



# Food, Gentrification, and the Changing City

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**Abstract:**

Food offers a visceral entry point into the politics and processes of gentrification. Traditional explanations of gentrification - when a neighborhood experiences disinvestment and economic decline followed by "revitalization" and "redevelopment" - hinge on either political economy or cultural drivers. This article discusses the relationship between these two drivers to show how food gentrification is multifaceted and changes neighborhood class and ethnoracial demographics, foodscapes and foodways, and housing. First, poor communities in cities around the world can experience the deleterious effects of food driving gentrification, like when developers use urban agriculture to attract new residents and increase property values. Second, food itself is being gentrified, which for communities marginalized by their race or ethnicity means both the dispossession of culturally important foods that are made "cool" and become unaffordable and the upscaling of food retail that displaces former bars, cafes, restaurants, grocery stores, and gardens. The article concludes with a brief discussion of some social movement strategies and policy approaches that might prevent the harmful effects of food gentrification.

**Key words:** food gentrification, green gentrification, political economy, culture, place

The current attention to *food gentrification* stems from an astute set of tweets on January 10, 2014 by a black feminist blogger named Mikki Kendall. She first wrote, «I need to be in my feelings about #foodgentrification for a second. Because at this rate my kids won't be able to afford soul food». She followed this up by writing, «When we talk about #foodgentrification we're talking about the impact of a traditionally low income food becoming trendy», and then «Black Americans have been told relentlessly soul food was to blame for obesity. Now collards are the new kale #foodgentrification». These tweets were followed by a widely covered blog post in which Kendall linked how white and wealthier people are commodifying the cultural foodways of poor communities and

communities of color that face increasing food and shelter expenses, both in the United States and around the world.<sup>1</sup>

You can now take a dive into any social media portal, type in “#foodgentrification,” start reading through the posts, and find intense debate over an array of intersecting topics; cultural appropriation, fetishization, corporate power, poverty, housing, food access, and racism, just to name a few, vie for discursive influence. After all, cities are battlegrounds. The contest is over who has a right to the city and what, if anything, is to be done about the intensifying social inequalities.

One of the first inklings of the current cultural debates over food gentrification in the United States might have been on the widely read satirical blog started by Christian Lander and Myles Valentin, called *Stuff White People Like*. As one might guess, food-related topics were central.<sup>2</sup> In a particularly telling post, #45 Asian Fusion Food, the blog states:

While white people enjoy venturing to ethnic parts of town to satisfy their palette (sic), most would prefer to take their first dates and parents to a place with dimmer lights, less water tanks with crabs and lobsters wishing that they would die, less ducks hanging from the window and table cloths that aren't plastic sheets. Some people caught on to this and decided to open Fusion Asian restaurants. These people are now very rich.<sup>3</sup>

And then there is the post, #73 Gentrification, which claims:

In general, white people love situations where they can't lose. While this does account for the majority of their situations, perhaps the safest bet a white person can make is to buy a house in an up-and-coming neighborhood. White people like to live in these neighborhoods because they get credibility and respect from other white people for living in a more “authentic” neighborhood where they are exposed to “true culture” every day.<sup>4</sup>

What makes these observations particularly cutting is the fact that the blog targeted typical white, educated, well-meaning liberals with upward class mobility, the same group that is driving gentrification in many places around the world. Taken together, there is both an economic and cultural dimension to the process by which white people's omnivorous tastes and economic advantage position them to colonize the tastes and places historically occupied by low-income people and people of color. Not only does food represent a biopolitical flashpoint to understand power relations but it is also a vehicle for physical displacement of people and their foodscapes.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> M. Kendall, «#Breaking Black: 1 in 5 children face food insecurity», *theGrio*, January 20, 2014, available in: <https://thegrio.com/2014/01/20/breaking-black-1-in-5-children-face-food-insecurity/>.

<sup>2</sup> The list includes, coffee, farmer's markets, organic food, tea, microbreweries, wine, vegan/vegetarianism, breakfast places, sushi, Asian fusion food, Whole Foods and grocery co-ops, kitchen gadgets, natural medicine, expensive sandwiches, bottles of water, dinner parties, hummus, sea salt, and picking their own fruit.

<sup>3</sup> See «#45 Asian Fusion FoodStuff», *White People Like*, January 31, 2008, available in: <https://stuffwhitepeoplelike.com/2008/01/31/45-asian-fusion-food/>.

<sup>4</sup> See «#73 Gentrification», *Stuff White People Like*, February 22, 2008, available in: <https://stuffwhitepeoplelike.com/2008/02/22/73-gentrification/>.

<sup>5</sup> I. Anguelovski, «Alternative food provision conflicts in cities: Contesting food privilege, injustice, and whiteness in Jamaica Plain, Boston», *Geoforum*, 58, 2015, pp. 184-194.

Before going further into the dimensions of food gentrification it is necessary to first break down the definition and processes by which gentrification occurs.

### **Gentrification: Political Economy, Culture, or Both?**

Very simply, gentrification is the process by which a neighborhood experiences disinvestment and economic decline followed by “revitalization” and “redevelopment.” Capital and wealthier people move in and improve the housing and retail stock, which increases property values, changes community culture, and displaces low-income residents. The process usually happens slowly, but economic shocks like a recession can create opportunities for investors to snatch up lots of property only to flip it as the economy recovers.

There are two major schools of thought that explain gentrification. The first relies on Marxist political economy. The basic premise of this production approach is that capitalism, as a growth-based economic system, drives urban development. As such, it compels urban growth machines made up of political and economic elites (e.g., planners, politicians, real estate brokers, and developers) to commodify land to increase economic growth. Simply put, when there is a large gap between the prevailing and potential market rate for real estate, capital investment leads to gentrification. Conversely, the consumption approach begins with the premise that cultural drivers inform why the “creative classes” followed by “yuppies” move from the suburbs back into urban centers. As cities become more post-industrial, that is, led by artistic-minded professionals in service- and knowledge-based economies, they become more attractive to move to. Cities are attractive to gentrifiers as a countercultural space for urban aesthetics, “cool” and “green” amenities, a perceived opportunity for authentic living, liberated self-expression, and diversity that is tolerant of empowered women and gays and lesbians and that provides an opportunity for cross-ethnic and cross-class interaction.<sup>6</sup>

In the context of neoliberal urban policies these two processes of production and consumption operate in tandem. Capitalist logics dominate development discourse and center the individual consumer as the driver of social change. This means that individual taste is seen by the growth machine as a commodity to exploit. Whether it is appealing to housing aesthetics, environmental amenities, or trends, what for the consumer might be a cultural self-expression is an opportunity for profit by the business person. Food offers a particularly visceral entry point into the politics and processes of gentrification. It is not just that humans must eat to survive. Food is an economic anchor for community development. Food is also culture. Food is therefore a proxy for social divisions and social cohesion.

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<sup>6</sup> L. Lees, T. Slater y E. Wily, *Gentrification*, Routledge, New York, 2008.

## Food, Culture, and Place

Walk through most urban neighborhoods and you will find food retail options that reflect the economic and social fabric of the place. Eating paella in Valencia, tacos in Los Angeles, nigiri sushi in Tokyo, or m'smen in Marrakech can be like a taste of home if you are from these cities or an exploration of new flavors if you are from somewhere else. Similarly, preparing this food can be a point of pride for the chef and cook or an experience of fetishized tourism. Complicating matters further is the fact that this relationship between businesses and consumers takes place within cities vying for capital investment and new wealthy residents. The saying goes that you are what you eat and if what you eat is culture that you pay for then you are taste commodified.

As part of a social experiment in New Orleans, Nigerian-born chef Tunde Wey charged white people \$30 and people of color \$12 for their meals at a pop-up lunch counter called Saartj. The experiment educated diners about racial wealth disparity in New Orleans, a city experiencing rapid gentrification and uneven urban development. One of the topics that Wey discussed with customers was how economic privilege and marginalization stem from structural conditions. Lacking wealth, say in the form of a home due to racist housing policies, means people lack power. The point of the experiment was to get white and wealthier diners to consider the need for wealth redistribution as a mechanism for equitable community development. This strategic intervention with food disrupted diners with the taste for Nigerian cuisine by making what is often an unreflexive choice to eat an opportunity to interrogate raced and classed dimensions of the decision and social context.<sup>7</sup> After all, not only does economic privilege allow people to gentrify neighborhoods, but also it can drive up the cost of “authentic” foods that make it even more unaffordable for poor and working-class people to stay in place.<sup>8</sup>

The complicated politics of consumption also extend to the realm of food production. Around the world, urban agriculture is a visible aspect of city landscapes. Personal and community gardens reflect the character of neighborhoods everywhere. People are gardening for personal health and to lower their food budget, as a form of cultural reproduction and an assertion of identity, to intervene in environmental crises such as climate change, and for profit in short local supply chains to food retailers and restaurants. But resources and recognition do not flow equitably to all urban food producers. In fact, in the context of the globalization of gentrification such practices might put people at risk of displacement in cities where there are competing land uses.

In many European countries, for example, there is the rapid rollback of social welfare protections and social democracy in a post-Great Recession context of austerity politics. Cities like Alicante, Paris, and Dublin have historically fostered traditional allotment gardens for individuals and families to grow their own food, but neoliberal development pressures have impinged on these spaces. The results are complicated and reflect the unevenness of the neoliberal city. The crisis-prone housing market both pushes

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<sup>7</sup> K. Wilson, «The New Orleans Pop-Up Confronting White Diners With Their Privilege», *Eater*, March 1, 2018, available in: <https://www.eater.com/2018/3/1/17067350/tunde-vey-saartj-new-orleans>.

<sup>8</sup> S. Ho, «The Cost of Kale: How Foodie Trends Can Hurt Low-Income Families», *Bitch Media*, March 12, 2014, available in: <https://www.bitchmedia.org/post/the-cost-of-kale-how-foodie-trends-can-hurt-low-income-families>.

gardens into more marginal places, thus inspiring urban agriculture to become a nomadic practice and creates opportunities for activist gardeners to use urban agriculture as a tool to intervene in poverty and cultivate empowerment.<sup>9</sup>

The political entanglements between food, culture, and place suggest that food gentrification means many things and can be used as an idea to interrogate different contexts. Below I provide two ways to understand the dynamics of this phenomenon. The first is the way that food helps gentrify a place. The second is the way that food itself becomes gentrified. While for analytical purposes it helps to separate these dynamics, they can also overlap.

### **Gentrified by Food and the Gentrification of Food**

Much like there are political economy and cultural explanations for gentrification in general, there are similar explanations for why and how food is part of this process. One useful analytical lens to untangle this further is the idea of green gentrification. This is the social process whereby local governments, economic interests, and even grassroots community groups create or expand environmental amenities, which attract wealthier residents and drive out lower-income residents.<sup>10</sup> Food is one such amenity. This can be in the form of food retail and in the form of urban food production. Either form can contribute to food gentrification, what I consider to be a subset of green gentrification.

In a city like Detroit, which has experienced extensive outmigration over the last sixty years, there has been the proliferation of vacant property and an attempt to “green” the city with urban agriculture. Young, educated, and often white people have increasingly moved in and started urban farms in a historically black city. This represents the fusion of the rent gap theory of gentrification with the post-industrial and professionalization theories of gentrification that I described above. The growth machine in Detroit has sought to commodify land to increase economic growth within the city. For example, an urban reforestation project called Hantz Farms, which is owned by a wealthy white man, is working to fix capital in cheap real estate in the hopes of creating scarcity and therefore increases to future property values. This has sidelined local urban agriculture and food-based community development projects that are driven by economic and racial justice; city planners and politicians prefer to remake the city in the image of residents with greater economic and social capital. The political economy of this process connects with a cultural discourse of settler colonial language by outsiders that refer to the city’s vacant lands as “no-man’s land.” Entrepreneurs and creative types have imagined themselves as pioneers coming to repossess an abandoned city. In brief, food in the form of urban agriculture – although farm-to-table restaurants, cafes, breweries, etc. are also involved in this process – is a tool for gentrification. It holds important symbolic value for newcomers who want a certain kind of city and it suggests that retail and residential property values are increasing.

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<sup>9</sup> S. Darly y N. McClintock, «Introduction to Urban Agriculture in the Neoliberal City: Critical European Perspectives», *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 16(2), pp. 224-231.

<sup>10</sup> K. A. Gould y T. L. Lewis, *Green Gentrification: Urban Sustainability and the Struggle for Environmental Justice*, Routledge, New York, 2016.

Tourism in cities throughout Spain also speaks to the use of food for gentrification. State-led tourism through retail gentrification that taps into symbolism coding certain neighborhoods as cosmopolitan destinations for culturally-rich experiences like fine dining permeate Spanish cities.<sup>11</sup> For example, while large poor and working-class populations with large concentrations of immigrants from places like North Africa and Ecuador historically lived throughout the Example and Ciutat Vella districts of Barcelona, they are now overrun with tourists from around the world. This is due in part to the “Barcelona Model” of development, which focuses on making the city a magnet for wealthy tourists. This entails the creation of amenities and encourages enterprising real estate interests to appropriate housing for tourists through short term rental companies like Airbnb. Of note is the fact that elite restaurants cater to wealthy visitors and provide an incentive to stay or visit the area. For example, an overwhelming majority of one- to three-star Michelin restaurants are in either the Example or the Ciutat Vella district. While alone food is not enough to drive gentrification, it provides signals to tourists who want to consume a fantasy version of a place like Barcelona. The outcome for residents is that they are leaving these districts or moving into more marginal segments of the neighborhood as housing and living expenses rapidly increase.

But this process also shows that there can be the gentrification of food. La Barceloneta was historically a dockland neighborhood with residents whose livelihoods depended on fishing. The housing stock was modest given the working-class position of fishers, but after decades of “revitalization” this neighborhood is a tourist destination with a transformed oceanfront full of fancy housing, hotel, and dining options.<sup>12</sup> As a result, not only has the more traditional cuisine of the neighborhood been marginalized as al fresco seafood restaurants and traditional tapas bars selling paella and sautéed shrimp dishes hijacked the food retailscape, but also most of the restaurants are getting their seafood from ports outside Barceloneta.<sup>13</sup> For longtime residents whose identity is tied to the fishing history of the neighborhood this is an especially painful experience. There are fewer places to buy meals that reflect their cultural foodways and there has been a steep decline in the amount of seafood fished right off the shore that feeds Barceloneta and the rest of Barcelona.

## Resistance to Food Gentrification

The current spread of gentrification in cities around the world operates alongside and through food. At the same time, these trends have been met with resistance. While not always successful, such resistance suggests that food gentrification is not inevitable. But because neoliberal capitalist urbanization operates through structures that benefit from gentrification it is necessary for activists across different social movements to recognize that there are shared conditions that can bring them together. Much like food justice

<sup>11</sup> M. Janoschka, J. Sequera y L. Salinas, «Gentrification in Spain and Latin America. A critical dialogue», *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 38(4), 2014, pp. 1234-1265.

<sup>12</sup> M. García Lamarca, «La Barceloneta’s Struggle Against (Environmental) Gentrification», *Barcelona Lab for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability*, November 23, 2017, available in: <http://www.bcnuej.org/2017/11/23/ la-barcelonetas-struggle-environmental-gentrification/>.

<sup>13</sup> T. Downey, «Barcelona’s Local Catch», *Afar*, January 3, 2012, available in: <https://www.afar.com/magazine/barcelonas-local-catch>.

activists are finding common cause with economic, racial, and environmental justice activists from different social movements, so too can progressive and radical wings within food movements fight alongside movements agitating for a right to the city.<sup>14</sup> Nowhere is this more obvious than in the need to work in solidarity with housing organizations that focus on tenants' rights and equitable rent and public housing issues. When people can build collective power, they can shift economic and political institutions in their favor. But what might this look like?

To conclude, I will draw on some suggestions by Nevin Cohen, an Associate Professor of Health Policy at the CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy and Research Director of the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute. These fall into four broad categories: food policy, economic policy, land use planning, and housing.<sup>15</sup> It is important that food and economic policies prioritize community-based approaches that increase access to healthy and culturally appropriate food; mandate food retailers to pay living wages and provide good benefits and reflect the cultural foodways of residents; encourage the development of food cooperatives and buyers' clubs; and protect urban agriculture from development. Second, activists should engage land use planning and housing policies to fight forces responsible for displacement in planning meetings and rezoning initiatives to prevent undesirable food retail options that threaten current food retailers; support zoning changes that diversify the food retailscape while still meeting local resident tastes; and advocate for affordable housing development that could include the development of appropriate food retail.

This is not a comprehensive list of suggestions, but it offers a helpful place to begin. While the cultural debate over food gentrification is important, tweets alone are not enough to shift the structural forces of the growth machine. Without policy interventions that prevent and slow down gentrification and without an equitable redistribution of economic power, we will continue to see food used as a tool for gentrification, which will gentrify food itself.

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<sup>14</sup> J. Sbicca, *Food Justice Now!: Deepening the Roots of Social Struggle*, University of Minnesota Press Minneapolis, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> N. Cohen, «Feeding or Starving Gentrification: The Role of Food Policy», CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute, March 27, 2018, available in: <http://www.cunyurbanfoodpolicy.org/news/2018/3/27/feeding-or-starving-gentrification-the-role-of-food-policy>.