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Graffiti and Gentrification

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The Erasure of Graffiti as Signs of Gentrification

Graffiti much like Gertrude Stein's idea of "there is no there there" (Stein), is something that is easily liable to change, as a piece that you see walking down the street may not even be there the next time you pass by. With the novel *There There*, a major motif is change, as by the end of the novel every single character's lives have undergone drastic changes in a very short period. In Tommy Orange's *There There*, there is a character named Dene Oxendene who had seen graffiti all over Oakland and had slowly been putting his own tag "lens" up. Dene was infatuated with photography ever since his uncle had introduced him to it, and as he was on his way to meet with some judges about getting funds to complete the project that his uncle had started with him before his death, he ran into a hipster who had been buying property for incredibly low prices, who Dene feels is slowly taking over neighborhoods that they know nothing about. Gentrification is typically when areas which generally house poorer people have wealthier people move in and increase the property values enough to the point to where the people who have lived, grown, and developed culture there are forced to move out because the area has become too expensive for them to live there. Gentrification can be seen as the wiping away of culture, art and originality, as it turns homes into apartment buildings, and wipes away graffiti, just to increase profit and property value.

Many of my family members live in New York City. Their neighborhoods have always been extremely diverse, yet, over the last couple of years the mix of diversity in their neighborhoods has changed, as they are being gentrified at an alarming rate. My relatives are constantly bombarded with offers by speculators and developers to sell their houses in order to make way for new residential and new business units. Across the street from my Uncle Jose's house, two two-family homes were demolished to put in 2 apartment buildings of the same size but increased the number of rental units. One now has 6 apartments, and the other has 18 studio apartments. Making each apartment at most around 200 to 350 square feet, cramming more than double the people in the same real state space. Over time, more single- and two-family houses are being demolished and replaced by expensive apartment buildings with exclusive retail store fronts. This high-end living is normalized and replaces the old and charming neighborhoods that attracted people in the first place. Soon after, the old residents and business are seen as a quaint anomaly of a past era, until eventually erased to form a generic cookie cutter, "perfect" neighborhood. This in turn, is causing more longtime residents to move away due to the rent costs, loss of cultural links and personal connections that created that community.

The families who rented these homes were paid generously to move out of these brownstones, because in New York, they have something called rent control. This means that a landlord is unable to charge more than what the city housing department says they can. The rent control does not factor in the ever-growing cost of rising rents in non-rent control units, so some tenants, after living there for a while, have much cheaper rent than a newer tenant, even when living in the same building. Due to this restriction, many landlords will try to pay the tenants to leave so that they can raise the rent and make more profit, or in this case pay them so that they

can create whole new buildings to hold more tenants, and greater increase profit. The new building is also a way to get around rent control as the old regulations do not affect them or are greatly reduced. They may offer a single low-cost unit to satisfy affordable housing requirements, however the rent is still on the higher end. Housing costs and high-end food markets that replace the bodegas and other shops make it even harder for anyone besides the wealthy to live there, furthering the spread of gentrification.

A major form of expression in New York is graffiti, and generally certain places will attract graffiti artists, and over time, cultures begin to form there. Much like graffiti, these spots are generally temporary, as they get bought out and painted over, or even demolished. Some of these buildings were completely abandoned for years beforehand, one of them being the Belmont Tunnel, located in Los Angeles. “The Belmont Tunnel was seen as the mecca of graffiti culture in the west coast yet was demolished without a second thought for luxury apartments” (Soriano 43). What happened at the Belmont Tunnel, where new life was given to the building and surrounding area, was thrown away to make apartments for profit, is commonplace, as a similar series of events happened at a place called 5Pointz in New York. 5Pointz for over thirteen years had been a home to graffiti writers and was helping to develop a culture between the five boroughs of New York, and then the owner of the building demolished the site, making it into a residential complex, similar to what happened at the Belmont Tunnel. The curator at 5Pointz, known by Meres said, “Every element of hip-hop is present here at any given time; [it's] no longer a building but a community” (Claudio). These places, which heightened connections with others, helped to form larger communities, along with allowing people to express themselves freely, are destroyed so that more profit can occur.

My older cousin, Pati lives in Brooklyn and is an activist against gentrification. She works with a program called Mi Casa es not Su Casa, which describes itself as a collective led by native New Yorkers that uses art and direct action to build a visible resistance to gentrification and the displacement of low-income Black and Brown families in NYC and beyond. She described graffiti to me as

Graffiti was always street art to us, New Yorkers, I mean, I think it's something beautiful, I remember the eighties I thought it was always beautiful, right? And I remember Tio Javier even, our uncle, who is like a pioneer in graffiti art, because he is from the seventies and eighties. And he would get arrested all the time, I remember, my dad always going to pick him up at the precinct, because he was being arrested for graffiti, and it sucks because it was criminalized, when it was black and brown kids doing the street art on the walls it was criminalized, but suddenly when it was some white kid from Europe putting up paint, it was street art suddenly, instead of just graffiti and some vandalism. Which is what the police would treat it as. When it is black and brown people doing it, it is not okay, it is criminalized. But if it is white rich people, it is art, or it is recreational, and it is okay for them. People would see graffiti as vandalism because that is what the police would lead people to say. I think that is what the mayor would treat it as, under Giuliani. Now, it is street art because white people do it.

The gentrification of graffiti has progressed to a point in New York to where white people are able to get away with spray painting walls by calling it street art, and when minorities do it, they are arrested, and it's called graffiti and vandalism. Graffiti is also used as a tool to attract the agents of gentrification in a few ways, such as creating a fake urban artistic flavor to attract

future tenants into a “vibrant community.” However, it too will eventually be painted over for that “perfect neighborhood” look. Real estate companies will pay for artists to come in, generally from outside of the community, and using the property that they own, have the artist paint a mural on it. This is done to attract the artist class who are looking for cheap rent, and they are able to pay a bit more than the people who live in those areas, raising the rent, and paving the way for the business class. Eventually, the people who lived in those areas realized the impact that those murals had, and began to rebel against them, painting over them and putting graffiti on them. “There’s this huge mural, in Bushwick, of this white woman, right, with what seems like indigenous makeup, but she’s a white woman with blonde hair and everything, and she’s huge. And it’s not what the community is about.” That piece has been defaced multiple times, due to how disrespectful the community finds it. The Bushwick Collectives is an area where artists from all over the world come to put up their pieces and murals. There was one graffiti artist, from Bushwick, that went to the Bushwick Collectives, and put his tag onto all the murals there, because he wanted there to be more art from the people who lived in Bushwick. In recent times, with the riots, protests, and injustices, these murals have been covered up by political graffiti with many different messages, some of which being ACAB, defunding the police, and remembering George Floyd. The painting over of these murals allows the communities to take back their representation in street art, and allow for them to voice what they believe in.

My uncle, Javier, started doing graffiti at around the age of 10, and his tag is “sno,” and it has been since he started. Around two years later he started tagging subway trains. He’s been arrested several times for doing graffiti. The lifestyle of graffiti revolves around not being seen, hiding your identity, being able to throw up pieces fast, and knowing that the piece is subject to

disappear at any time. It is a lot of work to create this type of art, first to create an original piece of work, find the spot to show off your piece, gather supplies hoping no one has taken your spot in the meantime, then paint, and again hope the city, the landlord or another graffiti artist has not decided to cover your work. I spoke to my uncle about how gentrification has changed graffiti. “You go now to Bushwick, or Williamsburg, you got people painting more walls because it’s more accepted by white people and the mainstream. Most of all the walls are covered with tons of graffiti in those areas. You don’t see that in my neighborhood, if my neighborhood was white, it would probably be the same.” Over time, gentrification has spread and found its way into graffiti. The graffiti found in the areas of Bushwick and Williamsburg, is much different stylistically than the graffiti found in areas which have lower percentages of white people, and less gentrification. All the tags that are found in gentrified areas are generally cookie cutter, all with the same style. They lack originality and the flavor once found in that area. There is also the legality of putting up graffiti in those areas, as many times white people are able to put graffiti up and get away with it, even when they are caught, however, minorities are arrested and charged with vandalism for putting up graffiti. “Back when we was [sic] in the eighties and doing graffiti it was a different style, and everyone was doing like the art thing, and now, y’know [sic] it’s mostly simple letters and it’s about the fame, like they just wanna [sic] go for fame and be up a lot. Opposed to before it was like if you was up [sic] it was a good thing, but mostly people took the time to try and make their art, their graffiti on the wall, more art than just their name up there to be known.” The initial idea behind graffiti was just another form of expression, or another art form. Over time, as parts of graffiti became gentrified, the desire to create art was suppressed by the desire for fame and money, which can be seen in the loss of originality in graffiti in areas with higher percentages of white people and more gentrified areas.

Gentrification can be seen as the wiping away of culture, art, and originality, as it turns homes into apartment buildings, and wipes away graffiti, just to increase profit and property value. Graffiti is also replaced with murals to attract different crowds to further gentrification. Much like Dene's experience in *There There*, the people who come as a result of gentrification are after the low cost of rent, and affordable housing, and not the culture surrounding the area, and as more of them come in, the people who lived there previously are forced to move out, taking the culture with them.

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