

# “Gentrify? No! Gentefy? Sí!”: Urban Redevelopment and Ethnic Gentrification in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles

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**Abstract:** “Gentrify? No! Gentefy? Sí!” (Farrell and Medina) is the slogan employed by middle-class Latino bar and start-up owners in Boyle Heights, a predominantly Latino, low-income, and working-class neighborhood in East Los Angeles that “[t]ries to [c]hange, but [a]void the [p]itfalls” (Medina) of gentrification. Alluding to the Spanish word *la gente* (the people), middle-class Latinos aim to improve the neighborhood from within the community in order to maintain the area’s Latino character and to avoid the displacement, exclusion, and sociospatial polarization typical of gentrification. Analyzing the potential and limitations of gentefication within the framework of neoliberal urbanization, the paper argues that the notion of gentefication marks a deeply ambivalent, contradictory interrelation of bottom-up momentum for neighborhood improvement and top-down real estate development. As upwardly mobile Latinos assert their desire to remain in the urban core, lower-income Latinos are displaced and class frictions within the ethnic community increase. Moreover, the residents’ momentum to positively reconfigure ethnic neighborhoods is often appropriated by redevelopment coalitions that try to render the area attractive for desired consumers via reference to its exotic character. Ethnicity is opened up for consumption as well as urban boosterism, and low-income residents face displacement due to the influx of affluent residents and consumers.

**G**entrify? No! Gentefy? Sí!” (Farrell and Medina) is the slogan employed by Latino bar and start-up owners in Boyle Heights, a predominantly Latino, low-income, and working-class neighborhood in East Los Angeles that “[t]ries to [c]hange, but [a]void the [p]itfalls” (Medina) of gentrification—displacement and exclusion. In the recent past, Boyle Heights, associated with poverty, gang violence, and failing public schools, has seen a return of “more well-to-do and younger Mexican-Americans” (Medina), who often have roots in the neighborhood, and it has

seen the opening of bars, coffee shops, and art initiatives. What sounds like the initial phase of gentrification, the pocketed reinvestment of capital into deteriorated inner-city neighborhoods that leads to the displacement of lower-income residents by more affluent populations (Lees, Slater, and Wyly, *Gentrification* 10), is called gentefication by some of the Latino entrepreneurs. Alluding to the area's cultural heritage and the word *la gente* (the people), the idea is to improve conditions in the neighborhood from within while maintaining the area's Latino character and avoiding displacement—"upwardly mobile Latinos, typically second-generation and beyond, [are] investing in and returning to the old neighborhood" (Berestein Rojas).

Gentrification, often framed as urban renewal or revitalization, exacerbates social inequalities in society, which find spatial manifestations in the increasing physical segregation of income groups (Fainstein, Gordon, and Harloe 7; Hackworth 78). In spite of the gentefiers' awareness of this problem, Medina's *New York Times* article points to similar potential pitfalls of gentefication. Notwithstanding the concept's appeal to community, class discrepancies within the Latino community are likely to increase as higher-income Latino newcomers push lower-income Latinos out of the neighborhood. Against this background, the ambiguous character of gentefication will be at the core of this paper. Is gentefication—with its concern about displacement and its emphasis on reinvestment from within the community—able to constitute a form of urban renewal that does not exacerbate sociospatial inequalities, or is it rather an ethnic twist on familiar processes of gentrification?

When looking at transformations in Boyle Heights, gentefication appears as an ethnic version of gentrification rather than a different approach to redevelopment, as exclusion and displacement are still prevalent. There seems to be a discrepancy between the ideal of gentefication and the reality in the neighborhood. Central to this argument is the fact that not only upwardly mobile Latinos are investing into the neighborhood but also large-scale developers whose upscale projects displace low-income residents. To analyze this discrepancy, different intersecting trajectories of redevelopment need to be taken into consideration. For one thing, upwardly mobile Latinos are asserting their desire to remain in the urban core, but not in disinvested neighborhoods. However, when trying to reinvest while simultaneously avoiding the influx of white people that often accompanies reinvestment, class frictions within the ethnic community itself are likely to increase. As a segment of upwardly mobile Latinos is able to improve their social position, they begin to displace low-income Latinos. For another thing, the Latinos' desire for reinvestment intersects with the desire of real estate developers to find profitable investment opportunities (Anderson and Sternberg 442).

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Thus, when Latinos reconfigure the image of their neighborhood, this momentum is often appropriated by redevelopment coalitions which engage in urban boosterism and try to render the area attractive for desired consumers via reference to its exotic character—ethnicity is opened up for consumption and low-income residents face displacement due to the influx of affluent residents and consumers. Analyzing the potential and limitations of gentefication within the framework of neoliberalization, this paper argues that the notion of gentefication, rather than being an inherently different and more equitable approach to urban redevelopment, marks a deeply ambivalent, contradictory interrelation of bottom-up momentum for neighborhood improvement on the one hand, and top-down real estate development as well as urban boosterism characteristic of the current form of urbanization on the other.

By highlighting the complex tensions between and within racial groups in the multicultural society of the United States, furthered by conflicting class relations, this paper constitutes a relevant contribution to American studies. The impact of urbanization is particularly crucial to current public and academic debates on the already complicated race and class relations: As urbanization is shaping twenty-first-century society, the social and spatial arrangements as well as relations between different social groups are reconfigured, as the example of (ethnic) gentrification illustrates.

To outline my argument in greater detail, this paper will begin with a brief overview of neoliberal urban strategies to introduce the context in which both gentrification and gentefication take place. Here, the focus will be on the relation between gentrification and the accelerated uneven development under the neoliberal system of capital accumulation. Following this contextualization, a case study of Boyle Heights will examine the concept of gentefication as it is being discussed in the media and evaluate its implications for the neighborhood. Moreover, transformations that are taking place in the neighborhood will be analyzed with regard to this idea.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, as displacement persists in Boyle Heights in spite of gentefication’s reformist agenda, the notion of urban boosterism will be introduced in order to account for the adverse consequences: While gentefication emerged as an emancipating approach, it runs the risk of being appropriated by local redevelopment coalitions as a strategy of urban boosterism geared toward attracting mobile capital to cities.

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1 Throughout the analysis, a large share of the interviewees that were considered are male. This imbalance in terms of gender reflects a selection bias in the media I analyzed rather than a personal selection. In keeping with this bias, I have chosen to use only the male form of Latino/a when referring to the community and its members. This includes cases where the effects described also pertain to women.

## NEOLIBERAL URBANIZATION, SOCIOSPATIAL POLARIZATION, AND GENTRIFICATION

Following the postwar abandonment of inner cities by capital,<sup>2</sup> the 1970s saw an influx of affluent residents, often young white professionals, to the urban core. What began as a “small-scale urban process” has evolved into a “mass-produced, state-led process around the world” (Lees, Slater, and Wily, *The Gentrification Reader* xv) characteristic of neoliberal capitalism: gentrification. The pocketed reinvestment of capital into the urban core, according to Neil Smith, “is designed to produce space for a more affluent class of people than currently occupies that space” (qtd. in Lees, Slater, and Wily, *Gentrification* 9) and thus displaces current residents. Often, displacement occurs along established cleavage lines. Marcuse speaks of gentrification “when new residents—who disproportionately are young, white, professional, technical, and managerial workers with higher education and income levels—replace older residents—who disproportionately are low-income, working-class and poor, minority and ethnic group members, and elderly—from older and previously deteriorated inner-city housing” (*Gentrification* 198-99).

Initial explanations of the reemerging middle-class interest in inner-city locations focused on variations of supply and demand on the housing market.<sup>3</sup> However, when gentrification turned into a more corporate-led process supported by the state after the recession of the 1990s (Hackworth and Smith 467) and gentrified neighborhoods evolved from “[i]slands of [r]enewal in [s]eas of [d]ecay” (Berry 69) into prevalent and systematic occurrences, a theoretical embedding of gentrification into larger processes of economic transformation gained momentum (Hackworth 11; Smith, “Of Yuppies” 153). In fact, Hackworth argues that “[g]entrification can be seen as the material and symbolic knife-edge of neoliberal urbanism representing the erosion of the physical

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2 While inner cities were predominantly white in the early twentieth century, their racial constitution began to change with the large-scale northward migration of African Americans after World War II. Following this Great Migration and motivated by racist sentiments as well as by the emerging (spatial) fix to the Great Depression, which fostered the development of automotive infrastructure, suburbanization, and a broad middle class of consumers (Hackworth 77), the white middle class began to leave inner cities for the suburbs between the 1950s and the 1970s. This “white flight,” (Katz 191) as well as the ongoing deindustrialization contributed to a decimated tax base and shrinking job opportunities, turning inner cities into disinvested ghettos (188-89).

3 On the production side, Smith’s rent gap theory is the most prominent model, according to which reinvestment into deteriorated areas occurs when the gap between the land rent under the current use and the potential rent under a different use has grown sufficiently large (“Toward” 93). On the consumption side, the altered preferences of a new middle class of professionals—result of the transition from a manufacturing to a service economy—are considered crucial for explaining the demand for urban housing (Ley 103; Rose 47).

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and symbolic embodiment of neoliberal urbanism’s putative other—the Keynesian activist state” (98).

To understand the role of gentrification in neoliberal urbanism, a relation established by Lefebvre is central: The physical layout of a city and the prevailing mode of economic production are closely related. Lefebvre argues that space, commonly perceived as a passive void, is both produced by and reproductive of a society’s mode of production: “[E]very society—and hence every mode of production [...]—produces a space, its own space” (31). A society’s relation to production and power is deeply ingrained in its physical appearance; space is more than a physical realm and allows considerations of social relationships (73). In fact, the production of space is a prerequisite for the success and, quite literally, manifestation and reproduction of an ideology. As Lefebvre phrases it, “what is an ideology without a space to which it refers [...]?” (44). Thus, space is a contested field that competing ideologies attempt to shape according to their goals and needs.

Processes of neoliberalization find their spatial manifestations in cities as well.<sup>4</sup> Particularly relevant are the exacerbated social inequalities and their spatial expressions—socio-spatial polarization—under this regime of accumulation. While the postwar manufacturing era was associated with the emergence of a broad middle class, today’s service economy contributes to a polarized occupational and income structure, especially within global cities (Sassen 36).<sup>5</sup> This polarization is visible: “Social inequality manifest[s] itself spatially, as income groups bec[o]me increasingly segregated” (Fainstein, Gordon, and Harloe 7). Marcuse and van Kempen also observe this concentration of poverty and wealth: There is a growing separation between enclaves of the rich and ghettos of the poor, often furthered by race and ethnicity (19-21). While the withdrawal of the rich is voluntary, the socio-spatial polarization is problematic for “the populations marginalized or condemned to redundancy by the post-Fordist reorganization of the economy” (Wacquant 237), and they are, thus, relegated to stigmatized ghettos and cut off from social provision and funding.

Gentrification, then, as the “knife-edge of neoliberal urbanism” (Hackworth 98), aggravates socio-spatial polarization. The concept of creative destruction (Brenner and

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4 Following Peck and Tickell (33), the term neoliberalization rather than neoliberalism will be used to highlight the local variegations of similar processes, such as political decentralization, the deregulation of financial markets, privatization, and social austerity (Brenner and Theodore 350).

5 Sassen argues that while the global division of labor is increasingly dispersed, command and control functions of the global economy are concentrated in only a few global cities, such as London, New York, and Tokyo (28-29). Those cities are also the locations in which neoliberalization and resulting inequalities are most evident. As Lees, Slater, and Wyly (*Gentrification* 163-88) argue, however, polarization and related processes of gentrification are no longer confined to global cities; instead, they are spreading to smaller cities as well.

Theodore 349) is helpful to illustrate this point. The term refers to two properties of neoliberalization. As existing institutional arrangements and structures are being dismantled, a new neoliberal infrastructure is created. Similarly, Peck and Tickell distinguish between the rollback and rollout phase of neoliberalization. While the former, during the late 1970s and 1980s, led to the dismantling of the infrastructure and policy framework of the Fordist era, the rollout phase of the 1990s refers to the creation of a new neoliberal environment (380).

More concretely, the destructive moment of neoliberalization is directed against “Keynesian artifacts” (Hackworth 11), spatial and institutional arrangements “designed to ameliorate the inequality of capitalism” (120) such as public housing, labor unions, and redistributive welfare. Neoliberalism’s creative moment in terms of space, then, consists of the pocketed reinvestment in disinvested inner-city neighborhoods—gentrification, portrayed as urban revitalization, with the purported goal of alleviating poverty. Instead of improving the situation for low-income residents, however, gentrification favors the creation of luxury residential and commercial space as well as prestigious projects like waterfront developments or sports venues (Harvey 7-8). The neighborhood is turned into a “safe and sanitized playground” (Lees, Slater, and Wyly, *Gentrification* 163)—a consumption space for higher-income residents, often professionals, or tourists (Gotham 226).

Gentrification exacerbates sociospatial polarization: As high-income groups voluntarily concentrate in gentrifying neighborhoods, low-income groups face (the pressure of) displacement toward the inner suburbs. Rising rents, the conversion of rental units into condominiums, and the destruction of (public) housing for the insertion of prestigious projects into otherwise disinvested landscapes often force low-income households to relocate and prevent similar households from moving into the gentrifying area, causing low-income groups to concentrate in excluded and underfunded parts of the city (Marcuse, “Enclaves” 24).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, upscale real estate development reinforces the polarized job and income structure, and thus spatial polarization, as high-end consumption raises the demand for work in the low-service segment. As Hackworth summarizes, the erstwhile “publicly regulated [...] inner city [is replaced by] privately regulated neoliberalized spaces of exclusion” (120-21).

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6 In defining displacement, Marcuse initially follows Grier and Grier: “Displacement occurs when any household is forced to move from its residence by conditions that affect the dwelling or its immediate surroundings, and that: 1) are beyond the household’s reasonable ability to control or prevent; 2) occur despite the household’s having met all previously imposed conditions of occupancy; and 3) make continued occupancy by that household impossible, hazardous, or unaffordable” (qtd. in Marcuse 205).

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This acceleration of uneven development needs to be understood against polarization processes on other scales. While revenue sharing between the federal government, state, and local governments was in place during the 1960s, responsibilities were devolved to urban governments in the course of neoliberalization, leaving cities with the task of finding alternative sources of revenue. As a result, competition between cities, but also between neighborhoods within a city, have increased: Local governments turn into entrepreneurial actors who attempt to attract prestigious development projects to generate property tax revenue and desired consumers (Harvey 4). Often, desired consumers are members of the white middle class, who are not only able to increase revenue via consumption but also, according to Florida (22), generate further economic growth via creative professional work.

As Marcuse (“Gentrification” 198-99) points out, displacement frequently takes place along established conflict lines: Given the history of US inner cities, white newcomers often displace African American or Latino residents. What happens, however, if newcomers to an area are higher-income members of the same nonwhite ethnic group that constitutes the majority in the neighborhood, as it is the case in the Latino neighborhood of Boyle Heights, Los Angeles? It is within this framework that gentefication unfolds: With its focus on reinvestment from within the neighborhood, gentefication aims to avoid further displacement and sociospatial polarization. The following section will contain a case study of the public discourse on gentefication, which circulates in the media in the Latino neighborhood Boyle Heights, in order to examine whether gentefication really constitutes a more inclusive and equitable approach to urban redevelopment.

### **PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON GENTEFICATION IN BOYLE HEIGHTS: A CASE STUDY**

In Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles, the recent past has seen an influx of “more well-to-do and younger Mexican-Americans” (Medina) who often have roots in the neighborhood and return to the place their parents left for the suburbs (Berestein Rojas; Izadi; Medina; “Gentefication”). Instead of leaving the inner city behind, the newcomers are asserting their desire to stay in the urban core, as local business man Marco Amador states: “We’re not trying to get out of the barrio, we’re trying to bring the barrio up” (qtd. in Medina). As a result, the neighborhood is changing: Along Main Street coffee shops, art initiatives, and independent book and record stores are opening—signs of the pioneer phase of gentrification, which is triggering fears of displacement among the low-income population (Berestein Rojas). However, some of

the owners of newly opened facilities, such as Guillermo Uribe of the wine bar Eastside Luv, Juan Romero of the café Primera Taza, and Amador, who runs an online radio station, try to disperse those fears and argue that they want to avoid both the displacement of low-income ethnic residents by higher-income white newcomers and the diffusion of the neighborhood's Latino character (Medina). Thus, in opposition to gentrification, Uribe and other store owners introduced the idea of gentefication. Playing on the Spanish word *la gente*, gentefication means “[t]he process of upwardly mobile Latinos, typically second-generation and beyond, investing in and returning to the old neighborhood” (Berestein Rojas). The idea is to generate change from within the Latino community and to achieve reinvestment without displacement.

Accordingly, the new bars and cafés emphasize the importance of Mexican culture. Instead of serving Café Americano, Primera Taza offers Café Chicano and is frequented by the Chipster, the Chicano version of the hipster (Medina). In a vertical marquee on its website, Uribe's Eastside Luv understands itself as the “[leader] of GENTEfication.” The bar also offers Mariachi nights—karaoke with traditional Mariachi music—and sweatshirts that sport the letters ESL, short for both Eastside Luv and English as a Second Language, emphasizing the predominance of Latino culture. Beyond Boyle Heights, Latino start-ups refer to gentefication. California-based Gentefy Media is an example: As college graduate Barney Santos states in an interview, he aims to promote small and mid-size Latino businesses; he wants to “help make a difference in [his] own communit[y]” (EKH). Also, gentefication is used as a keyword on social media platforms. On Twitter, for example, it is not only used as a hashtag for posts related to Latinos investing into their communities but also more broadly in reference to the empowerment of disadvantaged groups. As Latinos are expected to become the ethnic majority in Los Angeles in the near future (Farrell and Medina), it is not surprising that gentefication originated there. However, as the Latino middle class is expanding across the US, the influx of rather affluent Latinos to inner-city neighborhoods is also evident in New York, Houston, and Phoenix (Songha).

Going back to Boyle Heights, Uribe and other pioneers see upscaling as inevitable, as the neighborhood provides opportunity for cheap investment (Medina). In order to prevent the loss of Latino character that might result from such a transition, Uribe sees only one way: He wants Latinos to take change into their own hands and to gentefy their neighborhood rather than have it gentrified. Although advocates of gentefication want to avoid displacement, low-income residents still voice concerns about being pushed out of the neighborhood or are already experiencing displacement (Avila-Hernandez 54; Fortin). Thus, while gentefication might help to maintain Boyle Heights's ethnic composition, class frictions within the Latino community seem to increase (Medina). As upwardly mobile Latinos, often college-educated, ascend in the



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polarized social structure, downward pressure on lower-income Latinos simultaneously increases, threatening to push them from an already disinvested neighborhood to even more abandoned and excluded locations.

Uribe’s perception that change in Boyle Heights is inevitable constitutes a suitable starting point to analyze the transformations that are taking place. In fact, the change is especially visible in terms of income. While the median household income was at \$33,235 in 2008, it has risen to \$38,801 in 2012 (Songha), which points to the influx of more affluent residents. When looking at visible transformations, it seems that reinvestment is initiated on several levels. Although there is momentum generated by Latinos who have roots in the neighborhood and open coffee shops and bars, there is also large-scale development that is typical of the current form of corporate-led and state-supported gentrification (Hackworth and Smith 467). Four projects are particularly prominent and illustrative of the growing pressure on low-income residents: the planned conversion of the Wyvernwood Garden Apartments into the upscale residential community New Wyvernwood; the revitalization of a nearly vacant Sears property as a commercial and residential center; the remodeling of the Hollenbeck Police Station; and the extension of the Metro Gold Line, connecting Boyle Heights to downtown Los Angeles. Since those projects have triggered a lot of debate, are prominently figured in the media discourse on gentefication, and thus highlight the ambiguous nature of gentefication, the following paragraphs will analyze the impact of these four projects on low-income residents in Boyle Heights.

The future of Wyvernwood is hotly debated. Built in the 1930s, the complex was bought by Miami-based developer Fifteen Group Land & Development LLC in 1998, which devised a \$2 billion plan for its redevelopment; one of the “largest [real-estate ventures] ever proposed in the United States” (Hermosillo). The group aims to replace the 1,187 units with 4,400 new ones, combined with “325,000 square feet of stores, restaurants and offices, recreational facilities[,] [...] parking for 9,048 cars” (Hermosillo), as well as “[t]en acres of professionally maintained open space” (“New Wyvernwood”). While the units are currently subject to rent control, 3,200 are going to be condominiums designed for households with a yearly income of at least \$90,000—more than twice the Boyle Heights median. Only 15% of all units are supposed to be affordable for low-income households (Broverman, “Preservationists”), suggesting that wealthier residents will be attracted.

Fifteen Group promotes the opportunity of first-time homeownership for long-term Wyvernwood residents as well as the jobs the redevelopment process will create (“New Landmark”). Similarly, some of the current tenants support the project, as many units are in need of renovation (Farrell and Medina). However, protest has also emerged: Wyvernwood residents and supporters founded the group Save Wyvernwood

to voice their concerns about the mass displacement of tenants following the conversion of rentals into condominiums, the destruction of a historical complex, and the discrepancy between the types of residents attracted by upscale redevelopment and the current character of the neighborhood. As of now, the future of the complex remains undecided. Hearings were supposed to take place in front of the Los Angeles City Planning Commission in May 2013; however, they were postponed without a definite rescheduled date (Espinoza). Today, this situation remains unchanged: While the administrative process is currently not discussed in the public media, resident mobilization against redevelopment persists. In mid 2014, for example, activists initiated the project *Storying Wyvernwood* in which they document the history of the apartment complex and underline its relevance to generations of residents and the community as a whole vis-à-vis impending change (Sonksen).

New Wyvernwood is not the only attempt at large-scale luxury redevelopment in Boyle Heights. In the “second largest development in the [c]ity’s history” (Avila-Hernandez 31), developer Izek Shomof, an important figure in the redevelopment of downtown Los Angeles, is converting the nearly abandoned Sears distribution center into the “hub of the community” (qtd. in Glick Kudler), containing stores, lofts, restaurants, and creative space (Vincent). The revitalization of the complex had been planned by various developers in the past; due to individual financial restraints, however, none of them were able to realize the project (Broverman, “Downtown”). Although redevelopment will not directly displace residents since the building is currently not used as residential space, the endeavor is characteristic of current gentrification processes. Initiated by an individual investor, funds will flow into a prestigious object geared toward high-end consumption rather than the neighborhood as a whole, for example by investing into the failing school system.

Apart from residential and commercial redevelopment, other infrastructural projects that are closely related to rising property values and displacement are implemented as well. Since Boyle Heights has been strongly associated with gang violence and street crime in the past, the Hollenbeck Community Police Station was expanded in 2009. Using public funds for the physical improvement of public safety facilities, the police station was demolished and replaced with a modern building with on-site holding cells. Along with the old police station, fifty-seven residential units, some of them inhabited by low-income households receiving housing assistance, were destroyed without replacement (Avila-Hernandez 30; Hernandez). Again, the issue of the displacement of vulnerable residents becomes evident with regard to projects that intend to improve the overall reputation of the neighborhood. Additionally, as Davis argues in his article “Fortress Los Angeles,” the extension of police presence is characteristic of the securitization of public space, which also furthers sociospatial

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polarization: As the rich withdraw into gated communities, the surveillance and policing of low-income populations increases.

Finally, Boyle Heights was connected to recently revitalized downtown Los Angeles in the course of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s Gold Line Eastside Light Rail Extension in 2009. While improved public transit as such is beneficial to a community, local businesses and residents were forced to relocate due to land purchases by Metro during initial rounds of planning, and at least seventeen housing units were demolished and not replaced during the construction phase (Avila-Hernandez 29). Today, patches of mixed-use redevelopment are emerging in clusters around the metro stations. Although some of them want to provide affordable housing, there is some concern about high-end retail space that does not meet the needs of the current Boyle Heights population (Becerra; Nelson). Moreover, as access to downtown Los Angeles is facilitated, Boyle Heights is likely to become a more attractive residential location for people who have been priced out of immediate downtown neighborhoods.

When looking at transformation processes in Boyle Heights, it becomes evident that the change which is taking place is not living up to the ideal of gentefication. Reinvestment is not only initiated by Latinos within the community but also by large-scale developers who invest in projects from which the majority of current residents is not likely to benefit. Instead, reinvestment attracts wealthier consumers—capital—and contributes to increasing revenue from property and sales tax while displacing low- and middle-income residents. However, it would be premature to conflate the gentefication ideal of bar owners like Uribe with processes of gentrification. Rather, it is interesting to look at the interrelations between the bottom-up momentum for reinvestment and top-down real estate development, as well as the ambiguous consequences of concepts like gentefication.

An underlying problem in Boyle Heights, as generally in neoliberal urbanism, is the competition for funding (Harvey 5). As some neighborhoods flourish and turn into citadels of the rich, resources do not flow into disadvantaged (often ethnic) areas, exacerbating poverty. In Boyle Heights, several trajectories meet. For one thing, upwardly mobile Latinos do not want to be priced out of the inner city. At the same time, they do not want to reside in abandoned or underfunded neighborhoods. As Anderson and Sternberg phrase it, the “established ‘ghetto-invoking’ imagery” associated with predominantly nonwhite neighborhoods needs to be overcome, since those associations are “incompatible with a [growing] non-White middle class that seeks to carve out its own space for identity constitution” (442). Thus, with the example of the Chicago neighborhoods Bronzeville and Pilsen—the former African American, the latter Latino—the authors argue that the positive recodification of

established negative stereotypes of race and ethnicity play crucial roles in the transformation of nonwhite neighborhoods. In a first step, this is relevant for the ethnic group itself. Through the recodification of race, “resources that were primarily flowing to other parts of the city” (Anderson and Sternberg 444) are attracted and contribute to overcoming the negative stereotypes associated with the neighborhood in question.

### **GENTEFICATION AND URBAN BOOSTERISM: SELLING ETHNICITY**

In order to get to the heart of the ambiguities surrounding gentefication, the concept of urban branding helps to embed the process of the positive recodification of race and ethnicity. As Greenberg discusses, urban branding goes back to the nineteenth century, when urban boosterism attempted to replace the negative reputation of its product, the city, which was prevalent in American culture with a more positive imagery. Different strategies were employed toward this end: While stereotypically rough and dangerous frontier towns were promoted as orderly, clean, and well-managed locations of civic life, “[a]nother popular approach was to exploit the middle-class fascination with the city’s poorer, [usually] ethnic quarters, and to promote a ‘slumming aesthetic’” (22).

Today, both strategies are visible in ethnic neighborhoods as well. Generally, references to the respective ethnicity’s history and culture in the neighborhood in question take center stage (Anderson and Sternberg 442; Boyd 70; Hyra 511; Wherry 22). In Bronzeville, the rediscovered musical history of the area began to replace negative connotations, while Mexican American neighborhoods like Pilsen, East Harlem, and the Philadelphia Barrio use references to Latin American culture—food, arts, murals—to create an exotic and adventurous image (Boyd 70; Dávila 177; Wherry 3). In Boyle Heights, similar processes can be observed. Murals abound and wordplays like *Café Chicano* and *Mariachioke* underline the importance of Mexican culture: The continuous Mexican presence in Boyle Heights is emphasized (Medina), although the *barrio* has only become predominantly Mexican American in the early twentieth century (Romo 89).

However, as Anderson and Sternberg argue and as the development in Boyle Heights suggests, it is not only the ethnic community that is interested in the positive recodification of race but also development agents for whom the recodification of an area might provide opportunity for investment. Following Anderson and Sternberg, development coalitions “are acutely perceptive to evolving and varying local conditions, and exhibit an adept flexibility in their responsive capacities to new

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opportunities for growth” (457). In ethnic neighborhoods that are trying to improve their image, redevelopment agents are likely to adopt the momentum generated within the community and market the exotic character of the neighborhood. As Mele argues: “Developers, for example, utilize nostalgic or popular conceptions of ethnicity to (re)invent neighborhoods they seek to revalorize” (599). What is particularly marketable is a “sanitized version of ethnic and racial differences, scrubbed clean of their potential anti-development, political or social content” (599). In other words, efforts by the community to attract reinvestment contain the risk of ethnicity being “package[d] [...] for consumption by tourists and gentrifiers” (Hackworth and Rekers 215), which might happen in Boyle Heights as well.

What is more, not only real estate developers as such but also local governments often support and promote urban boosterism. Like gentrification and gentefication, this development needs to be understood within the context of neoliberal urbanization. As previously outlined, the end of revenue sharing between federal and local governments as well as the reduction of social budgets in the course of neoliberalization compelled cities to find alternative forms of revenue. Attention soon turned to mobile capital: Local governments turned into entrepreneurial actors who compete for businesses, affluent residents, tourists, and consumers. Faced with severe interurban competition and the limited availability of mobile capital, the need arose for individual cities to sell their particular advantages—a need that has given new momentum to urban boosterism and that continues to foster the marketing of ethnic particularities as exotic and adventurous urban features.

Thus, two dilemmas become evident with regard to gentefication. First, there are conflicts between race and class. Class differences within the Latino community become more pronounced, because, on the one hand, higher-income Latinos begin to displace lower-income Latinos as a result of the upscaling processes, and, on the other hand, members of the Latino middle class assert their desire to live in the inner-city and to generate reinvestment into ethnic neighborhoods without losing the area to the white middle class. Similarly, while the positive reconfiguration of race might contribute to elevating the overall social standing of ethnic groups and neighborhoods within a city, it is also likely to attract large-scale reinvestment that both increases displacement pressure on low-income residents and contributes to opening up ethnicity for consumption and spectacle or even to converting gentefication into a strategy of urban boosterism. Krase even speaks of the development of ethnic theme parks for tourist consumption, which again attract wealthy consumers and increase pressure on the poor (17).

## CONCLUSION: PROSPECTS AND LIMITATIONS OF GENTEFICATION

This paper looked at the prospects and limitations of gentefication—the notion of upwardly mobile Latinos reinvesting into their own neighborhood in order to maintain the area’s Latino character and to avoid the displacement and sociospatial polarization associated with typical neoliberal patterns of urban reinvestment, i.e. gentrification. When looking at transformations in Boyle Heights, it becomes evident that reinvestment is not only initiated by Latinos but also by large-scale redevelopment agents in search of lucrative investment opportunities, as the examples of the Wyvernwood apartments and the Sears property show. Those examples also represent displacement processes that are taking place in spite of the gentefiers’ desire to avoid this, which points to the complex relationship between community-generated bottom-up momentum and top-down projects of redevelopment.

In order to understand the ambiguous consequences of gentefication, discrimination along different lines needs to be considered within the neoliberal framework of competition for funding, urban boosterism, and sociospatial polarization. As the underfunded areas of a city are oftentimes ethnic communities associated with negative stereotypes, the revitalization of such neighborhoods usually begins with residents’ attempts to positively redefine the race or ethnicity in question. In Boyle Heights, which has been associated with poverty and gang violence, the area’s Latino heritage, its variety of murals, and Spanglish words like Chipster, Café Chicano, and Mariachioke contribute to conveying an image to the outside that is both emphasizing the community’s ethnic heritage and palatable to non-Latino parts of society.

However, the reinvestment that is taking place is not beneficial for the low-income population of Boyle Heights. Rather, the move toward the positive recodification of the neighborhood from within the Latino community seems to render investment in Boyle Heights more attractive to large-scale redevelopers, which in turn is often supported by cash-strapped local governments who are in need of revenue generated by affluent residents and consumers vis-à-vis reducing social expenses. The kind of reinvestment that takes place is typical of neoliberal urban restructuring—gentrification—and causes displacement. While the area might maintain its ethnic character, class frictions within the Latino community increase: At the same time as upwardly mobile Latinos can afford to live in upscale redevelopment projects in Boyle Heights and as other wealthy consumers are attracted, downward pressure on low-income Latinos increases. This friction is hidden behind the term gentefication—as references to *la gente* sound inclusive and universal, the class character is taken out of the transformations, drawing attention away from displacement and exclusion.

## **“Gentrify? No! Gentyfy? Sí!”: Urban Redevelopment and Ethnic Gentrification in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles**

The desire to maintain a neighborhood’s ethnic character indicates another unintended consequence of moves by ethnic communities toward reinvestment. As the examples of the Chicago neighborhoods Pilsen and Bronzeville show, bottom-up attempts to positively recodify race and ethnicity are sometimes appropriated by urban redevelopment coalitions who promote the rough, exotic, and allegedly authentic character of an ethnic neighborhood targeted for redevelopment and employ ethnicity as a strategy of urban boosterism. The positive recodification of race seems to contribute to the commodification and promotion of ethnicity as a spectacle, which again attracts wealthier consumers—be they permanent residents or temporary visitors—and favors pocketed reinvestment into prestigious mixed-use projects over structural reinvestment.

Finally, the question remains whether it is possible to generate change from within. Do commodification and growing class discrepancies lessen the idea’s potential? Or is there a political power implicit in the notion of *la gente* and in the desire for reinvestment into disadvantaged neighborhoods from within that can be made explicit and productive?

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