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Gentrification as a Metaphor for the Family Crisis in *Halsey Street* by Naima Coster

ABSTRACT

The article explores the relationship between people and the places they live in, depicted in Naima Coster's *Halsey Street* (2017). The novel chronicles the wave of gentrification in Brooklyn's Bed-Stuy and its effect on African and Latinx residents. The new Brooklyn aesthetic undermines the rich African cultural vibe and privileges Whiteness. The changing cityscape causes a crisis of community belonging among the marginalized long-time residents of the neighborhood. Coster's novel is also a family saga capturing the weight of familial obligation when a person with creative interests does not develop as an artist but instead has to focus on the family, evolving under the pressure of gentrification.

KEYWORDS

Brooklyn; gentrification; a crisis of belonging; people of color; Whiteness

1. Introduction

The term *gentrification* was first coined by the British sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964 to describe new and distinct processes of urban change (Miller, 2019, p. 26). American urban scholars Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly (2008) define gentrification as “the transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city into middle-class residential and/or commercial use” (p. xv). Thus, the visible urban process of ‘gentry-fication’ points to the emergence of a new ‘urban gentry.’ The positive side of gentrification is the revitalization of previously derelict neighborhoods and improvement of public safety. The magazine *The Brownstoner*, in its article published in 1984, argued that gentrification was not “genocide” but “genesis” (Lees et al., 2008, p. 7). Sociology Professor Jackelyn Hwang (2016) also accentuates the benefits of the process by which “low-income central-city neighborhoods experience investment and renewal accompanied by an in-migration of middle- and upper-class residents” (p. 190). The critics of gentrification indicate that the process results in the displacement of low-income residents who can no longer afford rising rents and property taxes (Miller, 2019, p. 26). Hence, gentrification becomes the neighborhood expression of class

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inequality, and working-class housing becomes middle-class housing. Cultural anthropologist Jay Sharma (2020) indicates that an influx of wealthy residents into a particular place is not the only component of gentrification. The process is triggered when middle-class and upper-middle-class newcomers demand particular services and establishments that refurbish the local cityscape (p. 53). The influx of newcomers into a gentrified area may cause marginalization of local communities from access to socioeconomic security, eventually resulting in their social exclusion (Koehler et al., 2020, p. 15). This process denotes the breakdown of social bonds between the individual and society (Rawal, 2008, p. 167; Silver, 1994, p. 534).

The theme of gentrification has received a multitude of literary depictions. The setting of a novel becomes a character of itself; it forces people together or apart and imprints itself upon them. Gentrification plots in American cityscape frequently refer to New York City, especially the “Brownstone Brooklyn” neighborhood. A brownstone is “a building constructed of, or faced with, a soft sandstone which weathers as a chocolate brown color” (Lees et al., 2008, p. 6). American Studies scholar Suleiman Osman (2011) examines “Brownstone Brooklyn” and calls it “a constellation of revitalized townhouse districts” (p. 5). Osman combines urban transformation with historic restoration in the New York neighborhood. The recent American literary works synthesize gentrification plots with issues of Blackness, identity crisis, and racial and class inequalities. *Restoration Heights* (2019) by Will Medearis is a mystery story set in the historical Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, which undergoes gentrification. The novel explores racial tensions, economic inequality, and the results of unrestricted urban development. *Red at the Bone* (2019) by Jacqueline Woodson depicts how gentrification influences people’s lives in the Brooklyn Brownstone community. *Pride* (2018) by Ibi Zoboi is a contemporary retelling of Jane Austin’s *Pride and Prejudice*. The book offers a commentary on socioeconomic class in the gentrified Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn. *Caul Baby* (2021) by Morgan Jerkins is a novel about a Harlem-based black family struggling to maintain their enterprise in a gentrifying neighborhood.

This article explores how the gentrification crisis evolves into a family crisis, depicted in the novel *Halsey Street* (2017) by Naima Coster. The book portrays a New York neighborhood in decline and renewal. It chronicles the wave of gentrification in Brooklyn’s Bed-Stuy and its effect on African and Latinx residents. The paper demonstrates how urban revival influences the characters’ sense of belonging, neighborliness, and multiple identities. *Halsey Street* is Coster’s debut novel, published in 2017 by Little A. The idea behind the book comes from the essay “Remembering When Brooklyn Was Mine”, published by Coster in *The New York Times* in 2011¹. Naima Coster is a Dominican-American writer from

¹ Biographical details of Naima Coster are available at <https://www.naimacoster.com/about> (retrieved on 17.3.2023).

Brooklyn who graduated from Colombia, Fordham, and Yale Universities. She published essays in *The New York Times*, *Elle*, *Time*, *Kweli*, *The Cut*, *The Sunday Times*, and *Catapult*. The author is a recipient of numerous awards, including the 2017 Cosmonauts Avenue Nonfiction Prize. Her second novel is titled *What's Mine and Ours* (2021).

2. Gentrification Crisis

The hyper-visibility of Whiteness frequently contrasted with Blackness, and occasionally Latinx, makes the narrative contradict the color-blind theory². What is defined as white occurs through its oppositional relationship grounded in a racial matrix, frequently expressed in the black/white binary. As a conceptual category, “whiteness exists because we have understanding of blackness and racial difference” (Flores & Villarreal, 2012, p. 88). Mainstream publications usually accentuate the ethnic belonging of people of color and make an assumption that others, not ethnically defined, represent the white majority. On the contrary, *Halsey Street* specifically indicates whether the protagonists are white. The Whiteness epitomizes the affluent newcomers who replace the black working-class residents in the neighborhood. The literary cityscape depicts economic transformations which parallel class and racial shifts.

Halsey Street is a story about African-Latinx Penelope Grand, who returns from a school of art in Pittsburgh to the Bed-Stuy neighborhood in Brooklyn. Her African father, Ralph Grand, lives in the old district undergoing rapid gentrification, and her mother, Mirella Grand, has left New York for her homeland, the Dominican Republic. Penelope feels that her non-white belonging excludes her from the community. In her district, she feels “surrounded by well-off white people, new to the neighborhood, blind to her” (p. 24). She does not link gentrification with revitalization but rather with the destructive process that ruined her father’s life. Ralph opened his record store ‘Grand Records’ because he believed “*The neighborhood needs its music*” (p. 267). The store became a cornerstone of Halsey Street, which district residents identified with, and the school principal called Mr. Grand “a friend to the community” (p. 30). Nonetheless, Ralph had to sell his store because the influx of wealthy newcomers in Bed-Stuy caused a substantial rent increase. The renovated building has been transformed into a healthy food supermarket. The images of the store feature crowds of customers who and standing in lines and sampling the groceries. This depiction juxtapositions the record store’s clientele, who meticulously selected the jazz records they intended

² The ‘color-blind’ perception changes the fixed binary opposition of black and white society. In 2017 Sociology professor Ashley Doane defines color-blind racial ideology as “a worldview grounded in the claim that race no longer “matters” as an obstacle to success in a “postracial” United States” (p. 975).

to listen to. Replacing a local landmark with a whole food deli is a cultural transformation of an ethnic space into a mainstream space.

'Grand Records' was not a business venture for Penelope but the symbol of her family heritage, with its traces imprinted on the store's walls. She contemplates whether renovation has covered the initials carved in the brick: *PSG*, standing for Penelope Sofia Grand; *RAG*, for Ralph Arnold Grand; and *M*, for Mirella. Penelope questions: "Had the green paint been enough to cover them?" (p. 26). She wonders whether gentrification will ultimately make her family's heritage disappear. In a broader picture, the Grands serve as a metaphor for the displaced residents whose traces are still visible but hard to find in the revitalized neighborhood. The closure of the record store was devastating for Ralph and, to some extent, for Penelope as well, "The end of Grand Records had been the end of Ralph Grand" (p. 71). The building has remained, but its purpose changed, and its merchandise offer has been adapted for the demands of the new clientele. Cultural heritage scholar Veysel Apaydin (2020) contends that urban public spaces are significant for social life and serve as "the voice of the people" (p. 85). The narrative shows that the newcomers' "voices" suppress the "voices" of the neighborhood's long-time residents.

The buildings provide a permanent fixture in the neighborhood, but people provide a dynamic factor that changes. Ralph observes his familiar places closing down and being replaced by hipster facilities he does not understand. Although he can report precisely which places are gone, he is unfamiliar with how the new amenities operate. Ralph observes that the Puerto Rican lady lost her bodega, 'La Nueva Victoria', replaced with a wine bar without a new sign. However, the bar's clientele knows how to find the unmarked bar "by its tinted windows, the absence of a building number" (p. 268). Ralph does not understand the marketing strategy behind creating the supposedly unique location whose whereabouts are known only to the privileged elite. The neighborhood is gradually becoming a circuit of middle-class display with hip cafes and restaurants, classic icons of the urban gentrification landscape. The contemporary convergence of hipster aesthetics with a black space results in the cultural re-coding of an ethnic district into a diverse neighborhood.

Urban transformations affect particular places and residential communities. American consultant in community building Peter Block (2008) claims that a community is formed from an "expanding sense of belonging" (p. 19). People identify with the community if they create, contribute, and feel welcome and appreciated. Their community is diffuse if its members do not feel an interpersonal connection with one another (Simon, 2018). *Halsey Street* demonstrates that the gentry is reluctant to develop more vital identification with the local community life but operates in a parallel culture. On the contrary, Penelope remains firmly rooted in the Brooklyn indigenous community even during her stay in Pittsburgh. When a young artist asks about home, she immediately answers "Bed-Stuy"

(p. 14). The white newcomers, the Harpers, neither identify with the Bed-Stuy community nor feel safe in Brooklyn. Urban revitalization is closely connected with “the rhetoric of the safe, attractive and cosmopolitan city” (Søgaard, 2014, p. 40). However, Samantha Harper worries about “bedbugs or asbestos or a break-in” (p. 60) and puts a deadbolt on her house door (p. 145). Marcus Harper understands the ambiguous status of his family: “It’s not that we don’t like it here, but we’re just not part of anything here. Everything we do is still in the city” (p. 60). Despite acknowledging the problem, he performs no actions for his familial integration with the local community. His daughter Grace continues to attend Orchard School in the West Village, where her friends live; thus, she cannot develop social connections with the children living in Bed-Stuy. Penelope reads Grace a book about “a girl with no place to go” (p. 125), metaphorically symbolizing the child’s alienation in the new neighborhood.

The representative of white newcomers, Marcus Harper, keeps the status of an external researcher. After quitting his job as a lawyer, he becomes a travel journalist, “a pop anthropologist” (p. 123) who writes about the Brooklyn Renaissance. Marcus treats the district as an object of study for his professional work. Penelope makes him realize that the place is inextricably linked with the creative potential of its residents. “There are people here, real people, who already have *potential*. Just because we’re not white and didn’t go to Stanford—” (p. 174). She repetitively uses the discourse of Whiteness to accentuate Blackness. Marcus prefers to create an illusionary depiction of a multiracial community based on equal footing. He writes a feature about a new community garden and publishes it in a local paper, *New Horizons: A Bed-Stuy Gazette*. The accompanied photograph depicts a multiracial group of people. The article appeals to white newcomers who value the neighborhood’s revitalization. However, Penelope finds it a mockery because she witnesses the disappearance of the ethnic flavor and resents that urban transformations benefit the whites.

The novel illustrates two opposite outcomes of gentrification. The Bed-Stuy neighborhood attracts new residents with its cultural heritage, namely jazz music created by African residents. Paradoxically, the newcomers intensify the gentrification process, which makes the ethnic flavor of the area gradually disappear. Ralph’s record store was the neighborhood’s landmark, promoting its distinctive music genre, jazz. He states, “if Bed-Stuy were include in the guidebooks, Grand Records would be on the first page” (p. 94). His friend Lionel also highly values this cultural venue for displaying the creative potential of Brooklyn’s black artists. The neighborhood’s long-term residents see the people, whereas the newcomers see just the places. The store’s closure indicates that the ethnic vibe is disappearing in Bed-Stuy, being replaced by undistinguished commercial ideas.

The public institutions become the agents of gentrification in the narrative. The school in Bed-Stuy manifests its commitment to revitalization by establishing

the community garden, “Plant a garden and the white folks come running” (p. 29). The incoming white residents are young and have children; thus, they provide rejuvenation to the ethnic community population. The wall over the school garden features a mural with “brown and white children holding hands atop a smudgy blue-green globe” (p. 49), symbolizing racial changes in the local population. The colors blue and green indicate that the transformation takes the form of a peaceful renewal (Morton, 1997, pp. 28–30; Olesen, 2013). The school mural demonstrates the ethnic diversity of the inhabitants of the same neighborhood. The gentrification process operates within the context of cosmopolitanism.

The white character’s perspective illustrates the benefits of the additional assets that gentrifiers bring. Mary presents the social gains of urban transformation in Williamsburg’s Brooklyn district: “Twenty years ago, that place was all Puerto Ricans and Hasidic Jews and empty warehouses and crime. Now? Galleries. Condos. Decent bars” (pp. 172–173). Her assessment diminishes the ethnic flavor of the neighborhood and elevates the commercial facilities oriented towards for middle- and upper-class residents. By stressing that the racial/ethnic minority population is decreasing, Mary assumes that gentrification draws more white residents into the district. When Penelope visits Williamsburg, she sees the houses “filled with white people” (p. 176). The African-Caribbean character prioritizes the human aspect of the place, while the white lady emphasizes its commodities. Although Penelope is still part of Bed-Stuy, she benefits from the urban transformations. She has deep roots in the community, but her exposure to other experiences gives her things in common with the newcomers to her district; thus, Penelope occupies a space between gentrifier and gentrified.

3. Family Crisis

The Grand family presents an intense emotional bond developed between Ralph and Penelope and the gradual exclusion of Mirella. Hence, Ralph’s attachment to his daughter is more substantial than to his wife. Mirella differs by ethnic belonging, diasporic past, weak attachment to the neighborhood, and the fact that she does not share other family members’ interests. Her pale skin and red hair make her white presenting and create a distance between her and other family members. She can exist in a gentrified neighborhood in a way they cannot because of color. Mirella emphasizes her daughter’s ethnic connection with the father, “She was browner than Mirella, a little wheat-colored girl who darkened to bronze in the sun. Ralph was the reason she was so dark, the reason her cheeks rounded when she smiled” (p. 86). Despite her half-Caribbean descent Penelope feels more African American than Dominican and develops routines similar to her father, “She had all of Ralph’s American habits—feet up on the table, shoes on the couch; she preferred her potato salad white, without carpers and without beets that stained it pink” (p. 102). Music becomes a discourse of inclusion for Penelope and Ralph

and exclusion for Mirella, “Ralph and Penelope were building a language of their own now, too. She started staying up late to listen to records with him when he came home from the store” (p. 102).

Multilingualism scholar Naomi Wells (2022) claims that language may serve as an identity marker (p. 49); thus, speaking the same languages contributes to the feeling of belonging. Those bonds reinforce the practices of inclusion and the members’ commonality. Mirella finds it challenging to develop a solid connection with other family members because she is the only one with a migrant experience. Brooklyn is a homeland for Ralph and Penelope, but it is just a diasporic temporality for Mirella. Speaking Spanish and visiting the Dominican Republic strengthened her bonds with her daughter. Nonetheless, Penelope is rarely a Latinx girl in Brooklyn, usually an African-American one, “Even her Spanish—one of the last things just two of them shared—seemed like a trick she was constantly practicing” (p. 102).

Sociology scholar Jan Willen Duyvendak (2011) states that some places have the meaning of ‘home’ as a fixed physical space that gives people a sense of belonging and identity. It does not mean that individuals are fixed in place, but they attach exceptional value to the special place (p. 8). *Halsey Street* depicts how particular family members develop different levels of identification with the Brooklyn neighborhood and how the rapid transformations occurring within this meaningful place evolve into a family crisis. Mirella’s attitude to geographical spaces differs from her husband’s and daughter’s. Ralph’s brownstone and record store are integral parts of Bed-Stuy, where he strongly identifies. His wife sees the building as a “dilapidated house in Brooklyn” (p. 46) and treats the store’s closure as an opportunity to start over and save her marriage. Her vision of the American Dream involves traveling together to distant places in Latin America, Europe, and Canada. However, Ralph ignores Mirella’s plans and diminishes his wife by grieving over the place he lost, “I have nothing left. It’s all gone” (p. 274). The father and his daughter perceive the record store as an essential component of the community, while for Mirella, it is just a business her husband runs. Gentrification triggers a course of events that deepen the family crisis. Urban transformations devastate Ralph, and then his wife abandons him. Mirella’s familiar world combines the binary perspective of Halsey Street in New York and Aguas Frescas in the Dominican Republic. As an ethnic exile, she experienced alienation in Brooklyn, where she never received adequate recognition of her Latinx heritage. Ralph and his friends kept identifying Mirella as “Ralph Grand’s wife” (p. 46) and ignored the geographic and cultural differences between the Dominican Republic and other Caribbean Islands. Therefore, she returns to the Dominican Republic to reclaim the status she had lost as a child. Her childhood trauma involves losing her father and his wealth. The Caribbean homeland provides her the refuge she did not find in New York. The empty pots, once filled with Mirella’s plants, symbolize the emptiness of Ralph’s life in gentrified Halsey Street.

Mirella is a diasporic character who feels split between two geographical spaces, her homeland and the host country. Her colorful garden, planted in Brooklyn, symbolizes the tropicality of the Caribbean Isle. With artistic sensibility, Penelope carefully conjures a watercolor image of her mother's garden. Mirella hangs this picture on the wall of her new house in the Dominican Republic. New York's image of the place she abandoned is brought into her new location. "Penelope had captured the way everything in the backyard was part of something else—there were no rows or little wooden signs separating the herbs from the vegetables and flowers" (p. 83.) This picture of Bed-Stuy is a metaphor for Mirella's life. She identifies with her homeland but is also part of Brooklyn, where her family lives.

Coster depicts how the places that are meaningful for Penelope influence her artistic creativity and reflect the family crisis. Since childhood, she has been "playing with colors" (p. 99) in pastel drawings. Young artists usually develop their creative techniques by drawing first before painting. Drawing is a more accessible medium to learn and allows the erasure of mistakes. Nonetheless, Penelope never progresses into a more demanding technique. Her later object studies demonstrate identification with particular places and connection with family members. When Penelope stays in Pittsburgh, she creates images of New York. Upon coming back to Brooklyn, she depicts a memorable visit to Aguas Frescas, where her grandmother lived. The white winter landscape of Brooklyn contrasts with colorful images of the tropical Caribbean Isle. "She had needed the color, a smudge of every pink and blue and yellow in her evening sky" (p. 106.) The color pink represents femininity and love; blue stands for harmony and security; and yellow symbolizes warmth and happiness (Morton, 1997, pp. 28–32; Olesen, 2013). Penelope depicts the places where she felt happy and safe with two influential women: her mother and grandmother. When Mirella returns to the Dominican Republic, she splits the nuclear Brooklyn family, and her daughter recalls the images of the extended family on the distant Caribbean Island. Penelope's artistic creations deliberately express identification with meaningful places, but they are never the places she resides while drawing them. Her object studies are non-verbal means of communicating the crisis in her split family.

Penelope's fractured family makes her attracted to the Harpers' supposedly idyllic life. They represent the version of domestic happiness she had as a child and would like to reclaim. Gradually, she develops friendly relations with the Harpers' daughter, Grace, and becomes emotionally involved with Marcus Harper while his wife Samantha works away from home. However, Marcus chooses to save his "real family" (p. 133) and turns away from Penelope, who just provided him with some ethnic flavor and the feeling of newness. She realizes this and concludes, "You used me. ... I was your sabbatical. Your tropical vacation—" (p. 175). Penelope decides to move on and focus on her familial crisis. Nonetheless, she neither prioritizes her happiness nor sets any artistic goals. Her boyfriend Jon

assesses Penelope's life, "You live like the world is happening to you" (p. 294). Gentrification and her parents' separation destabilize the feeling of permanence in her life, which eventually makes her sacrifice her artistic career.

4. Conclusion

The cityscape of *Halsey Street* incorporates economic and human aspects of gentrification through depictions of the Bed-Stuy district, which is becoming more diversified in terms of race and income. The cosmopolitan overtone accentuates the racial binary of Blackness and Whiteness. The neighborhood that used to be familiar creates a feeling of isolation for people of color. The affluent white characters participate in gentrification with some awareness and they value their comfort over community integration. The record store serves as a metaphor for the belonging that the long-term residents had and lost. The urban transformations involve the cultural re-coding of an ethnic district into a mainstream space with a hipster aesthetic. Black people fear improvements to their native space because the shift invites others to take over. The narrative constructs the rhetoric of contrasts in binary depictions of dilapidated buildings and revitalized areas, working-class and white middle-class, Whiteness and Blackness. Additionally, the indigenous population does not perceive Bed-Stuy as a dangerous district, contrary to the newcomers, who see it as crime-prone.

The themes of gentrification and homecoming emphasize different shifts in the characters' lives. The familial ties strengthen and weaken in the changing urban landscape. The Grand family are people with passions: Penelope's love for art, Ralph's love for music, and Mirella's love for her garden. Penelope's artistic object studies expose her identification with meaningful places. Ralph's record store demonstrates his communal belonging. Mirella's tropical-looking garden symbolizes her ethnic identity. *Halsey Street* explores how the gentrification crisis evolves into a family crisis. Ralph Grand grieves over the urban transformations that suppress ethnic heritage and replace Blackness with Whiteness. At the same time, he gradually distances himself from his wife. Ralph's separateness from Mirella is complicated by color and her immigrant experience. The narrative demonstrates that Brooklyn natives, Ralph and Penelope, develop strong community identification, contrary to the diasporic character of Mirella, who remains uprooted. Identification with place parallels the characters' ethnic belonging; the black family members stay in Bed-Stuy, and the Latinx character leaves New York for the Dominican Republic. The novel is a family saga capturing the weight of familial obligation when a person with creative interests does not develop as an artist but instead has to focus on the family, evolving under the pressure of gentrification. The protagonist attempts to define her place within her fractured family and native community.

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