Articles

James Peacock

Other neighbourhoods, other worlds

Other neighbourhoods, other worlds: Gentrification and contemporary speculative fictions

James Peacock

Keele University

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

James Peacock is reader in English and American literatures at Keele University in the United Kingdom. He is the author of *Brooklyn Fictions: The Contemporary Urban Community in a Global Age* (Bloomsbury 2015) and is currently working on a monograph about literary representations of gentrification.

Contact: English Literatures, School of Humanities, Chancellor’s Building, Keele University, Keele, Staffordshire ST5 5BG, UK.

E-mail: j.h.peacock@keele.ac.uk

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2028-1471

Received 17 September 2022; Accepted 9 January 2023

Abstract

This article analyses three novels which employ speculative fictional elements to explore gentrification: Reggie Nadelson’s *Londongrad* (2009), K. Chess’s *Famous Men Who Never Lived* (2019) and N. K. Jemisin’s *The City We Became* (2020). Although these novels are set in western cities – London and New York – Peacock argues that their speculative conventions reflect a conception of the city as ‘planetary’, as what Hyun Bang Shin describes ‘as unbounded space, understood as being constituted through its relationships, including flows and networks, with other places’. These novels use the trope of alternate worlds partly as metaphor for the clash of different views of authenticity in gentrifying spaces; partly as metaphor for diversity, migration and the alienation of global extraterritoriality; but also partly as a means of decentralizing the western city or to propose multiple, competing centralities at all spatial levels – domestic, neighbourhood, civic and beyond. In so doing they offer, in divergent ways, critiques of and symbolic alternatives to neo-liberal gentrification.

Keywords: urban space, contemporary fiction, genre, science fiction, fantasy, London, New York City

Introduction: Manchester made strange1

Though this article concentrates on novels set in London and New York, my prefatory example comes from a novel about Manchester. In her debut, *Cold Water* (2002), Gwendoline Riley captures the ways cities change rapidly, often haphazardly. When elements once familiar are altered, the resulting juxtapositions can feel disorienting to the observing citizen, the stuff of science fiction. Riley’s protagonist, Carmel McKisco, walks the streets of a Manchester poised between old and new, rough and regenerated, gritty and gentrified. As she walks, she acts as critical observer of the changing city and cultural curator of objects, places and people she deems valuable enough to preserve in her pithy reflections. In a characteristic passage, she wryly witnesses Piccadilly Gardens’ sprucing up, where ‘yellow drill vehicles’ and ‘larger diggers’ are employed in the attempt to transform the square into a ‘Japanese water park’ (Riley 2002: 56). Carmel laconically muses: ‘I’ll believe it when I see it’ (2002: 56). Her friend Gene’s alternative proposal to redesign the Gardens around ‘the album covers of his favourite band, Devo, with giant spacesuit helmets’ (2002: 56) appears no less fanciful. Its very absurdity serves to highlight the pretensions of the council’s vision.

The sci-fi inflection of the space helmets is reprised in another material symbol of Manchester’s regeneration. Continuing along the tram line into Shudehill, Carmel observes the old Co-operative Insurance Company building, ‘its windows boarded with black-painted plywood’, across the street from ‘its new home, a glass low-rise that looks like a stranded spaceship’ (2002: 56–57). Surrounded by ‘grand old Victorian trade buildings’, ‘old rag shops’ and tattoo parlours (2002: 56, 57), the new construction might appear incongruous or, indeed, *alien*. And yet in the context of Carmel’s idiosyncratic, affectless narration, its strangeness is no more pronounced than the ‘garish disco gear and sequinned jumpers’ in the windows of the local clothes wholesalers (2002: 57). This is partly because her picturesque perspective often shifts to render the familiar strange: recalling a visit to the tattooist with her friend, she comments: ‘We were like two sailors on shore leave that day’ (2002: 57). Reimagining the friends as outsiders arriving wide-eyed from elsewhere facilitates an excitingly alienating view of the city in all its contradictions.

*Cold Water* is not explicitly a gentrification novel, though there are nods throughout to the changes Manchester is undergoing; it is most certainly not a sci-fi or fantasy story. However, sci-fi allusions in the passage discussed are illustrative of the uses to which such images are put in other twenty-first-century novels more firmly rooted in speculative genres and more directly engaged with gentrification. Riley’s melancholic first-person reference to the ‘stranded spaceship’ suggests that the sci-fi inflection derives from individual perception and affect, a resident’s feeling of otherworldly estrangement engendered by local transformations. However, combined with reference to the ‘Japanese water park’, the image of the insurance building also indicates the wider economic and cultural factors contributing to urban change: the influence of global capital on the local landscape, the sense of ‘the city as an unbounded space […] constituted through its relationships, including flows and networks, with other places’ (Shin 2019: 111). To introduce evidence of space travel, then, is to emphasize through lyrical exaggeration the global forces at work in Mancunian space(s); to begin to reimagine the global metaphorically as the possibility of alternative worlds; to reconceptualize the city as ‘multiple centralities’ (Lees et al. 2016: 8) rather than a singular, bounded entity.

In this article, I discuss three novels – Reggie Nadelson’s *Londongrad* (2009), K. Chess’s *Famous Men Who Never Lived* (2019) and N. K. Jemisin’s *The City We Became* (2020) – which, in varying ways, draw on conventions of sci-fi and fantasy such as futuristic technologies, space travel, alternative universes, temporal disruption and radical forms of embodiment to explore the affective and material effects of gentrification.2 I make no critical value distinction between sci-fi and fantasy, considering them both examples of ‘speculative fiction’. Given that much of the ensuing discussion is concerned with land and property conceived of as what David Harvey calls ‘a fictitious form of capital that derives from expectations of future rents’ (2012: 28), then the pun on ‘speculative’ is doubly apposite. Not only does the term connote the accelerating ‘financialisation’ of real estate (Rolnik 2018: 3), it also suggests the efficacy of exploring financialization via these genres. Following Andrew Rowcroft, I suggest that ‘the most salient representations of “capitalist realism” […] occur in fictional environments which treat bourgeois social relations as profoundly othering, uncanny, and strange’ (Rowcroft 2019: 196–97) – science fiction, fantasy, horror, weird fiction and the Gothic.

This is not to relegate such representations purely to the abstract, spectral realm (though ghosts feature here). I agree with the editors of the 2015 issue of *Journal of American Studies* called ‘Fictions of Speculation’ that ‘genre fiction limns a more complex ontology, suggesting the correlation between the spectrally virtual and the intractably material that also characterizes our contemporary moment of late late capitalism’ (2015: 657). In this article, genre is thus understood as both figurative and material, as ‘a never-ceasing process’ of reformulation, ‘closely tied to the capitalist need for product differentiation’ (Altman 1999: 64). It is neither a taxonomy of fixed structures nor, at the opposite extreme, a concept so anarchic as to be practically non-existent, but a form of textuality emerging through negotiations between communities of individual genre consumers and the industries producing texts for consumption. What gives readers pleasure – the generic content – is inseparable from the text’s material commodity status. Choices are made according to individual pleasure but also according to what is produced and offered for consumption. If, in speculative fictions, these choices are frequently transgressive and alienating, escorting readers into spatiotemporal and ethical realms distinct from real-world norms, then they offer readers opportunities to reflect on ‘[t]he uneven spatial impact’ of contemporary phenomena such as gentrification and their affective consequences (Carroll and McClanahan 2015: 657). Moreover, they offer opportunities to consider symbolic alternatives, ‘to rewrite, to reimagine, even to refuse’ processes like gentrification otherwise considered irresistible (Carroll and McClanahan 2015: 657).

My discussion describes a trajectory from the disorientation and bewilderment of a hypergentrifying western world in *Londongrad*; to the creation of imaginative alternatives to gentrification in *Famous Men Who Never Lived*; to militant resistance to gentrification in *The City We Became*. In all cases, the depiction of gentrification, filtered through speculative fictional tropes, ‘unfolds at a planetary scale’ (Lees et al. 2016: 4) even as it assumes distinct local characteristics. In the supplementary, disorienting relationship between planetary and local lies the characters’ experience of othering strangeness. As Loretta Lees explains, ‘gentrification is a central ingredient in the reproduction of capitalism worldwide’ (2017: 4), and to conceive of ‘planetary gentrification’ is to advocate a comparative, relational, cosmopolitan approach to the subject beyond ‘the usual subjects’ of New York and London (Lees et al. 2016: 12) and without clumsily applying occident-centric theories of urbanism to phenomena emerging in the global south. It is to acknowledge financialization and ‘the ascendancy of the secondary circuit of real estate’ (Lees et al. 2016: 4) in contemporary capital and politics (what Samuel Stein calls ‘the real estate state’). It is to understand how global real estate breaks traditional binaries between centre and periphery, north and south, urban and suburban, public and private, resulting in ‘the emergence of multiple centralities across urbanizing spaces’ (Lees et al. 2016: 8). Even when the ‘usual suspects’ are scrutinized, they should be treated like any others – as networked, unbounded spaces containing ‘plural sites of contention’ (Lees et al. 2016: 11) – and neither as ineluctably singular nor paradigmatic.

If this article does indeed focus on the ‘usual suspects’ – New York in Chess’s and Jemisin’s novels, London in Nadelson’s – it is because I wish to demonstrate the ways in which speculative genres offer a clear-eyed view on the displacement that is a consistent factor in discussions of gentrification, even as ‘gentrification’ has assumed a myriad significations since being employed by Ruth Glass in 1964. By ‘displacement’ I mean familiar demographic shifts precipitated by gentrification: ‘[A] change in the population of land-users such that the new users are of a higher socio-economic status than the previous users, together with an associated change in the built environment through a reinvestment in fixed capital’ (Clark 2005: 258). In this context, however, the term ‘displacement’ also connotes the decentralizing of the western city itself, its reimagining as multiple centralities at all spatial levels – domestic, neighbourhood, civic and beyond – and its concomitant reimagining as (inter)planetary. Within this reimagining, the trope of alternative worlds is employed as a wide-ranging metaphor: for decentralization; the clash of different views of authenticity in gentrifying spaces; diversity, migration and the alienation of global extraterritoriality; the abstracted relationship between property’s material and affective value and the speculative value of the land upon which it sits. The potential power of the metaphor lies in reinforcing a cosmopolitan sense of global connectivity ironically, through estrangement.

Reggie Nadelson’s *Londongrad*: Hypergentrification and (inter)planetarity

Reggie Nadelson has written nine detective thrillers starring detective Artie Cohen, and what they share is a fascination with cosmopolitan Russians – the Russian diaspora, the transnational movements and activities of the Russian superrich, but also the coastal Brooklyn communities of Russian émigrés frequently depicted as fossilized, hyperreal, more Russian than Russia. In *Disturbed Earth* (2004), Artie describes Brooklyn’s Brighton Beach as: ‘[A] kind of theme park with stuff in the shops – dresses with glitter, big furs, fancy china – you probably couldn’t even find in Moscow anymore’ (2004: 52). Eccentric and isolated though these communities might appear, Artie’s investigations reveal their participation in global flows of people, goods and capital. The assumption is of cosmopolitan connectivity, of disparate agents and victims linked across national and local borders.

Though this is a generic convention of such thrillers – indeed, the editors of *Crime Fiction as World Literature* call crime fiction ‘a preeminently “glocal” mode of literary creation and circulation’ (2017: 4) – it is expanded in Nadelson’s writing to become her primary theme. She resists binaries between locality and globality, using the peripatetic Cohen to illustrate how

[I]nterdependence and uniqueness can be understood as two sides of the same coin, in which two fundamental geographical concepts – uneven development and the identity of place – can be held in tension with each other and can each contribute to the explanation of the other.

(Massey 1993: 64)

Or, as one of Cohen’s colleagues more idiomatically expresses it: ‘There are no local cases anymore, Artie. Everybody’s caught up in a spider web of shit, it encircles the globe like the ozone, you follow up something, it takes you somewhere else, borders are fluid’ (Nadelson 2009: 79). Crime in these fictions is a corrosive aspect of cosmopolitanism, ‘a reflection of the unprecedented global terrain of complex planetarity’ (Shaw 2017: 181), of alterity, interdependence and division.

In *Londongrad*, crimes are committed in the context of gentrification and extraterritoriality. The brutal torture and murder of a young Russian woman found on a swing in a Brooklyn playground leads Artie to London (and eventually Moscow) and into the lives and real estate of the global superrich, exemplified by his rambunctious friend Tolya Sverdloff, a former underground ‘rock and roll hero’ turned self-professed ‘asshole of capitalism’ (2009: 37). To consider Sverdloff’s London a ‘global city’ is to acknowledge the truth in the rhetorical question posed by a minor character: ‘You think London stops at the border?’ (2009: 334). It is a place of free-flowing capital, where extraterritorial individuals have multiple properties: for example, Sverdloff owns a house in Notting Hill, ‘his Eden’ and a country mansion which serves as an extension of his English ‘make-believe paradise’ (2009: 139, 166). London is also a centre of ‘safe deposit boxing’ – the purchasing of luxury urban properties to remain empty as ‘machines for money laundering’ (Stein 2019: 35) – and of tax avoidance and corruption. As Sverdloff admits, it has a ‘rotten heart of money’ (2009: 153). Most importantly, it is an unbounded space, located both within and separately from the nation state’s political and economic structures, comprehensible only insofar as it exists in relation to other global spaces. To quote another of Sverdloff’s perspicacious similes: ‘London is like an offshore island’ (2009: 155).

As Katya Aas explains:

[D]etached from the nation state, but intensely connected (by transport, information, communication and capital flows) to other global cities, the global city represents a structural background for the emerging global elite, whose cultural and economic connections may be closer to transnational spheres than to the national hinterland of the city.

(2007: 57)

A city like this is characterized neither by the classic model of gentrification described by Ruth Glass – the displacement of longstanding working-class residents by middle-class settlers – nor by the supergentrification accelerated by global consumer chains and finance industries, but by the ‘hyper-gentrifications caused by super-rich elites from the global North and the global South investing across borders’ (Lees et al. 2016: 110) that testify to the dominance of the secondary circuit of real estate capitalism. To the forced displacement of working-class populations, then, must be added the global elite’s enthusiastic succumbing to what Zygmunt Bauman calls ‘liquid modernity’ – a state of deregulated, fluid existence enabled by ‘the radical melting of the fetters and manacles rightly or wrongly suspected of limiting […] individual freedom’ (2000: 5). This actively embraced displacement is an aspect of what Manuel B. Aalbers dubs ‘fifth-wave gentrification’ (2019: 5) – building on the intensified ‘financialization of housing’ of the fourth wave (Lees et al. 2008: 179) and the systematic state intervention of the third wave – in which urban spaces are radically shaped by global finance capital and real estate’s expanded political influence.

In Nadelson’s novel, hypergentrification inspires a generic mutation that reflects a crisis of cosmopolitanism in a global city rendered uncanny by the movements of the superrich. Unlike another of Nadelson’s Artie Cohen stories, *Bloody London* (2006), *Londongrad* seems unable to remain fully committed to hard-boiled realist thriller conventions. Instead, its realism is corrupted by sci-fi imagery that metaphorizes the lifestyles and attitudes of the global elite it depicts, individuals whose absolute submission to the exigencies of capital flows within the real estate state has unmoored them from any earthly sense of reality, truth or location. Clues to sci-fi’s parasitical relationship with the detective thriller accumulate throughout the text. Sverdloff opens a club called ‘Pravda’ in New York, then another called ‘Pravda 2’ in London; he dreams of multiple truths around the world, each one further eroding the referential solidity of the word, rendering ‘truth’ a phantasmic commodity. A mall full of designer outlets is ‘devoid of life, dystopic’ (2009: 345). A mysterious character called Elena, the sister of the equally mysterious Grisha, changes her surname to ‘Gagarin’. Grisha, in turn, is described as ‘very good-looking in a sort of spooky scifi way’ (2009: 351). Most revealingly, Sverdloff explains himself to Cohen in the following terms:

I am also a pilgrim, like Billy Pilgrim, also unstuck in time, also tumbling in the ridiculous. The writer, Kurt Vonnegut, I love this man. I feel like that, London, Moscow, New York, planes in between, other places, nothing fixed, nothing regular, like many people these days, just falling free here to there. Even as a boy, I always feel I am in contact with creatures from another planet.

(2009: 69)

Sverdloff’s grammatical error, the use of the present simple tense to refer to his childhood, accentuates his temporal unfixing.

Reading *Londongrad*, one understands that this describes not just Sverdloff’s psychological idiosyncrasies, but lifestyles and states of mind emerging from specific historical and economic circumstances. As he confesses, Russian extraterritoriality stems in part from political anxiety: ‘We all travel too much now […] Russians feel they have to keep moving or somebody might take this right away again’ (2009: 271). In *Londongrad* and *Bloody London* the riches of New York and London’s Russian elite derive from what Manuel Castells calls ‘the pillage of Russia’ (2004: 187): as state regulation was weakened in the post-Communist era, there was a scramble to buy up state assets by whatever means necessary, a rush towards primitive accumulation with corruption and illegality as acceptable means to an end. Given the weakness of the Russian currency, the most effective way to maximize profits was to invest globally, particularly as power began to return to the Duma. London is a receptive environment for such investment, and its centrality to the network society (to employ another of Castells’s terms) makes the city a vivid scene for the depiction of a privatized neo-liberal economy not merely shadowed by an illicit global economy but sustained by it. As Sverdloff says, London is where Russians can hide ‘this money they make from buying whole pieces of the earth’ (2009: 156). When one considers Nadelson’s superrich characters against this historical background, the sci-fi images assume a specific descriptiveness. Cohen’s reflection that those who departed Russia after the Soviet Union’s collapse ‘had all migrated to a different planet’ (2009: 317) signifies radical shifts between different forms of capitalism: from state capitalism to neo-liberal, global capitalism and the hypergentrification it encourages and depends upon.

Interplanetary images come to dominate the narrative and inhabit the detective’s consciousness, undermining his already fragile sense of stability: ‘Grisha was gone. They had disappeared, both of them, Tolya slipping like a man on a stellar banana peel. During his interplanetary trip had he missed the connection, the spaceship home? I was tired’ (2009: 300). The case itself, far from being solved, fades away, rendered insignificant by larger (cosmic) forces. There is a partial exposition, delivered second-hand to Cohen, but none of the conventional satisfactions in the detective’s brilliance in finding culprits, establishing certainties and expiating guilt: instead, Cohen himself feels increasingly unmoored and estranged. Sverdloff, the interplanetary pilgrim, becomes gravely ill with heart disease, a victim of his indulgent lifestyle. If the detective thriller’s exposition requires grounding in space and time – an empirical analysis of who did what to whom, where and when – then the spatiotemporal disruption of characters like Sverdloff, their perpetual irregularity and elusiveness, makes such exposition impossible. Only when rendered temporarily immobile by illness, grounded in a hospital bed, can Sverdloff reflect honestly on the death of his romantic rebel persona and the emergence of the ‘asshole of capitalism’: ‘I wanted to go to the West in a hot-air balloon, I wanted to sail over the Berlin Wall. Instead I went with a business-class ticket’ (2009: 370).

In *Londongrad* sci-fi estrangement encroaches upon the fictional detective’s traditional values – questioning, the belief in collective culpability, the connection of past and present. As David Higgins argues, sci-fi has historically been bound up in ‘imperial fantasy’ – and frequently, as in the work of Philip K. Dick, resistant to such fantasies. If global capital, with men like Sverdloff as its architects and beneficiaries, possesses imperial qualities, it is empire removed from recognizable spatiotemporal location. London, New York and Moscow deliquesce within global flows, becoming abstractions, nebulous and interplanetary. Thus, rather than serving as ‘a generative site of cosmopolitan alternatives to imperial norms’ (Higgins 2011: 333), sci-fi in *Londongrad* is employed as a genre suited to the strangeness of the hypergentrifying global elite’s situation – corrupted cosmopolitanism in extremis, radical alienation. The detective, a cosmopolitan clinging to an ethics of mutual connectivity, is unequal to the job because things have gone too far.

K. Chess’s *Famous Men Who Never Lived*: Divergence and difference

The New York depicted in *Famous Men That Never Lived* is, like Nadelson’s London, an unbounded space. However, instead of freewheeling, interplanetary pilgrims like Sverdloff, it is home to thousands of refugees from a United States located, as the jacket blurb states, on ‘an alternate timeline, somewhere across the multiverse’ which split from this world in 1909. Escaping their version of New York City after the outbreak of nuclear war, Hel and her partner Vikram become redefined as ‘Universally Displaced Persons’ (UDPs), permanent outsiders, ‘[r]esented and resentful’ in a metropolis that superficially resembles their former home but is technologically and culturally divergent (2019: 18). If *Londongrad* employs images of interplanetary travelto portray the self-displacement of the superrich in the hypergentrified global metropolis, Chess uses the trope of alternative universes to explore ordinary citizens’ experience of physical and psychological displacement in a world rendered uncanny by global capital. The profound feeling of unhomeliness engendered by the forced move between universes is partly a metaphor for the shift from pre-gentrified to gentrified urban space, as we shall see, and provides a fictional gloss on Fredric Jameson’s ideas in ‘Cognitive mapping’ (1988). It elaborates on the ‘the local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of class structures in which he or she is situated, [the] gap between phenomenological perception and a reality that transcends all individual thinking or experience’ (1988: 353). For Hel and Vikram, ‘here’ exists in supplementary relationship with the ‘elsewhere’ of the New York from which they have been wrenched: in Jameson’s terms ‘the truth of [their] experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place’ (Jameson 1988: 349). The characters’ difficulties in mapping their spatiotemporal situation speak to the impossibility of grasping ‘the social and global totality’ (Jameson 1988: 353) of relations, and thus the elusive nature of ‘authentic’ living under capitalism.

When Hel explicitly compares both versions of Brooklyn, these difficulties are revealed. Waiting to enter the library on Grand Army Plaza, she considers Park Slope’s buildings and residents: ‘Hel took in the people at the other tables around them – prosperous-looking families, women with strollers engineered with as much sophistication as the one-person pods adults drive at home’ (2019: 68). The elegant facades of Prospect Park West, with their ‘Victorian-era urns flanking the park entrance’ were, in the universe she left behind, ‘defaced by graffiti and several of them were missing’ (2019: 68). She admits that this neighbourhood, ‘[w]ith all the coffee shops and the dog biscuit bakeries’, is more salubrious than its parallel version, blighted by the routing of the BQE expressway close to the park, and full of ‘[r]un-down brownstones and Hispaniolan restaurants and old Irish bars alongside newer spit clubs and payday advance shops’ (2019: 69). Illustrative though such details are, they are merely symptoms of what Hel calls ‘[s]kating the surfaces […] remembering without remembering’ (2019: 69): they fail to tell the deeper story of loss and displacement.

This is important because the merits of Hel’s current Brooklyn, evidently extensively gentrified, in contrast with the version she still regards as ‘home’, which resembles a pre-gentrified New York neighbourhood of the 1970s (albeit with the sci-fi addition of ‘velocabs and duple buses’ [2019: 11]) do not constitute the novel’s primary concern. Neither Hel nor Vikram is inclined towards disquisitions on gentrification’s evils and the loss of authentic neighbourhood spirit, nor towards the celebrations of ethnically diverse local colour that feature in many other gentrification stories, especially those set in Brooklyn.3 As Hel, visiting DUMBO with Vikram (and bemoaning its name-change from Gairville) sits in ‘a very dark, very hip bar’ with ‘[e]xposed brickwork and ugly paintings’, we are told: ‘She hated to see the gentrification of neighborhoods she’d known as poor. She also hated to discover formerly prosperous areas that had become run-down’ (2019: 89). And yet, despite Vikram’s taunt – ‘[y]ou just hate change’ (2019: 90) – Hel’s discomfort is spurred less by change per se than by the attendant danger of what her psychologist calls ‘Traumatic amnesia’: the forgetting of what went before or, more precisely within the speculative tropism of the novel, of the New York existing elsewhere in the multiverse.

For Vikram, initially more intent on assimilating to their new life than Hel, such amnesia is a constituent element of all urban living: ‘It was just the density of population that caused this feeling, the way that living chockablock with others encouraged anonymity, each member of a crowd consciously shutting out everyone else until one felt surrounded by ignored strangers’ (2019: 91). Conscious exclusion of others results in a feeling akin to ghostliness: Vikram is inspired to metaphors of haunting by a line from a novel called *The Pyronauts* by Ezra Sleight, a famous sci-fi writer from the alternative United States, unknown in this universe: ‘*Every big city has its ghosts*’ (2019: 91, original emphasis). To walk the city streets is to be surrounded by the absent presences of those who share one’s space but not one’s thoughts.

And yet in a city where refugees are regularly disparaged as ‘aliens’ (2019: 35) and where, as one UDP expresses it, ‘[a]lien is how anybody sane would feel, in the face of a life that’s so unfair’ (2019: 241), amnesia assumes a more active and pernicious form, and ghosts signify more than the conventional anonymity of crowded streets. Resistance to difference, denial of alternative cultures and the determination on the part of even some UDPs (including Teresa Klay, the intern tasked with helping Hel research Sleight’s life) ‘to destroy all evidence of [the] past’ (2019: 304), are attitudes amplified by the multiverse. They might collectively be described by Sarah Schulman’s term, ‘gentrification of the mind’, which refers to the ‘spiritual gentrification’ accompanying the concrete processes of urban regeneration and replacement, as well as ‘the destruction of culture and relationship’ (Schulman 2012: 14). Schulman’s term denotes a collective failure of memory and imagination, the death of diverse, dissenting, bohemian thinking and thus the ‘institutionalization’ and homogenization of culture (2012: 14). Hegemonic in nature, gentrification of the mind afflicts those most adversely impacted by gentrification, those ‘not represented’ and without ‘consciousness about the reality of their own condition’ (Schulman 2012: 14). The result is not only a loss of memory but also ‘a diminished consciousness about how political and artistic change get made’ (2012: 14) in a gentrified sociopolitical landscape inclined towards the expunging of difference and the promulgation of neo-liberal values.

Hel’s resistance to the gentrification of the mind (which sometimes manifests as blatant anti-UDP discrimination) is demonstrated by her commitment to memorializing the world she fled. Central to this memorialization is Ezra Sleight; Hel and Vikram’s tattered copy of *The Pyronauts* is the last surviving text by an author who, in this world, failed to reach adulthood but who in theirs became a renowned writer of sci-fi ‘masterpieces’ (2019: 2). Straddling two universes, the book is itself ghostly, first in the sense that ‘all writing evokes, revives or resurrects what is not present’ in its simultaneous literality and figurativeness (Lustig 1994: 1); second, because Sleight is both alive and dead in parallel spaces and times; third, in the sense that, according to Avery Gordon, ‘stories concerning exclusion and invisibilities’ are inevitably ghost stories (2008: 18).

For Hel especially, *The Pyronauts* is a cathected text because it embodies what is actively excluded in her new society and therefore speaks to the gentrification of the mind, or, in Gordon’s terms, ‘the structure of feeling […] akin to what it feels like to be the object of a social totality vexed by the phantoms of modernity’s violence’ (2008: 19). In Chess’s novel*,* this ‘violence’ is evocatively represented by the rupturing journey from one universe to another and corresponds, though it is more extreme, to the interplanetary travel of Nadelson’s superrich characters. It is the violence of displacement and loss accelerated by changes in capital formations, the material and psychological effects provoked by the gentrification so inextricably linked to the financialization of property and policy. The multiverse emphasizes the profound phenomenological and experiential aspects: to shift between capital formations is to undergo transformations of one’s sense of identity, to be haunted by contrasts between structures of feeling.

Hauntings disturb because they instruct, and because the ghost is a ‘social figure’ (Gordon 2008: 8) that reminds us of our inherent otherness, in the sense that one’s identity forms in supplementary relation to all others, including those one might willingly exclude. Hel’s desire to found a museum memorializing the UDPs’ world and ‘the brief part of the twentieth century that we all share’ before the divergence (2019: 314) is motivated partly by personal grief, partly by broader awareness of this relationality. What becomes known as ‘Divergence Memorial House’ is located in Sleight’s former Brownsville home, where the novel begins:

Hel stepped over the threshold from the sagging porch, squeezing her body between towers of junk. […] Within these walls in another Brooklyn, the great writer Ezra Sleight had lived, rats under the floorboards, a pile of books in his bed.

(2019: 1–2)

When one considers the traumatic journey Hel has undertaken, the word ‘threshold’ shoulders extra connotative weight in this passage. It refers not only to ‘a different Brownsville’ but also to ‘a different world, a world in which Ezra Sleight had died as a ten-year-old child’ (2019: 2). And yet it adumbrates not a rigid but a ghostly, porous membrane between difference and similarity, absence and presence, such that its materiality and emotional resonance must be understood only in supplementary relation to its inherent alterity. Characterized by divergence, this Brownsville house thus contains both actuality and hypotheticality. As Hel reflects: ‘Within these walls, what might have been’ (2019: 4).

Thus, Sleight’s house vividly demonstrates the aporia Jameson identifies: that the truth of experience is not fully coincident with where it occurs. In Gordon’s thinking, such a problem is social and ghostly in nature and inspires an imaginative and ethical injunction also serving as a warning against the gentrification of the mind: ‘We need to know where we live in order to imagine living elsewhere. We need to imagine living elsewhere before we can live there’ (2008: 5). For Hel, elsewhere and here are enmeshed in the house that simultaneously belongs to two universes and demonstrates how space is both materially and imaginatively constructed.

Sleight’s home therefore embodies what Gaston Bachelard calls ‘the dialectics of inside and outside’ (2014: 231). Though he frequently refers to the relationship between domestic and exterior space as one of hostility or ‘dynamic rivalry between house and universe’ (2014: 67), Bachelard’s phenomenological approach insists on the primacy of the imagination rather than ‘a reinforced geometrism’ of fixed definitions (2014: 231). Concepts such as size and space, inside and outside, are constructed imaginatively, so the ineluctable individuality of each imagination means that different people ‘[cannot] *live* the qualifying epithets attached to inside and outside in the same way’ (2014: 231, original emphasis). Thus, the poetic expression of language disrupts supposedly objective definitions and opens multiple, ambiguous meanings. Drawing on one of his favoured images of the door, Bachelard describes the human as ‘half-open being’ (2014: 237), unable imaginatively to conceive of the intimate interior without reference to the outside. Indeed, ‘[o]ften it is from the very fact of concentration in the most restricted intimate space that the dialectics of inside and outside draws its strength’ (2014: 244). Bounded by the imagination, ‘[o]utside and inside are both intimate – they are always ready to be reversed’ (2014: 233) and resist strict dichotomies.

Despite its occasional quixotic excesses, its nostalgia for rural childhood and its presumptuously romantic attitude towards ‘the space we love’ (2014: 19), Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* implies a supplementary relationship predicting the work of Derrida: inside can only be defined and understood in connection with outside, and the individual’s emotional orientation is shaped by that connection. In Chess’s novel, the supplementary relationship of inside and outside is heightened by the multiverse: Sleight’s house, physically located in contemporary Brooklyn, is an unbounded, uncanny space imaginatively haunted by its connection to the Brooklyn from which the UDPs evacuated. It is ‘divergent’ because it exists in different dimensions and embodies difference.

As the examples of *Cold Water* and *Londongrad* illustrate, feelings of uncanniness and alienation derive both from characters’ idiosyncratic perceptions and the material circumstances of urban change that shape those perceptions. In *Famous Men That Never Lived*, the uncanniness of Sleight’s house, filtered through sci-fi conventions, not only captures Hel’s personal pain but also speaks metaphorically to an aporia derived from neo-liberal economics which is central to any discussion of real estate, gentrification and the novel. To express it simplistically: a domestic space might feel like one’s own, and thus ‘private’, but in the real estate state it invariably sits on land which is privately owned by another individual or corporate entity. As Stein argues, land is integral to contemporary capital, as both ‘a precondition for all commodities’ production and circulation, and a strange sort of commodity in and of itself’ (2019: 29). Under neo-liberalism, land is much less a collective social resource than a profit-generating private asset. Its value is fundamentally abstract, speculative and, in Harvey’s terms, fictitious; it fluctuates dramatically in accordance with ‘external factors, such as pollution, zoning or the vagaries of demand’ (Stein 2019: 29), regardless of the emotional value it holds for its occupiers. Consequently, the material value of the buildings on that land is rendered hypothetical to the point of near inconsequence.

Thus, in the kind of paradox upon which literature thrives, the house is both one’s own and someone else’s and is both linked to the land upon which it sits and abstracted from it. In extreme circumstances (e.g. safe deposit boxing) the buildings are less relevant within the global property market as domestic spaces than as ‘a peculiar form of value storage’ (Rolnik 2018: 17) – as future potential, signs of coming exchange. In all cases, the global financialization of housing ‘directly relates macroeconomics to individuals and families’ (Rolnik 2018: 17) because the personal and private are inseparable from the global and privatized. To inhabit the here of domestic space is therefore to engage, whether one wishes to or not, with the elsewhere of global forces. Or, to express the notion in the more lyrical terms of the uncanny – to be inside and ‘at home’ is simultaneously to be outside and ‘not-at-home’, moving with global flows beyond one’s comprehension or control even as one invests time, money and emotion in the settlement of personalized spaces. It is necessary, then – following Bachelard’s ideas about inside and outside, which share with Jameson’s thoughts on cognitive mapping and Gordon’s on haunting a deep concern with how individuals locate themselves in relation to others – to read Hel and Vikram’s emotional orientation towards the micro-geographies of domestic space in supplementary relation to the financialization of urban space.

Speight’s house should be understood within this context. Unbounded, straddling two universes, here and elsewhere, the house functions as a deep, hypostasized metaphor for the paradoxical situation of domestic space in a global property market in which gentrification is a central element of financialization, and for the physical and emotional displacement inherent to this paradox. What is particularly powerful about Chess’s employment of the metaphor is, as noted earlier, her refusal unequivocally to condemn every aspect of gentrification, but instead to offer a meditation on the gentrification of the mind and the loss of memory it presupposes. Unlike the DUMBO and Park Slope neighbourhoods depicted elsewhere in the novel, the Brownsville in which the Speight house sits appears to be at a pre-gentrification stage, as Hel’s initial observations suggest:

[O]n New Lots Avenue, she’d witnessed a group of kids pretending to piss on a man slumped unconscious in an alley. She’d noticed melted vinyl siding fronting a building a few doors down, that ominous black smudge that marked a place where a car had burned hot.

(2019: 2)

Likewise, the interior of the house, full of ‘mismatched appliances’, ‘dirty wallpaper’ and ‘black plastic trash bags’ (2019: 3) has not yet felt a renovating touch. Neither Hel nor Vikram, however, makes value judgements about the house in terms of authenticity or aesthetics. It is instead regarded as a space of potential connection with an elsewhere in danger of being expunged from collective memory.

In eventually transforming, with the help of ‘charitable donations furnished by the curious and sentimental’, the ‘restored cottage’ into Divergence Memorial House (2019: 314), Hel is neither renovating, in the sense of ‘making new’, nor filling the space with fossilized, decontextualized objects from a past considered inert. Nor is she participating in incipient gentrification by fetishizing artefacts regarded as markers of ‘gritty’ neighbourhood authenticity: a tendency extensively analysed by Sharon Zukin (2010: 19–23) and seen in the exposed brickwork, maritime memorabilia and, in a particularly controversial case, ‘bullet holes’ of gentrified Brooklyn establishments (Eisinger and McShane 2017: 5). Rather, the ‘restoration’ of the Sleight house carries the word’s sense of ‘to give back’, as well as ‘to rebuild’ and ‘re-establish’. Counting among its exhibits the first-person accounts of UDPs like Carlos Oliveira, whose narrative closes the novel (2019: 309–15), Divergence Memorial House gives back to refugees the legitimacy of their memories and identities. It re-establishes and concretizes living connections with the alternative universe – thereby inspiring ‘observers from both known worlds [to] continue to scrutinize’ the circumstances of the divergence (2019: 314) – and thus resists the gentrification of the mind that would elide those connections. In so doing, it emphasizes the supplementarity of here and elsewhere, of local and planetary conditions. The haunting of the museum by the other universe is productive, a reminder of relationality and the inherent otherness of all individuals.

In *Famous Men Who Never Lived*, Chess takes the aporia of individual experience under global capital identified by Jameson and intensified in the relationship between macroeconomics and domestic space, and, through the speculative convention of the multiverse, performs a double divergence. Though it is based on forms of alienation, this double divergence has a positive ethical dimension. First, the house itself, like the city, consists of ‘multiple centralities’ and acquires its unique character through the embodiment of divergent but interconnecting experiences. Second, the house’s restoration enshrines divergence through the active memorialization of experience that would otherwise be marginalized and thus offers a symbolic alternative to, or divergence from, the narrative of amnesiac homogenization Schulman calls the gentrification of the mind. Sleight’s house therefore becomes a space in which a capitalist-realist narrative of socio-economic ‘progress’, of gentrification’s inevitability, meets resistance. The multiverse ensures that gentrification – of the neighbourhood and the mind – remains only one of myriad ‘unactualized possibles’ (Thrift 2008: 14). Different forms of regeneration, more committed to heterogeneity and long memory, are equally possible.

N. K. Jemisin’s *The City We Became*: Gentrification, the right stuff and the white stuff

If *Famous Men Who Never Lived* offers an alternative narrative of urban change, one which subtly challenges gentrification’s inevitability or completeness and its ‘ability to erase collective memory’ (Moskowitz 2017: 176), *The City We Became* polemically advocates resistance. Proceeding from the conceit that cities are living entities, ‘born’ into their ipseity after a long period of development and ‘built to incorporate newness’ (2020: 46), the novel opens in New York City, whose avatar is a queer, Black, homeless graffiti writer, just before ‘[t]he cord is cut and the city becomes a thing of its own’ (2020: 8). The avatar, known as The Primary, acts as ‘midwife’ (2020: 8) but finds himself pitted against powerful forces intent on thwarting the city’s birth and establishing an alternative urban space. In the opening chapter, ‘the *harbingers of the enemy*’ take the form of a ‘Mega Cop’ (2020: 13, original emphasis), whom The Primary destroys, but who leaves a ‘taint’ in the substance of the city, ‘spreading with every car that passes’ and creating ‘a foothold’ for the enemy (2020: 16).

After The Primary is left exhausted by the battle, the job of protecting the city passes to four other avatars. Manny, a queer Black man in his late 20s, embodies Manhattan. Brooklyn’s avatar is Brooklyn ‘MC Free’ Thomason, a middle-aged city councillor and former rapper whose power derives from music. Bronca Siwanoy, a lesbian Lenape woman in her 60s who works at the Bronx Art Center, is The Bronx’s representative. Queens is embodied in Padmini Prakash, a 25-year-old, heterosexual Tamil graduate student with mathematical skills. With the aid of Veneza, who becomes Jersey City’s avatar, as well as avatars from Hong Kong and Sao Paulo (characters whose inclusion underlines the novel’s conception of NYC’s interconnectedness and planetarity), the boroughs embark on an epic battle against the ‘Woman in White’ and her arrayed forces. The latter are determined not only to halt the city’s birth but also to replace it with a version from an alternative dimension.

Clues to the ideologies that frame the contrasting versions of the city are present from the start. In the Prologue, The Primary refers approvingly to ‘that church-plate sale I heard about over on Prospect, get chicken and rice and greens and cornbread for less than the cost of a free-trade small-batch-roasted latte’ (2020: 6). Shortly after the forgetting of his previous identity, his epiphanic transformation into ‘Manny’, and his experiencing of both cities ‘superpositioned over the other’, Manhattan’s avatar notices a branch of TGI Friday and ‘twitches a little, lip curling in involuntary distaste. Something about its façade feels foreign, intrusive, jarring’ (2020: 34). Later, Bronca admires the view from the arts centre, spatializing the ideological binary that pits the avatars against their shape-shifting opponents: ‘Homes and schools and churches and neighborhood bodegas, with only the occasional glass-and-steel condo high-rise to mar the view’ (2020: 156). Later still, in the climactic battle, the avatars are attacked by a Starbucks branch ‘covered in glittering white feathers’ (2020: 382).

In what is explicitly staged as a battle for the city’s soul between the defenders of neighbourhood, multiculturalism, authenticity and open-minded ‘newcomers’ (2020: 47), and the forces of gentrification, homogenization and global capital, the coffee shop’s white feathers are one manifestation of a recurring, deeply coded symbolic field with The Woman in White at its heart. Elsewhere it appears as ‘feathery white tendrils’ growing from a BMW’s wheels (2020: 38); a homophobic woman who turns ‘entirely white’ as she abuses Manny and his flatmate in Inwood Hill Park (2020: 60); the white frond emerging from the shoe of one of the ‘fascist dudebros’ posing as an arts collective in Bronca’s gallery (2020: 151); finally, 80-feet-high gleaming white condos formed from the massed tendrils (2020: 369). The apocalyptic whiteness threatening to overcome the entire city is a literary ancestor of ‘The whiteness of the whale’ in Chapter 42 of *Moby Dick* and of the ‘perfect whiteness’ of the mysterious figure rising up at the end of Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (2008: 175). It represents gentrification as ‘colonialism […] in its privileging of whiteness’ (Atkinson and Bridge 2005: 2); it symbolizes homogenization, the whitewashing of difference and a discourse of inscrutable purity and normativity that attempts to disavow its basis in forced displacement. It is the gentrification of mind and landscape hypostasized in eldritch, explicitly racialized form.

Jemisin’s fantasy and weird fiction tropes operate simultaneously on diegetic and metafictional planes, because the Woman in White’s alternative city has its declared basis in another literary ancestor – H. P. Lovecraft – thus setting Jemisin’s project in direct contrast to his. Lovecraft’s racist vision first emerges in a painting, called *Dangerous Mental Machines* (the author’s racist term for Asians), brought to Bronca’s art centre by the alt-right collective. In Bronca’s words, it depicts ‘New York *as* *he saw it* […] walking down the street and imagining that every other human being he met *wasn’t* human’ (2020: 149, original emphasis). Later, in conversation with Aislyn, Staten Island’s avatar, The Woman in White expounds on her Lovecraftian theory of people and cities: ‘Lovecraft was right, Aislyn. There’s something *different* about cities, and about the people in cities. Individually, your kind are nothing. Microbes. Algae. But never forget that algae once wiped out nearly all life on this planet’ (2020: 341, original emphasis). Demonstrating her meta-generic awareness, she describes the danger of proliferating, diverse urban populations in the language of the multiverse: ‘Then your cities start bringing multiple universes together – and once a few such breaches have occurred, why, the whole structure of existence is weakened’ (2020: 342). As in *Famous Men Who Never Lived*, the speculative trope of the multiverse acts as metaphor for a multicultural society and the multiple centralities of the planetary modern city, ‘both located but also dis-located’ (Lees et al. 2016: 204). And yet The Woman in White, whose real name is ‘R’lyeh’ (the lost city from Lovecraft’s ‘The Call of Cthulhu’) strives for the surrender of the city to the gentrifying, revanchist wave of whiteness and a severing of connections to alternative histories and lifestyles.

Though the avatars also recognize that a city’s birth necessitates a ‘punching-through’ and thus destruction of other hypothetical universes (2020: 306), their vision of what a city should be is, ostensibly, antithetical to The Woman in White’s. Hers is of supergentrification: high-rise condos, high finance, corporations and anonymous chains disconnected from local history or cultural mixing – a globalism of capital only. The avatars, by contrast, embrace the city’s planetarity and long history. They acknowledge ‘ancestors’ bones under Wall Street […] predecessors’ blood ground into the benches of Christopher Park’ and the spirits of other cities such as São Paulo, Paris and Lagos (2020: 17). Ancestors and recent immigrants, ‘*new* others’, combine to tread ‘heavy imprints upon the fabric of time and space’ in a transhistorical vision of inclusivity (2020: 17, original emphasis). The avatars recognize that New York, since ‘the first real estate swindle’ at Shorakkopoch when the Dutch purchased Manhattan from the Lenape (2020: 69), has always been built on the concept of ‘land ownership’ and ‘stolen value’ (2020: 70, 71). Nonetheless, they fight for the retention of shared spaces such as Inwood Park and the Bronx arts centre (home to ‘queer or neuroatypical’ artists and those ‘priced out’ of their apartments [2020: 152]) and recognition of these spaces’ long, complex histories. In a richly symbolic scene, Manny and his flatmate Bel throw bank notes and credit cards to the ground in Inwood Park to fight off the advancing white tendrils, ‘effectively *buying* the land around the tulip tree rock’ to prevent its destruction (2020: 71, original emphasis). Against the abstract financial value of land, then, are pitted the values of history, diversity, community and emotional investment in space.

And yet, this scene is revealing because it demonstrates the contradictions inherent to Jemisin’s approach to gentrification. On the one hand, it dramatizes the story’s binary of values through a violent frontier encounter and participates in the novel’s critique of racialized, neo-liberal ideology in the real estate state. On the other, it provides an image of supplementarity, with potential to disrupt the binary. For Manny’s actions attest to the fact that the battle cannot be staged *outside* the realm of contested land values, nor the arguments made in terms other than value and ownership. Thus the ‘chunk of space’ Manny clears by throwing down his Amex card (2020: 72) symbolizes spatially the impossibility of conceiving of a distinct, authentic community identity beyond capital. As Miranda Joseph argues, community and capital – even with the latter commonly believed to be destructive of the former – exist in supplementary relation: indeed, ‘the work of community is to generate and legitimate necessary particularities and social hierarchies (of gender, race, nation, sexuality) implicitly required, but disavowed, by capitalism’ (Joseph 2002: xxxiii). In an era of flexible specialization, capital is effective at extending its global reach because it ‘attends ever more precisely to place and culture and depends ever more profoundly on the extra-economic bonds of community and kinship’ (2002: 147); in other words, it successfully incorporates romantic notions of identity and belonging.

Though The Primary initially appears to recognize the supplementarity of the alternative urban visions, musing that ‘The Enemy is as quintessential to nature as any city’ (2020: 19), the words and ensuing actions of the avatars show their determination to reinforce binaries through problematic discourses of authenticity, belonging and protectionism which employ the same language of hierarchy and foreignness they decry in the enemy. In the opening battle, The Primary shouts: ‘*Fuck you, you don’t belong here, this city is mine, get out!*’ (2020: 19, original emphasis); the haunting beauty of the whiteness Manny dismisses as ‘alien […] meant for some other environment’ (2020: 46). Though a newcomer, Manny insists that ‘he *isn’t* an interloper […] He belongs here as much as anyone born and bred to its streets, because anyone who wants to be of New York can be!’ (2020: 47, original emphasis). Belonging can be achieved, he asserts, by an affective performativity, through simply *wanting* to embrace acceptable characteristics of the city. Such performative acts distinguish him and his fellow avatars from the ‘tourist, exploiting and gawking and giving nothing but money back’: furthermore, Manny argues that his decision to live there ‘makes all the difference in the world’ (2020: 47).

If it were simply a matter of residence, then those who chose to move into gleaming white condos would also qualify as legitimate citizens. However, Manny’s assertions depend on a preconceived, fixed notion of authenticity and a qualitative distinction between versions of ‘newness’ that ‘become part of a city, helping it grow and strengthen’ and those that ‘can tear it apart’ (2020: 46). As Maria Sulimma argues, the distinction is based in ‘cultural consumerism’ linked to already-valourized individual and communal identities:

Good consumerism is tied to characters of color, queer characters, or working-class characters. The novel differentiates between these characters as ‘authentic’ consumers who appreciate the neighborhood burger joint as an ‘institution’ (356) or a ‘tiny, poorly lit ancient restaurant whose staff are clearly all related’ (113–4), and white ‘gentrifiers’.

(Sulimma 2021: 6)

And yet, as Sharon Zukin illustrates with a supplementary logic that echoes Miranda Joseph’s, the pursuit of such ‘authentic’ consumerism is at the heart of capital and gentrification: ‘[T]his projection of your own self-image on the shabby chic streets is exactly what the marketing theorists expect authenticity to be: a sympathetic vibe between consumers and the objects of their desire’ (Zukin 2010: 101). So, just as Manny’s symbolic throwing of money at the problem in Inwood Park locates the avatars’ struggle firmly within the capital forces they reject, so their cultural consumer choices are drivers of their antagonist, gentrification. Authenticity is lifestyle, performance and ‘a means of displacement’ itself (Zukin 2010: 4). This is precisely why Paulo can overhear a group of gentrifiers in Inwood Park, wearing tell-tale white, sipping rosé, eating waffle cones and, most significantly, talking excitedly about ‘*authentic* Dominican food’ (2020: 112). Paulo’s retreat into a neighbourhood family restaurant earns him relief and ‘power’ to continue the fight (2020: 114), but it does not address the true significance of the scene he has just witnessed: that the alien gentrifiers share his desires, and that, as Jameson suggests, a discourse of individual, local authenticity within global capital cannot be ‘true’.

The avatars’ fixed conceptions of authenticity correspond with their fixed characters. Though, as Sulimma notes, ‘the collective, plural “we” of the title encompasses the assemblage of individual identities collected into a larger city as a community that is open to the novel’s reader as well’ (2021: 3), the avatars’ claims to represent their people are undermined by their basis in borough stereotypes. Manny has ‘a pleasant exterior and the ability to ruthlessly terrorize strangers into doing his bidding’; his ‘jutting skyscraperness’ (2020: 139), occasional coldness and understanding of money make him question whether he really is ‘one of the good guys’ (2020: 131). In contrast, Brooklyn channels the power of popular Black culture, using rap lyrics to protect herself from ‘the invisible feather monsters’ (2020: 130). Bronca embodies ‘a hundred thousand years or so of knowledge’ and the connection to Indigenous American civilizations (2020: 126). Most revealingly, Republican-voting Staten Island, dismissed by Brooklyn as ‘the sore thumb of this city’ (2020: 321) is represented by Aislyn Houlihan, a young Irish-American woman with a racist father, who displays a Lovecraftian fear of ‘Asian faces’ and anyone who does not belong to ‘her people’ (2020: 88). Sharing her father’s belief that ‘[e]vil comes from elsewhere’ in the form of immigrants (2020: 281), she proves susceptible to R’lyeh’s blandishments and refuses to join the other avatars. The novel ends with her betrayal and a huge ‘shadow over Staten Island’ (2020: 433).

Though Jemisin claims that ‘I deliberately created stereotypical representations of each borough, and then I tried to sort of complicate those’ (Howard 2020: n.pag.), and whilst it should be remembered that this is the first part of a trilogy, the vision of an evolving, inclusive, pluralistic city in her novelis compromised by borough stereotypes allied to prescribed notions of cultural authenticity. Unlike Chess’s novel, which employs the multiverse to decentre the western metropolis and metaphorize the complex, alienating relationship between micro- and macro-spaces, *The City We Became* reinforces binaries of local/historical/authentic vs. global/generic/inauthentic while disavowing the supplementarity of these values. When the extent of the enemy’s global property concerns is revealed, the name of the Woman in White’s parent company being ‘TOTAL MULTIVERSAL WAR, LLC’ (2020: 360), the revelation leads the avatars to understand that gentrification is the ‘foothold’ the enemy requires to alter the course of the city’s birth (2020: 361) and that the invading whiteness is a symbol of the global financialization of property. It does not, however, prompt reflections on how their cherished values enable gentrification’s foothold; on competing ideas of authenticity; or on the complex negotiations of local and global in the changing city. Ultimately, in *The City We Became* the critical possibilities of the multiverse are underexploited: characters fall back on simplistic declarations of emotional or spiritual attachment which are supposed to instantiate a powerful opposition to the exigencies of capital but which, as the novel’s moments of internal contradiction suggest, are complicit with them. If cities are ‘*whatever the people who live in and around them believe*’ (2020: 425, original emphasis), then those beliefs must take a multitude of forms and encompass a range of conflicting, experiences and ideals, even those of gentrifiers.

Other neighbourhoods, other worlds, symbolic resistances

In terms irresistible to this article’s author, Jameson insists on capital’s centrality:

[A]nyone who believes that the profit motive and the logic of capital accumulation are not the fundamental laws of this world, who believes that these do not set absolute barriers and limits to social changes and transformations undertaken in it, such a person is living in an alternative universe.

(Jameson 1988: 354)

Jameson participates in a long tradition of writing on economics inflected by imagery from speculative fiction, from Marx’s ‘vampire-like’ capital (1990: 342) to the ‘alien event’ that was the 2008 global financial crisis, according to the *Financial Crisis Inquiry Report* (2010: 4). In this article I have intervened in current discussions about speculative fiction and capital and looked specifically at novels exploring the global phenomenon of gentrification – ‘the eye in the urban capitalist storm pushing capital into all sorts of planetary urbanizing environments’ (Lees et al. 2016: 205). I have analysed how in three novels the decentring of the western metropolis, its reconfiguration as multiple centralities, reveals a planetarity emphasized through alienating tropes of interplanetary travel and the multiverse.

As the authors of *Gentrifier* explain, studying gentrification obliges one to acknowledge complex negotiations between structure and agency (2017: 14). And as Peter Moskowitz states: ‘We talk about gentrification at the interpersonal level because that’s how we see it in our daily lives […] But in every gentrifying city there are always events, usually hidden from public view, that precede these street-level changes’ (2017: 9). The challenge for authors writing gentrification stories is to balance the novel’s adeptness at portraying agency, interpersonal affect, the structures of feeling pertaining for characters in particular environments at particular times, while providing insights into the wider global structures that precipitate street-level changes. The destabilization of lived experience through metaphors of space travel and movement between universes is a vivid means to portray interactions of structure and agency, to locate individual lives within larger forces.

Moreover, the speculative approach taken in these novels offers opportunities to explore ‘a dimension of totalitarianism which cannot be understood on the model of despotic command’ (Fisher 2009: 50). In *Londongrad*, for example, the conventional spotlighting of a criminal individual or organization proves impossible in the context of global hypergentrification’s spatiotemporal decentring, leaving the detective to muse on the bigger causes of the malaise in which he finds himself. In *Famous Men Who Never Lived*, Teresa Klay comes closest to villainy but is ultimately portrayed as a symptom and victim of a pervasive gentrification of the mind. And in *The City We Became*, which, I have argued, is characterized by the tension between a supplementary view of capital and community and a desire to reinforce binary conceptions of authenticity, the Woman in White functions less as a despotic individual than as the embodiment of rapacious global capital’s *system*.

What is suppressed in all these texts is a *direct* engagement with the struggles of class which have been so important to gentrification studies since Ruth Glass’s pioneering work. Though an individual character’s perception of urban change as uncanny might stem from class anxiety and fears of social fluidity, such anxiety tends to be less explicit than it is in lyrical realist gentrification novels such as Amy Shearn’s *The Mermaid of Brooklyn* or Linda Rosenfeld’s *Class*. In speculative gentrification fictions, uncanniness is more likely to involve social groupings beyond traditional class distinctions (Nadelson’s global superrich); or subsume class within a deep metaphor such as Chess’s UDPs; or replace it with an idealized celebration of bohemian difference, diversity and authenticity, as in *The City We Became*. Whether one regards this as a weakness depends on several considerations. On the one hand, speculative tropes demonstrate the ways in which stages of gentrification (particularly later ones such as supergentrification and hypergentrification) ‘recast’ class relations and put pressure on established definitions, showing them to be ‘relational, situational and context dependent’ (Benson and Jackson 2018: 67). And yet, in so doing they risk reproducing the logic of flexible specialization within a neo-liberal cosmopolitanism seeking to target particular consumers through the discourse of authenticity.

Thus, returning to Carroll and McClanahan’s contention that speculative fictions might reimagine capitalist realism and offer symbolic alternatives to processes such as gentrification, it is necessary to make qualifications. In their planetary approach, speculative fictions depict decentralized urban spaces, cosmopolitan communities and multiple sites of struggle against gentrification, but also enact the power of global capital to penetrate, shape and valourize the local and ‘authentic’. Likewise, in taking readers to the ‘generic crossroad’, speculative genres offer the pleasures of a transgressive ‘break with social standards’ (Altman 1999: 145, 158) and alternatives to culturally sanctioned behaviours. But this transgression is, as Altman makes clear, temporary and the return to hegemonic, real-world norms inevitable. As commodities in themselves, bound up in product differentiation and, in their capacity to evolve to meet reader demand, as examples of flexible specialization, genres encapsulate the tensions with which this article has engaged: between uniqueness and generic mass production, authenticity and ersatzness, community and capital. As Theodore Martin argues: ‘[C]hanges in […] genres correspond to crucial features of contemporary capitalism: the global triumph of consumer society, the pervasion of geopolitical and environmental risk, and the precarious conditions of postindustrial work’ (2019: 14). I would add gentrification to this list and emphasize that speculative genres – no matter how explicit their anti-gentrification agendas – offer symbolic alternatives to gentrification which are partial, provisional and always-already compromised by the conditions of their production.

References

Aalbers, Manuel B. (2019), ‘Introduction to the forum: From third- to fifth-wave gentrification’, *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*,110:1, pp. 1–11.

Aas, Katja Franko (2007), *Globalization and Crime*, Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.

Altman, Rick (1999), *Film/Genre*, London: BFI Publishing.

Atkinson, Rowland and Bridge, Gary (eds) (2005), *Gentrification in a Global Context: The* *New Urban Colonialism*, London and New York: Routledge.

Bachelard, Gaston (2014), *The Poetics of Space*, rpt. ed. (trans. M. Jolas), New York: Penguin.

Bauman, Zygmunt (2000), *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity.

Benson, Michaela and Jackson, Emma (2018), ‘From class to gentrification and back again’, in L. Lees and M. Phillips (eds), *Handbook of Gentrification Studies*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 63–80.

Carroll, Hamilton and McClanahan, Annie (2015), ‘Fictions of speculation: Introduction’, *Journal of American Studies*,49:4, pp. 655–61.

Castells, Manuel (2004), *The Power of Identity*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell.

Chess, K. (2019), *Famous Men Who Never Lived*, Portland, OR: Tin House Books.

Clark, Eric (2005), ‘The order and simplicity of gentrification: A political challenge’, in R. Atkinson and G. Bridge (eds), *Gentrification in a Global Context: The New Urban Colonialism*, London: Routledge, pp. 256–64.

Dobraszczyk, Paul and Butler, Sarah (2020), *Manchester: Something Rich and Strange*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Eisinger, Dale W. and McShane, Larry (2017), ‘Biting back: Crown Heights unites vs. “bullet hole” eatery’, *Daily News*,23 July, p. 5.

*The Financial Crisis Inquiry Report: Final Report of the National Commission on the Causes* *of the Financial and Economic Crisis in the United States* (2010), Washington DC. www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/ GPO-FCIC/pdf/GPO-FCIC.pdf. Accessed 25 June 2022.

Fisher, Mark (2009), *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Winchester: Zero Books.

Florey, Kitty Burns (2004), *Solos*, New York: Berkley.

Glass, Ruth (1964), ‘Introduction: Aspects of change’, in Centre for Urban Studies (ed.), *London: Aspects of Change*, London: Macgibbon & Kee, pp. xiii-xlii.

Gordon, Avery F. (2008), *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, 2nd ed., Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Harvey, David (2012), *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, London: Verso.

Higgins, David M. (2011), ‘Toward a cosmopolitan science fiction’, *American Literature*, 83:2, pp. 331–54.

Howard, Annie (2020), ‘N.K. Jemisin confronts the city we’re becoming’, Citylab, 27 March, https://www.citylab.com/ life/2020/03/fantasy-book-n-k-jemisin-city-we-became-author-interview/608923/. Accessed 5 July 2022.

Jameson, Fredric (1988), ‘Cognitive mapping’, in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana, IL and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, pp. 347–60.

Jemisin, N. K. (2020), *The City We Became*, London: Orbit.

Joseph, Miranda (2002), *Against the Romance of Community*, Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Lees, Loretta (2018), ‘Introduction: Towards a C21st global gentrification studies’, in L. Lees and M. Phillips (eds), *Handbook of Gentrification Studies*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 1–10.

Lees, Loretta, Shin, Hyun Bang and López-Morales, Ernesto (eds) (2016), *Planetary* *Gentrification*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Lees, Loretta, Slater, Tom and Wyly, Elvin (2008), *Gentrification*, New York: Routledge.

Lustig, Tim (1994), *Henry James and the Ghostly*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Martin, Theodore (2019), *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the* *Present*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Marx, Karl (1990), *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (trans. B. Fowkes), London: Penguin.

Massey, Doreen (1993), ‘Questions of locality’, *Geographical Association*, 78:2, pp. 142–49.

Melville, Herman (2003), *Moby Dick*, London: Penguin.

Moskowitz, Peter (2017), *How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for* *the Neighborhood*, New York: Nation Books.

Nadelson, Reggie (2004), *Disturbed Earth*, London: Arrow.

Nadelson, Reggie (2006), *Bloody London*, London: Arrow.

Nadelson, Reggie (2009), *Londongrad*, London: Atlantic.

Nilsson, Louise, Damrosch, David and D’Haen, Theo (eds) (2017), *Crime Fiction as World* *Literature*, New York: Bloomsbury.

Poe, Edgar Allan (2008), *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket and Related* *Tales*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Riley, Gwendoline (2002), *Cold Water*, London: Jonathan Cape.

Rolnik, Raquel (2018), *Urban Warfare: Housing under the Empire of Finance* (trans. F. Hirschhorn), London: Verso.

Rosenfeld, Lucinda (2017), *Class*, New York: Little Brown.

Rowcroft, Andrew (2019), ‘The return of the spectre: Gothic Marxism in *The City & The* *City*’, *Gothic Studies*,21:2, pp. 191–208.

Schlichtman, John Joe, Patch, Jason and Lamont Hill, Marc (2017), *Gentrifier*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Schulman, Sarah (2012), *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*, Berkeley, CA, Los Angeles, CA and London: University of California Press.

Shaw, Kristian (2017), *Cosmopolitanism in Twenty-First Century Fiction*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Shearn, Amy (2013), *The Mermaid of Brooklyn*, New York: Touchstone.

Shin, Hyun Bang (2019), ‘Planetary gentrification: What it is and why it matters’, *Space,* *Society and Geographical Thought*, 22, pp. 127–37.

Stein, Samuel (2019), *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State*, London and New York: Verso.

Sulimma, Maria (2021), ‘Scripting urbanity through intertextuality and consumerism in N.K. Jemisin’s *The City We Became*: “I’m really going to have to watch some better movies about New York”’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 63:5, pp.1–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2020.1865866.

Thrift, Nigel (2008), *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*, London and New York: Routledge.

Zukin, Sharon (2010), *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*, New York: Oxford University Press.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Peacock, James (2023), ‘Other neighbourhoods, other worlds: Gentrification and contemporary speculative fictions’, *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies*, Special Issue: ‘Representing Urban Change Beyond Gentrification’, 10:1, pp. 00–00, https://doi.org/10.1386/jucs.

Notes

1. I have adapted this subtitle from Paul Dobraszczyk and Sarah Butler’s book, *Manchester: Something Rich and Strange* (2020). With thanks to the editors.

2. Following Loretta Lees, I maintain that ‘gentrification’ remains an applicable term for ‘processes around the globe’ which involve the targeting of neighbourhoods for investment and the displacement of populations (2018: 5), while acknowledging in the readings to follow the different types of gentrification being represented.

3. Examples include Kitty Burns Florey’s *Solos* (2004), Amy Shearn’s *The Mermaid of Brooklyn* (2013) and Lucinda Rosenfeld’s *Class* (2017).

James Peacock has asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.