March 2017

Lean Times in Boom Towns: #FoodGentrification at the Mouth of the Mississippi

Jennie Lightweis-Goff

University of Mississippi, jlightweisgoff@gmail.com

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Recommended Citation

Available at: https://aquila.usm.edu/soq/vol54/iss2/3

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Cover Page Footnote
For a spirited conversation on gentrification in (appropriately enough) Austin, Texas, I am grateful to Erich Nunn, Elizabeth Rodriguez Fielder, and Terrence Tucker. This essay emerged in a period when I’d pledged that I would hold off on writing about my adopted hometown, which fellow migrant Andrei Codrescu has called the most “overwritten” city in the U.S. (2009, 405). Nonetheless, my travels between Memphis and New Orleans after I began work at the University of Mississippi followed the River; my mind did, too. I offer thanks to the food professionals who made space for me at the bar, who talked through these ideas, who laughed at the term foodways (“food…waste”? ), and who reminded me to occasionally chase gin with water. And I’m grateful for everyone who has fed me: to one in particular, I offer a treasured gift: “a book of myths / in which / our names do not appear” (Rich 2002, 103).

This article is available in The Southern Quarterly: https://aquila.usm.edu/sq/vol54/iss2/3
"It’s cupcakes, cronuts, and hundred-dollar doughnuts dipped in 24-karat gold (yes, this exists – in Williamsburg).”

--Jeremiah Moss, *Vanishing New York: How a Great City Lost Its Soul* (39)

**YOUR HOUSE, MY INN**

“Make my house your inn,” says the supercilious father at the center of Marianne Moore’s poem “Silence” (1924). With the axiom cleaving the air, the interlocutor registers her understanding: “inns are not residences” (91). Though Moore could not have predicted it from her vantage point between the World Wars, the tendentious division between the home and the inn, the restaurant and the dining room, would shape much of the debate over the Civil Rights Act, interested as it and its constitutive activist movements were in the public accommodations of schools and streetcars, and in creating a kind of privacy-in-public for people previously banned from segregated hotels and restaurants. Resistance to the integration of the faux-private ‘welcome table’ in businesses that offered public accommodations were led by axe- and flag-wielding restauranteurs like South Carolina’s Maurice Bessinger and Georgia’s Lester Maddox, who obscured the division between their homes and their businesses in order to assert their ineradicable right to refuse service to anyone (Cooley 136). The segregationist seemed to say, in an inversion of the poem’s father: “make your inn my house.”
Down in New Orleans – a city of inns and of houses, of streetcars and of restaurants – the line between public and private becomes decidedly hazy, as the sound of a second-line renders the cypress wood of a shotgun house porous to the street, and the line between domestic and commercial dining rooms shattered in a flowering of writing on gentrification in the new, old city. Urban geographer Richard Campanella shifted, in the final years of the Katrina decade, a necessary focus from gentrification – a term that indexes, or should index, the scarcity of affordable housing – to a fixation on food-as-gentrification. Under a headline that read “Gentrification and Its Discontents: Notes from New Orleans” (2013), Campanella – a scholar in the Tulane University School of Architecture and a columnist for The New Orleans Times-Picayune – offered a collage of six images: two restaurants, a gallery, a multi-use space, and two pieces of graffiti. Scrolling in search of shelter, readers eventually find the façade of the Bywater Art Lofts: an income-controlled housing unit with a year-long waitlist for new residents. Here is class analysis in America: the agents of displacement are artists making under $27,000 a year. The objects of displacement are dinners, not bodies. The (local) impact of Campanella’s intervention is hard to overstate; it was the blog essay that launched a thousand more.

Perhaps the conflation of food and shelter should not surprise us: holding up a vast pyramid of needs, they are the baseline of the human body’s operating system. And the politics of urban place, space, and taste have already been crafted along these lines, thanks to the political and social transformations of the mid-century. But for Campanella, it is not the food of the domestic table, but the food of the restaurant table, that provides evidence of the end of ‘authentic’ foodways and generative lifeways. “Locavores in a kiddie wilderness,” is Campanella’s pithy description of the fantasy army of hipsters coming south to turn New Orleans into “a city of graduate students.” The map of Campanella’s New Orleans is rather limited to
Bywater, a neighborhood downriver of the French Quarter and Marigny, which he calls “the Williamsburg of the South” in order to reduce residents’ youth and reliably lefty politics to a punchline. Eschewing “fried okra” – never a common dish on New Orleans menus, even as Campanella deploys it as a sign of authenticity – they arrive to “import…national and global views,” to a city that has allegedly resisted such interventions. That New Orleans – and the modifier ‘Creole,’ which is so often appended to its cuisine – is itself the product of the importation of national and global values into an accidental, impossible, unfathomable, but perhaps wholly inevitable sliver of the Gulf Coast of Louisiana is seemingly forgotten in such accounts of the city’s singularity.¹

With their menus – and the labor catalogued therein – turned into visual jokes revealing the portability of Portland values to an urban Southern ecology, one might imagine that the chefs at the downtown restaurants mocked by Campanella’s essay might have something to say in response. But should you knock on their doors asking for comment, you will be met with silence; should you decide to make a reservation in exchange for their time, you will find all systems down. In the four years since Campanella’s intervention, many of the neighborhood’s restaurants have closed. Blocks stand empty. Dining rooms with dirty floors are full of the kitchen gear, visible through the windows to passersby on the street. Restaurant’s columns and pillars become useful bike racks for the action a few blocks away. The windows at Oxalis, Booty’s, and Maurepas Foods are dark, and not just on Monday, the Chef’s Sabbath. A restaurant is one of the few business models that requires expansive competition; four on a block can feed a crowd and feed each other a little business on a busy night. A well-functioning culinary block can, indeed,

look like a flourishing urban renewal project; considering the dearth of urban policy in the United States, it might be the best we can expect in New Orleans. But a shuttered block of defunct restaurants looks like old-fashioned blight. Blight, of course, is not the usual endpoint of gentrification, a process so often described as propulsive and directional – moving only forward, never backward. Blight is often framed as the starting point, but the culinary blocks that attracted such energy in 2013 have slumped toward emptiness.

Attention to the founding texts of gentrification in the 1960s reveal the strangeness of this trajectory, and of this focus on the culinary rather than the domestic, the public rather than the private. It is perhaps a merely interesting historical note that the two most influential theorists of the cityscape – German-born Brit Ruth Glass and American Jane Jacobs – were leftists and feminists, interested in the granular details of how a neighborhood changes and how economic pressure transforms houses, rather than how the residents of those houses find themselves surrounded by higher-status heads of lettuce. Both Jacobs and Glass wrote about the transformation of housing stock – the closing of the “rent gap” that enabled developers to transform small apartment buildings into expensive, single-family houses – rather than the working-class characters of people. They are less likely than Campanella to detail gentrification as the process by which a population becomes “more secular, less fertile, more liberal, and less parochial.” After all, these are the terms so often used to blame-shift sweeping social and cultural change to the liberation of women from constant, soul-crushing reproduction.²

Gentrification – the word that Glass coined in 1964 – is not a question of consumption or portable commodities, but of the size and scope of the houses in which people live: “the current social status and value of [houses in gentrifying neighborhoods] are frequently in inverse relation

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² For more on the complex interplay of food and gender, I recommend Tom Phillpott’s response to the “romanticization” of dinner and of pre-feminist kitchens in the writing of Michael Pollan (2013).
to their size, and in any case enormously inflated by comparison with previous levels in their neighborhood” (xviii – xix). The contemporary interest in food not bodies, in restaurants not houses, in social capital not cash-as-capital, inverts the order of Glass’s formation: first the social character of the district changes, then the “baby carriages… the neighborhood’s best hope of remaining down-to-earth” disappear, and then the blocks transform into empty spaces with a “museum-like stillness” because of the absence of children (Campanella). Process and order become unclear in these new, diffuse definitions of economics, where restaurants are described “as one of the first signs of gentrification in changing neighborhoods” (McColl). Even writers who frame theirs as “economic perspectives” on neighborhood change write of neighborhoods where “artisan cheese shop[s]” and “Viennese-style dessert café[s]” precede rent increases and evictions (Elwaki 2017).

Whose economics are these? And whose hungers?

A LOW, DISHONEST DECADE

People who witnessed the collective trauma of the post-Katrina floods from afar might profitably forget Kanye West’s denunciation of George W. Bush and Bush’s affirmation of Michael Brown in favor of Mayor C. Ray Nagin’s revealing palliative, offered to his city on Martin Luther King, Jr Day 2006. New Orleans, he promised, would remain “a chocolate city.” The phrase is not simply an evocation of a long, black cultural history – think of George Clinton, in the eponymous Parliament song, offering America Richard Pryor as Minister of Education and Aretha Franklin as the First Lady – nor is it a particularly revealing food metaphor. For a city that exists thanks to a combination of treacherous draining – which causes its soil to dry, compact, collapse, and sink a little more each year – and the control of nature, one might require
something edible but inorganic on the other side of the metaphor’s see-saw: a rationed chocolate bar, perhaps, shoved in the hand of a climate refugee. The scant protein provided inside an MRE, falling to earth from a passing helicopter. For the residents of a troubled region, we might find ourselves sometimes fed, sometimes sustained, but too seldom both fed and sustained by the scraps cast off the nation’s table.

Trauma scrambles time and shreds maps. When Nagin offered his address, shape-shifting poisonous marsh gas – by that time, only five months old – had already rolled into New Orleans like the unholy smells from the dredged oil fields Southeast of the city. The fear of a white influx, of a dizzying Disneyfied recovery, spread during the months the city was largely closed to its residents. Nagin, whose previous panic and urgency had brought attention to the plight of the city, set out to quash both of those previously-useful affects. “I don’t care what people are saying Uptown or wherever they are,” said Nagin. “This city will be chocolate at the end of the day.” That up- and down- geographies correspond to no particular racial demography in New Orleans—there were poorer, blacker communities on the Uptown side of Canal Street and I-10 in 2006 than there are now – was merely rhetorically inconvenient for Nagin. Geography is not destiny. But race is not biology, phrenology, genes, or cuisine. Race is real estate.

Much has changed since 2006. C. Ray Nagin, Bureau of Prisons #32751-034, is incarcerated in Bowie County, Texas until at least 2023. And there were one hundred thousand fewer African-Americans in New Orleans in 2016 than in 2000. The threat of gentrification – or, if we require a more exact term, one less tied to the interventions of Jacobs and Glass, the threat of whitening – dawned in those first days after the breached levees, but was not fully realized until the near decadal point of Campanella’s blog (2013). The injuries that the city had accrued were not wholly attributable to Katrina; nor, for that matter, was the blight that ‘VolunTourists’
and ordinary travelers alike photographed and sent to friends “from off” as evidence of their pleasure and risk as they tarried in Louisiana. The slow-motion hurricane of deindustrialization had taken much of New Orleans’s wealth and power in the second half of the twentieth century, characterized as it was by the radical erosion of worker power. Katrina’s floods returned to take what remained.

Writing on the Bush years, journalist Christopher Hayes referred to the “fail decade” that had brought America 9/11 in New York City and the District of Columbia, broken levees in New Orleans, a cheating scandal in Major League Baseball, MASH-level bungling and delay during military intervention in the Persian Gulf, and a sanctuary for sexual predators in the Catholic Church (17). Hayes’s phrase evokes poet W.H. Auden’s beautiful nomenclature for the “low, dishonest decade” of the rising tide of Nazi terror in “September 1, 1939” (1939, 95). The month and day in the poem’s title seldom fails to summon up Katrina’s floodwaters for this New Orleans partisan, who shares with natives an appetite for the city, if not an origin point within its riverine geography or crescent geometry.

The last decade has renewed interest in gentrification as a foundational force in U.S. culture: an appropriate pivot, considering that median rent has doubled in twenty years (Tuttle 2017). Everyday seems to produce a new viral article about gentrification as a force majeure in urban life, usually on The Atlantic Monthly’s CityLab project. “There’s Basically No Way Not to Be a Gentrifier” (2014) said one symptomatic article. A critical disposition toward one’s status as a gentrifier does not, of course, exempt one from CityLab’s critique: “How Many Gentrification Critics Are Actually Gentrifiers Themselves?” (2013) they asked. Imagine the stress of scrolling through your social media feed, wondering if the neighbor who just posted that meant…. you. All that emotional sturm-and-drang, served with a side of onerous and ever-
growing rent payments. Of course, like much of the internet, CityLab alternately transcends and
aspire to virality; one often finds nuance behind these headlines. What’s nonetheless startling
about this slice of the internet – curated as it is by sociologists and economists – is the
narrowness of its address: like Campanella, CityLab seems to speak to the residents of various
little Williamsburgs, rather than their distant and proximate neighbors. Rural gentrification – the
rapid transformation of small, waterfront towns into retirement communities, of college towns
into wastelands of expensive “game-day apartments” to support football programs – makes no
appearance. These blogs speak only to cities, and more often to demanders than suppliers. Here,
indeed, we find gentrification with renters but no landlords.

Gentrification critiques are too seldom wed to the whole ecology of injuries meted out by
our current economy, the still-growing legacy of this low, dishonest decade, and the last fifty
years of grift and graft. Each element of the fail decade feeds another, and each aggregates to
the institutional distrust that gave America first Barack Obama – whose racial difference from
previous presidents seemingly convinced voters, with little effort from the man himself, that an
institutionalist was an insurrectionary – and then Donald Trump, who seems intent to burn the
world down. A careful accounting of the “Katrina Pain Index” – to borrow the title of the yearly
list, distributed by the Guttmacher Institute, of what repair remains undone – would include
autocatalysis of all of these effects. Imagine, for example, a consideration of Katrina in
conversation with the high-risk mortgage crisis that enriched the lender and impoverished the
borrower. Surely the exilic wanderings of 200,000 New Orleanians – among whom people of

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3 For the phrase “grift and graft,” I am grateful to my partner, artist Phillip Lightweis-Goff, whose installation
_multitudes_ (2009) deployed it as name for an economy with so little work, and so much labor, run by the hyper-elite
“grift-graft.” The rhyme with riffraff is intentional. The grifters of the F.I.R.E. (finance, insurance, and real estate)
industries have crafted a system that runs on graft. Lightweis-Goff’s 108-piece collage installation used headlines
from the 2008 financial crisis to build a sense of capital swarming. The pieces were then distributed to 83 strangers
as a way to mirror and provoke the action of mass political movements.
color were over-represented – provided targets of opportunity for lenders, who managed to make money on both ends, from servicing successful and foreclosed mortgages alike?

Far away from New York and San Francisco, the two coastal bookends of urban life deployed so eagerly by CityLab, critiques of gentrification in New Orleans seem uncommonly small, and fully wed to the signposts of authenticity – jazz! second lines! crawfish! – that serve as cold comfort for someone who has been priced out of the Marigny, or exiled to Houston during Katrina, only to lose a house to Harvey a decade later. Perhaps this failure to link gentrification to systemic forces – rather than the literal tastes of gentrifiers – is a function of how seldom Southern cities have been taken seriously as part of the American metropolitan core vulnerable to “lost… soul” and subject to “engineering for the elite” (Moss, Busà). Perhaps it is a function of neoliberalism – the American academy’s current shibboleth – which has evolved since Lisa Duggan’s (2004) field-forming definition of it as a system that renders acquisition a matter of “neutral, technical expertise….presented as separate from politics and culture, and not properly subject to specifically political accountability or cultural critique” (xiv). The evolution has taken neoliberalism from the left-right free market consensus of the late nineties to a complete aestheticization of politics, wherein a taste for goat cheese – the closest thing to authentic, traditional food, if you’re descended from herders and nomads – signals all manner of political interests, as does a desire to vacation in Branson or make love to Blake Shelton.

One might blame this elision of class on the culture wars of the sixties, on Spiro Agnew’s denunciation of liberal profs in order to hoodwink disaffected voters, or on the splenetic bursts of quasi-class antagonism that have emerged in little waves since the nineties to explain the reliable map of red and blue states, purple counties and deep indigo cities. Thomas Frank’s What’s the

The red-state / blue-state divide… helped conservatives perform one of their dearest rhetorical maneuvers, which we will call the latte libel: the suggestion that liberals are identifiable by their tastes and consumer preferences and that these tastes and preferences reveal the essential arrogance and foreignness of liberalism. While a more straightforward discussion of politics might begin by considering the economic interests that each party serves, the latte libel insists that such interests are irrelevant. Instead it’s the places that people live and the things that they drink, eat, and drive that are the critical factors, the clues that bring us to the truth. In particular, the things that liberals are said to drink, eat, and drive: the Volvos, the imported cheese, and above all, the lattes. (17)

That both Campanella and the gentrifiers he excoriates are (likely) left-wing sorts – what New Orleanian isn’t, besides the outer-ring suburbanites living in the terrain where Davids Duke and Vitter thrive? – and transplants from less swampy climes scarcely matters to the enterprise of identifying gentrifiers among groups of people who have lived on the block for two fewer months than you. The latte libel, as Frank notes, so often carries “the elevated language of the confession” (18). Indeed, Frank identifies as master of this “game” David Brooks, “the grand generaliz[er]” about class and taste in America, who offers cheap truisms, cheaper relativism, and conventional wisdom on the pages of The New York Times… but, most of all, on the pages of Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There (2000), a book that ignored the confiscated wealth of the CEO class in favor of critiquing professors’ putative affection for expensive grains and pioneering new arrangements of water, milk, and coffee beans. “The liberal elitist” roared to life from these pages, and seems easily transmitted to
Campanella’s polemic, wherein “bourgeois bohemian[ism]” represents not only a political and social posture, but a stage of gentrification. Unironically cited by Campanella, Brooks is a man whose textual bumbling and babbling about microbrews and malbecs could only be mistaken for serious analysis in a country that forges a notion of itself as a classless society.

**CAPITALISM WITHOUT CAPITAL**

Several years ago, I offered my first response to Campanella’s “Gentrification and Its Discontents” on the pages of *American Literature* (2014). Much of my reading of it remains intact: the inclusion of the rent-controlled, subsidized Bywater Art Lofts as evidence of gentrification continues to baffle and enrage, especially because of my built-to-last partnership with an artist. Though artists are the constant straw men of gentrification – “stage 2” gentrifiers, according to Campanella – they remain deeply vulnerable to rent increases, and to contractions in tourism that have followed from the border-drawing chaos of the 2016 election. That New Orleans is not even in the top 10 cities for “arts vibrancy” should not escape our notice; that the city offers fewer opportunities than Pittsburgh, and only slightly more than Rochester, New York, should neutralize our desire to land a trenchant zinger about gentrification at the poorly-shod feet of the city’s artists. It is still true, three years on, that from reading such polemics, one gathers that gentrification is the process by which consumers begin to demand heirloom carrots, rather than the process by which institutions that underwrite mortgages and insurance policies refuse the right of return to Katrina exiles. Without attention to these industries, critiques of gentrification and the changing cityscape offer capitalism without capital, and an eerie

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4 For more data on this subject, turn to Southern Methodist University’s National Center for Arts Research’s (NCAR) Arts Vibrancy Index. The most vibrant art markets are Washington DC, New York City, San Francisco, Nashville, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Boston, Los Angeles, Silver Spring – Frederick – Rockville, Maryland, Newark, and Seattle. (Voss, Voss, Crane, and Armstrong 2017).
simulation of conservative discourse that renders graduate students, rather than investment bankers, the terminus of elite thought and hegemonic power in the United States.5

But on a second reading at the tail-end of the New Orleans mayoral race in which two women of color candidates fought it out over how to limit short-term rentals – the current hobgoblin of anti-gentrification activists, who note that short-term rentals create negative incentives for landlords to eliminate affordable housing for long-term, stable residents – I find myself far more troubled. Consider the new wave of polemicizing, appearing on the virtual pages of The Huffington Post (2017):

New Orleans, home to fewer than 400,000 people, has always been a tourist town, and locals have long complained that throngs of out-of-towners endanger the city’s authenticity. But Airbnb and other short-term rentals threaten that authenticity in a new way. Parts of the city were already gentrifying when Airbnb started to grow a few years ago, but the rise of short-term rentals appears to have accelerated that process.

This new kind of Airbnb-powered gentrification comes with all the downsides of traditional gentrification — home prices and rents are going up, lower-income residents and people of color are moving out — but with fewer upsides. Tourism and gentrification typically bring cleaner streets and less crime, but tourists don’t stick around to clean up the neighborhood, vote in local elections or lobby for better schools. (Peck and Maldonado)

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5 The second half of this paragraph is liberally borrowed from my essay “Peculiar and Characteristic: New Orleans’s Exceptionalism from Olmsted to the Deluge” (2014).
My weariness here is not only because of the familiar rhetorical moves, the reliable gestures towards culture-as-commodity. Since 2013, my circumstances have changed: in 2016, I left my home in New Orleans in the hands of short-term renters, having lost one job and found another that allowed me to return home often, if not often enough, to touch the Louisiana ground that has been so intellectually and spiritually generative for me. I am not the exiled subaltern. If, as the saying goes, white folks get a cold and black folks get pneumonia, then my lungs are foggy, not occluded. But it is nonetheless true that I have been displaced by a contracted academic labor market that makes a mockery not only of meritocracy, but of the very notion of rootedness.

Critiques of short-term rentals have shifted the map of four years ago; now it is Treme – my own neighborhood – that functions as ground zero of gentrification polemicizing in New Orleans. Now it is the penis-shaped balloons appended to homes rented for bachelorette parties, not the pillowy “house-made beet ravioli with goat cheese mint ricotta stuffing,” that fixate the gentrification police (Campanella 2013). What the balloon and the beet have in common is not simply their status as commodity, but as rhetorical tokens for money: a token economy stands in for a token economy. Were I to define neoliberalism in three words, it would be these: “capitalism without cash.” The chef and the stripper stand in for the mortgage agent and the landlord, and my narrow terrain of choices are imagined as the proper object of economics, rather than the scarcely-chosen effect of the same. Perhaps this should not surprise us, considering how often the ‘dismal science’ frames itself as the study of choices, even as it cheerfully assures the choosers that they cannot opt out of the totalizing and totemic free market.

That the clickbaiters have eased off restaurants in favor of short-term rentals is, nonetheless, the good news: at least we have returned from food to shelter. And I hasten to add that the last year has been a blood-letting in the New Orleans restaurant industry, which lost not
only what Campanella called the “retro-chic foodie/locavore-type restaurants” associated with gentrifiers, but staples of local cuisine like Mat and Naddie’s in Carrollton. In a remarkable rhetorical echo of both Campanella and the *Huffington Post*, Neal Bodenheimer, the owner and bartender at Café Henri – the restaurant that replaced Booty’s, which had been attacked for selling mofongo (insufficiently “Creole” in a place where “Creolization” is a putatively fixed history rather than a process) and marketing itself as a “blogstaurant” – claimed that his restaurant suffered from a lack of long-term residents who might be interested in the “dad food” on the offer (Carter 2017). Short-term renters, Bodenheimer said, were less interested in a casual restaurant where one might catch a drink after work, and a simple dinner made without much fanfare. If this is the case, then Café Henri must be the first restaurant that has ever suffered from the influx of tourist cash. (Price 2017a). But in response to the low, dishonest decade since Katrina, the left and leftish who purport to fight the rising tide have learned that “gentrification” makes far neater rhymes than “oligarchy,” and that “that’s fancy” is a better laugh line than “that’s fucked.”

If food is to maintain a place in conversations about gentrification in New Orleans, then it cannot come to us through the deployment of cuisine as cultural capital, but in centering workers in the hospitality industry as key to the struggle for affordable housing in a changing cityscape.

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7 There are not enough pages in this essay – or, indeed, in this issue of *Southern Quarterly*, to account for the widespread loathing of Booty’s by its neighbors. Much of this was simply provincialism, an unwillingness to accept the capaciousness of what could count as “New Orleans food.” Much of it was contempt for its owners’ desire to market it as a place to Tweet: “People see food as a type of content now. They talk about it online, they take pictures of it,” restauranteur Nick Vivion told *The Gambit* (2012). “We want chefs to be Tweeting and sharing the food from the kitchen and we want people to convene at our restaurant like they do online now” (McNulty 2012). If “hating Booty’s” was, before its 2016 closure, “a sign of good character,” I am of low character, as I spent much of 2013 writing at their bar while eschewing their small portions (Bentley 2016). But the celebrations of their demise were monuments to shade and negative thinking, which I take as a sign of hope in a world that offers its residents daily injuries; that bullies marginalized people into optimism; and in which reflexive optimism is naught but nihilism.
Certainly every business should attempt to “engage…with the community” in order to “try to be better neighbors” in a “confusing food landscape” in which hunger and abundance are in intimate proximity, but the work of making good neighborhoods cannot fall on food-workers who are also likely to feel the stress of rising rents at home and at work, since a key determining factor of a restaurant’s success is often whether the building is owned or rented by the restaurant’s proprietors (McColl 2015). The broader culture and economy must provide support for the people who work in a food, and not just with a “like” on an Instagram post that shows the finished product, but neither the sweat nor the blood.

The last twenty years of food culture in the First World have, as sociologists Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson and Sharon Zukin (1993) argue, offered ample opportunity to “extol the sensual qualities” of food cultivation (193). The food writers’ tendency to establish chains of provenance for each ingredient has seemingly provided consumers with an occasion to know everything about their food, save the labor conditions in which it is made palatable. And while the winking provocations of “proud gentrifiers” like Ink! (in Denver’s Curtis Park neighborhood) and Summerhill (in Brooklyn’s Crown Heights) scarcely aid in the tangle of associations that mistake taste for class, they are the products, not the agents, of an absurd cultural moment.  

Initiatives undertaken by the Congress of Day Laborers, the Fight for 15, the New Orleans Hospitality Workers Committee, and, of late, the feminist group Medusa – including “predictable scheduling, higher wages, sick pay, paid breaks, freedom from harassment,” benefits, and the end to segregation of whites on waitstaff and people of color in the kitchen – do

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8 During the winter season of 2017, Ink! Coffee boasted, on a sidewalk sign, that they had been “happily gentrifying the neighborhood since 2014.” For their insouciance, they were targeted by graffiti and boycotts their Denver neighborhood (Madrid 2017). Summerhill, located in the zone of reflexive gentrification critique, offended the sensibility of Crown Heights by deploying a neighborhood history of violence to laughingly market fake “bullet hole-ridden walls” and Forty Ounce Rosé (Rosner and Dai).
the necessary work of considering how the industry that runs New Orleans can be made more just and inclusive (Stromquist 2017). But deploying the places that they work, and the culinary products of that work, as signs of gentrification will fail to do justice. Indeed, food professionals are so often ghostly presences in writing about food; there is “artisanal” food without artisans preparing it, “house-made” ravioli without a maker. Their absence is a sure sign that such critiques emerge from professions where cultural capital, not cash, is framed as the product of our work. On this subject and many others, academics, writers, bloggers, activists, and public intellectuals are deeply wrong: you cannot pay your rent with prestige. You cannot offer basturma as down payment on a mortgage, even if it’s sliced finer than a dollar bill.

**PUKING ON ARTISANAL TREATS**

Take a long haul on I-10 from New Orleans and you will eventually find a city that has often been described as its ego ideal; “this is L.A., not LA” reads a bumper-sticker appended to a more than incidental number of Louisiana cars. New Orleans, where the sandy soil is simply a compromise between land and water, and Los Angeles, where a Louisianan’s lips dry, chap, and split as soon as they crack the car window, are both characterized by the difficult task of controlling the tide. Storms and floods demonstrate the impossibility of that control: you cannot move water with a plow or with a shovel. Out in California, C. Ray Nagin’s up-and-down geographies might make a certain kind of demographic sense: hills connote prestige, valleys bespeak some middling status. Across the Los Angeles River from the city’s downtown – a place famous for its Skid Row, but now in the throes of neighborhood change – one can find Boyle Heights, a historically Latinx community that is currently building a human retaining wall against the downtown values that seem intent on crossing the waters under the 6th Street Bridge. The neighborhood fights valiantly to keep out real estate developers, though their rhetoric seems,
like Campanella’s, flush with food and free of cash. In response to a real estate developer promising “bargain properties and… artisanal treats,” the contempt heaps disproportionately on the food: “I can’t help but hope that your 60-minute bike ride is a total disaster and that everyone who eats your artisanal treats pukes immediately” (Carroll 2016).

Surely the residents of working-class neighborhoods, where cars are scarce and commutes are long, would benefit from the infrastructure of a bike lane. If cities fail to build them in working-class neighborhoods, it is their absence, rather than their presence, that should provide a stress point for activists. Surely these same neighborhoods might benefit from the presence of high-end and casual restaurants alike, considering their potential to provide places to work as well as places to eat. If the former fail to hire people from the surrounding community, their hiring practices, not their mere presence, offer the grounds of protest. Surely even a Whole Foods – the straw man of so many gentrification arguments for its targeting of “pre-gentrifying or ‘up-and-coming’ areas, where overhead costs are low and city governments are willing to offer generous subsidies to coax the chain to a neighborhood”—are more likely to provide the groceries necessary to sustain people than the corner stores that currently predominate in food deserts and food swamps (Bendix 2016). If those two options are too few to sustain the lives of the poor – and I hasten to note that of course they are – then our interventions for justice must place more choices, rather than fewer, on the horizon of possibility. Having lived in a number of food swamps and deserts – Suitcase City in Tampa, the Southwedge of Rochester, New York, and the pre-gentrification Sixth and Seventh Wards of New Orleans – I can attest that the corner- and convenience-stores that serve neighborhoods with low car ownership are not cheap; they are merely “authentic.” And perhaps this singular, always-vexed, ever-scare quoted word simmers under the gentrification polemics cited above. The Bywater Art Lofts are comparatively
inexpensive, but they, and all that goat cheese, have committed the mortal sin of inauthenticity to marquee versions of New Orleans culture: “the mighty coo-de-fiyo hoodoo show,” as Dr. John once described the minstrelsy expected of Louisiana artists (188).

Writing on Twitter and in *Bitch* magazine, Mikki Kendall and Soleil Ho seemed to make explicit what remains implicit in writing by Richard Campanella and other gentrification polemicists. Kendall’s coinage of #FoodGentrification, and Ho’s intervention on the subject, furthered rhetorical displacement: gentrification without the hashtag displaces human beings from houses. With that marker ahead of it, houses are displaced from conversation about the crisis of affordable housing. Indeed, responding to Kendall, Goldie Taylor (2015) would write that “gentrification does not begin and end with the question of housing, transportation, or jobs. Lost in the conversation is its yet to be measured impact on the dinner table.” It is unclear what such a conversation would mean in the absence of housing, transportation or job: all phenomenon implicitly tied to food, and the capacity to sustain one’s body.

In *Bitch* magazine, Ho (2014) criticized Whole Foods’ attempts to promote the healthiness and kale-adjacency of collard greens. The eye-rolling marketing claim that “collards is the new kale” became, for Ho – who is both a chef and an anti-racist activist – the peak of a slippery slope that would take credulous consumers on a violent trip through the souls of black folk, “pluck[ing] out something they deem fit to sell” (2013). But authenticity feeds no one; indeed, it might snatch the taste from their mouths. Kendall is clear that the corner stores that often offer the only alternative to a Whole Foods in a gentrifying neighborhood are “basically selling food poisoning” (2017b) and offering “dumping ground for bad produce & bad meat” (2017a). As for the effects of #FoodGentrification – the putative price spike attending to “traditional” foods targeted by food advertising – within three years, we should certainly be able
to see the effects. In 2013, the average cost per pound of collard greens was $2.63 (USDA 2013). Four years later, that price has scarcely budged (USDA 2017). This is the good news: the first to feel a price spike in the supply lines would likely be the restaurants that serve as straw men in critiques of gentrification.

For writers and food professionals in southern spaces, it is perhaps useful to reflect on the relationship between two vexed adjectives: *southern* and *authentic*. Such reflection requires, for me, a return trip home to New Orleans, and a slow cycling trip through the Marigny and Bywater, where Campanella and others found the source material for the gentrification panics of 2013. On panicked days preceding hurricanes and tropical storms, I have often imagined a dystopic future in which Louisiana’s small-government conservatives transform New Orleans’ 1600 restaurants into shelters of last resort. In the appendix of this essay, I have scattered a few images of boarded-up restaurants and vacant storefronts; they look sufficiently post-apocalyptic, but this is scarcely the complete picture of a still-vital neighborhood. At two arpent lines – one on Franklin and the other on Poland Avenue – are the hulking stucco buildings of the neighborhoods’ former sugar plantations. Inside each is a restaurant: Bacchanal Wine on Poland Avenue, and the New Feelings Café on Franklin Avenue. Authentic southernness offered in places linked to a city’s captive history would, I think, offer an unsatisfying answer to the question of how a culture can be sustained in vulnerable economic times, on shifting ground, and in changing neighborhoods. At such sites, there is some relief to be found in inauthenticity, in new Creolizations that do not end at Orleans Parish boundaries. On Bacchanal’s menu, there are signs of the latter: cebollita and cotija might give City Lab readers’ pause, considering the undeniable fetishization of Mexican food in majority white spaces, but they are also indices of New Orleans’s Spanishness, a bare fact of its identity that was alternately ignored and denied in
post-Katrina panics among white natives about the influx of Honduran and Mexican recovery workers to the city. On Scott Maki’s menu at the New Feelings Café, one found signposts of tradition – evocations of long-gone New Orleans institutions like Mandich and LeRuth’s – and of promiscuous invention, too. Here, the taste of Hanoi via New Orleans East’s Vietnamese cuisine, the smell of New York in a plate of smoked salmon and latkes, the frisson of Budapest in cured duck. In a neighborhood where so many windows have gone dark, one should take comfort in signs of life.⁹

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⁹ This final paragraph describes two meals eaten in December 2017. The pictures that append this essay were taken in pre- and postprandial walks between the Marigny and Bywater. As you can imagine, there has been even more shuffling in the restaurants since I wrote the first draft of this essay. The empty building of Booty’s, then Café Henri, is now full: I hope that the Paloma Café will still be there when this essay is published. The New Feelings Café closed in July 2018. I read the news while teaching in Beijing. In honor of the excellent duck of December 2017, I walked to a business named New Feelings in the Shijingshan District of a city famous for its fowl. Alas, it was a hair salon.
References


Kendall, Mikki. @Karnythia. “Yeah this Jewel I have noticed seems to be the dumping ground for bad produce & bad meat.” 13 September 2017a, 8:16am. Tweet.

-------- @Karnythia. “Gentrification will bring something eventually, but in the interim the closest store is a Jewel that is basically selling food poisoning.” 13 September 2017b, 7:57am. Tweet.


Appendix: Pictures and captions.

3: At Maurepas Foods, the kitchen’s stainless equipment sits in the dining room.
4: The former Maurepas Foods stands as Bywater’s largest bike rack.