

# GENTEFIED AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE GENTRIFICATION RELATED LATINX CONFLICTS

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## ABSTRACT

*Gentefied*, launched by Netflix in 2020, is a series revolving around a Mexican American family living in the LA neighborhood of Boyle Heights, showing their efforts to cope with daily needs, economic problems, and life dreams. The series tackles the complex issues related to gentrification, a phenomenon that raises a variety of conflicts in areas historically populated by minorities, changing the shape and nature of neighborhoods by increasing their economic value by renovating buildings and businesses in order to attract a more affluent population. *Gentefied* succeeds in conveying the complexity of the community's internal conflicts as well as the struggles against imposed gentrification, staging the underlying sociocultural and economic contexts in which a reconfiguration would have been inevitable in order for the neighborhood to adapt and overcome marginalization. Supported by a study of the mechanisms intrinsic to gentrification processes in the Latinx neighborhood, this paper will analyze them through their representation offered by *Gentefied*, pointing out its intrinsic values as well as fiction-related simplifications.

**Keywords:** Gentrification; TV series; Chicanx; Spatial Justice.

On February 21, 2020 Netflix launched *Gentefied*, a 10-episode long, fast-paced series revolving around a Mexican American family living in the LA neighborhood of Boyle Heights and their efforts to cope with daily needs, economic problems, and life dreams. Created by Linda Chávez and Marvis Lemus and produced by America Ferrera, the series was adapted from the same team's eponymous Sundance digital series (2017); aside from its slice-of-life value, *Gentefied* tackles a rather complex issue that has raised a variety of conflicts among the inhabitants of areas historically populated by minorities. Gentrification has been progressively changing the shape and quintessential nature of neighborhoods, increasing their economic value by renovating buildings and businesses in order to attract more affluent consumers and inhabitants.

Widower 'Pop' Casimiro Morales (played by Mexican actor Joaquín Cosío) and his grandchildren Erik (J.J. Soria), Chris (Carlos Santos), and Ana (Karrie Martin) orbit around their beloved family-run taco shop. Erik is presented as a loyal, little educated yet book-loving, heavily tattooed, machista young man with an estranged pregnant

girlfriend, ticking—and at the same time, challenging—most of the stereotyped features of a cholo. His conflict with Chris—who wishes to become a chef in fine dining restaurants—is pervasive and juxtaposes the clashing realities of a small family-run business and the luxury industry. Both within the family and the workplace, Chris is mocked and discriminated against because of his lighter skin tone and alleged betrayal of his own roots; nonetheless, he gets fired—and consequently ostracized within the industry—for directly confronting his employer about racist attitudes. Ana embraces her ethnicity and sexuality, but as a struggling artist she ends up ‘selling out’ too. Her conflicts with Afro-Latina activist girlfriend Yessika (Julissa Calderon) embody the dilemmas faced by many Latinx to achieve career goals without being exploited by affluent, overbearing Anglo agents. As their grandfather struggles to keep the shop afloat, the family tries to unite efforts to avoid its closure while pursuing their dreams. Nonetheless, both their dreams and intents of regenerating the shop to attract new clients will clash with the struggle to preserve the neighborhood from gentrification.

Through the articulation of the cousins’ relationships and networks, the series reconstructs the fundamental issues related to the neighborhood’s internal conflicts generated by gentrification and, more in general, the assimilation mechanisms imposed within a monoglossic national state.

## GENTRIFICATION AND THE RESHAPING OF THE BARRIO

The process known as gentrification—a term coined by sociologist Ruth Glass (1964) analyzing urban evolutions in London—is fundamentally embodied by urban redevelopment and a consequent socio-spatial restructuring involving the local resident components. It is a process that “replaces the poor, usually minority, residents of frequently well-established neighborhoods with middle-class residents” (Deutsche 1996, 69), by reshaping spatial dynamics in a way that appeals to external investors and upgrading the image of the neighborhood. Gentrification is seldom planned as an equitable process: it is usually characterized by projects that dissect the neighborhood, neglecting the local, low-income residents’ necessities in favor of providing an environment that is attractive for gentrifying investment (among many, see Sandoval

2018). The urban, architectural, commercial, and social upgrading lead to dramatic changes of the existing urbanscape, reinvestment of capital, and displacement of low-income groups (Lees et al. 2008). The precondition that usually represents the foothold for gentrifying plans lies in the decline of neighborhoods, affected by a systemic administrative neglect rooted in historical segregation and repression. Neighborhoods such as Boyle Heights have been populated by consolidated ethnic communities and have been objects of a consistent afflux of migrants over decades. Their urban configurations are characterized by the manifestation of the structural violence intrinsic to a history of urban policies that have led to abandonment and local devaluation of real estate. Historical neighborhoods have been plagued by underdevelopment and a progressive deterioration of urban conditions, in particular if inhabited by minority communities (among many, see Diaz 2005, 3-79). An unfair distribution of resources has been known to facilitate the exploitation of space as form of domination and segregation, as locational discrimination can be exerted by means of differential access to services (Soja 2011).

The social meaning—and the consequent discourse—distinctive of gentrification has been constructed through the constructions and discursive strategies of the frontier myth (Smith 1996, 11). The neighborhood characterized by a consistent ethnic minority community represents a new frontier for Anglo investors to conquer, configuring otherness as a new wilderness and redevelopment as the regeneration of allegedly hostile—possibly uncivil and somehow savage—urbanscapes. The frontier ideology justifies the perpetuation of social differentiation and exclusion as inevitable (Smith 1996, 16), as well as rationalizes the structural violence intrinsic to gentrification and subsequent displacement. Aside from an entrepreneurial discourse that constructs civility on bases of class and ethnicity, gentrification is usually accompanied by a commodification of a culture that is other, and thus holds an exotic attraction in the eyes of affluent consumers. Allegedly harmonizing with the existing environment, the redevelopments aim at recapturing the history and imaginary of the neighborhood in a superficial, idealized way, according to an aesthetic contextualism that Deutsche has identified as “real estate aesthetics” (Deutsche 1996, 43). New types of business find

places in the renovated buildings, providing hip products and experiences, such as vintage ethnic accessories and fusion food, satisfying the relatively volatile demand of a consumerist cultural curiosity and longing for exoticism.

Underneath a discourse of urban renaissance, gentrification processes raise the value of real estate and expand the commercial scope of the neighborhoods, consequently mining the presence of supportive services for the local, consolidated working class population. Thus, the original inhabitants of the neighborhood lose non-profit support and cannot adapt to the consequences of the rise in property values caused by redevelopment. As a result, even entire families are dispossessed or displaced. Detailed data on displacement is often obscured, yet the increase in the presence of homeless ex-residents is an issue that many non-profit organizations have been trying to address, providing relief and support. The process of exclusionary displacement affects a variety of vulnerable actors such as low-income residents and immigrant families, as well as non-profit social services that are forced to relocate to peripheral areas, losing part of their efficacy and scope. Among active private residential strategies of resistance to displacement, the most common are overcrowding and enduring the increased housing costs (see Newman and Wyly 2006) with the harrowing consequences these solutions entail. The existence of social services that resist further displacement leads to a “rough co-existence” (DeVerteuil 2012, 214) generating conflicts between entrepreneurial and social oriented politics. Clusters of non-profit social service organizations can cooperate with individual actors, local business facilities, and clients, providing “a common front against gentrification-induced displacement and dismantlement” (DeVerteuil 2012, 209), as active resistance has proven to facilitate the persistence of service hubs in gentrified areas. Nonetheless, an effective contention of the consequences of gentrification requires the intervention as well of supportive local institutions.

Aside from residential resistance, neighborhood grassroots activism has a crucial role in the struggles against gentrification and for a more equitable urban development. As Edward Soja has underlined, since the 1992 riots, Los Angeles has seen the surge of grassroots movements characterized by a strong spatial consciousness and even

specifically seeking spatial justice (Soja 2014). Ethnic identity is exercised through continuity of cultural practices and political resistance. Especially in the wake of the civil rights and Chicano movements of the 1960s, Latinx barrios have developed a historical preservation of cultural identity, often expressed through public art directly connected with the struggle for social justice (Lin 2019, 25), but also through the preservation of everyday customs, intangible heritage elements, and shared sets of values and beliefs. The importance of defending the neighborhood space, reasserting the community's control and—at the same time—its belonging to it, represents a “reaffirmation of culture, a defense of space, an ethnically bounded sanctuary, and the spiritual zone of Chicano/a and Mexicano/a identity” (Diaz 2005, 3). The fight for spatial justice (Soja 2010) offers evidence that space and its (re)arrangement are strictly related to the sociocultural milieu and have a role in producing social injustice.

Since the turn of the century, several LA neighborhoods inhabited mostly by ethnic minority communities—including Boyle Heights—have seen the emergence of the phenomenon called “gentefication.” The term was allegedly coined by Mexican American entrepreneur Guillermo Uribe in 2007, after establishing his wine bar in Boyle Heights amidst the spread of gentrification businesses, and it defines redevelopment projects and processes brought forward by Latinx. These operations are often carried out by actors who advocate for locally owned businesses and the creation of safe spaces for the community, fostering a revitalization of public space (Lin 2019, 36-38). Gentefying investors are mostly young, educated, upwardly mobile Latinx professionals, belonging to an emerging Latinx middle-class investing in the neighborhood, becoming commercial and residential property owners and exploiting the entrepreneurial possibilities the rezoning can offer. New generations of Mexican Americans have been relocating and dispersing, often due to diverse configurations of social mobility and change of socioeconomic status. Some have been moving to suburbs in which they represent the demographic majority (e.g. in Los Angeles County, communities such as Whittier and Downey) ranging from lower middle-class up to so-called upscale Latinx. Others return to their neighborhoods and participate in the efforts to revitalize the barrio, often trying to preserve its cultural heritage and yet opening it up to

gentrification mechanisms. An inevitable clash between different networks existing within the same community ensues: Latinx are both victims as well as agents of gentrification.

It is worth mentioning the existence of a few other recent popular culture products revolving around gentrification. The drama *Vida* (Starz, 2018-2020) focuses on the return of two Mexican American girls to Boyle Heights upon the death of their estranged mother. Its three seasons follow their personal issues and clashes, framed within the neighborhood's struggle against gentrification; dramatic conflicts ensue, touching the topics of queerness and rejection of cultural roots as well. Conversely, Netflix's approach to the topic has been marked by a shift toward comedy, often verging on camp, nevertheless tackling the related issues in a rather lucid and forceful way. Besides *Gentefied*, the platform has produced for example the horror comedy movie *Vampires vs The Bronx* (2020), whose protagonists are local teenagers fighting an influx of real estate speculators in the Bronx. The metaphor linking gentrifiers to vampires is quite simple and yet effective, as they lure locals into selling them properties with the promise of a new affluent life, only to suck their blood until death or, at best, convert them into vampires.

#### THE CHOLO AND THE STRUGGLE FOR POSITIVE MASCULINITY

*Gentefied* opens with vignettes introducing the protagonists, establishing right away the distinctive mood of the series and outlining the characters quite effectively. The first sequence builds a stereotypic cholo narrative and imagery: Erik rides his lowrider bicycle on the sidewalk and furtively approaches a woman, pulling something out of his backpack. Rapper Santi Mostaffa's "Intratable" is playing in the background and the tone is a subtle version of the stereotypic lo-fi filters often used in US film in the representation of Mexican and Latinx narratives. The dialogue between the two characters actually happens outside the local public library, as Erik returns some books and asks the librarian if any copy of Gary Chapman's *The Five Love Languages* is available yet.

Erik has been living with his grandfather Casimiro and late grandmother Fina since childhood, as his father was a petty criminal getting in and out of prison and he was estranged by his mother. Casimiro has owned the Mama Fina's taco shop for decades and has developed a more intense emotional connection with it since his wife died. Despite being fluent in English, he mostly speaks Spanish, facilitating most of the bilingual sequences in the series as his grandchildren converse with him in English or code-switch through the dialogue. The relationship he has with Erik is of the fatherly kind, characterized by intimate connection and reciprocal respect, responding to patterns typical of Mexican upbringing and so-called *familismo* (among many, see Rueschenberg and Buriel 1989; Cauce and Domenech-Rodríguez 2002; Crockett et al. 2007; Calzada et al. 2013). Gender role is a key aspect in the construction of both Erik's and Casimiro's characters. The latter represents the traditional set of values that characterize Mexican American communities, based on the centrality of the family and the notion of respect, whereas the former embodies the struggles intrinsic to Mexican American fatherhood in present times. Erik's estranged girlfriend Lidia (Annie Gonzalez) ended their relationship because she is pregnant and considers him not reliable enough to be at her side. Her life project is to move out of the barrio, accepting a job offer at Stanford; she is also a highly educated feminist, nagging him for his toxic masculinity as she seems to have lost any hope in the possibility that he could change and, overall, she is considered "too good" for him.

Within the quite limited representation of Latinx families in mainstream popular culture products, the representation of Latinx fathers is often omitted or generically connected to patriarchal simplifications (Hernández 2015, 247). Reduced to superficial characterizations, the father often embodies a stereotypically described masculinity situated within the family context, bereft of positive aspects and an affective role. The pathological, negative view of machismo is often imposed from agents external to the community and—as Mirandé among others analyzed thoroughly (1994, 165-182)—corresponds to a selective construction of machismo that focuses on negative, stereotypical aspects of Mexican American masculinity. A reassessment is necessary to discern false manifestations of machismo—connected to violent behaviors and toxic

masculinity—from genuine machismo values, such as generosity and courage (Mendoza 1962, 75-86), corresponding to an ideal of positive masculinity within the framework of the Mexican and Mexican American collective imaginary or “popular philosophy” (Paredes 1967, 73).

Latinx fatherhood and positive machismo are imbued with cultural expectations, work ethics, supportive presence, responsibility, dedication to one’s own family, and a central importance given to education (Behnke and Taylor 2005). In fact, Mexican American adolescents have shown awareness and understanding of the nuances of the father-child relationship, identifying the expressions of paternal concern and the supportiveness intrinsic to the sacrifices a father makes to provide for the family (Crockett et al. 2007). These aspects are highlighted in *Gentefied*, as an indirect yet constant display of caring marks Erik and Casimiro’s interactions and their sharing in daily activities, expressed through joking and masculine complicity. Also, the grandfather provides his grandchild with the keys to unlock such a configuration of fatherhood, as adult development and fathering styles are influenced by the intergenerational transmission of familial values (Behnke and Taylor 2005). For example, Erik is mistakenly ready to sacrifice his own salary to help solving the taco shop’s economic issues, as “family comes first” (ep. 1); nonetheless, Casimiro’s reaction corrects his misjudgment on the issue, reminding him that he needs to take care of Lidia and his unborn child. When a drunk Casimiro is arrested for breaking the windows of a gentrified property (ep. 1), a crack in his fathering role opens, as he used to take Erik to the same detention center to see his young father. His shame, though, is accompanied by the impotence gentrification is imposing on Casimiro, both as a business owner and as family head. Erik is the only person that he wants to know about his detention, asking him to find a solution even though the necessity to pay the bail worsens their economic problems. His grandchild scolds him and refuses to seek Chris’s help, unaware that his cousin has some considerable savings set aside for culinary school. Erik does understand the struggle and suffering that lie behind Casimiro’s situation, yet nonetheless he wishes to solve the situation by himself. This leads to a series of attempts involving Ana, then



Chris, until, eventually, his ex-girlfriend Lidia will lend him the money after he attends her ultrasound appointment (ep. 2).

A positive Latinx masculinity that is supportive and strengthened by notions of honor and respect, as well as generosity, courage, and stoicism (Mirandé 1997, 79) is possible, and it does exist in reality. Erik's resilient evolution throughout the series subverts the one-dimensional, stereotyped construction of Chicano masculinity, while he tries to find meaning and identity as a father. Yet, it does not need to be a radical evolution, as the positive aspects of machismo were already present in his character from a diegetic time before the narrated events. Possibly, the configuration of his relationship with Lidia was not allowing space for a change in his consolidated behavioral patterns, strongly influenced by social and cultural expectations as a Chicano raised in the barrio. The mutual understanding and communication between the couple evolves in the series, moving the relationship on from stereotyped patterns to an actually equal connection based on future plans. Something clicks for Erik when he attends the aforementioned ultrasound appointment, prompting him to seriously commit to Lidia and his unborn child. When she doesn't seem to believe in his stance, he asks her how she can expect him "to do better, if [she doesn't] give [him] the chance to be better" (ep. 3). In fact, he starts to approach the journey toward fatherhood with short, apparently insignificant steps, such as listening to Lidia's favorite feminist Chicana podcasts (ep. 3) to learn about toxic masculinity and reading books about maternity. Erik's strong—albeit at times misguided—connection with Lidia is also fundamental, as a definite correlation has been found between the positive involvement with the partner and the father's increased engagement with their children (Cabrera and Bradley 2012). In an intimate conversation with his grandfather (ep. 7), Erik confesses that he is afraid of not being "the man [Lidia] deserves." Casimiro prompts him to ask her to marry him and tells him to talk openly about committing to the family they can build together. After helping her out for a long, complicated day and preparing the baby's nursery, Erik accidentally finds out she has been granted the job at Stanford as assistant dean of student life (ep. 7). The news keeps him from expressing his proposal, as he decides instead—albeit heartbrokenly—to insist that she follows her

dreams, whereas his dream “has always been [her]” since they were high-school sweethearts. Erik is firm in his stance and even quarrels with her father Pancho (Rafael Siegler), who wants him to talk her out of the job (ep. 9). Eventually, upon the baby’s birth, he decides to follow her to Stanford (ep. 10).

Meanwhile, Erik does contribute actively to the taco shop’s cause, informing himself about related legislation and seeking the help of a pro-bono lawyer to resolve the lease situation. The lawyer succeeds in elucidating their position and rights as tenants and Casimiro rewards her support with some *burritos de carnitas*, abiding by a rooted Mexican American custom (ep. 5). Episode nine opens once again with a vignette protagonized by Erik playing with the cholo stereotype. The close-up shot shows his grave, menacing expression while he advances and Classik and Kidd Marley’s “hood approved” rap track “Dope Boy” plays in the background, possibly as diegetic music. The frame changes and the viewer sees that Erik is pushing a library cart, part of his own “read a book, get a taco” program; at the shop, he has been lending books to undocumented kids, testing them to verify if they read the books, and awarding them some free tacos if they did. His program has expanded: it has been given the wordplay name “Li’ Bro” and now he walks around the barrio lending books and providing recommendations to the local kids, promoting the shop’s new activities at the same time. Erik is actually a keen reader of all sorts of books—his recommendations include a barrio-infused description of the plot of Dumas’s *The Count of Monte Cristo* in episode four—and a passionate reader of Cli-Fi essays (ep. 3), aside from delivering some of the most articulate and informed bits of speech in the whole series.

Episode six is dedicated to a subplot involving Javier, a friend of the Morales family and regular customer of the taco shop, who works as a mariachi to support his child Danny and their family back in Mexico. The business is stalling, as the local bars and restaurants look for different music genres to entertain their new, more affluent Anglo customers and those “hipsters no aprecian la música de mariachi clásica” [hipsters don’t appreciate traditional mariachi music]. Despite trying to innovate his group’s gig, Javier and Danny are forced to live in a van and to cut down on basic expenses to stay afloat. Javier tries to resort to social services and non-profit

organizations, but they will eventually have to move to Bakersfield, where his brother lives and can provide work for him at a local factory. Aside from his own sense of failure, Javier is struggling to force his son to leave his school and cut ties with the friends he has in Los Angeles, but their departure is inevitable, as they cannot continue to live in homelessness and uncertainty.

#### THE FRAGMENTED IDENTITY OF THE MODERN POCHO

The second introductory vignette presents Chris in his workplace: he is employed at a renowned luxury restaurant, owned by a demanding chef. The kitchen, though, is populated by Latinx employees, among whom Chris stands out for his culinary training and the shortcomings of his Spanish. He recently returned to Los Angeles after a decade spent working in various kitchens, lastly in Idaho, where there was “no real Mexican anything” (ep. 1). He struggles for most of the series to affirm his Mexicanness, while the people around him deprecate it and make fun of him throwing popular ethnic slurs at him. Ana’s little sister Nayeli (Bianca Melgar) calls him “White boy” (ep. 1), while Erik calls him “wheat cracker” (ep. 5) and “Mr. Identity Crisis” (ep. 9). Even Casimiro repeatedly calls him *güero*, a term that in Mexico is not necessarily used to refer to someone actually blond or light skinned. It is, rather, a term of submission to address a person considered somehow superior, such as a customer could be; conversely, it can be used defiantly and to mock people who think themselves superior.

Since its depiction in the golden age of Mexican cinema, a pocho is described as a person “who has forgotten [their] roots and who has exchanged the vitality of idiosyncrasy for the superficiality of Americanization” (Monsiváis 2005, 70), embodying the guilty conscience of people’s voluntary or passive loss of cultural roots. Language is one of the keys to delineating the pocho, as their linguistic loss reveals their alleged status immediately; Chris’s Mexicanness is put in doubt just as much as his linguistic knowledge. It is worth mentioning that even in the barrio there has been a progressive loss of the use of Spanish, partly due to the assimilative monoglossic policies that have characterized public education (among many, see García 1983; 2003). The development of an articulated bilingualism—or even effective translanguaging—is facilitated by

adequate support in the educational system; when public education does not provide the opportunity of bilingual learning, an impoverishment of the linguistic resources accessible to the younger generations is inevitable. It is worth noting that, in recent years, the offer of TV broadcasts and popular culture products aimed at a Spanish-speaking audience has increased, as well as widened its generational scope, promoting a wishful return to bilingualism. Nonetheless, the rooted, nation-wide lack of support from the institutions to favor such a process impairs the development of an advanced command of Spanish; linguistic support in the barrio is usually offered by non-profit organizations offering bilingual spaces in the context of social justice grassroots activism (Marini 2019).

In *Gentefied*, the struggle and quest for identity and authenticity are constructed by means of humor, which is pervasive and helps in constructing the lucid awareness the barrio inhabitants have about the gentrification process as well. Chris's co-workers try his Mexicanness through a series of hilarious tests, including quizzes on Mexican telenovelas, geography, and candy (ep. 3). His heritage suddenly becomes credible, though, only when Erik storms the kitchen of the restaurant to collect the bail money and his co-workers see them together. Chris's relationship with his cousins is also very problematic, as Erik and Ana are wary of his attitudes and career plans. When he tries to give practical suggestions in order to keep the taco shop afloat, he misses the complex family bonds underlying the organization of Casimiro's business. Attempting to (re)connect with Erik, Chris cannot grasp the struggles his family is involved in, and sometimes his commentaries come across as condescending and out of place. Throughout the series, he manages to rediscover the intimate, familiar bond he has with his childhood and the members of his family.

Chris could be White passing, and it would be an attitude coherent with the colorist environment that characterizes luxury catering. It is evident that the Mangia kitchen is full of Latinx workers—mostly undocumented—who carry out most of the preparation and actual cooking, but none of them can be appointed to any higher position within the food industry. Chris has been pursuing a career in this sector and has secured his position at Mangia because the chef does consider him superior to the

rest of the crew. Executive chef Austin (Greg Ellis) is constantly nagging his Latinx subordinates for petty reasons, sustaining a rather discriminatory discourse that intertwines with his distinctive aggressive arrogance. The repeated racist remarks make Chris feel patently and progressively uneasy, until he confronts Chef Austin directly and gets fired (ep. 3). On the night he offered Erik and Lidia a dinner at the restaurant, the chef enters the kitchen and asks “who let the delivery guy [Erik] in,” then proceeds to insult the whole staff and one Venezuelan member in particular. Chris reacts—triggered by the insults and fueled by his unrecognized Mexicanness—by lashing out at Chef Austin, calling him out for his racism and contemptible behavior. His boss threatens to call ICE on his own employees to show them “how racist” he can be, and Chris punches him before getting thrown out of the restaurant. From that moment, he will go through a depressive period and then start to help actively at the taco shop. After a long while, he feels accepted and his Mexican identity is somehow confirmed by the shop’s regulars, who quit nagging him by asking if he can really speak Spanish (ep. 9).

The taco shop’s landlord Roberto is another problematic *pocho* figure, embodying the aforementioned processes of gentefication. Erik calls Roberto “Rob-the-rent-hiker” (ep. 7), as well as “coconut” and “potato” (ep. 1) using derogatory terms usually directed toward people who are considered “White inside and Brown outside,” as they allegedly deny their own ethnic heritage and assimilate the attitudes, values, and ideological stances peculiar to the White middle- and upper-classes. Once he starts to participate in the family business, Chris’s suggestions to help are often too detached from the reality of the neighborhood. For example, he proposes a “tikka masala taco” that proves to be a failure, and yet the experiment prompts Casimiro to try something new (eps. 3-4). He also uploads videos online to foster the arrival of new customers, uses customer review platforms, and suggests the implementation of new decor (ep. 7). Chris’s approach, though, often lacks tact. Casimiro discovers that his longtime friend Lupe has been able to exploit the gentrification process and was able to cut out a space for herself, taking advantage of affluent new customers. Thus, he accepts to try out new solutions, and yet he struggles when the grandchildren dismantle parts of the shop that remind him of his late wife. Despite being mostly Chris’s doing, when he leaves

saddened and offended, it is Erik that follows him, and a meaningful father-to-son conversation ensues. Despite the awareness and understanding that children show toward the different upbringing and hardships their migrant parents endured, intergenerational differences inevitably lead to conflict, and they are at times perceived as disrespectful to the elder members of the family (Crockett et al. 2007, 656).

Crucially, the main struggle for the shop is that the implementation of changes to attain new, more affluent customers implies the loss of its *barrio* regulars, who cannot afford higher prices for their everyday meals. Eventually, Chris proposes participating in a food tour through Boyle Heights organized by *LA Weekly*, around which episode nine revolves. Yessika confronts him about this decision, claiming that he doesn't understand the repercussions of "welcoming outsiders *en masse*" which leads to "pushing people out of their homes and into the tents around every corner." The topic of homelessness caused by gentrification is partially shown in episode eight, although it is not explained exactly why some people live in tents until her dialogue with Chris. Displacement is one of the most evident consequences of gentrification, and yet not all local inhabitants can afford to move to a different part of the city or a suburb. Just as Javier was living in a van with his child, many people are forced to find unstable alternatives while waiting for possible opportunities with the support of the surviving social services. Nonetheless, bureaucratic procedures can take a very long time and often cannot guarantee a positive outcome for the applicants. Yessika proposes looking for "other ways to fundraise for Pop," but she cannot really offer a feasible way to raise the money the shop needs in order to survive. She plans a protest against the shop on the day of the food tour and the Morales family needs to make a counterplan. Even though Casimiro believes that she won't create problems as "Yessika es como de la familia y no va a venir aquí a protestar" [Yessika is part of the family and she won't come here to protest], he, Chris, Erik, and Nayeli reunite and discuss the issue to avoid the protest damaging their event. Erik states that "there's nothing gentrifiers hate more than be called gentrifiers" because of White guilt; the solution he offers is to make the protest seem part of the experience, as a "piece of next-level immersive performance art" and thus a "reclaiming of the narrative." To do so, they produce a comic advertising

video exploiting stereotypes, in which Chris plays the Anglo hipster coming across the shop, Erik plays the cholo thug—with a fake, black marker executed teardrop tattoo on his cheek—and Nayeli joins the regulars in a fake protest (ep. 9). Yessika and her friends expect Ana to address the situation—considering her and her cousins as “sellouts”—but she says that she won’t stop her grandfather from trying to save the shop at all costs. The counterplan actually works and the shop is stormed by affluent Anglo customers, dressed up with Mexican hats and accessories embodying the existing commodification of Mexican heritage in the US leisure industry. It is worth noting that the customers mention the Taco Tuesday custom that has become popular since the 90s, offering special taco menus on Tuesdays. If on the one hand it is a sign of appreciation and some Latinx customers indulge in it as well, on the other hand the custom holds a controversial, underlying sense of appropriation and commodification.

#### QUEERING THE BARRIO AND THE EXPLOITATIVE ART PROMISE

The third vignette opening the series is an intimate scene with Ana and her girlfriend Yessika as protagonists, interrupted by an offstage sneering remark by Ana’s mother, reminding her to tell her *negra* that there is coffee and *pan dulce* for both. Despite its apparent courtesy, the remark instantaneously introduces some of the topics of criticism that characterize the series, such as homophobia and colorism internal to the community, but also gentrification. Ana is an emerging, striving artist wishing for her work to be recognized, whereas Yessika is a grassroots activist against the gentrification processes that are imposed on the neighborhood. In the opening sequence, the latter warns the former that she is not “dating a *vendida*,” anticipating the core issue that their relationship will face throughout the episodes.

Ana’s life is characterized by the conflictive relationship she has with her mother Beatriz (Laura Patalano), who does not approve of her lifestyle and lashes out that she kills herself working to support her “mientras que [Ana] juega al artista” [while Ana plays artist]. Episode eight is dedicated to a subplot starring Ana’s mother and her struggle against her exploitative boss. She works at a *maquiladora* where female workers are treated inhumanely, and forced to work in conditions violating labor laws and

human rights, while under the constant threat of dismissal; the workers evidently cannot refuse to suffer these conditions as they have families to support and some of them are undocumented. The issues related to intergenerational conflict and the possibility of change permeate her relationship with her daughters, as she is sacrificing her own life to support them and struggles to admit the acceptability of lifestyles different from hers. Clearly, she doesn't want that same life for her daughters but cannot figure out any valid alternatives; she works overtime and even brings extra work home to give them anything they need, but it never seems to be enough. Beatriz lives her life pervaded by hardship and despair, paralyzed by the sense of impotence and loss of dignity that the work at a *maquiladora* entails. Change will come when she successfully manipulates her overbearing boss in order to have the work reorganized in a more efficient way and stops him forcing the workers to work at home as well. In the same episode, Nayeli attempts to run away to visit her friend Danny in Bakersfield and is retrieved by Casimiro, who has a meaningful talk with her and, once again, plays the fathering role that is missing in his grandchildren's lives.

Ana as well is conditioned by *familismo* and the notion that family comes first. For example, to help Erik raise the money to pay for Casimiro's bail she throws away a chance to get a job as assistant to a renowned artist, which could have been a concrete development in her career. Later on, she gets hired by Tim, an Anglo gallerist, to work at a party, where she and Chris enjoy a night of fun and relief from their struggles; nonetheless, the party is populated by White people dressed up as Native Americans (ep. 4). The barrio represents a physical, spatial Latinx cultural milieu (Sandoval 2018), corresponding to a heterotopia where the Latinx community can thrive and retain its cultural heritage. Social justice activism—such as the movement Yessika leads—has been developing in order to reassert control over the neighborhood, which is also an attempt to preserve the immaterial heritage that characterizes it. The penetration of gentrifying gallerists and urban developers that promote an imposed “artification” of the barrio have often instrumentalized subjects like Ana, local artists who would accept their conditions in order to survive while pursuing their artistic path.





Figure 1. Ana's mural (Gentefied, Season 1, Episode 5, 10':30") © Netflix

Ana is commissioned to paint a mural in the barrio, on a wall of the building the gentrifying gallerist bought to set up his art market aimed at affluent buyers (ep. 5); her task is to “beautify the location” in order to attract people and other artists from outside the community. Her final artwork represents two male luchadores making out (fig. 1), sparking controversial reactions among the locals. Besides the economic problems she has been dealing with because of gentrification, old Ofelia, the tenant of the corner shop next to the mural, is harassed because of it and her customers threaten to buy their groceries at the 7-Eleven nearby if that *cochinero* [obscenity] remains on the wall. When she attempts to paint over it, Tim intervenes saying that if she does, she would owe him thousands of dollars. Furthermore, his discourse is based on the legitimizing notion that he engages in gentrifying activities for her and the local community’s good. He states that he is “raising property value[s]” and he doesn’t need to ask for Ofelia’s permission to do whatever he wants with the building, because “she doesn’t know what is good for her.” This kind of condescending, overbearing discourse is supported by a delegitimization of the original barrio inhabitants, constructing them as an opposing, generalized collective not civilized enough to know what is better for them. Once again, the new frontier ideology is applied to a whole community, depicted as a group of good (or bad) savages living in an urban wilderness that it is right to conquer and subdue. The gentrifying actors only accept those inhabitants who willingly accept their

impositions, and it doesn't matter whether they do so to embrace the gentrificatory 'vision' or to try surviving the regeneration process. The diegetic connotation of the Anglo gallerist is composed of many telling elements, among which it is worth noting his car's license plate spelling "RU4SALE," reminding the viewer of the opening vignette in which Yessika made fun of Ana calling her a *vendida* [sell-out]. Ana tries to make up to Ofelia by organizing a cash mob—inviting people to buy all the inventory—but she fails again at dealing with the locals, condescendingly imposing a solution that would only put a temporary patch on the shop's economic situation and cut out her regulars. Even though Ofelia seems partially to understand what Ana is trying to accomplish, she expresses harshly realistic remarks and insists that the image has to be erased.

The mural is vandalized and then painted over, crushing Ana's expectations and artistic aspirations; what is most interesting, though, is the issue intrinsic to the representation of Brown bodies and their queering. On the one hand, the locals' reaction is understandable, as the art-related gentrification is problematic and characterized by galleries and artists who seem to assume a role as "the 'shock troops' of gentrification [...] [depicting] the transformation of the declining neighborhood as romantic bohemia permitting the flourishing of individual freedom" (Deutsche 1996, 151). On the other hand, it seems impossible for Ana to express her identity as a queer Chicana within the barrio. Aside from her participation in the gentrifying process, an internal regeneration is needed to allow the creation of a space for her in her own community; the representation of overtly queer Brown bodies is a crucial problem in itself within the Chicana milieu. In the 80s, the otherwise circumscribed Chicana movements saw a breakthrough thanks to openly queer intellectuals and creators such as Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Francisco Alarcón among many (Aldama 2005, 21-23). Aztlán—the mythic locus of Chicana resistance—became also a queered, inclusive heterotopia where colonial oppression, racialization, patriarchy, and homophobia could be remapped. Nonetheless, the queering of the Chicana heterotopia remains a terrain where old and new perspectives clash. Queer Brownness is also embodied by Norma (Brenda Banda), the shop's Salvadorean employee who is often keeping things together while the family argues and clashes. Her characterization is that

of a butch lesbian, even though she is depicted as caring, fun, and understanding, rather than through common stereotypes.

Yessika is very proud of Ana's work, although it represents yet another struggle. Within her social justice activism, she fights for queer rights, and yet there is a highly conflictual opposition in her stance. Her approach to contesting gentrification processes is often rather Manichean, averse to any kind of innovation that both the external gentrifying agents and the local business actors might invest in. Nonetheless, the barrio's conservative attitudes imply a certain degree of exclusion and negation of diversity affecting her own identity and rights. The mural issue also raises a core conflict around the notion of respect and its centrality in the Chicana community culture: the landlord has all the legal rights to paint on his property's walls without asking permission to the tenants, and yet he should have asked out of respect. Moreover, the possible alternatives to help local businesses to survive and thrive are not very realistic, effective, or feasible. Yessika clearly feels impotent and transfers her frustration to her fighting activism, creating further problems for the owners who are striving to find actual solutions. She comes across as almost obsessed by the fear of losing her community, yet it is also evident that she purposely doesn't want to listen to her barrio peers who are actively trying to avoid displacement. The lack of the necessary institutional support for opposition to the gentrification process is patent, leading to ineffective protests and—even more critically—to conflicts internal to the community, which inevitably contribute to a further weakening of the barrio's social fabric. Casimiro's conversation with Yessika during the protest against the shop (ep. 9) bares the quintessential conundrum: while she states that she cares for the community, accusing him of "selling [its] soul," he reminds her that he too is part of it. Erik chimes in and tells her that if they have to choose between the gentrifiers and themselves, he chooses "us." Yessika then quarrels with Ana, both about the shop issue and because she is going to hold a personal exhibition supported by Tim (ep. 10). Her show is a success and even her mom attends, showing her appreciation; as Erik comments, the meaning of her art is that their "*gente's* joy deserves to be captured." Nonetheless, Ana gets fed up with the exploitative discourse characterizing the gallerist and the Anglo

public; upon hearing the news that another gentrifier investor has already bought the building where the taco shop is, she spray paints all over the show's main wall "raza not for sale!" and leaves to go visit Erik's newborn daughter at the hospital.

## CONCLUSIONS

Without taking a defined position on the conflicts, the series succeeds in conveying the complexity of the intersectional struggles internal to the neighborhood community and, in fact, the impossibility of leaning starkly to one side or the other. It also effectively stages the underlying sociocultural and economic contexts in which—even without the intervention of gentrifying agency—a reconfiguration would have been inevitable for the neighborhood to adapt to current times and thrive, overcoming its marginalization. Spatial and cultural consciousness, as well as survival, reveal the necessity of not falling into overbearing, commodifying mechanisms. The core theme at the base of ethnic resistance to external gentrifying actors and capricious hipster appropriation lies in Yessika's words, as she states that "they may love all our shit, but they don't love us" (ep. 1). The series ends with Casimiro being stopped due to the fine he must pay for his initial vandalism charges and thus, getting detained by ICE agents. Gentrification has indirectly led to an even more dramatic displacement: most likely, he will be deported to Mexico. Scourged by issues related to unjust urban development practices, the family splits and is forced to move in new directions. Despite the bittersweet ending, their hope is resilient; as Casimiro tells Ana in episode one, "somos pinches pobres, pero con un chingo de sueños" [we are damn poor, but with lots of dreams].

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