housing developments."[22] In terms of housing, there are several references to gentrifying developments sprinkled through Raisin's novel. For example, in one of Mick's stream of consciousness memories he recalls Cathy calling the "high and mighty new flats going up across the way there" the "Iron Ladies," an ironic reference to Margaret Thatcher whose neoliberal policies are blamed for both the deindustrialization of the area and its later gentrification (52). Another example occurs in a conversation following Cathy's funeral between Mick, his son Robbie, Cathy's sister Lynn, and Lynn's husband Alan, during which, Robbie comments: "You've seen the new apartments in Glasgow Harbour? […]" to which Lynn replies, "Yes […] Very modern. About time they made more of those dead areas along the river […] Better developing than leaving a wasteland" (13). The "dead areas," of course, are the parts of the city that had previously been the location of the shipyards. Robbie, however, registers the irony in the cultural displacement of the people who had worked in this area, when he sarcastically comments, "There you are, then, Da. You should get one. You could have a wee balcony to sit on and look out over the water" (Ibid.). The new housing, of course, is priced beyond the means of those who had previously worked in the shipyards, and who have predominantly been forced into unemployment or precarious labour; Mick, for example, has been working as a freelance taxi driver since he lost his job. Mick remains largely silent during this exchange but is left "feeling uncomfortable" by the conversation, hinting of his deeper resentment of the effects of gentrification. Mick is at the sharp end of

[22] Paton, *Gentrification*, 36.

these processes, and they result in a gradual decline in his mental health, a decline exacerbated after Cathy's death. After experiencing a panic attack due to an uncanny encounter with what might be Cathy's ghost, Mick gradually exiles himself from his home, first by moving into his shed to sleep, and ultimately abandoning his house completely and moving to London. The economic reasons for his migration to the metropolitan centre are thus bound up with a profound change in personality and identity for Mick, who no longer feels comfortable in an area that has experienced various stages of de-industrialization and gentrification. Mick's story, then, is presented as that of one who is unable (or unwilling) to consent to the ideological shifts necessary to accommodate the profound economic, social and cultural changes brought on by de-industrialization.[23] He is unable to gentrify his mind to the required degree and his only available recourse is to move away the area.

In the poetics of gentrification established in the text, several characters are ideologically mapped in socio-spatial terms through the novel's hierarchy of discourses. Mick's in-laws, Alan and Lynn, for example, are aligned with the processes underlying gentrification. Although from a similar working-class background to Mick, Alan was had been a part of the management team in the shipyards that had martialled their closure. He had also been in management during the period in which concerns about the debilitating health effects of the asbestos that ultimately caused Cathy's mesothelioma were brushed under the carpet by the employers. Alan and Lynn, therefore, are identified as the beneficiaries of the neoliberal policies that have caused the area's dereliction and they embrace the cultural gentrification that attends those economic and policy measures. When staying in Mick's house after Cathy's funeral they bring in a set of references to cultural capital that are presented as alien to Mick's traditional working-class culture. It is the new "shopping centre at Braehead" that particularly appeals to Lynn: "It's a great M&S […] Two levels, and a

[23] Mick's other son, Craig, is also presented as struggling to cope on the margins of society.

decent café. We stopped in for a sandwich when we'd done. And there's a dry ski slope down there now, I couldn't believe it. You should go over there and take a look, Mick" (13). The irony is lost on Lynn, whose casual reference to "stopping in for a sandwich" does not recognize the emotional and economic obstacles that prevent Mick from visiting the newly gentrified commercial and leisure areas. Lynn and Alan's consumption of an M&S sandwich stands in stark contrast with Mick's later encounter (when he's homeless) with a man who is affronted by Mick's refusal of his offer of a fish sandwich: "Sandwiches. Always fucking sandwiches. They never come and offer you a bloody bottle, do they?"[24]

The shopping centre is one representative example of a general shift in the residential, commercial and leisure environment of the area. While still in Glasgow, Mick reflects on another recent development at one of the old shipyards:

> He's heard about the crane. Turned into a visitor centre. He's seen it lit up pink and red at night a couple of times when He's been over near Clydebank. The last he knew, they were talking about putting a restaurant in the jib and making it revolve. He'd read that in the paper. It was part of a project to represent the industrial heritage of the area. A revolving pink restaurant. You've got to wonder how they dream these things up. And see the view? That's one thing for starters they'll have to change. All very well getting the full panorama but if all you're looking at is a puddled wasteland every direction – gangs of weans playing football and smoking, pigeons roosting and crapping over the rusted fabrication sheds – it isn't going to make your mozzarella parcels taste much better, is it? (5)

Mick sees the inconsistencies in the transition of the area from industrial production to consumption and leisure and the way in which the products of the heritage industry replace

[24] Sandwiches are a running theme in the novel with forty references to them. They represent a staple, normative form of food, whose ready accessibility becomes increasingly precarious when Mick becomes homeless.

the actual labour that the area once fostered. That the new pink restaurant will look out over the old industrial area suggests that this is the first stage of a general gentrification of the location; the "puddled wastelands" and the "gangs of weans playing football" it is presumed will have to be removed to make the view palatable to those who can afford to dine on the mozzarella parcels. This aspect of the novel connects to a phase of gentrification identified in the 1980s and 1990s as a shift from the initial, "pioneering" gentrifiers to a broader movement of economic policy. Hackworth and Smith, for example, note how "third-wave" or "post-recession" gentrification can be "linked to large-scale capital […] as developers rework entire neighbourhoods, often with state support."[25] Similarly, Sassen argues that during this period: "Gentrification emerged as a visible spatial component of transformation. It was evident in the redevelopment of waterfronts, the rise of hotel and convention complexes in central cities, large scale luxury offices and residential developments, and fashionable, high-priced shopping districts."[26] This is the kind of gentrification that parallels Mick's narrative, however, he has little interest or investment in, the amenities, services and retail outlets provided in the newly gentrified areas, although he can observe them from a distance.

As the novel develops, Mick becomes increasingly unsettled in his life in Glasgow. It becomes apparent that he is suffering from some form of mental trauma brought on by the combination of the loss of his wife and the loss of a stable work identity and he begins to feel increasingly uneasy in once familiar places. He decides to move to London, where he hopes to find new employment and a new life and, initially, he comes to recuperate some form of collective, working-class identity in his solidarity with a group of migrant workers he meets when working as a kitchen porter at a hotel at Heathrow Airport. However, when he is summarily (and illegally) fired from this job for being involved in a worker's dispute, he

[25] Hackworth and Smith, "The Changing State of Gentrification," 467.
[26] Sassen, *The Global City*, 255.

finds himself homeless and eking out a precarious existence on the streets of central London. Although it is clearly a traumatic experience for Mick, the viewpoint from which he now observes the city allows observation of the contrasts between the wealthy surface architectures produced through gentrifying forces and the shadowy and interstitial places in the capital traversed by those on its margins. When wandering along the Thames, for example, he observes the derelict Battersea Power Station, which is now surrounded by expensive apartments, trendy bars and restaurants:

> Further down the water, Mick is viewing across the way to the power station. One thing that must be admitted: It's bloody big. When did they close it? Who cares, what does it matter? It doesn't. Probably the Milk Snatcher but. We don't want power stations, what we want instead is more apartment buildings – these ones you can see here all along past the bridge, curving swirls of bright blue and green. (158)

The scene Mick observes shows that the transformation of the urban landscape enacted by policies of deindustrialisation is taking place not only in those regional industrial spaces like the Clyde with which he is familiar, but also in London. The reference to Thatcher in the quotation registers Mick's resignation to the forces of neoliberalism and gentrification that have debarred him from inclusion in a society and culture that he can now only observe from his position on the margins.[27] As Phil O'Brien notes of Raisin's novel: "It is the landscape itself which provides greater insight into historical, social, and political change. And the comparison between Battersea and Glasgow Harbour is here explicit: a former industrial site which once provided thousands of jobs transformed by global capital into twenty-first-century prestige destination."[28] The novel's use of point of view and focalization is crucial here; in the rapid shifts between the third-person narration to Mick's free indirect discourse,

[27] Margaret Thatcher was dubbed the "milk snatcher" earlier in her political career when, as Education Secretary, she brought in a policy that ended free milk to schools in Britain, thus depriving all school age children under seven of government-funded milk.
[28] O'Brien, "Ross Raisin and Class Mourning," 101.

to a variety of other observers introduced in the text, we are provided with a series of perspectives of the processes and effects of gentrification. Mick's narrative, in particular, provides a form of psychogeography reminiscent of Michel de Certeau's "Walking in the City" where the aerial "Icarus" viewpoint is replaced by the wanderings of a Dedalus figure in the labyrinth below.[29] Homelessness is thus placed as the inverse corollary to the gentrification observed in the text, with the narrative frame promoting a position of critique through the presentation of Mick's lived experience in his wanderings around London.

The sum of his experiences eventually lands him in a hostel, where he is able to have a bath (and indeed remove his clothes) for the first time in several weeks. The image that greets him in the mirror is startling and registers an existential crisis: "As if the body isn't his; it belongs to another time when nakedness was something that had to be dealt with on a daily basis, and now he doesn't own it – He's removed himself from his body like he has from everything else" (188). The narrative of decline and displacement suffered by the larger communities due to the processes of deindustrialization and subsequent gentrification is thus given a powerful visual metaphor here in this embodiment of the damage done to Mick's body and the effect it has on him psychologically. In this passage, Mick's body has become the derelict object that needs to be either removed or regenerated for the processes of gentrification to occur, in both a material and ideological sense.

This represents the lowest point in Mick's narrative, but his decision to opt out of mainstream society can be read as an act of resistance to the forces of neoliberalism and the gentrification of the mind. The end of the novel, however, sees a partial acceptance of his need to conform to the inevitable processes of what Mark Fisher (2012) calls "capitalist realism," that social condition wrought by the advance of neoliberalism whereby, as Fisher

[29] De Certeau, "Walking in the City."

puts it (following Fredric Jameson), "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."[30] At the end of *Waterline*, this ubiquitous consumerism is inscribed on the architectural and economic landscape of contemporary Britain; the final location in we find Mick is in a large sports retail store where he is looking for a present for his grandson; a "massive warehouse-type shop floor, mobbed out with swivel rails of trackie bottoms and luminous shirts" (258). The reference to the "shop floor" is ironic here as it recalls a lost factory space of industrial production now given over to consumption, consumerism and style. Although an example of what Jeremy Gilbert refers to as "disaffected consent,"[31] this neoliberal space, nevertheless, allows Mick a tentative reconnection with his family through his purchase of a football shirt for his grandson. The specificity of this transaction is itself ironic as the collective experience of being on the football terraces in the past (registered in the text's numerous references to Glasgow Rangers FC) is reduced to an economic transaction for a shirt that has "no team markings" (258). This moment also recollects for Mick a past memory of shopping with Cathy and causes a brief emotional breakdown. Although he soon recovers – suggesting that he has, to a certain extent, come through the trauma of losing his wife – it is clear that in order to survive he is left with no alternative but to consent to a new existence in a postindustrial and gentrified landscape. Fisher's capitalist realism is thus poeticized in *Waterline* through the spatialized narrative trajectory of Mick's experience as, in the culmination of the novel, he acquiesces to the forces of hegemony.

**Lisa Blower, *Sitting Ducks* (2016)**

Lisa Blower's *Sitting Ducks* offers an illuminating comparison with Raisin's novel. It is set in Stoke-on-Trent, an area once famous for pottery and coal mining, both of which suffered

[30] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2.
[31] Gilbert, "Disaffected Consent."

from deindustrialization policies in the 1980s and 90s. It deals with the effects of these profound shifts through a series of narratives related to a small group of people located within a specific area around Bennett Road. This name evokes the early-twentieth-century novelist Arnold Bennett, who set many of his Zolaesque narratives in the Five Towns of the Potteries, and indeed, the experiences of the characters from the industrial period of Bennett's novels is written palimpsestically underneath the postindustrial context of Blower's contemporary narrative of decline. Blower's decision to name her main character Constance, for example, references a character in one of Bennett's most well-known novels, *The Old Wives' Tale*. Totty Minton, the main male character in the novel, is a figure similar to Raisin's Mick Little, but one of a slightly younger generation who has grown up wholly within a deindustrialized environment and who has never been able to find any long-term employment. Totty's name also reveals a palimpsestic relationship, not to Bennett's fiction, but to the local pottery industry. His real name is Josiah, which evokes one of the most well-known pottery industry figures in the region: Josiah Wedgwood; while his surname echoes Thomas Minton, another pioneer of the pottery industry in Stoke-on-Trent. The industrial past is thus carved into Totty's very identity, thus making its absence in the present the more poignant. His mother, Constance, looks after Totty's two children and they all live in the last occupied house in Bennett Road, a street that has been targeted as an area for regeneration. Regeneration, however, in this case is a policy that has been exploited by an unscrupulous property developer, Malcolm Gandy, who is himself of the area, went to school with Totty and knows Constance well, and has his eye on owning all the properties in the street. In some ways Gandy can be seen as what Ruth Glass defines as a pioneer gentrifier, although one of a home-grown subset.[32] However, the novel is keen to foreground a distinction between material developments in an area and the way Gandy manipulates government policies and

[32] Glass, 1964.

cultural distinctions around the discourses of regeneration and gentrification to make a quick profit. In Blower's novel, there are winners and losers within the traditional working class from the policies of inner-city regeneration and it dramatizes Kirsteen Paton's model of gentrification played out through a mixture of coercion and consent. The novel clearly, however, sympathizes with the victims of the coercive measures, those who are unable or unwilling to respond positively to an imposed gentrification of their culture. Gandy's shady business practices include alleged collusion with local government officials and other public-sector workers; as the novel explains:

> How he acquired properties was a […] sketchy business. He was known to have deals in places with nurses […] But mainly he repossessed, from the living, from the dead, often swooping before the body had gone cold […] he lived amongst his tenants, slap-bang in the rut, cock of all he surveyed. (14-15)

Blower's novel thus describes an unscrupulous form of proactive gentrification in which older properties (in this case, social housing) are bought up by private landlords before being developed. Gandy uses the rhetoric of gentrification as an excuse to acquire properties, but with no intention of developing them to benefit the community. He buys a number of houses on Bennett Road, for example, which he then partly demolishes before claiming to a council surveyor that he has run out of money. He thus leaves the street in a derelict state, which, in turn, makes it easier for him to persuade, cajole or evict (through non-payment of his inflated rents) the remaining tenants from the properties.

As with Raisin's novel, this micro-story of exploitation and failed resistance intersects with larger political and economic contexts. The novel is set in early May 2010 over a period of four days that includes the UK General Election that saw the thirteen-year Blairite Labour administration (at that time led by Gordon Brown) ousted by a Conservative-Liberal

Democrat coalition that ushered in David Cameron's austerity policies.[33] For the working-class characters in Blower's novel, however, decline is identified as a continuing process irrespective of political party colours. The Blairite rapprochement with neoliberalism had come on the back of the Thatcherite polices of the 1980s and 90s, both of which martialled a sustained policy of deindustrialization that impacted greatly on areas like Stoke-on-Trent. The combination of neoliberalism and deindustrialization has served, as historian Selina Todd notes, to promote the idea of a classless society despite the fact that during the 1990s and 2000s, the richest 10% "enjoyed far bigger rises in their income than any other group [while…] the least wealthy half of society […] lived on less than one-quarter of the national income."[34] Blower's novel offers its own set of statistics pertaining to Stoke; as Mrs Knight, one of the social workers in the novel, tells us: "There were 244,800 miners employed in the collieries here in 1984 and just three pits left today […] in 1958, there were 2,000 kilns in use, 298 factories and seventy odd thousand workers. Last year there were just 9,000 people employed in the factories, forty-seven kilns as cold as the grave" (108-09). The subsequent long-term unemployment generated by these processes of deindustrialization impacts directly on characters like Totty, about whom we are told, "Men like Totty Minton were everywhere and nowhere and now, more than ever" (24).

Blower's novel, then, dramatizes the lived experiences of those negotiating these policies on a day-to-day basis in a series of encounters between victims of those policies, entrepreneurs exploiting them, and the social institutions trying to manage their effects. One of the main storylines is the attempt to oust Constance from her home based on the fact that she is looking after her grand-children (a fifteen-year-old boy and seven-year-old girl) in a

[33] Several references in the novel to "a big society" responds specifically to David Cameron's campaigning for the 2010 UK General Election, and a quotation from Cameron is one of the epigrams of the book: "The Conservative government pledges to take everyone with us, the frail, the elderly, the vulnerable, the poorest – we know they need protection." David Cameron, 2010 (cf. Blower, *Sitting Ducks*, 5).
[34] Todd, *The People*, 338.

two-bedroom house, which is deemed by Social Services to be an inappropriate living arrangement. The novel makes it clear, however, that the actions are part of the ideological and hegemonic structures that uphold unequal power distribution. As Jake Povey, a disillusioned Social Services officer in the novel, notes: "This is about the council selling out to predatory landlords for a backhanding snip then having the nerve to send us lot in questioning when word gets leaked that they're living like dogs, packed in like sardines, poor as fucking crows. Have you any idea what landlordism can do to a family who don't have the means to fight back?" (60). As the novel recognizes, the mechanisms of state are thus aligned with the gentrifiers, rather than those who are displaced by the process.

One of Gandy's strategies is to exploit the "Right to Buy" policies brought in by the Conservative governments of the 1980s, whereby council houses could be bought by private tenants (with the potential for them to be sold on to landlords). These policies were part of a swathe of measures intended to break any potential resistance to neo-liberal individualism conveyed through the solidarity of industrial working-class communities by introducing the notion of a property-owning contingent within areas that were being rapidly deindustrialized. As Gandy explains to Constance, "Councils are strapped for cash. They can't afford the upkeep" (134). In this sense Gandy is representative of what Jason Hackworth and Neil Smith have identified as a third wave of gentrification whereby the state becomes "more interventionist" and "gentrifiers and outside investors [begin …] to roam into economically at risk neighbourhoods – e.g.[…] remote locations, protected parcels like social housing."[35] Gandy's manipulation of government policy goes against the ostensible spirit in which Right to Buy was established as it was meant to offer tenants the opportunity to own the home in which they had lived (and had been paying rent to the council) for many years. As Constance notes: "We've never missed a rent payment […] since the day we were handed the keys in

[35] Hackworth and Smith, 469.

1937. We should own it by rights, must've paid for it twice over" (82). However, Constance is unable to gather the required money to pay even for the reduced rate she can get under the scheme.

The novel's examination of the relationship between individuals and the housing in which they build their lives, therefore, runs counter to a gentrifying narrative that is often predicated on home ownership. The gradual decline in the status attributed to council house dwelling has been identified as an active government policy and media-supported cultural shift, promoted by the Right to Buy policy. Cultural historian John Boughton has traced the history of the public perception of council houses and council house estates in Britain and concludes that the Right to Buy policy "was a perfect storm of policy and law with the clear and largely accomplished aim of diminishing and marginalizing council housing and, by extension, those who needed it."[36] Raquel Rolnik similarly notes, that "Homeownership and housing financialisaton shaped the role of housing in the UK, transforming it from a social good into a financial asset."[37] This context is integral to the nefarious practices Gandy employs in *Sitting Ducks*; in one of the various stand-offs between Gandy and Constance, the latter argues, "You're stigmatising council to make folk feel like being a private tenant sets them apart" to which Gandy replies, "You're right Connie, Folk do feel stigmatised when stuck in council" (226). Where Constance sees this stigmatising as one of Gandy's personal techniques to displace people, the latter recognizes it as a general cultural perception that he is only too happy to exploit. The novel, however, is keen to show the emotional and personal investment Constance has in her house, despite not being the legal owner. She has, indeed, lived in the house for 73 years and it has become an integral part of her identity: "She didn't know life without the house. The house didn't know a life without her" (116). As she

[36] Boughton, *Municipal Dreams*, 176. For a history of social housing in Britain also see, Linsey Hanley, *Estates*. For recent literary criticism of estates fiction and drama see Cuevas, "Societies Within"; and Beswick, "The Council Estate.
[37] Rolnik, *Urban Warfare*, 31.

explains in an argument with Gandy, “It’s my right to die in the house that I was born in.” This “right,” however, although based on a moral and ethical justification, has no legal grounding; as Gandy counters: “You’re squatting in my property and I want my property back” (19). The distinction between the descriptors of house (and “home”) for Constance in contrast to Gandy’s “property” crystalizes the tension between the emotional and financial significance each places on the physical space of the dwelling. Gandy’s actions reveal the ways in which rhetoric about regeneration can be manipulated by unscrupulous property developers to maximise profits through landlordism. In this context the developer artificially manufactures a rent gap by buying up council houses and then raising rents beyond the means of the postindustrialized workforce. As Constance comments to a local councillor who visits her house to try and get her to move out: “This *was* affordable living. My house. Next door. This road. This estate. But you lot went and made it affordable houses for leeches like Gandy so we can’t afford to live” (40). Constance reveals, here, that she is fully aware of the political contexts affecting her everyday life but lacks the agency to resist the economic drives and social policies lined up against her.

The novel, then, combines several stages of gentrification, both in terms of individual “pioneer” development and through local (and national) government policies on housing and so-called regeneration; roughly what Hackworth and Smith identify as the first to third waves. In Blower’s novel, it is clear that the rhetoric around gentrification as a genuine attempt to regenerate an area is a narrative imbued with power and selective interests. In this sense, it focuses on how gentrification inevitably involves the displacement of people despite the claim that such policies can create a social mix of new middle-class consumers alongside the older working-class communities of deindustrialized areas. As Allan Cochrane argues, however, this trickle-down claim (both economic and cultural) involves the regenerating of people as well as places and in terms of power hierarchies this transaction tends to be one-

way.[38] As Paton notes: "Gentrification is used as part of urban policy to 'gentrify' people, that is, to make their subjectivities and behaviours more congruent with neoliberal principles of the economy. Class culture is the point of intervention" (Paton, 40). The attempt to gentrify people's minds through the manipulation of their cultural practices inevitably causes disjuncture in the phenomenological responses to their "structures of feeling." Although in a very different context to *Sitting Ducks*, the process identified by Blower resonates with Sarah Schulman's concept of a "gentrification of the mind" alongside the physical and geographical contexts. as Schulman notes, "while literal gentrification was very important […] there was also a spiritual gentrification that was affecting people who did not have rights, who were not represented, who did not have the power or even the consciousness about the reality of their own condition."[39] As with Mick in *Waterline*, it is partly Constance and Totty's refusal to accept this cognitive shift that leaves them displaced and marginalized.

**Conclusion**

This article has shown that novels like *Waterline* and *Sitting Ducks* can provide powerful and convincing descriptions of the experiences suffered by those for whom gentrification is not an opportunity but a form of gradual erosion to their sense of identity and community belonging. These narratives articulate the positions of those who are not able or willing to be gentrified alongside the places that they formerly occupied or continue to inhabit. The psychological damage registered by Mick in *Waterline* and Constance and Totty in *Sitting Ducks* is mapped onto the general effects on the landscapes of traditional urban industrial centres. Indeed, these characters might be said to be suffering from a kind of slow trauma, that ultimately affects the understanding of their own identity in a postindustrial context, an

[38] Cochrane, *Understanding Urban Policy*.
[39] Sarah Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), 14.

ontological shift in their class consciousness.[40] This suggests that not only are working spaces, residential areas and commercial centres deindustrialized but so are the people inhabiting those spaces. The experiences foregrounded in the kind of contemporary working-class fiction produced by Raisin and Blower can, then, give testimony to the pressures placed on individuals and communities forced to adhere to top-down social policies in order to achieve some kind of ideological vision of renewal and regeneration after deindustrialization. This poeticization of the effects of gentrification potentially has the power to influence policy makers and temper the decisions made by those in positions of power who produce urban policies. Such fiction is important, therefore, because it might ultimately have an effect, however modest, on the direction of social policy and social planning for those areas that were once part of a celebrated industrial past but have seen, more recently, profound and widespread economic decline. But whether or not it can effect governmental change, fiction such as that produced by Blower and Raisin remains culturally vital in its capacity to bear testimony to the material resistance of the working people who built and lived in industrial environments and continue to navigate the effects of deindustrialization.

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[40] I am evoking, here, Rob Nixon's (2013) notion of the "slow violence" perpetrated on marginalized and precarious populations through a combination of neo-liberal economic policies and climate change.

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