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Naomi Bartz
University of Chicago

Gordon Douglas
University of Chicago, gordon.douglas@sjsu.edu

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The Self-Conscious Gentrifier: The Paradox of Authenticity and Impact among 'First-Wave Neo-Bohemians' in Two Changing Neighborhoods

Naomi Bartz and Gordon C. C. Douglas
The University of Chicago

Abstract:

Gentrification has been a major factor reshaping North American cities for at least four decades, as well as a vital concern of sociological research. In recent years, there appears to be an increasing awareness of the process among contemporary gentrifiers themselves. This self-consciousness is significant on two levels: (1) it is unanticipated by or at least unaccounted for in much of the canonical literature on gentrification, having only recently gained acknowledgement (most notably work by Brown-Saracino that explores aspects of a particular type of self-aware gentrifiers); (2) it is complicating the way many gentrifiers or would-be gentrifiers frame and actively work toward their ideals of neighborhood, community, and place. Responding to existing literature and recent critiques, we combine findings from our own ethnographic research on first-wave “neo-bohemian” newcomers in distinct contexts of early-stage gentrification in Chicago and Vancouver. We demonstrate the degree to which these individuals, possessing shared ideals for lifestyle and community and a romanticization of “authentic” and “edgy” urban places, exhibit a sophisticated understanding of the process and complicated attitudes towards their own responsibility for neighborhood change. By focusing on first-wave gentrifiers in rapidly changing neighborhoods - overlooked in Brown-Saracino's work and other recent studies - we address the degree to which these individuals reconcile (or do not) their self-consciousness around their own gentrifier status. Making use of our findings in the two different sites, we also demonstrate the importance of context, by arguing that this activity is shaped both by shared cultural values and specific environmental contexts.

Paper presented on 19 August, 2012, at the American Sociological Association annual conference in Denver, in the Community and Urban Sociology Section session on “‘Lifestyle,’ Community and Place.”

The Self-Conscious Gentrifier: The Paradox of Authenticity and Impact among 'First-Wave Neo-Bohemians' in Two Changing Neighborhoods

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Recent studies have shown that it is more than simple economic rationale that drives newcomers into newly gentrifying areas; many seek particular qualities and characteristics commensurate with their own ideals of community character (see Lloyd, 2006; Brown-Saracino, 2009 and 2010; Zukin, 2010, among others). High among these, especially for many “first-wave” gentrifiers, is an idealization of authenticity that romanticizes “real” urban neighborhoods, with a predominately lower socioeconomic status and perceived edginess (Lloyd, 2006; Bartz, 2011; Douglas, 2012). Ironically, the movement of these artists, students, and other “neo-bohemians”¹ into any such community represents a first step toward the eventual undoing of the very authenticity and grit that they seek (Zukin 1982, 1987; Kerstein, 1990; Ley 2003; Zukin and Kosta, 2004). In this presentation, we draw on field work in Chicago and Vancouver to argue that another important feature of this lifestyle group is their emerging *consciousness* of this process and of their culpability therein. Understanding this awareness in turn helps explain the actions of these defining individuals, considered by many to be the catalyst for further gentrification through their cache as beacons of “hipness” (Florida, 2002; Lloyd, 2006).

¹ Described in both academia and mainstream culture under many different monikers - bohemians, scenesters, hipsters, a particular segment of the creative class - the individuals in our study fit the common description of non-speculating, first-stage gentrifiers (see Zukin, 1982; Ley, 2003; Lloyd, 2006; Ocejo, 2011), seeking a less trendy, less mainstream, and more affordable neighborhood in which to find community and work space, with creative and artistic pursuits central for many we spoke to. For the purposes of this talk we use Lloyd’s definition as our main jumping-off point, terming them ‘first-wave neo-bohemians.’ While highly educated and mobile, like their professional peers, this population tends to be the first to enter into neighborhoods others might consider dangerous because rent is cheap, the pursuit of independent artistic practice is easily facilitated, and identity and lifestyle ideals of edgy “authenticity” are present.

This seemingly recent degree of awareness is not well anticipated or accounted for in canonical gentrification literature. Recent research has introduced some important implications (see Brown-Saracino 2009), but invited many more questions, especially about its significance among first-wave neo-bohemians, widely recognized (by scholars, mainstream media, governments, and developers alike) as having a substantial impact on the character of the neighborhoods that they move to and in no small measure define. To more directly address this emerging phenomenon, we bring forth new empirical work on first-wave gentrifiers in two different contexts: the top-down, government-and-business-initiated redevelopment (and rebranding) of Vancouver's Downtown East Side (DTES), and the more bottom-up, 'naturally occurring' spread of hip colonization in a quiet and long-undefined part of Chicago's West Town community area. However, this is not simply a study of first-wave gentrifiers in two contexts, it is a study of the ways that *across context* their sophisticated understanding of gentrification and their own role therein impacts their own actions, and thus impacts the character of the gentrification process itself.

In this presentation we limit ourselves to a concise literature review and methodological discussion to move quickly to our data and findings regarding the cultural values that motivate and coalesce first-wave neo-bohemians as a lifestyle group, and how these mores influence the ways in which they frame and even actively work toward their ideals of neighborhood, community, and place in complicated ways.

Literature Review:

It is beyond the limitations of this presentation to fully review the literature on gentrification and the processes that define its inception, spread, stages, and impacts. Landmark

analyses include work by Zukin (1982, 1987), Smith (1984, 1996), and Ley (1994, 2003). Dennis Gale (1980) was among the first to describe the process as occurring in “waves” or “stages” (see also Kerstein, 1990; Zukin and Kosta, 2004, among others), and scholars also posited different gentrifier archetypes (artists, speculators, families) who might be expected to turn up at different points in the process. Yet other than the nuance and particularities of individual case studies, the main thrust of gentrification research has largely been monolithic in its understanding of dominant processes and outcomes, featuring the standard model of the white middle-class newcomer displacing the low-income minority resident in a simple economic and ecological process of the former “returning” to or “pioneering” the central city (see Lipton 1977; Zukin 1987; Smith 1996). While it is difficult to determine if this lapse in research is due to a reality of early gentrification being of a more singular character than it appears to be today or an actual analytic oversight, understanding the ideological and cultural motivations of gentrifiers is becoming increasingly important among researchers (see for example Brown-Saracino 2010 and the contents of a recent issue of *City and Community*, vol. 10, no. 3 [2011]).

Critical research did begin to surface in the mid-1990s as an attempt to complicate simple economic models of gentrification, especially in terms of framework and socio-spatial context (e.g. Lees 1994, 2000), and recent studies have begun to untangle the complex motivations that drive certain newcomers into areas at the vanguard of gentrification (see Lloyd, 2006; Brown-Saracino 2009 and 2010, among others). Brown-Saracino (2009) expands our understanding of gentrifiers with a typology that includes “social homesteaders” (newcomers who understand the gentrification process but feel ambivalent about it, simply hoping to stay out of the way or gently work to protect the physical character of a place) and “social preservationists” (who decry the effects of gentrification and work to maintain the authenticity and customs of the neighbourhood

they have moved into) in addition to the more classic “pioneer” type. Through extensive interviews, she shows that the theories of the “creative class” have seeped into popular culture to the extent that members of this demographic have an emerging self-reflexivity about their role (Brown-Saracino 2009; Greif, Ross, and Tortorici 2010).

In this study, we go beyond Brown-Saracino’s work to argue that this self-awareness takes an even stronger form for many artists, students, and other “bohemians,” considered by researchers to commonly serve as the “first-wave” of gentrification (Ley 2003). We illustrate that while this stems in part from the tenuous hold these first-wave gentrifiers have on their environment (most lack fiscal ties to the neighborhood like property rights), their need to reconcile their identity as “anti-establishment” authenticity-seekers with their perceived role in spurring development amplifies their self-consciousness and motivates anti-gentrification responses. Our analysis across two very different sites demonstrates that while the actions taken by this lifestyle group may vary by place and circumstance, the very need to take action (essentially through fleeing or fighting the conditions that produce the next waves of gentrification) is shared across contexts.

Methodology:

This research is informed by combined findings from two parallel and complimentary studies of first-wave neo-bohemians in different contexts: the “Edgetown” area in Chicago and Vancouver’s DTES.² The data were gathered in two separate ethnographic studies, each carried out by one of the two co-authors, with the process and the data fully shared and re-analyzed in tandem for the present study. Douglas’s field work in Chicago was conducted in the spring and

² In both cases some places and many names have been changed or omitted for anonymity, but we make no attempt to disguise the neighborhoods themselves and other major locations or institutions involved.

summer of 2009, with follow-up visits in summer 2010 (see Douglas, 2012). Bartz' research in Vancouver began in the fall of 2010 and continued throughout 2011 (see Bartz, 2011). We discuss the details of each field site in greater detail in the next section.

The methodological approach used in both sites was the same: empirical neighborhood-level ethnographic fieldwork comprising in-depth immersion and observation in each community for extended periods, complemented by participant observation, targeted interviews with local informants, attendance at community gatherings and events, and background archival research. As Katz argues, case studies allow the researcher to "examine social process as subjects experience it from within" (1983 p. 135). Interview and observation are vital methods of assessing these social processes. This approach provides in-depth knowledge of the character of the neighborhoods and gentrification processes in question while affording direct insight into the attitudes of this lifestyle group through observation and interviews alike.

Each site provides data from a neighborhood undergoing the early stages of gentrification, though in very different ways and contexts. Comparative analysis, allows us to demonstrate with greater breadth the degree to which these individuals possess a shared understanding of the gentrification process and complicated attitudes towards their own role in neighborhood change. At the same time, making use of our findings in the two different sites, we show that these uneasy gentrifiers respond differently to this dilemma in different contexts.

The First-Wave Ecological Footprint: The Paradoxical Search for Authenticity and the Process of Gentrification in Two Urban Centers:

Our research on first-wave gentrifiers demonstrates two important and interrelated themes that underscore the need to examine the positionality of first-wave gentrifiers and how

the ideological dilemma of this lifestyle group may in fact mediate the gentrification process. In brief, these neo-bohemian cultural producers and consumers appear to share a “grit as glamour” romanticization of authentic edginess; second, an awareness of themselves as gentrifiers essentially responsible for the eventual displacement of the very authenticity they idealize. We will discuss each in turn before discussing their implications for the actions of these crucial players in the narrative of neighborhood change. But first we begin by describing the different sites of our ethnographic work to better frame the data that follows.

The Downtown Eastside, Vancouver: Top-Down Gentrification in one of the most Expensive Cities in North America

Attempts to establish a creative economy in struggling neighborhoods have recently garnered much popularity (Zukin 2010). With urban development blueprints inspired by the controversial theories of economic-geographer Richard Florida, city planners across post-industrialized nations are attempting to rebrand ‘grit’ as ‘glamour’ in the hopes of enticing the purchasing power of the so-called “creative class.” Targeting one of the city’s highest crime and lowest-income neighborhoods, the Downtown Eastside, Vancouver’s City Council has since 2005 been following a mandate to “increase arts and culture [in the DTES] ... through support and funding” (City of Vancouver 2009). One of the most comprehensive ways in which the City has pursued this vision in the neighborhood is through the introduction of the SFU Arts Department, which comes complete with theaters, classrooms, and a constant stream of cultural festivities. They also chose to move the entire City Cultural Services Department into the neighborhood, reinforcing the connection between the City’s art and DTES neighborhood plans.

As one city planner explained at a local community meeting, the City is trying to attract the “right mix of creative minds” to the area to spur economic development.

The DTES is described by developers and City officials as “the hottest nouveau fashion and arts district in Vancouver,” and one development website boasts that there are “more than 700 artists living in the DTES” (Rennie, 2008). A local consultant and politician, Thomas Stocking, describes the SFU Arts Department, as “a magnet and transmitter of arts and cultural affairs;” he is confident that “the students that come here will be producing art, and this [area] will be the arts capital of all of Western Canada.” SFU, and new condominium developments, are seen as the lighthouse to guide private developers through the murky fog of an open-air drug market and high-traffic prostitution area.

Developers have taken note of the City’s goals and followed suit with their own investments in the neighborhood. Two years after SFU’s opening, another developer has come onto the scene with a condo tower specifically advertised for artists. Other recent condo developments like “The Edge” provide perks geared toward artists such as sound-proofed music rooms and art studio space. The developers are, as a local stakeholder explained, “tak[ing] advantage of the Downtown Eastside edginess.” The City is rebranding the area as a hip - not only an ‘arts and culture destination,’ but also a place for adventurous upper-income consumers to lay their heads at night.

“Edgetown,” Chicago: Searching for Hip Authenticity at Gentrification’s Fringe

The research site in Chicago was selected for possessing many features characteristic of a neighborhood at the very fringe of the development frontier, experiencing its first wave of gentrifying newcomers due to a socio-spatial position as essentially just the next “logical” step

(despite any visible “top down” efforts to promote development in the area). In a grey area between established neighborhoods with relatively little agreed upon identity of its own, the neighborhood we refer to as Edgetown is centered on a fledgling commercial strip on Chicago Avenue, 3.75 miles due west of Chicago’s Magnificent Mile and about a mile and a half southwest of the trendy “Six Corners” area of Wicker Park.³ Demographically, it is a classic “zone in transition” (Park and Burgess, 1925) having long been a destination for various immigrant groups: first Germans and other Europeans in the late 1800s, followed by large numbers of Puerto Rican and Mexican immigrants after World War II (Betancur, 2002; Essig, 2005). The area is now witnessing further cultural and economic shifts with the early signs of middle-class gentrification, including an influx of young, predominantly white artists, students, and other “neo-bohemians.” Census data confirm that the area is becoming increasingly white and middle-income, with the proportion of Latinos declining dramatically throughout the West Town community area.

The most salient aspect of Edgetown today - and the inspiration for its name in the research - is its place in the context of contemporary gentrification on Chicago’s West Side, which can be understood geographically as a patterned expansion outward from the trendy cultural center of Wicker Park over the past couple of decades into contiguous neighborhoods like Ukrainian Village and Logan Square. Early signs of this process arrived in Edgetown beginning in about 2005, and today it remains a clear example of Smith’s “urban frontier.” At the intersection of Chicago and California Avenues, one sees a block of condos so new that they are unoccupied or not even finished, and the westernmost outposts of hipness: a late-license bar

³ Much of the description in this section and ensuing discussion of Edgetown in the presentation are borrowed from Douglas (2012), a recent publication of findings from his initial research project in the area. The article, concerning the subcultural appeal of areas like Edgetown on the gentrification fringe with little preexisting neighborhood identity, was accepted for publication after the submission of the present co-authored study for presentation at ASA.

and the trendy “home-style” restaurant Feed. Neither has been open in its current form for more than three years, and beyond them are little more than vacant lots and auto shops leading into the decidedly not-gentrified community area of Garfield Park, where most census tracts register greater than 90 percent African American residents and among the lowest median household incomes in the city. Edgetown is, to quote one of its new residents, 21-year old artist and coffee shop barista Aaron, “the edge of the island.”

Authenticity and Identity-Formation: The Allure of the Edge

In Lloyd’s analysis of Chicago’s Wicker Park, he argues that the artist population that settled there actively sought out and valued diversity and social disorganization as evidence of authenticity and culture. As Lloyd (2006, p. 78) writes, “sharing the streets with working-class and nonwhite residents, even if personal interaction remains superficial, is part of their image of an authentic urban experience.” This population sees danger and disorder as providing a sense of vitality to their lives, and some describe forging connections with longtime residents to create informal networks of social control, despite the heterogeneity of class, race, and education. Thus, it appears that there is a growing population of young urbanites who desire life in a city that provides drama, public characters, and diversity – spaces that provide authenticity and excitement to their lives.

In our own ethnographic work, we sought to discover what the significance of place and identity is for this “first-wave” group, and how this impacts the ways in which they frame their neighborhood and respond to market-forces of change. As established above, the gentrification process is not homogeneous, indeed it is ideologically (and geographically) varied. Nor can it be understood wholly economically. In the earliest stages, identity creation and commercial

development alike are led by individuals influenced by cultural considerations as much as the search for cheap rent. We found that first-wave hipsters living, working and/or playing in the DTES and Edgetown, like their wealthier second-wave counterparts in Brown-Saracino's work (2009), fetishize the longtime residents and neighborhood culture.

In the DTES, many young artists and musicians describe the neighborhood as a place with a "strong sense of community," a place where "people look out for each other." Laura, a young activist and worker at a DTES anarchist bookstore, says she sees the neighborhood as special because it is not "first and foremost a shopping destination; it isn't selling culture, but being a part of culture." The homeless and 'off-the-books' workers in the DTES represent a form of anti-establishment and anti-capitalism that is attractive to the musicians and artists with middle-class backgrounds and four-year degrees. Similarly Fink (2010), and Bartz (2011), find that homeowners and renters in a new mixed-income development in the DTES described their reasons for moving to the area as a deliberate choice to avoid neighborhoods like Yaletown (an expensive neighborhood featuring restaurants and services catering singularly to wealthy professionals) in favor of the "edgier" DTES.

In Edgetown, the concept of the edge itself: a cultural ideal and source of identity that drives certain individuals – young, 'hip,' conscious of and conflicted about wider subculture and gentrification – to seek out spaces just beyond established, "fully" gentrified neighborhoods in an ecological process that is distinct from but clearly prescient of more mainline gentrification. Aaron, the young barista quoted above, explained his attraction to Edgetown in context: "It's like Jurassic Park. Wicker Park is the center of the island, and it's where all the dinosaurs are, so you want to stay as close to the edge of the island as possible." The island is essentially the entirety of hip, 'relevant,' gentrifying Northwest Chicago; the dinosaurs the

trendier, wealthier inhabitants of the island's "fully-established, too-commercial-to-still-be-hip core" (qtd. in Douglas 2012, p. 8). The goal for those in Vancouver and Chicago seeking the leading edge of hip authenticity is to be in a place away from the trendy center without being 'off the island' altogether.

The basic act of fleeing the "dinosaurs" at the center demonstrates why the concept of the edge is as much ideological as economic. "I mean we're all kind of tired of Wicker Park" says Jennifer, a teacher who just moved to Edgetown. "Now none of us could even afford to live in Wicker Park, ," explains Blütt, "nor would we want to because of the way things have gone" (he goes on to deride its after-work clubbing atmosphere, wine bars, lap dogs, etc.). The fear of a 'cultural takeover' in the form of a top-down developer-branded art scene in the DTES is also mentioned by respondents. As Jonathon says: "I think creating it as a Mecca for arts would be detrimental. I wish it wasn't pushed into the neighborhood like it is now; I would like to see some sort of balance between the arts and the residents." Jay, the owner of a hip new "coffee bar" in Edgetown, even actively tries to dissuade what he calls "the whole Wicker Park bicycle messenger indie rock crowd" from hanging out in his coffee shop by playing older rock bands that he believes they dislike.

The desire to preserve the "authenticity" of the neighborhood by actively leaving already-gentrified neighborhoods or taking a stand at the city's last frontier can be, at least in part, explained by the defining newcomers' (re)creation and preservation of identity based on the pursuit of the "edge" itself. But what is most striking about the Edgetown and DTES first-wave newcomers and their desire for an edgy anti-corporate existence is the awareness implicit therein of the larger gentrification process, where they themselves fit in, and the inevitabilities that make their very ideal so untenable.

An Inconvenient Truth?: Neo-Bohemians' Critical Evaluation of their Own Market-Value

Standing out front of the cafe on Chicago Avenue that he helped open and now owns, discussing the lack of neighborhood identity in Edgetown, Jay throws up his arms: “They can call it whatever they wanna call it, but, you know, they’re gonna eventually call it ‘West Wicker Park.’” Nearly every newcomer we spoke to in Edgetown or the DTES had such textbook understandings of the patterned inevitability of the gentrification wave, and of themselves as riding its leading edge. Indeed the very metaphor of the “edge of the island” mentioned above (and the similar conceptions among DTES newcomers) requires a considerable understanding of the spatial, temporal, and demographic elements of gentrification as an urban ecological process.

Travis, a local musician and employee of a social service agency in Vancouver’s DTES noted succinctly that: “hipsters do all the colonialization work. They go where the rent is cheap. I am already seeing the classic turnover where friends of mine can’t afford to live down here anymore.” Some of Edgetown’s earliest newcomers have likewise already witnessed the change happening around them: Blüt remembers other bohemian times past, such as one block where there “were all these rundown apartment buildings, but all these kinda cool people lived in ‘em, and they all shared one giant back yard, had all the dogs in there, I used to bring the dogs over and let them run around. Those got sold, or they evicted everyone, to rehab them or whatever.” Even people who had lived in Edgetown for less than a year described it as having “changed a lot” since they arrived.

These self-conscious newcomers also make distinctions between themselves and long-time residents that demonstrate a consciousness of the distinct and delicate positions of each. Jay explains his relationship with the area’s Ukrainian community: “You walk in to what is their neighborhood, there are families and families and families, probably got lots property, they want

to raise their kids here. And then you have some half-Mexican, tattooed kid coming in here opening a business.” The manager of the subsidized units in a mixed-income development in the DTES noted that there are very few complaints about his tenants from the market-rate owners, because “they knew what they were getting into and they know the neighborhood.”

The self-awareness of these first-wave gentrifiers does not simply reflect a paranoia or narcissism on their part. Developers and politicians do indeed emote enthusiasm about the changes to these neighborhoods and directly link it to the artists and neo-bohemians settling in the area. One of the Chicago aldermen for the Edgetown area, for example, was well aware of what is going on in his district: “It appeals to people from the artists community and people who I would consider from the creative class,” he explained, adding that “the folks who are moving in tend to have higher levels of education and perhaps come from a higher income household.” In Vancouver, even Simon Fraser’s community-oriented arts programming has presented lectures in the DTES on subjects such as “Art and Gentrification.” It is quite clear that the forces of gentrification are not catching anyone by surprise.

The irony is that what Edgetown’s newcomers are really inspired by is essentially an image of Wicker Park past. While they insist they spend little time there today, the truth, as Blütt rather simply sums it up, is that Edgetown’s newcomers are “the kind of people that were in Wicker Park, well, ten years ago maybe?” While the DTES is considered by many first-wave gentrifiers to be one of the last authentic places left, Travis believes it will become like all the other neighborhoods in Vancouver, “...less realistic – a parody of itself.” Indeed, despite the intentional distance drawn from what each neighborhood represents today, it seems the real goal (intentional or not) is to recapture what *once was* symbolized there (and in places like it) in their heyday on the edge of hipness. And yet as Travis makes clear, they know this ideal is temporary

at best. As Lloyd (2006, p. 237) writes, “The sense of being always already over” is inherent to bohemia. The question, then, is what they are going to do about it.

Reconciling Identity and Staying on the “Edge”: The Coping Strategies of Exit and Voice

Albert Hirschman (1970) describes the choices consumers can make to demonstrate dissatisfaction with an organization or product in the marketplace in his seminal treatise *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*. The dichotomy of exit versus voice has also been applied to ethnographic neighborhood-level research by Wilson and Taub (2006) to describe the ways in which residents respond to ethnic and economic change in their own neighborhoods. This dichotomy is also seen among our first-wave gentrifiers in both Edgetown and the DTES, and much as Wilson and Taub found, our preliminary data suggest that the choice this lifestyle group makes is dependent on the larger environmental context in which they are positioned.

Exit: The Incessant Search for New Territory

The gentrification process, in the eyes of the edge-seekers, would seem as intractable and inevitable as implied by the geological metaphor of the island. Indeed, in Chicago, since it is too late to preserve or reclaim the ideal in Wicker Park, it must be captured at the new, and again temporary, edge. Intentional or not, the goal is the continual recreation of the tenuous time and space of the edge based on this nostalgic blueprint. Of course, this in turn spurs further gentrification. It is perhaps for this reason that Edgetown’s newcomers are ultimately interested neither in preserving the underlying character of the area (as with Brown-Saracino’s “social preservationists” or “social homesteaders”) or in founding a new middle class urban outpost (as with traditional gentrifiers such as Smith’s “pioneers”).

The new residents of Edgetown are somewhat protective of the area's *current* state from signs of more advanced gentrification – such as J's efforts to keep out the “hipster bike crowd” – but not as socially-conscious caretakers with an active concern for integrating with or preserving the underlying social fabric; the efforts appear self-interested, more about keeping the secret and temporarily preserving the edge. Ryan, who moved to an apartment in the study area in mid-2009, exemplifies this desire: “If you're thinking about moving here, don't tell anybody about it,” he implores me. “Yeah keep it quiet. The Italians kept it quiet for a long time. I like it here.”

There are exceptions in both directions, but ultimately most of our interviewees in Chicago expressed a sort of sober resignation about gentrification. “As soon as the economy gets back on its feet it's gonna skyrocket,” explains Jay. “That's how all the neighborhoods have always worked in the entire city of Chicago since the beginning [...] it just keeps going farther and farther west.” Blütt describes how he has come to terms with it: “I don't gripe too much about like new condo buildings as much as I used to because you can't stop it, you can't really worry yourself sick about it. [...] stuff is just gonna keep moving north and west in this town. And I wouldn't have moved to this neighborhood ten years ago, you know?” But nor, it appears, would he move there now: Blütt is already leaving for cheaper (and ‘edgier’) soil, heading a handful of blocks north and west to the Humboldt Park area. “I would like to stay right over here, and I tried,” he laments, “but there wasn't anything cheap enough and nice enough at the same time.” In other words, just because the pursuit of the edge is an important part of the area's attraction does not mean those seeking the edge are actually committed to preserving it.

In a sense then, Edgetown's newcomers may have more in common with classic gentrifying pioneers, having essentially identified the next area of the city to “trailblaze” and convert (Smith, 1996). Yet rather than laying the groundwork for further investment or creating a

more middle-class community (though they may well be) they wish only to escape the ostensibly *more* upper-class “dinosaurs” and live the pre-fabricated ideal of the edge – for both economic *and* ideological reasons. In the end, their awareness of the impermanence of their situation makes these edge-seekers more like members of a nomadic people, happy to have found a temporary place to call home, even build community in and identity with, but always ready to move on.

Voice: Defending the Last Frontier

In the DTES, the situation is different. While there are certainly those who exhibit the same willingness to flee the encroaching gentrification and move on to greener pastures (such as the nearby Hastings-Sunrise neighborhood, where Travis has moved and predicts to be the next mecca for edge-seekers), others are determined to stand their ground and serve as allies to longtime residents in a shared interest to stop further waves of gentrification. As Travis reflects on his recent move and what he presumes to be its inevitable gentrification as well, he wonders: “what will you do when there are no neighborhoods left?”

The neo-bohemians of Vancouver face a far more restrictive terrain. While Chicago’s geography and post-industrial landscape provide a relatively endless horizon of potentially pre-hip edgespaces for its nomadic hipster herdsmen, the DTES is much closer to being a literal island in terms of Vancouver’s sky-rocketing property values and limiting geography. Because of this many do not see exit as a choice any longer. For this group the only option is to use their voice to actively defend the last frontier of ungentrified territory in the city and many approach this through building strategic alliances with longtime residents. This subset of gentrifiers differs from the “social preservationist” homeowners described by Brown-Saracino (2009), who felt

their role and responsibility was to remain outside the politics of their neighborhood because of their inauthentic place in it. But with nowhere left to go, many are motivated to direct action.

One example of this anti-gentrification activity occurred in the winter of 2010 when SFU's community engagement program was awarded five million dollars from Goldcorp Mining Company for community-building events and activities. However, Goldcorp is considered by many students and professors to be an oppressive and, as one student states, "ruthless" corporation that exploits workers in third-world countries.

Rather than fighting the award of this "dirty" money independent of local concerns, the "Students and Faculty against Goldcorp and Gentrification" aligned themselves with the local anti-gentrification groups, calling for the return of the money to Goldcorp, or if not a return, then a promise that decisions about how the money will be spent be made by the longtime DTES residents. In 2010 they held a forum inviting local activists to sit alongside professors where they tied their concerns over the corporatization of the university to the gentrification of the DTES. As the organizers described it, this was a "panel discussion centered on the corporatization of universities, the ongoing gentrification pressures in the Downtown Eastside, and the ethics of artistic practices involving community engagement" (Vancouver Media Cooperative, 2010). One speaker explained: "There is a long history of the financialization of artistic practices. Culture is tied into urban planning. Now it serves as a force of gentrification." It is clear that, thus far, SFU students and faculty have served as allies to longtime residents, and as part of academia, they have brought legitimacy to the fights of local activists which draw the attention of politicians and other officials.

However, the romanticism and activism on the part of artists and musicians is not without its personal benefits. To be sure, because of the tenuous nature of the idealized edge, feelings of

exclusivity and defended community are probably inevitable among new arrivals in the DTES as much as Edgetown. Beyond alleviating the guilt of being ‘first-wavers,’ keeping the area low-income means they too will avoid displacement. As Jonathon insightfully points out:

...[independent] musicians have a vested interest in keeping [the] Downtown Eastside from gentrifying, because it’s the only place that people can go to see music and perform. I guess, the more down-and-out people there are in the Downtown Eastside, the more the venues will stay open and we will have a place to play.

As Jonathon spoke, he reflected on how “cold” this sounds, but conceded that it is in the back of his mind and likely his friends’ as well. The desire to keep the DTES “down-and-out” to both serve a romantic purpose and ensure one’s own stability there can make for treacherous allies. While longtime residents of the DTES do not want to be pushed out of the neighborhood, many also prefer not having to struggle day and night to find food and social assistance, and not everyone views the DTES so romantically. A woman working for a local nonprofit explained that many of her clients want to leave the DTES for safer neighborhoods in Vancouver. Others enjoy and appreciate the benefits of change happening in the community. A resident of a newly built mixed-income development stated that he is “glad to see that this place has been built and that things are changing, that the neighborhood is becoming more mixed.” While the artists and musicians see the low-income longtime residents of the DTES as the ultimate bohemians, this vision can be stagnating for those who want to join mainstream society.

Conclusion:

Today’s first-wave gentrifiers face a rather stunning (if fitting) paradox. Their cultural interest in moving to authentic, edgy, *ungentrified* urban neighborhoods is incompatible with the

role they know they play in catalyzing further investment, development and change there once they arrive. Across sites, we found neo-bohemians to share this romanticizing of “authenticity” in urban communities and staking of identity on the idea of the edge. Likewise, as this very orientation implies, we found a considerable consciousness of the nature of neighborhood change on the part of the gentrifiers. This consciousness-raising is indeed leading to actions that have a direct impact on the neighborhoods this group settles in. Their desire to preserve the “authenticity” of a neighborhood by either fleeing or taking a stand at gentrification’s frontier is, at least in part, explained by these defining newcomers’ simultaneous interest in living in authenticity and self-consciousness of their role in disrupting it. However, regardless of a neo-bohemian’s decision to exit or use voice in response to the perceived tide of further gentrification, his or her actions also appear inherently self-serving and romanticized, lacking a complex reading of the needs and desires of longtime residents.

The resulting picture is of first-stage gentrification that is largely driven by subtle cultural factors across unique socio-spatial conditions yet is simultaneously quite self-conscious and contrived. This finding cuts to the heart of the chicken and egg story of gentrification and further complicates outdated impressions of its deterministic pattern, homogeneity, or simple economic rationality. Economic considerations are undoubtedly and inextricably part of the story. But so too are social and even personal ideologies concerning the subcultural ideal of the (re)creation and preservation of identity based on the tenuous pursuit of the “edge” itself.

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