**Gentrification in the House! John Lanchester’s *Capital*, Brian Platzer’s *Bed-Stuy is Burning*, and the House as Nexus of Glocal Forces.**

I’ll begin with a ridiculous gnomic riddle: “When is a house not a house? When it is a house.” By which I mean that a house is much more than a house; it is a repository of hopes, dreams, disappointments, memories, hauntings. Houses are, in Marilyn R. Chandler’s words, “visible histories of personal and collective life” (Chandler 11). In many works of literature, a house “stands at stage center as a unifying symbolic structure that represents and defines the relationships of the central characters to one another” (Chandler 1) and embodies important characteristics of the protagonists and their milieu. [SHOW SLIDE 3]. Some brief examples: Thoreau’s cabin at Walden represents nascent American virtues of simplicity, self-reliance and hard work. It stands in stark contrast to later examples such as Gatsby’s mansion, in which transplanted “European” architectural flourishes result in empty pastiche, masking a futile nostalgic passion driven by impossible wealth. Toni Morrison’s 124 Bluestone Road assumes the moods of its malevolent resident ghost and hypostasises the brutal legacy of slavery. Satis House in *Great Expectations* tells a tragic tale of female abandonment and, in its direct allusion to ritualised Hindu widows’ sacrifice, holds in its time-frozen rooms the myth of colonial power. And Brideshead symbolises a vanished England, overtaken by war, an aristocratic ideal taking “flyte.”

So a house is never just a house, especially not in a novel. It transcends the physical bounds of its careful geometry of “well hewn solids and well fitted framework” (Bachelard 68, SLIDE 4). As Bachelard reflects, a house becomes a participant in “the human plane” when one regards it – as surely one always does – as lived space rather than geometric object, as a “topography of our intimate being” (Bachelard 20) rather than a place exterior to the soul in which everyday functions are performed. To regard a house as a participant is not to cast it as metaphor – a figure that merely stands in for something else, or “a subordinate means of expression” (Bachelard 68) – but to elevate it to the status of poetic image, which demands that one live it directly, and which in so doing creates the world anew. Bachelard’s topoanalysis, then, is a philosophy of poetic images that are “personally innovating” (Bachelard 8) and possess the power of inter-subjective transmission. They are neither to be understood nor described, they are to be felt and lived: they are ontological. Hence Bachelard’s preoccupation with houses [SLIDE 5]: “Our soul is an abode. And by remembering ‘houses’ and ‘rooms,’ we learn to ‘abide’ within ourselves” (Bachelard 21). Lest he be accused of a huge affective fallacy, Bachelard stresses that the implied relationship is not causal: it is a matter of simultaneous attention and creation. The image “becomes a new being in our language” (Bachelard 8); coming from another, it nonetheless is remade at the moment of reception.

 One might suggest that Bachelard’s philosophy is too romantic, too firmly wedded to nostalgic notions of the house “as space for cheer and intimacy” (Bachelard 68). This is why Joshua M. Price, with reference to Bachelard’s *Poetics,* deconstructs “home” as a normative ideal of intimacy and safety that elides the possibility of violence against women (Price 40). As we shall see, my analysis of houses in John Lanchester’s London novel *Capital* (2012) and Brian Platzer’s Brooklyn satire *Bed-Stuy Is Burning* (2017) also shadows images of domestic intimacy with less reassuring aspects – risk, violence, rootlessness and displacement. Whatever criticisms one might level at Bachelard’s “phenomenology of the soul” (Bachelard 6), his work is applicable to a discussion of houses in gentrifying neighbourhoods because he never neglects the materiality of the image. Inhabited both bodily and imaginatively, his houses, rooms, passageways and closets participate in a “complex of reality and dream” and never shed their “objectivity,” their existence as things (Bachelard 69). “The image,” he stresses, “is created through co-operation between real and unreal” (Bachelard 79). In his assertion that all values – real and unreal, living and departed – “must remain vulnerable,” he anticipates the supplementarity so central to Derridean poststructuralism and the critical fields of hauntology and vulnerability that have emerged from it.

At the risk of multiplying theoretical strands, I would contend that Bachelard’s commitment to the mutual vulnerability of oppositions including real/unreal and, as we shall see, inside/outside, is also an antecedent of Raymond Williams’ “structures of feeling.” Though Williams is working within a political rather than a philosophical or poetic framework, he shares with Bachelard the desire to understand how material objects and forces might be experienced and felt individually and communally. Structures of feeling are means of conceptualizing complex negotiations between social formations already established and understood and “the kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate” (Williams 131). Thus they help negotiate a path between institutions defined as external and objective and present, subjective lived experience.

What I am trying to do here is sketch out an approach to the study of houses in stories set in gentrifying neighbourhoods, one which reveals the complex interplay of structure and agency and avoids what Avery F. Gordon calls “the twin pitfalls of subjectivism and positivism” (Gordon 19), one which recognises the enduring geometric “objectivity” of the house while acknowledging the emotional and imaginative investment in every brownstone facing, door, polished floorboard, cornice and original fireplace. Literary texts have a special part to play in contemporary discussions of gentrification. On the one hand, the novel’s abiding interest in multiple subjectivities, perception and affect, its potential for combining lyricism with ethnography, can allow for a nuanced treatment of gentrification in all its messiness and avoid the moral reductionism of some critical debates. It can portray the “individuation of perception” Sarah Schulman maintains is the antidote to the homogenization – of consumption, class, ethnicity, sexuality – inherent to gentrification (Schulman 17). On the other, one must recognise that the subjectivities being represented are themselves partly shaped by larger political and socioeconomic forces, and that gentrification, as the authors of *Gentrifier* argue, carries “explanatory power” only when understood as a product of coincidental larger trends and not as “an all-encompassing belief system” (Schlichtman, Patch and Hill 11). Gentrification novels, then, can demonstrate that if gentrification is driven in part by cultural preferences – which neighbourhood to live in, of course, but also one’s choice of fitted kitchen, or whether to knock through a partition wall – then those preferences are inseparable from policy decisions and global market forces.

I’ll talk about two novels today: [SHOW SLIDE 6] John Lanchester’s state-of-London story, *Capital* (2012), and, more briefly, Brian Platzer’s debut, set in Brooklyn, *Bed-Stuy is Burning* (2017). It is important to acknowledge that while both texts represent aspects of gentrification common to many urban environments around the globe – the hegemonic promotion of “homeownership and consumer citizenship” (Paton 32) and the supplanting (or, as Paton states, the *managing* [Paton 9]) of older, often working-class residents from city neighbourhoods as more affluent middle-class professionals move in – there are socioeconomic, political and historical differences between the London and New York contexts, even as both are considered global cities. Loretta Lees discusses some of these differences, and forgive me if for reasons of time I resort to a crude list. They include: the varieties in leasehold and freehold systems in the UK versus the fact that in the US property owners have exclusive property rights, thus enabling “the liberalism and possessive individualism associated with gentrification in the US” (Lees 205); the greater importance of land value in the US compared to property value in the UK, resulting in the prominence of the so-called “rent gap” in the former as opposed to the “value gap” in the latter (Lees 207); and the role played by postwar abandonment of inner-city neighbourhoods in favour of the flourishing suburbs in the US, a phenomenon less significant in the UK context (Lees 209). If the legal and economic preoccupation with land recalls American mythologies of the frontier and “free land,” it also speaks to a peculiar ambiguity in the figure of the house in American culture. [SLIDE 7] As Marilyn Chandler states: “One of those differences [between American and European literary houses] lies in the characteristic tension in American culture between the project of building and settlement and the romantic image of the homeless, rootless, nomadic hero whose roof is the sky and whose bed is the open prairie, the meandering river, or the boundless sea” (Chandler 4). Furthermore: “Enclosure in a house and in the structures of town or city life runs counter to the inherent romanticism of some of our most deeply held collective values: autonomy, self-determination, mobility” (Chandler 4). Indebted as it is, at least in part, to the English country house novel and the long history of British class stratification, the English gentrification story partakes less of frontier tropes, which recur frequently in American gentrification narratives, and displays less anxiety about physical mobility and more about the possibility (or otherwise) of social mobility.

With these (admittedly schematic) differences in mind, it is interesting to observe that *Capital* and *Bed-Stuy is Burning* have a striking generic similarity – they both utilise certain conventions of the thriller – and a shared concern with *risk*. What I want to do in the remainder of the paper is to examine the types of risk they portray, and to return to a discussion of the ways in which a house transcends its physical geometry to become much more than a house. Specifically, drawing again on Bachelard, Williams, and in addition Fredric Jameson, I show how the gentrified house intensifies questions of belonging and community and the relationship between domestic, local and global, and that the chief risk for the gentrifier home-owner is the shock of awareness that the world intrudes on the home, that, moreover, one’s *here*, indexed most powerfully and affectingly in the image of the house, depends on *elsewheres* [SHOW SLIDE 8]. As Bachelard says, in typically ambiguous style: “Come what may the house helps us to say: I will be an inhabitant of the world, in spite of the world [. . .] In this dynamic rivalry between house and universe, we are far removed from any reference to simple geometrical forms” (Bachelard 67). Both novels concern themselves with what Bachelard calls “The Dialectics of Outside and Inside.”

John Lanchester’s *Capital* is a social novel that tells the stories of a disparate group of residents of Pepys Road, London, a street in which houses now sell for seven-digit sums. Connected by their postcode, though not necessarily by regular social interactions, these people become narratively linked by the rather flimsy detective plot when all of them receive mysterious postcards bearing the message, “We Want What You Have,” followed by sinister home-made videos. Eventually a police investigation is launched. Though it is premised upon economic disparities, and though it introduces the threat of intrusion taken to greater extremes in *Bed-Stuy is Burning*, the thriller plot is less important than the novel’s more detailed observations, focalized through the main characters’ points of view, on financial risk-taking, globalization and gentrification.

The following description of banker Roger and his wife Arabella Yount’s house is an apt starting point, given that the Younts’ story most directly engages with the world of finance and its attendant risks, what Barbara Korte calls “the ﬁctitiousness of ﬁnancial speculation” (Korte 494), and that the extract exemplifies both the narrative form and the characteristic use of interior design features as apparent indices for character, class and relationships: [SLIDE 9] “The house in Pepys Road was double-fronted and had cost £2,500,000, which at the time had felt like the top of the market, even though prices had risen a great deal since then. They had converted the loft, dug out the basement, redone all the wiring and plumbing because there was no point in not doing it, knocked through the downstairs […] The kitchen had been initially from Smallbone of Devizes but Arabella had gone off that and got a new German one with an amazing smoke extractor and a colossal American fridge” (Lanchester 19-20). Internally focalized, the passage reveals the Younts’ preoccupation with monetary value and the marketization of property, but also the labour involved in gentrification, though the builders who actually carried out the renovation work are carefully elided. International brands – the German kitchen, the American fridge – are prominent, and the progression from “small” to “colossal” and from Devizes to America implies a shift from local to global perspectives, even as material evidence of global forces resides *within* the private locale of the house.

Crucial to our understanding of how the Yount house, and other Pepys Road houses signify is the “strange reversal” caused by gentrification and described in the Prologue: [SLIDE 10, READ OUT] “Now, however, the houses had become so valuable to people who already lived in them, and so expensive for people who had recently moved into them, that they had become central actors in their own right” (Lanchester 5). What this means is that the building is no longer, in Chandler’s words, “a kind of autobiographical enterprise” (Chandler 3) or an external representation of consciousness, but a form of interpellation, a means of constituting human subjects in the realm of abstract exchange value, subject to fluctuations of the global property market that can be especially volatile in a city of bankers, speculators and oligarchs. Houses do not simply reflect character, in other words: or rather, they do so ironically, revealing character to be always abstracted from itself in a realm of commodities. As Fredric Jameson observes in his study of Raymond Chandler, this is largely to do with the “wholesale alteration in our purchasable environment” in the postwar, postmodern world. A household object – say, an American fridge – ceases to be a physical thing *per se*, and instead becomes “an artificial need or desire” shaped by advertising and flexible specialization and never really apprehended as “pure materiality” (Jameson, *Detections* 17). Thus, one might argue that the Pepys Road interiors differ from, say, the interiors of Edith Wharton’s houses in their relative lack of solidity as signifiers. One might also suggest that their deliquescence begins with the house-as-advertisement seen in a text such as *The Great Gatsby*: this is what Richard Godden’s analysis of Fitzgerald’s novel suggests.What is striking is the lack of appreciable difference between the description of the Younts’ house and the global, neutral non-space of the property in which the African footballer Freddy Kano lives [SLIDE 11]. In neither case can we say that the occupants truly belong: drawing on Derrida (and Miranda Joseph), I would say that it is more a matter of complex *participation* in glocal networks and flows.

Even as the novel seems to contrast the empty wealth and commodity fetishism of the Younts with the authentic labour of the Polish builder, Zbigniew, materiality and abstraction are shown always to be in supplementary relation. The image of the bank notes in the wall of the recently deceased Petunia Howe’s house, discovered by Zbigniew, is a neat hypostasis of this relationship, especially so as the notes turn out virtually to be worthless. What one sees in *Capital* is a constant process of *conversion* – of material into abstract and vice versa – which mirrors the work of conversion carried out on the properties themselves. Through this conversion is revealed the radical impermanence of “home” as a concept, one always at risk because in a global marketplace it depends so much on elsewhere and is always apt to be commodified. As Petunia’s grandson, Smitty, reflects on the ungentrified interior of her house, one senses how readily the space is transfigured through a gentrifying, commodifying gaze [SLIDE 12], how instantaneously the supposedly timeless becomes historicised and the authentic something far more marketable – nostalgia.

For reasons of time, my comments on *Bed-Stuy is Burning* are necessarily more telegraphic. In the tradition of Paula Fox’s classic gentrification satire *Desperate Characters* (1970), though without Fox’s elegance and wit, Platzer’s is a frontier story, with its middle-class protagonists Aaron and Amelia cast as the brave pioneers familiar from any number of New York tales and frequently decried in sociological accounts of gentrification such as Neil Smith’s *The New Urban Frontier* (1996). Aaron, like Roger Yount, takes risks with money,

in his case via a gambling problem, but from his perspective the real risk is moving to a traditionally African-American neighbourhood of Brooklyn [SLIDE 13]: “It was a real risk, and a thrilling one. It took guts to be surrounded by people who didn’t look like him, in a neighborhood without the amenities he was accustomed to, but it was worth it” (Platzer 39). Platzer’s debut, again like many gentrification stories, denotes character partly through the fetishization of interior details considered authentic [SLIDE 14, DON’T READ ALL, PULL OUT DETAILS]: “The top windowpanes behind Amelia were 1890s stained glass, and they all matched one another. Orange teardrops emanated from a central sky-blue whirl surrounded by golden diamonds. Aaron owned those windows. He and Amelia did together. They owned the stained-glass windows and the original woodwork surrounding them. The wood was mahogany, carved to look like columns holding up a frieze, with little torches surrounded by wreaths carved into the corners. Aaron and Amelia owned this woodwork, as they owned the fireplace tiles around the still-functional gas fireplaces, the sconce lighting, the hardwood floors, the built-in closets” (Platzer 36).

There are minatory clues here – the tears, the torches, the wreaths – to what follows: after a cop shoots a local boy, rioters start trashing gentrifiers’ houses, including Aaron and Amelia’s. For the avoidance of spoilers, I will say merely that a tragedy occurs in front of their house, which leads to a confrontation between a local girl, Sara, and Amelia in the office upstairs. According to Amelia, Sara “embodie[s] the repercussions of gentrification” (Platzer 214): in counterbalance to this observation, Sara asks Amelia why she would move to a neighbourhood where everybody hates her (Platzer 215). As a home invasion thriller, *Bed-Stuy is Burning* confronts more directly (or perhaps clumsily) than *Capital* the gentrifiers’ fear of otherness, of the world invading the home and showing that home to be contingent on that world. Later in the novel, the smashing of the stained-glass office window in the office symbolises the destruction of Aaron and Amelia’s quasi-devotional authentic space, the fortress breached.

Obsessed as it is with thresholds, entrances and exits, Platzer’s novel bears out the wisdom of Bachelard’s thoughts on doors [SLIDE 15]: “Often it is from the very fact of concentration in the most restricted intimate space that the dialectics of inside and outside draws its strength” (Bachelard 244). A key scene in the novel, when an African-American neighbor is trying to defend the house from the rioters, resonates with images of the threshold [SLIDE 16, JUST DRAW ATTENTION TO CERTAIN THINGS]. Note that Aaron and Amelia’s defender, upon whom they depend at this crucial moment, is called “Jupiter,” to emphasise his otherness, certainly, but also, in the key line “Jupiter, and then the rest of the house,” to suggest the dialectic of inside and outside, home and world and indeed universe. Like *Capital*, *Bed-Stuy is Burning* problematizes authentic individual experience under gentrification, a global process of what Kirsteen Paton dubs “restructuring” (Paton 1), in ways similar to what Fredric Jameson sketches out in his famous essay “Cognitive Mapping” [SLIDE 17]: “the truth of that experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place [. . .] There comes into being, then, a situation in which we can say that if individual experience is authentic, then it cannot be true; and that if a scientific or cognitive model of the same content is true, then it escapes individual experience” (Jameson 349).

Both *Capital* and *Bed-Stuy is Burning* depict houses in gentrifying neighbourhoods to locate individuals within global flows which destabilise a sense of belonging, safety, indeed of “home” itself. Both authors might be criticized (and have been) for making the redemptive narratives of the gentrifiers so central: in the case of *Bed-Stuy is Burning*, I have some sympathy with this view, while noting that Amelia’s decision to turn her experiences of the riot into award-winning journalism, to become a critical expert voice on gentrification, is a clear satire on hypocritical virtue-signalling and undermines any potential redemption. It is

also worth mentioning the realist mode in which both novels are written. I would respectfully take issue with Paul Crosthwaite’s contention that “postmodern avant garde” narrative forms better capture the unreality of global capital and the financial crisis. Rather, realist novels such as these focus on “manners” in the sense conveyed by Lionel Trilling back in 1948 – “a culture’s hum and buzz of implication” (Trilling 12) – and, most importantly, allow clear insights into how those manners are shaped by the impersonal, abstract, unreal workings of capital even as they reveal social reality. Likewise, they show that houses reflect those manners in complex ways.

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