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**Money**

## **How 'Woke' Liberals Convince Themselves That Gentrifying Is Okay**

As a gentrifier myself, I decided to study how we justify what we're doing.

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By **Katie Donnelly**

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IMAGE: MATT BROWN/[FLICKR](#)

In 2015, my college roommates and I shared the top half of a brownstone in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant (Bed-Stuy) neighborhood. Historically Black, Bed-Stuy has been **rapidly gentrifying** over the past few decades, a transition made visible in the juxtaposition of discount calling-card stores and vegan juice bars. In 1980, Bed-Stuy's population was only 5 percent white and median gross housing rent was \$580 (in 2016 dollars). By 2012, the white population had jumped to 17 percent and the median rent skyrocketed to more than \$1,000 (in 2016 dollars). According to a **recent article in *Curbed***, median rent in Bed-Stuy today is \$2,000.

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As politically engaged young people, my friends and I were concerned about the displacement of longtime residents, who are overwhelmingly low-income and people of color. We often discussed these concerns at parties and on social media. We'd share posts about new high-rises being built in Brooklyn or elderly residents being tricked into selling their homes far below market rate, and comment with appropriate outrage. When we saw Starbucks replace bodegas, we'd shake our heads and exchange "there-goes-the-neighborhood" looks.

But we were noticeably silent on our own role in the process. As relatively affluent college students, our presence in the neighborhood was driving up rent and fueling the changes we lamented. This made me wonder: How do liberal gentrifiers, like my friends and I, reconcile our worldviews with the reality of these behaviors and the consequences? Do we have a political blind spot when it comes to our own actions? I put it to the test with a **study**, which was recently published in *City and Community Journal*.

For the study, I interviewed 35 gentrifiers (adult residents who moved into the neighborhood after 2000 and had or were pursuing a bachelor's degree) residing in or around Bed-Stuy and asked them about their experience living in the neighborhood. I was careful not to bring up the topic of gentrification, explicitly because I didn't want to bias the responses. Yet within the first few minutes of each interview, all of my interviewees independently broached the subject.

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## **Do we have a political blind spot when it comes to our own actions?**

There were common threads throughout the interviews. Bed-Stuy's history is what attracted many of my respondents to the neighborhood. They liked the diversity and the "grit" of the neighborhood, but acknowledged that the area was changing and expressed guilt for their own role in the process. As one interviewee, who I call Amy, put it: "I guess I feel a little like I'm the white girl who moved in to your [longtime Black residents'] neighborhood. So, I feel a little guilty?"

When I probed respondents on these feelings, I found that they minimized their complicity in the process of gentrification by using what social psychologists call "moral disengagement"—a strategy that has been used to rationalize behaviors ranging from playground bullying and unethical consumerism to Nazism. Interviewees differentiated themselves from the stereotypical disengaged gentrifier by presenting themselves as "good neighbors." They described charming stoop conversations with longtime residents and often spoke in an over-the-top praiseworthy manner about neighbors who they hardly knew. For example, a respondent I call Jonathan told me that he felt more connected to the people in Bed-Stuy than any previous neighborhood he'd lived in. When I asked him to give me a few

examples he mentioned bodega owners, dry cleaners, and a woman on the corner with an “immaculate garden” whose name he did not know.

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In many cases, gentrifiers' guilt was tied to race. Gentrification is not simply an economic transformation of a neighborhood, but is a racial transformation as well. White gentrifiers who find themselves in the uncommon position of being a racial minority in their neighborhoods often experience this situation as highly stressful and respond defensively (e.g., through guilt, fear, or avoidance), a phenomenon which scholar Robin DiAngelo calls “**white fragility**.” DiAngelo argues that when confronted with their racial identity and its implications, even progressive whites “often opt to protect what they perceive as their moral reputation, rather than recognize or change their participation in systems of inequity or domination.”

Respondents in my study exhibited these defensive mechanisms when I asked about their engagement in the community. Most respondents expressed wanting to get involved, through volunteering or attending neighborhood block parties, but few actually did. When I asked why not, they cited hesitation or feelings of intimidation. One respondent, Gabby, told me a story of her neighbor asking her whether she was planning to attend a block meeting. She said that on the one hand she wanted to invest in the neighborhood, but on the other hand thought her presence at the meeting might “change it in a not-positive way,” and ultimately decided not to go. Another respondent, Benjamin, told me he wanted to volunteer at a community garden but felt “intimidated by the neighborhood and by the whole process in which [he] was taking part, in gentrification.”



### **The Hidden Systems at Work Behind Gentrification**

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To justify their fears of being white in predominantly Black spaces and not appear racist, respondents used “face-saving” techniques. Gabby’s reframing of her own fear as concern for the other meeting attendees is one example. Others pointed to a lack of time or other practical impediments as reasons for their minimal involvement in the community.

Another way gentrifiers justified their behaviors was to deny the negative consequences completely. Several respondents said that the neighborhood’s transformation might actually be a good thing because it was bringing a “diversity” of shops and restaurants to the area. Here they used that word not in the typical sense of racial or ethnic diversity (a diversity which Bed-Stuy already had prior to gentrification), but to refer to the influx of high-end and niche businesses. Jonathan, for instance, was happy that the neighborhood now had high-end Italian restaurants, saying “that’s the taste that [he] has.” He saw this as a positive change because it allowed him to “spend money in the neighborhood” rather than going into the city on weekends, ignoring the fact that his taste for gourmet food is exactly what drives the process of gentrification.

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Similarly, some respondents questioned whether longtime residents were actually being displaced by gentrification. After first expressing guilt that her presence in the neighborhood was making it unaffordable for many families, one respondent, Sarah, then backtracked, saying:

*“And I don’t even know that it’s unaffordable. It’s just that I see sort of the writing on the wall, of like, the dollar signs. Like families who own their own homes know that if they put them on the market and then they can get so much more money for it, and so at some point that becomes sort of a siren call you can’t ignore.”*