6

Gentrification

James Peacock

Cabbagetown, Atlanta, in the last decade of the twentieth century. A forty-something African American man watches gentrification in action. He sees “ash-brick factories now being converted into trendy lofts to make way for the chi-chi yuppies swarming in” and reflects on the racial and class configurations attendant on neighborhood change: “The poor white trash in Cabbagetown despised chi-chi yuppies a tad less than they hated niggers. They had more in common with the blacks, but you could never convince them of that.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Sardonic observations like these, taken from Nathan McCall’s black comedy *Them* (2007), abound in gentrification stories set in cities across the United States, and they demonstrate both the distinct power of literature to represent urban transformation, and the distinct challenges that transformation poses to writers. 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 Manicheanism and moral reductionism of some critical debates. It can portray the “individuation of perception” that Sarah Schulman maintains is the antidote to the homogenization – of consumption, class, ethnicity, sexuality – inherent to gentrification.[[2]](#footnote-2) On the other hand, one must recognize that the subjectivities being represented are themselves partly shaped by larger political and socioeconomic forces, and that gentrification, as the authors of *Gentrifier* (2017) argue, carries “explanatory power” only when understood as a product of coincidental larger trends and not as “an all-encompassing belief system.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Part of the difficulty in talking about gentrification is its multivalency: it has come to denote not only changing demographics in urban space, but also, among many other phenomena, collective loss of memory, the death of bohemian thinking (*bohemian* itself, as Erik Mortenson shows in this volume [Chapter 15], being an “overdetermined” idea, but one that he allies to nonconformity and spontaneity), or neoliberalism more generally.[[4]](#footnote-4) From its original coinage by British sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964, referring to the displacement of “working class occupiers” by the middle classes in areas of inner London, *gentrification* has acquired, like *country* and *city*, and like *suburbanization*, as Kathy Knapp’s contribution to this volume (Chapter 7) indicates, a host of ideological values.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The challenge for gentrification novels, then, is to balance agency and structure in their portrayals, to demonstrate that if gentrification is driven in part by “cultural choice and consumer preference,” then those preferences are inseparable from policy decisions and global market forces.[[6]](#footnote-6) According to Peter Moskowitz, “We talk about gentrification at the interpersonal level because that’s how we see it in our daily lives – rents mysteriously rise, an art gallery opens one day, then hipsters follow. But in every gentrifying city there are always events, usually hidden from public view, that precede these street-level changes.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Adept as they are at representing interpersonal encounters, the best gentrification novels (complex, dialogic systems in themselves) also reveal the concomitant workings of politics and capital beyond the street, the block, the neighborhood. They show that people actively make choices, for a huge variety of reasons, to live in particular communities, but also, as Miranda Joseph persuasively argues in *Against the Romance of Community* (2002), that capital and community are supplementary, not conflicting realms. Such novels balance critique – primarily of gentrifiers – with a desire to humanize rather than demonize.

In the passage from *Them* just quoted, the juxtaposition of active and passive verbs adumbrates the play of structure and agency. Factories “being converted” by unspecified actors – enabled, presumably, by civic planning decisions, private investment, the decline of manufacturing industry – invite the influx of the affluent middle class. The verb *swarming* shows the novel’s internal focalization. It encapsulates the narrator’s dismissive attitude to the invaders, and signals the ironies to come later, when a white couple moves in next door and forces him to confront his tendency to dehumanize the racial other. Most importantly, the passage betrays his assumption that *all* yuppies are white. Although he is prepared to consider links between class and race, his intersectionality is limited at this early stage of the narrative. Ostensibly born of his own experience and empirical observation of a changing Atlanta, it must also be understood as a cliché (as evidenced by the hackneyed term “trendy lofts”), and therefore as shaped, at least in part, by the preexisting, prevailing discourses surrounding gentrification and the divisions it inspires. This is not to say that in the broadest terms the narrator’s observations are *wrong* (or that clichés have no basis in truth), only that subsequent events will add nuance by demonstrating the complex negotiations of structure, agency, and lived experience.

This chapter explores such negotiations in a range of gentrification stories from Paula Fox’s excoriating dark comedy *Desperate Characters* (1970) to Michael Chabon’s epic of Oakland soul fans, *Telegraph Avenue* (2013), with reference to genre and mode. Following Rick Altman, it conceives genre neither as a taxonomy of fixed structures nor, at the opposite extreme, as a concept so anarchic as to be practically nonexistent, but as a form of textuality emerging through negotiations between communities comprising individual genre consumers with specific preferences, and the industries producing texts for consumption. Thus, the (re)formulation of genre is “a never-ceasing process, closely tied to the capitalist need for product differentiation.”[[8]](#footnote-8) What gives readers pleasure – the generic content – is inseparable from the text’s status as a material commodity. Choices are made according to individual pleasure but also according to what has been produced and offered for consumption. In turn, the industry continually audits its products according to choices made by communities of consumers. Through the symbiosis of these two processes, genres evolve.

The idiosyncratic ways that authors use genre can be regarded as evidence for their ethical orientations toward subcultural groupings and clashes of communities.[[9]](#footnote-9) Because it develops, like gentrification, through interactions of structure and agency, and because it, too, is both material and ideological, genre is useful in studying gentrification novels, which are expressly concerned with contiguous, overlapping or conflicting communities and with the material, ideological and affective elements of urban change. Starting with a brief survey of genre and mode in a range of novels and continuing with closer readings of selected texts, this chapter demonstrates ways in which these texts make important contributions to understanding gentrification as it is experienced within communities. Moreover, as fictional characters map the built urban landscape in ways linked to their own subject positions (and to the genre characteristics of their stories), they reveal gentrified environments to be texts in themselves, laminated with multiple meanings.

The term *gentrification story* does not refer to a monolithic genre. Urban transformation has been explored through coming-of-age narratives, detective thrillers, comedies of manners, romances, social novels, and historical fictions. Nor does a singular modality pertain. Although satire has been an important recurring mode in novels from *Desperate Characters* and L. J. Davis’s *A Meaningful Life* (1971) through to twenty-first-century texts such as *Them* and Lucinda Rosenfeld’s *Class* (2017), it is but one of many modes employed in the dissection of gentrifier culture and its casualties. The Gothic, detective fiction’s saturnine ancestor, emerges in crime fiction interested in the inequality attendant on gentrification, a prime example being the work of Thomas Boyle. His *Only the Dead Know Brooklyn* (1986) ends with a central character, who has recently survived the attentions of a psychopathic murderer, lying in a Park Slope brownstone, disturbed “by the intermittent sounds of his next-door neighbor stripping paint from his cherrywood shutters, punctuated by water dripping from the toilet bowl into a bucket.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Here, the very work of renovation, the implied fetishization of architectural features considered “authentic” (a key, contested term in all discussions of gentrification, as we shall see) is rendered grotesque, uncanny.

If the history of gentrification fiction has a strong realist line, befitting stories concerned with the material aspects of urban change – brownstone renovation, school zones, retail choices – it is a realism often inflected by magical *ostranenie*, fabulism, hauntings and comically exaggerated picturesque. These modes offer revealing insights into affective experiences and perceptions of gentrification, the structures of feeling engendered by material alterations in the urban environment, as well as implying resistance to a conception of gentrification as capitalist realism. Thus they provide means of discussing complex negotiations between structure and agency or, as Raymond Williams argues, between external 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.”[[11]](#footnote-11) And so the *rusalka* (a mermaid from Slavic folk tales) who magically appears to help the protagonist of Amy Shearn’s motherhood comedy *The Mermaid of Brooklyn* (2013) after her husband’s disappearance, also hypostasizes her anxieties about class and racial conflicts in Park Slope, Brooklyn. Likewise, the magic ring that confers invisibility upon white kid Dylan Ebdus, protagonist of Jonathan Lethem’s *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003), and the power of flight upon his black friend Mingus Rude, expresses Dylan’s as yet unarticulated guilt at the whitening of Gowanus as it becomes Boerum Hill. More broadly, in Matt Godbey’s terms, it speaks to “the complex relationship between gentrification, race, and middle-class white identity” in Lethem’s novel.[[12]](#footnote-12) Similarly, the ghosts that populate Ivy Pochoda’s *Visitation Street* (2013) represent the histories of communities in danger of being occluded as Red Hook gentrifies.

The contemporary gentrification picturesque comes in many forms, but these forms share with their nineteenth-century ancestors such as William Dean Howells’s *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) an aestheticizing impulse toward what Carrie Tirado Bramen calls “variety,” which “bypasses the extremes of [cultural] heterogeneity and uniformity by finding a middle ground [that] creates a sense of relative stability without monotony.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Urban picturesque promulgates a vision of local-colorful, heterogeneous neighborhoods at an early, bohemian stage of gentrification, under threat from “supergentrification,” the broad shift from independent establishments to global brands and extreme wealth.[[14]](#footnote-14) When comforting variety is signaled by a character’s surveying of shops and services, a mode emerges that one might call the “consumer picturesque,” as exemplified by the protagonist of Kitty Burns Florey’s *Solos* (2004), reflecting on Williamsburg: “They pass the sushi place, the Mexican restaurant, the video store, the Syrian deli, the Polish bakery […] the new baby shop that has a pair of studded black leather booties in the window, and Marta’s beauty salon, whose faded pink-and-green sign has probably not been retouched since 1966.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Emily Lime’s wanderings are a form of taxonomic cognitive mapping, one in which shop signs become a metonym of ethnic diversity, providing the (white, middle-class) individual with a sense of local and global belonging through commodity consumption. In Amy Sohn’s *My Old Man* (2004), the consumer picturesque is reconfigured as the sexual picturesque. The transformation of Brooklyn’s Cobble Hill into a neighborhood of white yuppies is temporarily staved off by the diverse romantic choices of protagonist Rachel Block’s rampaging housemate Liz Kominsky: “One other cause Liz worked very hard for was minority men. The whole two months I’d known her, every guy I’d seen coming or going from her apartment was Arab, Latin, or black.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Both *Solos* and *My Old Man* employ picturesque as a critique of gentrification’s homogenizing effects. In both cases, however, the characters’ preoccupation with consumer preferences as benchmarks of variety and authenticity invites a concomitant critique of romantic views of community founded just as firmly on notions of commodity and capital, and in the end just as internally contradictory and exclusive as the supergentrification against which they fight. What Sharon Zukin dubs the “schizoid quality” of authenticity is key to understanding these contradictions. As Zukin argues, *authenticity* oscillates between seemingly competing visions: it derives from, “on the one hand, being primal, historically first or true to a traditional vision, and on the other hand, being unique, historically new, innovative and creative.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Yet these visions can be reconciled through judicious elision. Emily Lime can describe the late-industrial Williamsburg that existed before the arrival of artists and eccentrics as “an urban wilderness of warehouses and factories,” and the new luxury apartments as “untrue to the spirit of Brooklyn in general and Williamsburg in particular” because in her eyes her prelapsarian idyll is both traditional and innovative.[[18]](#footnote-18) Unwilling to accept that she is a gentrifier present as part of larger historical and economic forces (as hinted at by the warehouses and factories she cursorily dismisses), Lime displays a nostalgia for the present, reinforced by the historical present of the narration, that attempts to mythologize her narrow view of neighborhood and arrest historical change. As reference to the “wilderness” implies, this is a frontier novel with a colonialist mindset, disguised as a local-color picturesque. Likewise, *My Old Man*, for all its rambunctiousness, ends conservatively. Having had an affair with Block’s father, Kominsky enters therapy, admitting, “I violate boundaries because I’m afraid no one will like me if I don’t relate to them sexually.”[[19]](#footnote-19) The sexual picturesque is a pathology to be cured; boundaries – between family and friends, whites and blacks, authentic “holdovers” from the 1970s and inauthentic hipster newcomers – must be reinforced.[[20]](#footnote-20) Once again, a picturesque becomes a frontier novel, differences clearly defined.

For the sake of argument, this chapter has up to now employed a false dichotomy. In truth, picturesque gentrification novels are *always* to some extent frontier narratives, too; to be more specific, a novel’s implied orientation toward gentrification can be understood by examining the play between these two modes, one of which inclines (often factitiously) toward variety, inclusivity, aestheticization, one toward material difference and exclusivity. The relationship between the picturesque and the frontier depends on the stage of gentrification being depicted, as well as narrative point of view and texts’ complex mapping of genres. If one accepts that genres carry ideological use-value, are produced through difference and are inherently unstable, then one can accept their utility in exploring representations of urban landscapes also (re)produced through interactions between competing ideologies and material circumstances. According to Suleiman Osman, for example, Brownstone Brooklyn “was neither completely real nor invented” but was “a tectonic cityscape with the architectural and social imprints of multiple economic stages.”[[21]](#footnote-21) As the following examples show, gentrified neighborhoods in stories set in Brooklyn, Atlanta and Oakland share this layered character. What is especially important is the ways in which different socioeconomic groups seeking versions of authenticity in gentrifying neighborhoods make legible particular features of the landscape in order to distinguish themselves and their neighborhood vision. After all: “Authenticity differentiates a person, a product, or a group from its competitors; it confers an aura of moral superiority, a strategic advantage.” It is, in Schulman’s terms, a way of masking domination “from the dominant themselves.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

At the start of *Desperate Characters*, the cathexis of architecture, tasteful furnishings and objets d’art affords Otto and Sophie Bentwood an aura of superiority in their new Brooklyn neighborhood. Readers’ attention is drawn to “the old cedar planks of the floor,” the “Victorian secretary” and a “bookcase which held, among other volumes, the complete works of Goethe and two shelves of French poets,” as well as “an earthenware casserole filled with sautéed chicken livers, peeled and sliced tomatoes on an oval willowware platter Sophie had found in a Brooklyn Heights antique shop.” We also observe the Bentwoods’ self-consciousness, the way Otto “regard[s]” the dining table, the “deliberation” with which Sophie unfolds a linen napkin.[[23]](#footnote-23) A carefully constructed picture of middle-class accumulation, sophistication, and authenticity, this opening scene communicates a studied cosmopolitanism achieved through an interior picturesque suited to a couple who share a name with a furniture style.

References to the “slum street” behind their house and a fellow newcomer from Manhattan as “a brave pioneer” signal the Bentwoods’ awareness that they are outsiders, that this is a frontier environment and that their beautiful interior functions partly as insulation against the material realities outside. Sophie is even perspicacious enough at this stage to realize that “it doesn’t take courage. It takes cash.”[[24]](#footnote-24) As Elizabeth Gumport says: “As fixated as they are on the appearance of their houses, characters in early gentrification novels recognize that there are consequences to their labor. The newcomers are not immune to guilt.”[[25]](#footnote-25) This is why Sophie feeds the imperturbable cat that arrives as an emissary from the slum street and becomes so central to the narrative. When the cat bites Sophie on the hand, drawing blood and thus casting her as a gentrifying Lady Macbeth, it is tempting to view the bite as symbolic of the locals’ revenge on the presumptive and self-isolating gentrifiers, a kind of opening salvo in a frontier skirmish. And yet this would be far too simplistic; it would fall into the trap Fox deliberately sets – that of subscribing to the Bentwoods’ symbolic system, and Sophie’s desire to sublimate her guilt and prejudices through the symbolically charged animal. Moreover, when the sudden arrival of a black man in their home later in the novel lays bare their prejudices, his exasperated description of his white middle-class neighbors as “inhospitable cats” inverts the symbolism and complicates the relationship between self and other. So the bite, the accompanying pain, and the blood are better understood as representing a sudden, violent invasion of the material into an exquisitely constructed interior (matched by the novel’s perfect prose) full of fetishized commodities so artful as to be absolutely abstracted. The cat bite stands for the inevitable failure of the Bentwoods’ symbolic system. If, as Sophie’s friend Leon says, civilization occurs when “you take raw material and you transform it,” then the bite is the moment when the abstract carapace of the gentrifiers’ picturesque interior is transformed back into crude raw materials, the smooth surface of skin into ragged, damaged flesh.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Throughout the novel, the couple’s agency is directed toward an aesthetic utopian vision, but they are constantly being reminded of the material circumstances upon which that vision rests, the larger economic structures at play in the background, ones which they try to disavow. In a fancy kitchen shop, Sophie desires an omelet pan; the description of it highlights this tense play of abstraction and materiality: “it sat, substantial as its own metal, in a hazy domestic dream: a middle-aged couple sitting together over their *omelette aux fines herbes*, two glasses of white wine.” When the shopkeeper informs Sophie that another pan is “made better,” thus drawing attention to the labor involved, she panics and leaves instead with an egg-timer.[[27]](#footnote-27) In *Desperate Characters* the frontier upon which the gentrifiers live is not simply the one separating slum street from gentrifying block, black from white, rich from poor; it is also that between concrete materiality and the abstraction required to turn commodities into an exclusive vision. Each rude interruption of the Bentwoods’ life – the stone thrown through the window of a friend’s house, the return of the cat, the green plastic airplane in the hands of a near-naked black man stumbling down their street, the ransacking of their Long Island farmhouse – reminds them how porous this frontier is, how supplementary the relationship between materiality and abstraction. At an early stage of gentrification, and still in a minority, they are unable to assimilate these intrusive elements successfully into a picturesque vision: the frontier narrative keeps invading. Moreover, Fox refuses to let the beauty of her own writing stand outside its own materiality: when Otto grabs an ink bottle and throws it violently against the wall at the close of the novel, the black ink down running the wall reminds us of the physical substance of the words we have read, and by association the labor of creation.

*Desperate Characters* sets the template for the gentrification story’s yoking of the picturesque and the frontier to explore negotiations between materiality and ideology, structure, and agency. Despite being told from the gentrifiers’ perspective and allowing a measure of sympathy for the Bentwoods’ plight, the novel’s ironic distance and insistence on its own materiality achieve a critique of their ideological disavowals. Fox’s frontier tale has many descendants, including Brooklyn motherhood comedies set at a later stage of gentrification, in which an established middle-class picturesque appears to come under threat from outsiders. In *The Mermaid of Brooklyn*, for example, a child breaks her arm in a Park Slope playground, causing the narrator to reflect on the presence of boys from the poorer, “other side of the park,” as if “they themselves had imported free-floating violence over from the projects, like a flu virus.” Hence the frontier is reimagined and reinscribed in the playground.[[28]](#footnote-28) In the way its lead characters obsess over interior details, Brian Platzer’s *Bed-Stuy Is Burning* (2017) explicitly shows the influence of Fox: “Aaron owned those windows. He and Amelia did together. They owned the stained-glass windows and the original woodwork surrounding them.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Where it differs from Fox, and where ultimately it fails as a bourgeois critique, is in its choice of genre. After an African American neighbor is shot dead on their stoop and a poor local teenager occupies the couple’s upstairs office, it becomes a home-invasion thriller. Thus, whatever degree of satire is aimed at the gentrifiers, narrative resolution arrives with the expulsion of outsiders (the poor, the ethnically different) from the sacred space of the renovated home.

Although it, too, culminates in a violent encounter derived from crime thrillers, McCall’s *Them* provides a more balanced frontier narrative. Set in Atlanta’s Old Fourth Ward, birthplace of Martin Luther King Jr., its protagonist is an African American man called Barlowe Reed who lives in the ward and is concerned about the “wild rumors, about *them* coming through the neighborhood, snooping around for who knows what.” His deliberate othering and diminishing of “them” is challenged in Part Two of the novel by his interactions with Sandy Gilmore, a white woman who moves next door with her husband, intent on “building bridges.” Although her noble intentions are challenged by the “imaginary boundary to her yard” that becomes a physical boundary when her increasingly paranoid husband builds a wrought-iron fence, the gradual thawing of their relationship is a key element of *Them*’s nuanced treatment of the issue.[[30]](#footnote-30) McCall avoids reducing the novel merely to a sentimental story of unlikely friends: he carefully places both the Gilmores’ decision to move and Reed’s resistance to their arrival in a wider structural and historical context. Ironically, the civil rights history of the Old Fourth Ward is both the source of pride for its black residents and a key attraction (along with house prices) to liberal white gentrifiers, a point the Gilmores’ real estate agent is happy to emphasize. Moreover, Reed himself, we discover, is an incomer, who moved to Atlanta from the “small and small-minded town” of Milledgeville as a young adult, like many black Americans escaping poverty and prejudice in rural areas. McCall also introduces Marvetta Green, a property developer and African American gentrifier. Taken individually, these elements are interesting if not conclusive. Considered together, they complicate the narrative of neighborhood invasion by locating it in a longer historical narrative of migration, by demonstrating how real estate agents and banks exploit “authentic” black histories as marketing tools, by exploring in detail the (sincere) agency of gentrifiers and locals, and, thus, by blurring the implied frontier between blacks and whites, gentrifiers and locals, them and us.

When no easy distinction between insider and outsider is initially possible, as with Michael Chabon’s *Telegraph Avenue*, frontier imagery is a less viable approach to urban mapping. Chabon’s story takes place in 2004 as Oakland experiences incipient gentrification. Centered on Nat Jaffe and Archy Stallings’s “neighborhood institution” and “church of vinyl,” Brokeland Records (“Brokeland” is both the neighborhood’s nickname and an indicator of the store’s financial status), *Telegraph Avenue* is a sprawling social novel, a family saga, and an affectionate dissection of subcultural obsession, its two main characters vinyl addicts with an encyclopedic knowledge of soul and jazz-funk records and an immaculately audited shop window “vaccinated against all forms of bullshit.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Like Lethem’s *The Fortress of Solitude*, in which the white protagonist sees black characters in stylized terms as “scribbling in flesh” or “cartoon squiggle[s],”[[32]](#footnote-32) *Telegraph Avenue*’s picturesque elements tend to be human – mythologized, fantastic figures in a realistic landscape. They include Stallings’s father Luther, a legendary Blaxploitation actor; keyboard player Cochise Jones with his “octave-and-a-half hand, its nails like chips of piano ivory”; and Gibson Goode, former quarterback and now successful boss of Dogpile Music, a man not averse to wearing “heavy tortoiseshell sunglasses with dark green lenses.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Goode poses an existential threat to Brokeland Records when he announces plans to open a Dogpile megastore on Telegraph.

The stage is set for a battle between independent shop and chain store, between bohemia and gentrification, between authentic and inauthentic. On one side is Stallings, “the last coconut hanging on the last palm tree on the last little atoll in the path of the great wave of late-modern capitalism,” a man whose very surname connotes delaying the inevitable. On the other, there is Goode, eyes behind funky shades intent on “the cold business of empire.” Stallings frequents the old neighborhood businesses such as Neldam’s bakery, soon to close down, with its “old-fashioned sincerity, a humble brand of fabulousness”; Goode, by contrast, can afford “to open a *bangin* used vinyl store, five times as big as Brokeland and tenfold deep […] bankrolled by his media empire, his licensed image, his alchemical touch with ghetto real estate.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Goode stands for reinvention, regeneration, and *danger*: he is also called “G-Bad.”

Yet the situation is more complicated, the battle lines blurred. Goode’s declared motivation for opening Dogpile is “to restore, at a stroke, the commercial heart of a black neighborhood cut out during the glory days of freeway construction in California,” the place where he was born and visited regularly throughout his life. In one of the novel’s most surreal, picturesque scenes, Goode invites Stallings for a ride in his Dogpile zeppelin, hoping to make him a job offer. Surrounded by fantastical people, including “a Harryhausen negro, mythic and huge […] the dude from *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad,*” he proves himself perfectly capable of indulging in the same nostalgia for old Oakland – House of Wax record store, the laundromat, purchasing classic Luke Cage comics – as Stallings. In the gondola suspended from an envelope described, significantly, as “formed from some black polymer glossy as a vinyl record,” Goode shows himself to be authentic within the parameters established by Jaffe and Stallings: black, soul and funk-loving, wedded to original vinyl and, as Oakland businessman Garnet Singletary describes him, “a semi-local product.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

*Telegraph Avenue*, then, problematizes notions of authenticity based on Stallings’s brand of “sheepish nostalgia” and on fixed cultural markers of race.[[36]](#footnote-36) Goode and the music he purveys encapsulate the complexity of blackness as a signifier: black music is both innovative and traditional, he tells Stallings, and working in Dogpile represents a chance to reeducate black youth in the wonders of the form rather than sell records “for some white dentist or tax attorney to take home and hang on his wall.” His withering assessment of Brokeland’s current clientele is corroborated by the protest meeting convened there by Jaffe: a “motley gathering of freaky Caucasians united […] only by a reflexive willingness if not a compulsion to oppose pretty much anything new” in “a city that was largely black and poor and hungry for the kind of pride-instilling economic gesture” Goode’s store represents. Though Jaffe has a horror of “black-acting white men,” his attempt to bribe Singletary into supporting the protest with a plate of fried chicken is especially uncomfortable.[[37]](#footnote-37) Reflecting, perhaps, the author’s self-consciousness about his own love of African American culture, the novel subverts a narrative of gentrification (especially common in Brooklyn novels) of wholesale usurpation of nonwhite populations from urban neighborhoods, opting instead to highlight an equally insidious process of cultural appropriation by bohemian white liberals – a gentrification of the soul, if you will – bound up in myth and nostalgia for a perceived authentic blackness. Such an impulse extends even to the midwifery business run by Gwen and Aviva, Jaffe’s and Stallings’s partners, laconically described as “Black midwife and a million white mommies.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

If the African American cultural signifiers are a version of picturesque, Chabon contrasts them with a panoramic picturesque which expands the novel’s horizon beyond obsessed-over spaces such as the record store, revealed for the first time from Goode’s zeppelin. As the ship soars, Stallings, feeling “unhooked,” looks down: “Oakland fell away beneath them. The Bay Area shook out its rumpled coverlet, gray and green and crazy salt pans, rent and slashed and stitched by feats of engineering.” Later, he spies “the giant oil tanks of Richmond, ranked along the slopes like second-hand turntables.”[[39]](#footnote-39) His simile is an attempt to anchor the panoramic view in his obsessions, but he is nonetheless forced to consider, literally and metaphorically, the bigger picture – the shifting layers of industry, engineering and natural features composing the landscape over time. This spatial expansiveness suggests a temporal scope developed in the novel’s impressionistic middle section, “A Bird of Wide Experience,” in which a parrot once belonging to Cochise Jones embarks on an Oakland odyssey, connecting the lives of diverse characters in diverse neighborhoods. More than a literary flight of fancy, it, too, opens a more expansive social viewpoint that transcends a restricted set of cultural obsessions. It maps the picturesque back onto the social novel.

The examples of *Them* and *Telegraph Avenue* provide a revealing contrast to texts such as *Solos* and *My Old Man* and allow us to form some conclusions about late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century gentrification novels. In their determination to situate their characters in a neighborhood landscape subject to continuous imprinting and layering, McCall’s and Chabon’s texts not only show the involutions of structure and agency, they also challenge a linear trajectory of gentrification. Moreover, though they include characters suffering from nostalgia, the implied ethics of such novels moves away from the nostalgia Gumport argues is endemic in contemporary gentrified fictions.[[40]](#footnote-40) The combination of genres, modes, and levels of reality – notably the picturesque and the frontier – is part of the strategy of avoiding a narrow, nostalgic worldview predominantly based on a gentrifier’s perspective. In this respect, *Telegraph Avenue* in particular shares much with Lethem’s *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003), which combines a realist Bildungsroman with superheroic powers and subcultural imagery derived from graffiti and hip-hop. Most significantly of all, the spatial expansiveness of Chabon’s novel corresponds to the spatial and temporal scope of Lethem’s, its tracking of a longer neighborhood history from pregentrification to a stage of firmly established bourgeoisification, and its occasional superhero’s-eye-view of the Brooklyn streets. Both authors also dramatize self-consciousness about their problematic racial politics, the risk of appropriating “authentic” urban signifiers of blackness inherent in their writing.

The need to historicize, not to be trapped in nostalgia (for the past or present) leads to a counterintuitive final thought: that some of the most incisive gentrification stories of recent years choose not to tackle gentrification directly but instead its prehistory. Examples include Ernesto Quiñonez’s *Bodega Dreams* (2000), which portrays a Spanish Harlem native’s attempts to regenerate his neighborhood from within in order to resist the predations of white developers and settlers. It contains many of the contradictions of the ghetto narrative Thomas Heise identifies in his chapter: poverty and criminality, local pride, and activism. It also, as Sean Moiles demonstrates, accurately depicts the neoliberal policies of free-market privatization that allow gentrification to flourish.[[41]](#footnote-41) (For a more detailed analysis of Quiñonez’s work, see Ana María Manzanas Calvo and Jesús Benito Sánchez’s contribution to this volume [Chapter 5].) Jacqueline Woodson’s coming-of-age story, *Another Brooklyn* (2016) inherits from Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) a focus on postwar African American or West Indian communities in New York. By returning to gentrification’s prehistory – migration from the south, white flight from the inner cities – it renders it a ghost haunting the textual margins, and reveals the varied lived experience of populations eventually marginalized and moved out. Like all coming-of-age stories, its subject is memory. The most insightful contemporary gentrification narratives, in different ways, insist on long memory, and a longer, more complex view of history. In so doing, they deny what Moskowitz calls gentrification’s “ability to erase collective memory,” any assumption that it is, in Schulman’s terms, “normal, neutral, and value free,” and any sense of its inevitability or completeness.[[42]](#footnote-42) They offer, if only imaginatively, the possibility of alternatives.

1. Nathan McCall, Them (New York: Atria, 2007), p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sarah Schulman, The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Joe Schlichtman, Jason Patch, and Marc Lamont Hill, Gentrifier (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), pp. 12, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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