Gentrification: a philosophical analysis and critique

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ABSTRACT: Philosophical discussions of gentrification have tended to focus on residential displacement. However, the prevalence of residential displacement is fiercely contested, with many urban geographers regarding it as quite uncommon. This lends some urgency to the underexplored question of how one should evaluate other forms of gentrification. In this paper, I argue that one of the most important harms suffered by victims of displacement gentrification is loss of access to the goods conferred by membership in a thriving local community. Leveraging the social scientific literature, I go on to argue that non-displacement gentrification also often damages local communities. One can hence extend existing philosophical critiques of displacement gentrification to argue that non-displacement gentrification likewise poses a threat to relational equality, and often violates certain basic occupancy rights. Focusing on the value that inheres in thriving local communities also suggests some new possibilities for critiquing gentrification. For instance, existing occupancy rights critiques focus on incumbent land users' *interests* in stability. However, one can also argue in a Lockean mode that incumbent land users' occupancy rights are at least partially grounded in their community having laboured together to create objects of value. An extension of Michael Walzer's theory of justice to incorporate community goods as a separate 'sphere' might also have widespread appeal. Taken together, these arguments constitute a sustained and theoretically ecumenical case for the *pro tanto* moral objectionability of gentrification.

San Francisco's Mission District has historically been home to many of the city's working-class Latino families. Since the 1970s, studios and converted warehouses in the north-eastern part of the Mission have also played host to a community of artists. In the 1990s, however, white-collar professionals began to buy and rent residential units in the Mission, "attracted by the area's unique cultural identity, transit access, proximity to downtown, and increasingly hip nightlife scene" (Lees et al., 2008, p. 259). In the face of this new demand, many artists and blue-collar Latino families found themselves unable to afford to live or run their businesses in the Mission. Between 1997 and 1999, average rents in the Mission rose by 42 percent for commercial units, and by 26 percent for two-bed residential units. Campaign groups were formed to protest rent hikes and evictions, including the Mission Anti-Displacement Coalition, and the more militant Mission Yuppie Eradication Project. The work of some of these groups – as well as the effects of the dot-com crash – served to slow the pace of change for a few years after 2001. Since then, however, rents have been rising again, causing tensions between newcomers and longtime residents (Lees et al., 2008, pp. 255-63).

The story of the Mission District is an example of gentrification, a phenomenon that has risen to considerable prominence since the British sociologist Ruth Glass (1964) coined the term in 1964. However, although social scientists have now been studying gentrification for more than half a century, the topic has only recently begun to receive attention from moral and political philosophers.

Philosophical discussions of gentrification have thus-far tended to focus on residential displacement (see especially Zimmer, 2017; 2022; Pierce, 2021; Putnam, 2021; van Leeuwen, 2022; Dawkins, 2023). However, the prevalence of residential displacement is fiercely contested, with many urban geographers regarding it as quite uncommon (Freeman & Braconi, 2004; Ellen

& O'Regan, 2011; Ding et al., 2016; Freeman et al., 2016; Brummet & Reed, 2019; Dragan et al., 2020. For the opposing view, see Marcuse, 1985; Newman & Wyly, 2006; Lees et al., 2008; Chum, 2015; Martin & Beck, 2018; Qiang et al., 2021). This lends some urgency to the underexplored question of how one should evaluate other forms of gentrification. In this paper, I argue that one of the most important harms suffered by victims of displacement gentrification is loss of access to the goods conferred by membership in a thriving local community. Leveraging the social scientific literature, I go on to argue that non-displacement gentrification also often damages local communities. One can hence extend existing philosophical critiques of displacement gentrification to argue that non-displacement gentrification likewise poses a threat to relational equality, and often violates certain basic occupancy rights. Focusing on the value that inheres in thriving local communities also suggests some new possibilities for critiquing gentrification. For instance, existing occupancy rights critiques focus on incumbent land users' *interests* in stability. However, one can also argue in a Lockean mode that incumbent land users' occupancy rights are at least partially grounded in their community having laboured together to create objects of value. An extension of Michael Walzer's theory of justice to incorporate community goods as a separate 'sphere' might also have widespread appeal. Taken together, these arguments constitute a sustained and theoretically ecumenical case for the *pro tanto* moral objectionability of gentrification.

A note on the meaning of the phrase '*pro tanto* moral objectionability': philosophers commonly distinguish between '*pro tanto*' and '*all-things-considered*' evaluations of things. To claim that gentrification is *pro tanto* morally objectionable is to claim that it is morally objectionable in at least certain respects. This is conceptually compatible with the claim that gentrification is also morally *desirable* in certain respects. By contrast, to claim that gentrification

is morally objectionable *all-things-considered* is to claim that the *pro tanto* objectionable features of gentrification outweigh any *pro tanto* desirable features.[1] I discuss all-things-considered evaluations of gentrification in §4 of this paper.

Here is how the remainder of the paper will proceed: In §1, I analyse the concept of gentrification. In §2, I discuss its harms. In §3, I argue that gentrification is *pro tanto* morally objectionable. In §4, I conclude by briefly discussing potential policy implications.

1: The concept

1.1: Definition

According to a relatively broad and ecumenical analysis, gentrification occurs when

GENTRIFICATION: new land users arrive in a neighbourhood, until-then occupied by less-privileged land users, resulting in a substantial change in "the whole social character of the district" (as Glass puts it, 1964, p. xviii).

The term 'land users' is intended to include not just residents, but also owners and employees of local businesses, plus recreational users of places like urban parks and waterfronts.[2] I also intend for the term to cover rough sleepers and squatters, who in some cases of gentrification will comprise a non-negligible proportion of the gentrifying neighbourhood's incumbent population.

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[1] I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to explain this distinction.

[2] Discussions of gentrification in the philosophical literature have thus-far tended to focus on the experiences of incumbent *residents* in gentrifying areas (Moore, 2015, pp. 43-5; Kohn, 2016; Zimmer, 2017; 2022; Brake, 2019, §4; Pierce, 2021; Putnam, 2021; Jenkins & Brownlee, 2022, pp. 463-4; van Leeuwen, 2022; Wells, 2022; Dawkins, 2023).

As well as new residents and businesses, gentrifying land users might also include the government, universities, and tourists.

'Privilege' should here be understood as a composite of both social and economic privilege. In archetypal cases, gentrifiers are more privileged than longtime land users both socially and economically. Nonetheless, in some cases of gentrification the incomers are less privileged than the longtime land users in one of these respects, but more privileged all things considered. For example, some of the earliest gentrifiers in San Francisco were the city's gay community, who transformed certain neighbourhoods into enclaves of sexual tolerance (Lees et al., 2008, pp. 103-6, 213). Although the gay gentrifiers were financially privileged, they were socially stigmatized by wider society, to the extent that the gay activist Carl Wittman (1970, p. 3) described San Francisco's gay community as having "formed a ghetto, out of self protection."

On the other hand, some of the earliest instances of gentrification (in the developed Anglophone world) were driven by poor, white, well-educated bohemians, whose social capital (a) made landlords more likely to regard them as 'good tenants,' (b) allowed them to take advantage of government support for people willing to 'rehabilitate' distressed historic properties, and (c) made it easier for them to obtain mortgage credit at a favourable rate of interest. Although (b) and (c) can perhaps be understood as elements of economic privilege, at least some aspects of (a) cannot. Hence, any analysis of gentrification should recognise the importance of social as well as economic privilege.

Suppose that a substantial change in "the social character of a district" occurs without privileged new land users arriving there. According to my definition, this does not count as an instance of gentrification. This is consistent with standard usage of the term in the urban studies literature. If the social character of a district is transformed by longtime land users of the district

themselves, then urban geographers would describe this as a case of "incumbent upgrading," rather than gentrification (Lees et al., 2008, p. 34).

According to my definition, gentrification can occur in a neighbourhood whose incumbent land users are relatively affluent – provided, that is, that they are less affluent than the incoming land users who gentrify the neighbourhood. Thus, what are sometimes called 'supergentrification' and 'financialization' count as subtypes of gentrification according to my definition (Lees et al., 2008, chapter 4). Nonetheless, the most common and archetypal cases of gentrification appear to be those in which the incumbent land users are relatively disadvantaged members of their societies, and so these are the cases of gentrification that I will focus on in this paper.

1.2: Threefold typology

As urban theorists have long recognised, the concept of gentrification is broad enough to admit of significant internal variation.[3] In particular, one can draw a contrast between *displacement* and *replacement* gentrification. *Displacement gentrification* occurs – on my use of the term in this paper – when

> DISPLACEMENT GENTRIFICATION: incumbent land users move away from a neighbourhood earlier than they otherwise would have were it not for gentrification.

This understanding of 'displacement' is relatively broad, as compared against, for example, Hartman et al.'s (1982) use of the term to describe what "happens when forces outside the

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[3] In fact, some have argued that 'gentrification' cannot be easily defined, and that it should instead be understood as something like what philosophers would call a 'family-resemblance concept' (Lees et al., 2008, pp. 9-10, 158).

household make living there impossible, hazardous, or unaffordable."[4] We can refer to displacement gentrification under conditions like this as '*unevadable*.'

One subtype of displacement gentrification is *price-caused* displacement gentrification, which occurs when a change in property values is the proximate cause of displacement. Renters – who are vulnerable to rent increases and/or landlord harassment in the face of rising real-estate demand – typically comprise the majority of victims of price-caused displacement gentrification (Martin & Beck, 2018). But it is also possible for property owners (especially those with outstanding mortgages) to face price-caused displacement pressure, since municipal property taxes often depend on the assessed value of a home or premises. Finally, price-caused displacement gentrification might sometimes involve incumbent land owners leaving the neighbourhood willingly, 'cashing out' on their real estate investment in the neighbourhood whilst the price is high.

Price-caused displacement need not be *unevadable*, even when it happens to renters: some incumbent renters who are in principle able to evade displacement by paying higher rents for their homes might nonetheless be *unwilling* to reduce their discretionary expenditures in order to afford higher rents. However, since displacement gentrification often affects relatively disadvantaged incumbent land-users, it is reasonable to suppose that a significant proportion of the victims of price-caused displacement gentrification would regard their displacement as more-or-less unevadable.

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[4] Here I am offering a stipulative definition of 'displacement' for use as a technical term within this paper, rather than an analysis of any pretheoretical understanding one might have of the phrase 'land-user displacement.' I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this point.

[insert Figure 1]

Another subtype of displacement gentrification is *pressure-caused* displacement gentrification, which occurs when incumbent land users move away from a gentrifying neighbourhood primarily because of changes to the social character of the neighbourhood. In the words of Peter Marcuse (1985), "when a family sees the neighborhood around it changing dramatically, when their friends are leaving the neighbourhood, when the stores they patronise are liquidating and new stores for other clientele are taking their places, and when changes in public facilities, and in transportation patterns, and in support services all clearly are making the area less and less liveable, then the pressure of displacement already is severe" (p. 207). I discuss these kinds of gentrification-induced pressures in §2.3 below. *Unevadable* pressure-caused displacement gentrification might occur when an incumbent land user is highly reliant on certain "support services," "public facilities," and/or provisions of everyday support from their local friendship network.

So much for displacement gentrification. In cases of *replacement gentrification*,

REPLACEMENT GENTRIFICATION: longtime land users do not move away from the neighbourhood sooner than they otherwise would have. But when they *do* move away, instead of being replaced by people from a similar socio-economic background, they are replaced by gentrifiers.

In what follows, I'll refer to people who are prevented from moving into a neighbourhood by replacement gentrification as 'replacees.' (NB: some authors follow Marcuse (1985) in classifying replacement gentrification as a subtype of displacement gentrification, using the term 'exclusionary displacement' instead of 'replacement.')

Although displacement and replacement are the two varieties of gentrification that are best understood by urban geographers, my broad definition of gentrification admits of one further type. What I will call *augmentative gentrification* occurs when

> AUGMENTATIVE GENTRIFICATION: gentrifiers move into buildings or parcels of land that were previously unoccupied, without displacing or replacing other land users.

Especially if it leads to an increase in the market value of local real estate, augmentative gentrification in vacant units and new-build developments may in time lead to displacement and/or replacement (Freeman & Braconi, 2004; Newman & Wyly, 2006). However, augmentative gentrification also changes the class mix of neighbourhoods in and of itself, simply by bringing in extra people. Thus, augmentative gentrification *per se* may well change the "social character" of neighbourhoods just as much as displacement or replacement gentrification can.

Critical discussions of gentrification in the philosophical literature tend to focus on displacement gentrification. However, there is fierce debate among urban geographers about the prevalence of displacement, with many arguing that it is quite uncommon. This lends some urgency to the underexplored question of how one should evaluate the other two types of gentrification. Some (but not all) of the critiques of gentrification thus-far proposed in the philosophical literature can be extended or modified to cover replacement and augmentative gentrification. I discuss these critiques and other potential objections to gentrification in §§2-3 of this paper.

2: Harms

2.1: Effects on displacees

Prima facie, residential displacement gentrification looks likely to be the most harmful type of gentrification. It is certainly the type of gentrification that has received the most attention in the philosophical literature.

Although the most severe harm that sometimes befalls residential displacees is being forced to become homeless, the majority of displacees are usually (at least in developed-world cases of gentrification) able to find accomodation in other neighbourhoods. There is some evidence to suggest, however, that people who move out of gentrifying neighbourhoods are more likely to move into lower-income neighbourhoods than people who move out of otherwise-comparable non-gentrifying neighbourhoods (Ding et al., 2016.). This is perhaps because displacees deplete their savings trying to shoulder rising rents in their home neighbourhoods, and/or because their financial situation places a time limit on their search for alternative accomodation. To the extent that neighbourhood income levels are positively related to educational attainment (Sampson et al., 2008), and inversely related to the incidence of crime (Newburn, 2016), being forced to move into a lower-income neighbourhood may well constitute a harm (Qiang et al., 2021).

Displacement gentrification might also have an adverse effect on the working lives of displacees. Commercial displacement might leave some employees of the displaced businesses unemployed (Lester & Hartley, 2014; Meltzer & Ghorbani, 2017), and residential displacees who are forced to move far away from their original neighbourhoods might have to switch jobs (perhaps to something lower-paid, or less desirable) if commuting to their former job become impractical (Qiang et al., 2021). (One recent study finds, however, that these kinds of work-related harms are suffered only by a minority of residential displacees [Brummet & Reed, 2019].) Furthermore, residential displacement can often detrimentally affect schoolchildren's educational outcomes (Pearman, 2019). The explanations for these effects "can be direct, as in the case of disrupted

instruction in school or increased net stress engagement for children, or indirect, such as through a disrupted peer network or changes in household routines" (Pearman, 2019, p. 150).

Displacees of all ages might also be harmed by their displacement in virtue of being psychologically attached to their home neighbourhood. An extensive scientific literature suggests that despite "increased mobility, globalization, growing homogeneity of places and loss of their cultural specificity," feelings of place attachment continue to be strong and widespread (Lewicka, 2011). Place attachments have a significant effect on our well-being, and separation from a place to which one has become attached is often a cause of significant distress (Lewicka, 2011, §2.3.2; Scannell & Gifford, 2014). This distress is likely to be particularly severe in cases where separation is also accompanied by sweeping changes (such as demolitions and redevelopments) in the neighbourhood to which one was attached (Fullilove, 2016).

Cara Nine and Margaret Radin have both developed accounts of some further significant harms that they believe befall residential displacees. Radin's account is grounded in her view that property theorists should distinguish between two sorts of property: *personal*, and *fungible* (Radin, 1982, pp. 986-7ff.; 1986, pp. 363-4).[5] An item of property becomes *personal* to a particular agent to the extent that the agent becomes "justifiably self-invested" in it, so that her "individuality and selfhood becomes intertwined with [that] particular object" (Radin, 1986, p. 362).[6] Thus, according to Radin (1986), displacement from a home that a displacee has become justifiably invested in can constitute a kind of violence to the displacee, separating her from a part of herself, over which she

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[5] Actually, Radin's view is that the personal-fungible distinction corresponds to a continuum rather than a dichotomy. However, she often allows herself to "telescope the continuum to its two end points."

[6] On "justifiability," see Radin, 1986, pp. 364-5; 1982, §II.C.

has a strong "priority claim" (p. 365).[7] Radin (1993, p. 13) also suggests in passing that some *communities* might also be "bound up" with particular locations – like a sacred burial site in a Native American community, or a historic church in an African-American neighbourhood.

Need Radin's critique apply only to *residential* land-users? No: if we regard her argument for the objectionability of residential displacement as compelling, then we should be able to construct parallel compelling arguments for the objectionability of *commercial* and *recreational* displacement too. In the same sense that one can become justifiably self-invested in one's rented apartment, it seems possible to become justifiably self-invested in one's places of work and recreation.

Cara Nine (2018) has argued that a person's home – and in particular the way in which objects are organised within it – often forms a part of her 'extended mind.'[8] Displacement, argues Nine, can cause significant short-term damage to a person's cognitive effectiveness, especially when a person is forced to leave her home quickly or under stress. Nine's critique can also be extended to cases of commercial displacement where workers have control over semi-private spaces like cubicles or workshops.

Another important harm that might befall victims of displacement gentrification is loss of access to the goods conferred by membership in a thriving local community. Several philosophical critics of gentrification have drawn attention to this harm (Radin, 1986; Imbroscio, 2012; Kohn,

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[7] At p. 362, Radin makes the metaphysical claim that "persons are not merely abstract disembodied rational units, but rather [are] concrete selves, whose situation in an environment of objects and other persons is constitutive."

[8] On the extended mind, see Clark & Chalmers, 1998.

2016; Zimmer, 2017; Huber & Wolkenstein, 2018; Mousie et al., 2021; Putnam, 2021; Jenkins & Brownlee, 2022, pp. 463-4; Dawkins, 2023; cf. also Dagger, 1997, pp. 161-6), and for good reason: when incumbent land users in gentrifying neighbourhoods articulate their grievances, they often emphasise the damage that is being done to their local communities (Sevcenko, 2016; Evans, 2018).

Thriving neighbourhood communities are valuable for several reasons. In the first place, such communities often sustain informal networks of mutual aid and practical support: what is sometimes called *bonding social capital*. Members of a community of trust can count on each other to: help out with childcare; sustain local institutions like a Neighbourhood Watch; lend a hand with DIY construction projects; and share expertise in financial and legal dilemmas.

Communities at risk of gentrification are often characterised by particularly strong networks of mutual aid. This is to some extent a product of the fact that poor and socially marginalised people are especially reliant on social capital. Even the UK Labour Party's Urban Task Force (whose *Towards an Urban Renaissance* report often takes a positive attitude towards gentrification [Lees et al., 2008, pp. xviii, 198-9]) admit that "many existing social housing estates have a strong sense of community – often more so than wealthier neighbourhoods" (Urban Task Force, 1999, p. 45; see also Greenbaum et al., 2008; Clampet-Lundquist, 2010; Keene & Geronimus, 2011).

Relatedly, several scholars have found evidence to suggest that local-community 'collective efficacy' is negatively associated with neighbourhood rates of crime – where 'collective efficacy' is defined as "social cohesion among neighbours combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good" (to control the behaviour of other members of their community) (Sampson et al., 1997; Hipp & Wo, 2015). Furthermore, local-community collective

efficacy and social capital both appear to be positively associated with desirable health outcomes (Ehsan et al., 2019).

Membership of a particular local community and neighbourhood can also be a psychologically important part of a person's identity. Much like attachments to national, religious, and ideological communities, attachments to local communities are often 'constitutive' in the sense that part of how one defines one's *self* is as 'a member of *X* local community' (Radin, 1982; Sandel, 1982).[9] Relatedly, the philosopher John O'Neill (1993, §3.3) has argued that membership in an enduring local community encourages people to regard themselves as embedded in certain transgenerational projects, and thus to exhibit greater moral concern for the interests of future generations (cf. also Dagger, 1997, pp. 164-6).

Another way in which a thriving local community can be valuable to its members is that it can act as a milieu for the genesis and continuation of social relationships important for human well-being, such as friendships. Local communities also often play an important role in the cultural lives of their members. Consider, for example, Notting Hill Carnival, the Durham Miner's Gala (with its distinctive tradition of decorated silk trade-unionists' banners), and the importance of Bronx NY 'block parties' in the history of hip-hop music. Insofar as we think that artistic

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[9] Elizabeth Brake (2019, pp. 195-7) has also argued in a Rawlsian mode that local community membership often plays an important role in the maintenance of self-respect.

expression and aesthetic appreciation are important ingredients in the good life, local community membership can turn out to be very important indeed.[10]

Displacement gentrification has an obvious effect on the community-membership status of the land users whom it displaces. In the words of Portland anti-gentrification organiser Jeana Woolley, "you can't grow [or even preserve yourselves] as a community if you're scattered to the wind" (quoted in Sevcenko, 2016). Residential and commercial displacees will typically lose touch with the members of their former community, because they will often be forced to take up new residential or commercial tenancies wherever they become available. Furthermore, displaced recreational land users might lose touch with each other if they are unable to relocate *en masse* to a single alternative location. Loss of contact with a local community may, variously: reduce displacees' social capital; impose psychological damage via a loss of identity; put pressure on many of the displacees' friendships and other relationships; and impoverish their cultural lives.

Won't the displacees be able to ameliorate this damage by assimilating themselves into new communities? Well, the relationships of trust and familiarity necessary to sustain membership in such networks will take time to build, especially when the displacees are busy settling into a new neighbourhood. So at the very least these displacees will be deprived of the benefits of community membership for some time after their displacement (on the "disposable" social relationships that are often formed by recently-displaced residents of poor communities, see Desmond, 2012). It may also be the case that the neighbourhoods into which they are displaced

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[10] In addition to the benefits that they confer on community members, the local cultural traditions that I have mentioned here may also deserve to be protected for the sake of their own intrinsic aesthetic value (Zimmer 2022, pp. 280-1).

lack thriving local communities. Indeed, because it is vibrant local communities that generate local amenities and interesting cultural traditions, rents will typically face less upward pressure in neighbourhoods whose local communities are weaker. Alternatively, displacees from public housing projects might be stigmatized in their new communities (Keene & Padilla, 2010). For all these reasons, displacees will sometimes suffer a permanent reduction in their access to community goods. This is particularly likely to hold true of displacees' sense of identity: some may never find it possible to identify with their new community as strongly as they did with their old one.

What if a whole community is relocated *en masse* to a new neighbourhood or housing development? Even in this case, the displaced community is likely to suffer significant damage. People's loyalty to and sense of identification with a particular community is often bound up with their attachments to a particular place (Manzo & Perkins, 2006). Perhaps, for instance, they regard the builders and the past occupants of their neighbourhood as their predecessors in an intertemporal community, whose legacies they are striving to preserve. Particular physical spots may also have cultural significance to certain communities, giving them unique value as community rallying places.

The barriers to (re)constructing a local community are often particularly difficult to overcome in high-rise 'projects' or 'council estates' (Gifford, 2007). One potential obstacle to community (re)construction is the architectural homogeneity of many high-rise projects: local heterogeneities and quirks often help to sustain local identities in places like the Mission District and London's East End. Relocation to a housing project might also create physical obstacles to community life, such as children no longer being able to play on the streets outside their families' front doors, or the housing project lacking meeting spaces for local groups and clubs. Widespread

stigmatisation of housing projects as troubled 'options of last resort' can also make housing project residents unwilling to identify with their environs and their neighbours.[11]

The roster of psychological and social harms that I have imputed to displacement in this section may help to explain why residential displacement appears to increase adults' (Lim et al., 2017) and children's (Dragan et al., 2019) risk of mental health problems. There is also some evidence to suggest that residential displacement increases risk of hospitalization for drug and alcohol abuse (Lim et al., 2017), and affects smoking behaviour (Kearns & Mason, 2015).

2.2: Effects on replacees

So much for the harms that displacement gentrification inflicts on displacees. I now want to discuss the harms that might be suffered by replacees, who are prevented from moving into gentrifying neighbourhoods by replacement gentrification.[12]

By definition, replacees are similar in social capital needs and socio-cultural background to the incumbent land users in the gentrifying neighbourhoods that they are prevented from moving into. Thus, replacement gentrification denies replacees the chance of moving into a community that they could otherwise have easily assimilated into. If these replacees are not enjoying extensive access to local-community goods in their current neighbourhood, then replacement gentrification deprives them of a chance to improve their access to local-community goods.

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[11] This is not to deny that some public housing projects (particularly low-rise projects) are nonetheless home to thriving local communities.

[12] Here I am using the term 'harm' relatively loosely. I do not intend for anything substantive to turn on this usage.

Residential and commercial replacement gentrification might also have an adverse effect on the working lives of replacees. Commercial replacees might struggle to find alternative locations at which to set up their businesses. And victims of residential replacement might be prevented from taking up attractive vocational opportunities that were proximate to the neighbourhoods that they were prevented from moving into. Relatedly, some economic research suggests that new immigrants' labour market outcomes significantly improve when they are able to move into established immigrant enclaves, especially in cases of shared ethnicity (Damm, 2009).

2.3: Effects on non-displaced incumbent land users

So much for the harms that replacement gentrification inflicts on replacees. I now want to argue that all three types of gentrification often harm non-displaced incumbent land users, in ways that go beyond simply increasing the cost of living.

Firstly, gentrifiers often avoid social contact with incumbent land users who remain in gentrifying neighbourhoods. Because gentrifiers usually have different social-capital needs to incumbent land users, and often come from different socio-cultural backgrounds, they tend to prefer not to become active members of the incumbent communities in their new neighbourhoods. Thus, displacement and replacement gentrification often decrease the number of members of a local community, thereby potentially enervating its activities, and endangering its sustainability (Jackson & Butler, 2015; Gibbons et al., 2020).

Secondly, all three types of gentrification often result in the loss or transformation of physical meeting places that help to sustain the social networks and cultural activities of incumbent communities, such as local stores, leisure spaces, and churches (Hyra, 2015; Shaw & Hagemans,

2015). Established local businesses will find themselves able to increase revenues by adapting to the tastes of gentrifiers, and in cases of replacement and displacement gentrification may see their customer base shrink; businesses that rent their premises will probably face rising rents – priced out by entrepreneurs wishing to cater to gentrifiers; and local businesses that own their premises will face increased taxes if, as in many jurisdictions, these taxes are based on the market value of their premises. In gentrifying neighbourhoods with large ethnic-minority populations, the loss of established local businesses may also deprive longtime residents of access to culturally specific products and services, like kosher foodstuffs or black haircare products (Bonotti & Barnhill, 2022).

Thirdly, incumbent land users also often face reduced access to public and recreational areas. For instance, Margaret Kohn (2016, pp. 156-9) narrates the story of a 2014 confrontation in the Mission District between locals and gentrifiers over the use of a soccer pitch. An indirect reason why this is important is that some public spaces like parks and public squares also serve a necessary political function as sites of assembly and protest (Jenkins, n.d.).

Fourthly, incidents like this exemplify what Robson and Butler (2001) refer to as "tectonic" conflicts between social groups in gentrifying neighbourhoods. These – sometimes quite acrimonious (Betancur, 2002) – inter-group antagonisms are bad for the body politic: they corrode mutual respect and civic friendship, and stand in the way of good-quality democratic deliberation at the local level. Moreover, in cases where the gentrifier-incumbent divide coincides with a racial divide, gentrifier-incumbent antagonisms may also deepen racial prejudice (Huse, 2018).

Fifthly, all three types of gentrification sometimes curtail the political power of non-displaced incumbent land users. There is often a sharp political division between longtime land users and gentrifiers in gentrifying neighbourhoods, reflecting disagreements about issues like zoning reforms and proposals for new public housing projects nearby (Betancur, 2002; Hyra,

2015). When gentrifiers come to form a majority within a local electoral district, they become capable of depriving incumbent land users of a sympathetic voice on the local council. Neighbourhood advocacy organisations are another possible locus for gentrifier-versus-incumbent rivalries. When gentrifiers are outnumbered by longtime land users in established neighbourhood organisations, they sometimes set up competing organisations, leveraging their social and economic capital to monopolise the attention of law-enforcement agencies, journalists, and policymakers (Betancur, 2002). These strategies stand in the way of good-quality democratic deliberation. To the extent that they succeed in politically marginalising incumbent land users and depriving them of respect, these strategies can also be criticised on relational egalitarian grounds (see §3.2 below).

Sixthly, in cases where gentrification is anticipated, certain important harms to incumbent land users can antecede the occurrence of gentrification proper. In the first place, field interviews suggest that in buildings and neighbourhoods perceived to be at risk of gentrification, fear of displacement can have a significant effect on incumbent land users' well-being (Wells, 2022). The fact that fear of a harm can itself inflict harm is of course far from unique to gentrification (the same can be said of racism or sexual harassment, for example).

Somewhat more distinctive, however, is the fact that some of the typical harms *of gentrification itself* can antecede gentrification. For example, if gentrification of a certain neighbourhood is anticipated, then developers have a speculative incentive to purchase property in the neighbourhood, potentially putting displacement pressure on incumbent land users even before gentrification proper begins (Zimmer, 2017, p. 63). Elected local officials will also have less of an incentive to pay attention to the interests of longtime land users, since the chances that these people will reside within the locality's political limits at the time of the next election will be

lower than usual (Zimmer, 2017, p. 65). Similarly, there is some evidence to suggest that local organisations sometimes hold back on investing in long-term community improvement projects when they believe that their community might not last long enough to enjoy the potential benefits (Sheppard, n.d.). Likewise, land-users in neighbourhoods at risk of gentrification might see little reason to form lasting social ties with their neighbours, or to embark on personal projects that require long-term stability (Jenkins, 2022).

What if the reason why gentrification destabilises a local community is not that the gentrifiers refuse to engage with community activities, nor that they undermine local businesses and political organisations, but rather that the incumbent land users feel dislike or distrust towards the gentrifiers? Such incumbent land users might refuse to allow gentrifiers into their social networks, or might cease to identify with their neighbourhood when its "social character" begins to change. Are the incumbent land users in a case like this themselves morally responsible for any harms that they suffer? Our response to this question will have to depend, I think, on whether we judge the incumbent land users to be legitimately entitled to feel dislike or distrust towards the gentrifiers.

If new land users in a neighbourhood are willing to engage in the local projects and the reciprocal aid networks that are already established in the neighbourhood, then incumbent land users plausibly have a presumptive duty to welcome them into their community. This duty may require the incumbent land users to alter their established conception of their local community. Historically, for example, shared Puerto Rican nationality might have been one of things that bound the community together. But if Americans of other backgrounds wish to enter the community, then its longtime members will plausibly have a presumptive obligation to reconceive of their local community in more inclusive terms, emphasising shared values or objectives.

What if gentrifiers wish to change the character of the local community? Suppose first of all that the changes will harm longtime members of the community. Reduced participation in the neighbourhood watch might, for example, weaken its effectiveness as a crime deterrent. In cases like this, longtime members are plausibly entitled to oppose the mooted changes. The same can be said of changes that threaten to undermine distinctive and valuable local cultural traditions, like reducing noise in Tremé, New Orleans by curtailing the neighbourhood's traditional second line parades (Parekh, 2015).[13]

But suppose, on the other hand, that the proposed changes will not harm longtime members, and stand to benefit newcomers to the community. Broadening the range of celebrants at the local Miner's Gala might, for example, allow newcomers to better enjoy the event. In cases like this, longtime members plausibly have a presumptive duty to make a reasonable effort to accommodate the newcomers. Thinking even more optimistically, newcomers might even be able to suggest or to help implement a change in the character of the local community that is beneficial to the longtime members: for example, suggesting the establishment of a neighbourhood watch where one previously didn't exist. Of course, longtime members might disagree with each other about whether a certain change to their local community would be good or bad. The norms regulating the behaviour of incumbent land users in cases like this are likely to be complex, and will involve some weighing up of people's preferences for and against change within the community.

All of these duties of welcome towards newcomers are only presumptive, however, and can plausibly be outweighed in cases where a community's longtime members are legitimately entitled to dislike or distrust the new arrivals. An example of a case in which incumbent land users

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[13] I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this example.

are entitled to distrust newcomers might be that of a poor black community that has historically experienced mistreatment and betrayal by white outsiders. An example of a case in which incumbent land users might be entitled to dislike newcomers could occur when the newcomers are displacement gentrifiers who have previously behaved disrespectfully or arrogantly towards incumbent land users. To expect longtime residents to engage with newcomers after receiving treatment of this kind is to demand too much from them.

3: Wrongs

3.1: Distributive injustice

In §2.1 above, I argued that displacement gentrification often inflicts significant harms upon displacees. In §2.2, I argued that replacement gentrification also sometimes harms replacees. In §2.3, I argued that all three types of gentrification often harm non-displaced incumbent land users. Thus, all three types of gentrification sometimes inflict harm.

Invoking considerations of *distributive justice* might help us to strengthen our case against gentrification. Margaret Kohn, for example, critiques gentrification from the perspective of Cohenian *luck egalitarianism*. Kohn (2016, chapter 5) argues that displacement gentrification is particularly morally objectionable because its victims cannot be held responsible for the fact that their neighbourhoods – to which they are uniquely attached – suddenly become pricier than they can afford. A more straightforward way to appeal to distributive justice is to argue that gentrification (of all three types) typically aggravates injustice by harming socio-economically underprivileged people – who are already deprived of their fair share of access to advantage – in order to benefit privileged gentrifiers.

A third possible appeal to distributive justice is suggested by Michael Walzer's (1983) *spheres of justice* theory. According to Walzer's theory, different categories or 'spheres' of social goods (such as money and commodities, education, healthcare, and leisure) are regulated by differing principles of just distribution, and it is unjust for a person's ownership of one type of good to determine her access to another.

Walzer's own account of his theory does not carve out a special sphere for the social goods that are conferred by access to a local community, to one's home, and to a neighbourhood with which one can identify. Nonetheless, for many people in our society (especially typical victims of gentrification) these goods are an important prerequisite for being active, well-functioning, and psychologically well-adjusted citizens (see §2 above). Walzer (1983) himself suggests that "prolonged unemployment and poverty" are unjust partly because they undermine people's "self-respect" as equal and active participants in their *national* communities (p. 278). But the self-respect of many incumbent land-users in gentrifying neighbourhoods also likely depends upon social and cultural ties to their *local* communities.

Thus, a Walzerian theorist of justice might well argue that the social goods at stake in cases of gentrification comprise their own sphere of justice, whose goods should ideally be distributed as widely as possible, and otherwise in accordance with need (Jacobsen, 2008).[14] In that case, it would be unjust for somebody to suffer reduced access to this new sphere of social goods simply because she has low standing in the spheres of social and/or economic privilege. Thus, victims of

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[14] According to Walzer (1983) "the category of socially recognized *needs* is open-ended. For the people's sense of what they need encompasses not only life itself but also the good life, and the appropriate balance between these two is itself a matter of dispute" (p. 83, my italics).

all three types of gentrification would in that case suffer an important injustice, since this is exactly what happens to them.

It is also worth noting here that according to Walzer's theory of justice, it is not unjust for a smart lawyer to get rich – *per se* – simply because she has a high IQ. Material prosperity is, for Walzer, its own sphere of justice, governed by norms of just distribution far more permissive than the norms that are appropriate in spheres like healthcare or education. Hence, a Walzerian critique of gentrification is more readily accessible to someone on the political centre-right than other potential distributive-justice critiques of gentrification. Indeed, the 'traditionalist' or 'one-nation' strand in conservative political philosophy has historically strongly emphasised the value of local and historical communities (Woods, 1999; Scruton, 2017). Thus, a Walzerian and community-focused critique of gentrification might be particularly helpful for persuading those on the political centre-right that gentrification is a moral problem worth fighting against.

3.2: Relational inequality

According to David Miller's (1995) reading of Walzer's theory of justice, when socioeconomic privilege starts to regulate one's access to other spheres of social goods, this is objectionable not just *qua* distributive injustice, but also *qua* threat to the "equality of status" that is characteristic of a society in which "people's behaviour towards one another is not conditioned by differences of rank, in which specific inequalities – in income, say – do not crystallize into judgements of overall personal worth, and in which barriers of class do not stand in the way of mutual understanding and sympathy" (p. 208). If social goods belonging to the different spheres are distributed independently of each other, then these goods "are incommensurable with one another – there is no common currency in terms of which [they] can be valued against one another." Thus, if Cain is wealthier than Abel, but Abel enjoys better access to community-conferred goods,

then it will not be possible, "from a social point of view," to rank Cain and Abel against each other (Miller, 1995, p. 206). However, Miller suggests that if, say, economic privilege comes to regulate one's access to social goods in general, 'invading' the other spheres, then economic privilege is likely to become the focus of a status hierarchy in our society (see also Knoll, 2019).

A Miller-inspired view according to which gentrification is especially objectionable because it corrodes the social status of people who are socio-economically disadvantaged but rich in community-conferred goods can be understood as a kind of *relational egalitarian* view. According to relational egalitarians, some of the most important norms binding upon us as moral agents are norms in favour of treating, respecting, and regarding each other as equals. One means by which a relational egalitarian can critique gentrification is to argue that gentrification has the *effect* of reducing the power and respect afforded to its victims. Alternatively, a relational egalitarian might also argue that gentrification *embodies* an act of disrespect towards, or domination over, its victims, or that gentrification is often the *product* of social relationships in which incumbent land users are afforded insufficient power and respect.

These latter two lines of critique have recently been explored by Tyler Zimmer (2017; 2022) and Daniel Putnam (2021), whose discussions of gentrification draw on *neo-republican* as well as relational egalitarian responses to domination and exploitation (see also van Leeuwen, 2022; Wells, 2022; Jenkins, 2022). Both Zimmer and Putnam focus specifically on (1) market-driven (2) displacement of (3) residential (4) tenants. Zimmer argues that the free-market landlord-tenant interactions implicated in this type of gentrification involve, as a rule, "economic exploitation, marginalization, and political subordination" (see §2.3 above). "Marginalization," in Zimmer's (2017) sense, "is a form of subordination in which one is regarded as relatively unimportant, unauthoritative, and lacking the standing to make valid claims on others" (p. 62).

Zimmer's line of critique can easily be extended to cover other types of gentrification. (1) Government-led gentrification of a public housing project will typically involve the marginalization and political subordination of incumbent tenants. (2) Replacement gentrification typically marginalizes replacees, and all three types of gentrification typically marginalize and subordinate incumbent land users (see §2.3 above). Finally, all three of Zimmer's charges can plausibly be levelled (3) against landlords involved in typical cases of commercial displacement,[15] and (4) against municipal governments involved in typical cases of displacement of property owners due to rising property taxes (see also Jenkins, 2022).

In a similar vein, Putnam (2021) argues that cases of gentrification involving the market-driven displacement of residential tenants instantiate a "distinctive, two-tier nexus of domination." At the first level, "whenever low-income, market-rate tenants cannot afford the market rate on their homes, they are *dominated* by their landlord in virtue of being dependent on the latter's arbitrary benevolence to remain in their homes and communities." At the second level, "when market rents are poised to become unaffordable because of an influx of gentrifying residents, gentrifying residents stand in a relationship of *higher-order domination* to current residents insofar as their arbitrary preferences effectively determine whether and to what extent current residents end up at their landlords' mercy." Moreover, both levels of domination "are essentially enabled by the state, insofar as it treats rental housing in gentrifying neighbourhoods as just a commodity" (see also Jenkins, 2022).

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[15] Note that because of their involvement in local advocacy organizations and campaign groups, commercial land-users can have political power in a neighbourhood even if they do not have the right to vote there.

In discussing the second level in this nexus of domination, Putnam (2021) argues that "the presence of affluent white professionals checking out houses" in a neighbourhood at risk of gentrification "can reasonably be taken as a sign that one's housing security is less secure than it was before. It is difficult to see how this wouldn't get in the way of relating 'without reason for fear or deference'" (§IV). We can extend this argument by pointing out that longtime land-users in a neighbourhood at risk of gentrification will also probably feel fear and deference towards potential replacement and augmentative gentrifiers (for the reasons outlined in §§2.2-2.3 above) – likewise undermining relational equality.

3.3: Violating locational rights

Finally, several philosophical critics of gentrification have recently argued that gentrification sometimes violates the *rights* of incumbent land-users (Moore, 2015, pp. 43-5; Huber & Wolkenstein, 2018). This claim entails – according to the standard philosophical understanding of rights – that in these cases certain person(s) (perhaps the entire political community) are neglecting a *duty* in allowing gentrification to occur. The rights-theorist's claim might also be intended to express the view that some cases of residential displacement gentrification are morally objectionable not only because they are harmful, but also because they involve a disrespect to the *autonomy* or to the *equal moral status* of the displacees (Zimmer 2022).

Margaret Moore (2015, chapter 3), Jakob Huber and Fabio Wolkenstein (2018) argue that incumbent land users – especially in underprivileged communities – have an important interest in security of occupancy that grounds a *locational right* held by them against displacement.[16] In order

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[16] Recent work on locational rights might also help us to make sense of Henri Lefebvre's much-discussed notion of a 'right to the city.'

to pursue the kind of personal projects and life plans that most of us take to lend meaning to our lives, a person is apt to require – especially if she is underprivileged – a certain level of stability in her external circumstances. In making the decision to have children, for example, it is important to know whether one will be able to rely on one's local networks of reciprocal childcare provision. Likewise, in making the decision to start a professional apprenticeship, it is important to know whether one will be able to live within commuting distance of one's workplace for the duration of the scheme. Locational rights against displacement protect a person's ability to engage in important, personally-chosen projects like these (see also Kohn, 2016, p. 61).

As I have argued above (in §2.3), gentrification can significantly disrupt a land user's external circumstances even if she avoids being displaced. In recognition of this fact, Moore and Huber and Wolkenstein argue that the locational rights of incumbent land users include the right to exercise some control over the social character of their neighbourhood. Huber and Wolkenstein (2018, p. 391) mention the Brazilian city Porto Alegre's 'participatory budgeting' scheme (in which local communities are granted significant influence over municipal government spending in their neighbourhoods) as a potential policy tool for vindicating incumbents' rights of control.

Moore's and Huber and Wolkenstein's arguments in favour of locational rights focus on the *interests* of incumbent land users in continuing to have stable external circumstances. Another (potentially complementary) approach is to argue (in a Lockean mode) that a community of incumbent land users have locational rights over a neighbourhood to the extent that they have succeeded in creating or sustaining value there.[17] Physical improvement might constitute one form of value creation – consider, for example, cases where volunteers have helped to keep local streets

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[17] In the terminology of Kolers (2012) this would be an "achievement" argument for locational rights.

clear of rubbish, or have engaged in 'guerrilla gardening' on unused patches of public land. But creating or sustaining a thriving local community in the neighbourhood might also count as a relevant achievement. Separating somebody from her local community would prevent her from benefitting from an intangible asset into which she has invested her labour.[18]

This second possible Lockean defence of locational rights is somewhat analogous to the Lockean defence of creators' copyright over works of art and literature. According to the 'principle of maker's right,' works of art and literature belong (at least presumptively) to the artists who laboured to create them (Peterson, 2008). Similarly, one might suggest that a local neighbourhood's cultural heritage and intangible social capital institutions belong (at least presumptively) to the incumbent land-users who laboured to create them.

This line of argument suggests that displacement gentrification is *pro tanto* wrongful insofar as it involuntarily dispossesses displacees of the goods of their community (see §2.1 above), and that any kind of gentrification is *pro tanto* wrongful insofar as it degrades or devalues local-community goods (see §2.3 above). Moreover, non-displacement gentrification can also be *pro tanto* wrongful insofar as it violates a local community's rights of *control* over its heritage and institutions. Consider the set of local communities that are at risk of gentrification. If those communities had a choice about which kinds of people should replace departing land-users and which kinds of people should move onto previously unoccupied parcels of land, then it seems plausible to suppose that many of them would choose those kinds of people who have similar social backgrounds to the incumbent land-users; these kinds of people would be likely to derive the greatest benefits from integrating themselves into the local community (see §2.2 above).

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[18] Cf. Kohn's (2016) analysis of the city as a form of "common wealth."

Thus, insofar as replacement and augmentative gentrification bring in land-users who are not well-matched to incumbent communities, these kinds of gentrification violate local communities' *pro tanto* rights of control to share the goods of their community with those who are best-placed to benefit from them. This *pro tanto* right of control violation is analogous to forcing a talented painter to exhibit her works of art in a private residence when this painter instead wishes to exhibit her art in the national public gallery.

What if we suppose that some land-owner and longtime member in a local neighbourhood community decides to capitalise on rising real-estate prices by selling her land in this neighbourhood to a gentrifier? Can the land-owner also sell to the gentrifier her rights claims of ownership and control in the local neighbourhood community? This result follows only if we conceive of the bearers of rights to community goods as *individuals* rather than as *groups*. If each individual in the community has a certain share of the locational rights in that community's ownership and control, then it is difficult to see why any given individual should not be free to sell her share to outsiders. However, the alternative is to treat these locational rights as *group rights*, held by the entire community taken collectively as a group agent (for an introduction to group rights, see Jones, 2022). If the community as a whole wishes to sell its locational rights to a group of outsiders, then it is free to do so. However, no individual member of the community has this option. This result strikes me as intuitively plausible.

The group rights conception also fits in nicely with the etiological history of the community goods that Lockean locational rights are designed to protect. Local cultural traditions and intangible social capital institutions are not the sorts of things that it is even conceptually possible for a single person acting alone to bring into existence. Rather, a group agent comprised of several

different individuals is required. Thus, it is fitting for Lockean locational rights to be held by groups rather than by individuals.

4: Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that all three types of gentrification are often *pro tanto* morally objectionable. However, I have not considered in this paper any possible countervailing considerations in favour of gentrification.

A more complete assessment of the desirability of gentrification would have to depend upon weighing up any possible benefits against the harms that I have discussed in this paper. Nonetheless, I think that we are already in a position to conclude with some confidence that most instances of gentrification are likely to be morally undesirable all things considered. The harms that I have discussed in §2 of this paper are significant and extensive. Thus, any potential defence of gentrification starts with quite a significant handicap. Moreover – and perhaps more importantly – my arguments in §3 suggest that even in a case where gentrification has aggregate benefits marginally greater than its aggregate harms, it might still be morally undesirable all things considered. For instance, I argued in §3.1 that gentrification often worsens distributive injustice. If these arguments are correct, then for a typical case of gentrification to be morally desirable all things considered, the *pro tanto* moral desirability of its aggregate benefits must outweigh the *sum* of both the *pro tanto* objectionability of its aggregate harms taken in themselves *plus* the *pro tanto* objectionability of the extent to which these harms aggravate distributive injustice.

Exactly how one should weigh up the benefits of gentrification against its harms depends on exactly which selection of the proposals canvassed in §3 of this paper one decides to incorporate into one's preferred account of the *pro tanto* objectionability of gentrification. In §3.3, I considered

the possibility that gentrification often violates the locational rights of incumbent land users. Theorists who embrace this claim should be especially insensitive to defences of gentrification which claim only that the aggregate benefits are somewhat greater than the aggregate harms. The whole purpose for 'rights' in moral theory is that they serve as *constraints* against the utilitarian maximisation of 'benefits minus harms.'

On the other hand, those who embrace the rights arguments discussed in §3.3 of this paper should be especially sensitive to the worry that anti-gentrification measures might infringe upon (a) the legitimate property rights of landlords and developers, and (b) the *rights to mobility* of gentrifying land users (cf. Bonotti & Barnhill, 2022). Such theorists might aim to find policy measures that at worst *partially* infringe upon landlords' and gentrifiers' rights, whilst ensuring that the rights of incumbent land users are not violated *wholesale*.

One of my central conclusions in this paper has been that replacement and augmentative gentrification often share wrong-making features with displacement gentrification. This conclusion has important implications for how policymakers and activists should respond to gentrification.

Consider, for instance, the use of rent control as a policy response to gentrification. Although rent controls might be effective in preventing displacement gentrification, they are in themselves unlikely to prevent replacement or augmentation. In particular, 'tenancy decontrol' regimes (which allow landlords to raise rents to markets rates before the start of each new tenancy) facilitate replacement gentrification. And even 'tenancy control' regimes (which regulate rent increases between tenancies as well as during them) in themselves do nothing to prevent replacement gentrifiers from moving into controlled units. Thus, rent control is at best one part of the solution to the moral problem of gentrification.

One potential response to gentrification that might have a better chance of preventing replacement and augmentation is bringing a greater share of properties in neighbourhoods at risk of gentrification under the management of public and/or non-profit organizations with long-term remits to serve the socioeconomically disadvantaged. Possible models for initiatives like this include: traditional social housing systems; community land trusts (Choi et al., 2018); limited-equity housing cooperatives (Vidal, 2019); and 'grant of use' housing models (Levya del Río, 2022). Proposals that place significant control in the hands of incumbent land-users might be particularly effective in preventing the loss of community goods that I discussed in §2 of this paper (in the commercial sphere, cf. also Imbroscio et al., 2003; Imbroscio, 2013).

This discussion of potential policy responses has of course been much too quick. Until now, philosophers and political theorists have largely focused on arguments for the moral objectionability of gentrification. They have given rather less attention to questions concerning how we should decide between different possible policy responses to gentrification. These questions strike me as promising subjects for future theoretical research – building on the sorts of arguments for the objectionability of gentrification that I have canvassed in this paper.

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