

**I Gentrify Bed-Stuy**  
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## i gentrify bed-stuy

by syed ali

If you have any young professional friends in Brooklyn, chances are they're gentrifiers who moved into a neighborhood that, until recently, was a ghetto. They'll probably get prickly if you probe too much, especially if they're white ("no, I'm not displacing poor African Americans!"), so go ahead and push that button. It's fun. But it's not their fault. They just want to rent or own a nicer place than they could afford in centrally located, white-majority neighborhoods.

There are affordable middle-class neighborhoods they could live in at the edge of the city—far out in Queens and Staten Island. But the gentrifiers want to be in "the city." And today they want to live in Brooklyn because it's now the physical and metaphysical epicenter of the universe. That's not a value judgment; it's a fact. I know so because I read about it regularly in the *New York Times*. Every article on my almost-no-longer-ghetto neighborhood of Bed-Stuy (Bedford-Stuyvesant) signals its rising popularity and a rise in property values, even to the east of Malcolm X Blvd.—the poorer, more removed part of Bed-Stuy where I live.

The story of gentrification—the term was coined in reference to 1960s London by sociologist Ruth Glass—is pretty well known. Neighborhoods that are centrally located but industrial

### We may all share the same neighborhood, but we're not neighbors in a Mr. Rogers or Jane Jacobs sense.

or poor (and in the United States, populated mostly by blacks) have become attractive for their cheap rents for artists, queers, and college student "pioneers." Their arrival is followed by an influx of trendy bars, restaurants, cafes, and galleries, all of which make these neighborhoods attractive for young professionals who want to be where the excitement is.

In the 1980s and 1990s, when the gentrifiers were thinking of having kids, they grew more attentive to crime and bad schools and fled to suburbia. Eight years ago my wife and I moved to then-gentrifying Clinton Hill (bordering Bed-Stuy), off Myrtle Avenue—known as Murder Avenue back in the day. Murders are less common today; now the more common crime is joggers getting hit and robbed for their iPhones in Fort Greene

Park. (Note: Do not jog with your iPhone in Brooklyn.) The other major crime is not getting an outdoor table at Madiba on a beautiful summer evening.

Partly because of lower crime rates today, the gentrifiers are staying put, especially those who are pregnant or have kids in tow. They are mainly white, or interethnic families, with a smattering of buppies (black urban professionals). They love the city, and want the "ethnic background ambience" gentrifying neighborhoods have to offer.

But what is our presence doing to the neighborhood? My black neighbor likes my kind—young, upper-middle-class families buying brownstones—because we raise her property value. (And my white wife and half-breed kids are very sweet.) Does our moving to Bed-Stuy mean poor, black residents will have to move? Many analysts think gentrification is like musical chairs, but where the last person is poor and black, doesn't own their own home or have rent control, and so gets pushed out of the neighborhood as rents rise. However, Lance Freeman, an urban planning professor at Columbia University, says that gentrification is more complicated. In the 1990s, what appeared to be driving neighborhood change in Clinton Hill, Harlem, and elsewhere was who was moving into the neighborhood rather than how quickly people were moving out. Basically, the wealthier newcomers are not directly displacing poor, black people. So if you gentrifiers were feeling guilty, you can relax and point to Freeman's research.

Then again, while we may all share the same neighborhood, we're not neighbors, in a Mr. Rogers or Jane Jacobs sense. The fancy new restaurants and stores cater to the gentrifiers, not to their poorer neighbors. And the gentrifiers' kids initially don't go to the local public or charter schools with the poorer neighbors' kids. At some point though, the yuppie offspring, usually out of necessity rather than choice, do end up at the local schools where they form a critical mass—and that's when you know for certain that the neighborhood can no longer be called a ghetto and that the prevailing cultural atmosphere will reflect the tastes of the gentrifiers.

If you're thinking, hey, I too would like to gentrify Bed-Stuy—you're out of luck. The bourgeois factor has reached the tipping point with the wine bars, organic groceries, and gourmet doughnuts. But you could try Staten Island.

**Syed Ali** is the *Viewpoints* editor at *Contexts*. At the age of 15, he vowed he would die before he'd live in the suburbs.