

Trotter Review

Volume 23
Issue 1 *A Place in the Neighborhood: Pushed
Out, Pushing Back*

Article 2

9-22-2016

Introduction: The Gentrification Game

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Recommended Citation

Lewis, Barbara (2016) "Introduction: The Gentrification Game," *Trotter Review*. Vol. 23: Iss. 1, Article 2.
Available at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol23/iss1/2

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Introduction

The Gentrification Game

In real estate talk, there are only three things that matter, and they are location, location, location. The same is true in dispossession, which translates into the freeing up of location so that it can be possessed by others. Another term that has cropped up fairly recently, much in use in the crossover between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is gentrification, which has a benign face as well as one that is not so kindly, like the paired tragic and comic masks of classic drama.

In this issue of the *Trotter Review*, we explore gentrification and its alternate, dispossession, through the lens of housing policy focused on increasing opportunity; as a strategy of neighborhood displacement; as possible collusion between developers, politicians, and members of an African heritage leadership class eager to keep their pockets jingling with gold; and as local examples of ouster and remake of a neighborhood to suit the tastes of a more moneyed population with a creamier complexion.

In what follows, I offer my take on gentrification as someone who spent time as a child in the segregated urban South, as a resident of Harlem as it was being gentrified, and as an avid student of history from the perspective of African heritage presence in the New World. My thesis is that gentrification is a segregation strategy rebranded to achieve the same old divide and disappear game.

Sometimes words are bold in their significance, even when it is denied that they mean what they say. Gentrification, as its root announces, gives roles and rewards to the gentry, while those not considered well-born are excluded from the bounty. The connotation is clear; some are given the good life and others aren't. Even before the term gentrification became current once again, the split thinking of *us vs. them* was operational. It was present, centuries past, in the passion and

charge that brought the Puritans from England, where their religious beliefs were not accepted, to a frontier world, where they used *carte blanche*, literally the white card, to advantage, taking the better portion of the land for themselves. From the beginning, land mattered, and the Puritans waged war to possess it and labor. Not long after they arrived, they engaged, strategically, in a war against the Pequots, enslaving them and turning them into currency to purchase Moors, a term still used in the seventeenth century to refer to Africans.

At bottom, gentrification is a war game, with at least five basic elements. First, the enemy group is identified and a smear campaign conducted, which labels the target as unworthy. With the various Native New England tribes when the Puritans arrived, destruction was the agenda, whether by disease or force, as the first objective. Thus, religious validity hit the table; the Natives were pagans to be eliminated. Second, the mantra of divide and conquer was pursued. So some of the Native tribes were designated as friends and allies and others were made enemies. Third, borders were breached. So the targeted Pequot villages were attacked. Fourth, the defeated group was removed from its land. Pequot captives were exiled. Fifth, a narrative was bruited about that put all blame on the enemy, thus allowing the victor to justify its behavior and be ready to wage the war game again with impunity.

The gentrification game was the genesis of the Massachusetts colony, which advertised its erasure aim by naming itself after a Native group, the Massachusett, who were nearly annihilated in the seventeenth century. The colony also warred against the Pequot, who were made trade items for the acquisition of African labor. This happened between 1637 and 1638. In the former year, Pequot war slaves were sent to Providence Island, which the Puritans established in the Caribbean as a slave trading depot, and in the latter year, African slaves were brought to Boston to labor and grow Puritan wealth. John Winthrop, then governor as well as a lawyer in the Massachusetts colony, noted the 1638 Boston arrival of a ship, the *Desire*, built in 1636 in Marblehead early in the Pequot War expressly to trade in human cargo. As a principal in the colony, Winthrop had a spread of 600 acres, called Ten Hill Farms, and he needed an army of unpaid Native hands to turn the ground to wealth. He was not alone. The early Puritans all had vast tracts to cultivate.

It didn't take long for some of the Africans to catch on to the game, and they pushed for land as well. In 1670, forty-two years after the *Desire* pulled into Boston Harbor in February 1638, the first deed found to date establishing African

heritage land ownership in Boston was registered. And, surprisingly, the purchaser was an African-heritage woman. Mrs. Zipporah Atkins Potter was her name, and more than likely her father, perhaps also her mother, was among the first enslaved Africans to arrive in Boston on the *Desire*. Let's do the arithmetic to situate this woman who bought herself into citizenship, installing herself as a person of property in Massachusetts fifty years before the Salem witch trials, a century before the Boston Massacre that felled Crispus Attucks, who was of Massachusetts and African blood, during a period when livestock were grazing on the Boston Common, and a decade after Mary Dyer, a Quaker, was punished by hanging for her religious beliefs, from a Great Elm in the Common.

We know almost nothing about Mrs. Potter except that her father was a slave, so we need to speculate a bit to determine when she might have been born. Likely, when she bought her house in the North End, she was in her late twenties or early thirties, which means that she could have been born between 1638 and 1640. That makes sense, given that we know the first shipment of Africans for sale arrived in Boston in 1638, and so her father, and perhaps even her mother, could have been part of that first cargo. Or one or both might have arrived a year or two later, but before 1641, when slavery was officially entered into the laws of the Commonwealth. In the interim period between 1638 and 1641, the laws dividing the animalized from the benefited class of humans are not yet as stark as they become. And so Mrs. Potter secures the imprimatur of citizenship, with help from her father. We know he saved some money, enough to give his daughter a leg up in life; but how he accomplished that, we have no idea. Still, we can surmise he and his daughter understood the worth of land acquisition and its tie to status.

Mrs. Potter's father is not the only possible occupant in the cargo section of the *Desire* who found a way to leave a mark on history. Samuel Maverick was another early Boston land owner, who possessed a vast tract near what is now Logan Airport, and his last name is memorialized in a stop on the Blue Line. An Englishman, John Josselyn, was visiting Maverick in October 1638 when one of Maverick's slaves, a woman, complained bitterly to the visitor that she was abused. Maverick, she said, had forced a male slave to mate with her so as to increase his livestock. This African woman keened that she had been forcibly raped, taken against her will. More than likely she had not read and may yet have been unable to read English, yet she knew she had not consented to the treatment that she had been made to suffer and so she was entitled to redress, which she tried in the best way she knew how, to secure.

Centuries later, by written word and by deed, evidence of female resistance and determination survives—in a 1670 purchase document that Dr. Virginia Johnson, education professor emerita from Boston University, discovered in the Massachusetts archives and in an article that Wendy Anne Warren published in the *Journal of American History* in 2007. Both scholars offer evidence that the first two generations of Africans in Boston, one enslaved and one that had managed to gain freedom, were energetic in opposing the status that others for easy prosperity forced on them, against their will. They fought the denial of rights and heritage that cast them into a new, foreign land and sought to dispossess them of friends, family, and protection. And so they fought for more status and greater belonging. In the shift from the seventeenth into the eighteenth centuries, an African male named Adam Saffin sued John Saffin, to whom he was indentured. When John Saffin failed to keep his word that he would free Adam Saffin at an agreed-upon time, Adam Saffin went to court in 1701. Two years later, he and his wife were declared free. In 1701, while the trial was ongoing, John Saffin wrote a poem vilifying Adam Saffin, using language that would not be entirely out of joint with contemporary public opinion. In fact, it is easy to imagine an online commentator today describing some Obama look-alike as “cowardly and cruel ... revengeful ... libidinous, deceitful, false, rude ...”

Fast-forward to 2014. Deval Patrick is governor of the commonwealth, Beverly Morgan-Welch heads the Museum of African American History, and they pull together the political muscle to put a plaque on the Rose Kennedy Greenway, near where Mrs. Zipporah Atkins Potter’s home once stood. At the time that Mrs. Potter purchased her home in the North End, the section was already home to enslaved and freed Africans, however their freedom was effected, whether the will of a former owner liberated them or they negotiated or purchased their independence. Because of that plaque, and its official imprimatur, it is impossible for anyone to claim that free, property-owning Africans never lived in the North End of Boston, which, today, is popularly known as Little Italy. Restaurants fill practically every quaint, narrow street and tourists throng the area in order to visit Paul Revere’s home and see the Old North Church, where lanterns burned bright and where Mrs. Potter was married either by Increase Mather or by Cotton Mather, who were both ministers, one after the other, of the Old North Church. Increase Mather, in addition, was president of Harvard, and before I get too much farther along in this history of African-heritage occupation across Boston, I also note that in the year African slaves officially came to Boston, 1638, Harvard was named. So

the most prestigious educational institution of higher education in the country, and possibly in the world, has the same date of currency as the dehumanizing practice of African slavery. Both are dug deep in Commonwealth soil.

When the African-heritage community began leaving the North End after the Revolution, as property and rental prices began to rise, traces of this prior presence remained. Copp's Hill Burying Ground in the North End, opened in 1659, is still where roughly 2,000 African-heritage burials rest, offering an archaeologist's gold mine. One of those graves holds a young mother and an infant child. Jane and son were the family of Onesimus, a slave that Cotton Mather mentions often in his diaries. Mather was a man for whom order mattered. And he was very concerned with the principles of right and righteous behavior in the ranks of the slaves. In 1693, during the religious controversy that accompanied the Salem witch trials, Mather laid out the rules of proper deportment for the slaves, who were to look to their masters as speaking the word of the Lord on Earth; thus, their commands were to be obeyed in all things. More than twenty years after setting the code of slave behavior to paper, Mather wrote, in 1716, to the Royal Society in London to investigate a lead that his slave, Onesimus, had given him about a tribal medical practice that stemmed the spread of infectious diseases. Originally a gift from his congregation, Onesimus was a dutiful slave at first, who became harder to manage; still, Mather considered him intelligent. And his intelligence proved useful in 1721, as a smallpox epidemic raged in Boston. Mather convinced Zabdiel Boylston, a local doctor, to experiment with inoculation, an intervention he had learned about from Onesimus, which cut the city's death rate. *Medical Apartheid*, the 2006 book by Harriet Washington, cites Onesimus as paying the same price as so many other Africans who contribute, without due recognition, to democratic medical advancement.

In the early 1800s, the African heritage community moved to the West End, on the downward slope of Beacon Hill, where rents and property prices were more affordable, and where a sizable settlement grew up lasting at least into the end of the nineteenth century. That area, also once known as Nigger Hill, became famous as a haven for runaway slaves, some of whom became celebrated. A few of the people who called that area home were Lewis Hayden, who had escaped from slavery in Kentucky in the 1820s, came to Boston, purchased a home with his wife, and endowed a medical scholarship at Harvard. George Middleton, a veteran of the American Revolution, also owned a home there. Harriet Jacobs, Nancy Prince, and Harriet Wilson, nineteenth-century authors, lived there. So did David Walker, a

political pamphleteer, likely killed for his radical views, who was found dead in a doorway in 1830. Maria Stewart, the first American woman to speak in public, lived there for a short time and gave an address at the African Meeting House, which was erected in 1806, and was financed entirely by community donations. The Meeting House church, still standing, was the heart of the community, along with the primary school that was started in its basement before growing into a separate building, known as the Abiel Smith School, now home to the Museum of African American History. The segregated Smith School was the focus of a legal case in the 1840s that set the separate and unequal precedent for *Plessy v. Ferguson*, finally challenged, by law, in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision.

At the start of the twentieth century, when their numbers were swelling thanks to the influx of southern migrants, the African-heritage communities in Boston were coming not only from the South but from the Caribbean as well, and they were settling in the South End from the era known as the Harlem Renaissance up into the latter part of the twentieth century and beyond. Allan Rohan Crite, a painter born in 1910 who lived in the South End into the twenty-first century, passing in 2007, captured life in this once vibrant Black neighborhood through the eyes and images of the people who lived there and called it home for most of the 1900s. Crite, a graduate of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, devoted himself to creating a visual record of Black urban life that is vibrant and strong and journalistic in detail. These were the people he knew and saw, and they deserved, he felt, not to pass into oblivion. The bulk of his work is now owned by the Boston Athenaeum, but his art is also represented in the Museum of Fine Arts, in the Smithsonian, and in the Art Institute of Chicago. The streets he so loved have radically changed and the neighborhood people he depicted have been almost totally dispossessed, moved out into other sections of the city, as the streets that were once relegated as fit only for the marginal have been upgraded, and now they are among the toniest in a city that can easily be called *The White City* since, according to the Brookings Institution, Boston is the nation's most racially inequitable and divided city.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Roxbury became identified as the section of Boston where African heritage peoples lived. Then the pendulum swung out to Dorchester and Mattapan, roughly at the same time. But the inner city, once reviled as urban expanses for the poor, is now desirable again. The theaters and shops are there. So are the restaurants and cultural entertainments and jobs. And

besides, there are all these properties that can be purchased and renovated and made to look cool, blending old and new and upping the real estate value into the stratosphere. So the people and families and communities that were living there before, some of them speaking other languages and following different cultural patterns, can pack and move to less expensive places farther out on the rim of the city or in other towns altogether. And so the pattern of demean and neglect, then buy and fix for big profit in artificially created enclaves of White sameness, can go through the rigmarole of denying the past and its habits and making a new tomorrow in the footsteps of a yesterday willfully blind to what has been.

So the gentrification game is proceeding full throttle forward in Boston in the early twenty-first century, targeting Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan especially, after having conquered and *redeemed* (referencing a Puritan emphasis on the faithful versus the infidels) Jamaica Plain, South Boston, and the South End, etc. And it is not the outer shell of gentrification, the upgrading and refurbishing of homes and streets and amenities, that is the problem—everyone wants to live on beautiful, orderly avenues with well-tended houses. Rather, it is the inner core of the gentrification agenda that rankles, its replacement mantra, which banishes prior inhabitants beyond the zone of desirability, chucking them on the refuse heap. An associate professor of anthropology who purchased a home in Upham’s Corner, long an enclave of Boston’s Cape Verdean community, said in the spring of 2016 that since she purchased her house in that Dorchester neighborhood, intersected by the upgraded Fairmount-Indigo line into and out of South Station, she has seen the ownership pattern reverse. The people who used to be her neighbors when she took possession have disappeared, and a new crew of yuppie owners has come to roost.

And, of course, the pattern is much bigger than Boston. Some of the urban spaces also on the road of transition from *undesirable* to *desirable* include New Orleans post-Katrina, which was sunk in a landscape of destruction that made it clear who mattered enough to save and who had to fend and paddle for self. The same ouster process, unassisted by nature, happened, thanks to desire, a noun and verb so very precious and directive to the Puritans, in other national enclaves, like the neighborhoods of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Georgetown, and Harlem, and the cities of Houston, Los Angeles, Oakland, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Seattle, *ad infinitum*.

Places other than this nation are involved in the acreage grab to build and bring on the new, refurbished world order that is rapidly replacing the old for

profit, while making the thoroughfares so much easier to negotiate given that the New World, Old World, and Caribbean cousins of Adam Saffin are being banished from sight. The shift is also stunning in Port-au-Prince, the Caribbean capital by the sea in Haiti, hit by a killing earthquake in 2010. In the rush of assistance, change began immediately: the sleepy airport, caught in the 1940s, was replaced to benefit the international helpers; then it was learned that many of those helpers, coming from the philanthropies in Europe and in America, swelling the local stores and restaurants, were helping themselves most of all. And now a slew of new hotels are rising.

It used to be affordable for families to fly to Cape Verde, a chain of nine islands, some of them more desert than green, previously under Portuguese rule, off the coast of Africa, close to Senegal. An industrious and entrepreneurial people, they began leaving their native islands in the nineteenth century, finding work in New England and settling in Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts, where they worked first in whaling and then in the cranberry bogs on Cape Cod. They also established stores and businesses and shipping concerns, continuing a tradition of going back home for the holidays. And the children would be sent to spend the summer with grandparents and relatives. Then, after independence in the 1970s, fares started to climb and the hotels by the sea proliferated. Now going home is prohibitive, about twice what it used to cost when the hotel chains started coming, unleashing a building frenzy and ousting the natives, unless, of course, they worked as maids and porters.

At MIT in early 2016 I listened to a panel that included architects, museum curators, and artists. One of the architects, out of New York, discussed one of his firm's newer projects, which is being built on the beach in Rio de Janeiro. It is designed to have free access, by means of ramps, up to the roof, where anyone who so desires can take advantage of free films and free performances, and enjoy a unique dining experience. The architects wanted to create an ambience available to all, not just to the men and women paying the high cost of seaside hotel residence. The beach is close to the *favelas*, the architect said, and the shore is a resource for everyone. During the post-panel Q&A session, one MIT professor was quite concerned that the notion of rapture, which is most associated with the rarity of an experience, was being lost with an open attitude of all can come and be served, equally, with which the New York architects were experimenting. Instead of rarefied access, a new agenda of open access was under trial, allowing more than one segment of the population to share in the benefit of updated design.

And the question of who gets to have, who gets the lion's share of privilege, who is included in the good life still very much matters, maybe even more so now as demographic shifts are happening and causing some to be unsettled and to want a return of an easier, more strictly demarcated world where having a given complexion meant you were never on the wrong side of the door of acceptance. Who knows when it all started to change, perhaps with the *Brown* decision that really, fundamentally, hasn't led to as much change as people anticipated? Maybe it was the bicentennial year of 1976 when Boston saw, in a Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of young Whites attacking a suited Black man on City Hall Plaza, that the liberal image it had given out about itself had another side. Maybe it was a summer night in 2006 when a young Harvard Law School graduate, recently elected a U.S. senator out of Illinois, made the country fall in love with his clean-cut young self, before he turned old in our eyes as the first African American president in a country that had enriched itself, North and South, on the sweat and muscle of one or another of his relatives, a history of exploitative wealth creation it has continually denied. And now, in a phrase that was brought back into unfortunate currency when a young man, who grew up in Roxbury in the 1940s and 1950s, who renamed himself Malcolm X, the chickens have come back to their American roost, flying around the head of a man named Trump whose father built his fortune by keeping the racial riffraff far outside his residential fortresses in Brooklyn, one poetically named Beach Haven. And now we can see, in history's examples, which keep repeating, should we care to look, that the divisions and denials of yesterday are in a regular state of regurgitation.

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