

## **Zip Code Colonization: Counter-Narratives of Gentrification’s Traumatic Impact on Philadelphia’s Black Educational Communities**

Carol Richardson McCullough  
*Drexel University*

Keyssh Datts  
*Drexel University*

Ayana Allen-Handy  
*Drexel University*

Kimberly Sterin  
*Drexel University*

Karena Escalante  
*Drexel University*

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### **ABSTRACT**

An American’s residential zip code persists as intricately connected to one’s educational and life outcomes due to the continuous implementation of a web of discriminatory public policies. As the forces of gentrification continue to alter the racial landscape of many cities, long-time Black residents experience traumatic changes affecting which educational opportunities exist in their neighborhoods and for whom. In this study, we use collaborative autoethnographic (CAE) methods to interrogate the traumatic ways gentrification has influenced the lives of three Black Philadelphians – a community elder, a young adult activist, and a mother-scholar. These counter-narratives highlight the interrelationship between place, education, and trauma through the lens of Black spatial agency. Implications for resistance and place-making within a gentrifying society characterized by racial capitalism are provided for educators, policymakers, developers, and community residents.

**Keywords:** neighborhood schools, gentrification, trauma, Black spatial agency, collaborative autoethnography

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In addition to one's home, a person's school often serves as a central place of identity and development (Verhoeven et al., 2019). Since matriculation is largely tied to neighborhood residency in the United States (U.S.), the characteristics of a school often reflect the characteristics of the surrounding neighborhood (Bischoff & Taff, 2020). As generation after generation walk the same halls, participate in the same traditions, and sometimes even have the same teachers, communities form strong bonds with these neighborhood schools and they become pillars of the community (Bateman, 2002; Prati et al., 2018). A person's identity becomes attached to their school's identity which is shared with the community's identity.

The centrality of schools to personal and community identity makes the gentrification-led colonization of neighborhood schools a traumatic experience for longtime residents (Bailey-Fakhoury et al., 2022; Smith & Stovall, 2008). As initially defined by Glass (1964), the process of gentrification includes a rapid displacement of the original, working-class occupiers until the community's character is changed. A person forced to experience this dramatic change to their neighborhood may suffer from what Fullilove (2004) describes as "root shock" or "the traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one's emotional ecosystem" (p. 9). Brown et al. (2016) add that "displacement creates emotional and psychological wounds that are difficult to heal and inflicts trauma that is often undiagnosed among individuals as community bonds are torn apart" (p. 82). The trauma inflicted on community members who experience the dispossession of their homes and community institutions during the process of gentrification is little understood.

The trauma of gentrification-led colonization of one's neighborhood school is further compounded by the racialized component of gentrification and the history of systemic racism in the U.S. (Delgado et al., 2017; Rothstein, 2017; Rucks-Ahidiana, 2021). Seminal gentrification research has focused on class change (Glass, 1964; Marcuse, 1985; Smith, 1996) and the racialized demographic shifts which occur in gentrifying areas are well-documented (Fallon, 2021; Goetz, 2011). Some scholars argue that the racialization of space as a tool for valuation in the gentrification process is just as pivotal, if not more so, than class in efforts to promote 'urban renewal' (Hightower & Fraser, 2020; Hyra, 2012; Rucks-Ahidiana, 2021). As Hightower and Fraser (2020), explain, "these processes involve the creation of value out of the racialization of space whereby Black homeowners and residents are incentivized and often forced to leave as a precursor to predominantly white populations entering" (p. 223). These changes in neighborhood racial composition coincide with changes in culture. As Dantzer (2021) points out, "dispossession involves the explicit taking of both physical land and property and the erasure of symbolic forms of occupation" (p.121). These forms of racial and cultural erasure add another layer to the trauma experienced often by Black people from low-income backgrounds as the white in-movers take over their neighborhoods and schools (Dantzer & Reynolds, 2020).

There is a limited, yet an emerging body of literature that specifically examines the relationship between the traumatic experience of gentrification and the changing educational landscape of urban communities (Bailey-Fakhoury et al., 2022; Rothrock, 2017; Smith & Stovall, 2008; Thomas-EL, 2019). Smith and Stovall (2008) highlight the importance of school change in gentrifying contexts: "as a key contributor to the new gentrification project, education must be part of the analysis. Something as

sanguine as school change should now be viewed as a warning sign for working-class communities of color” (p. 150). Some evidence shows that when white, middle-class families move into gentrifying neighborhoods, they use their social, political, and economic power to influence school policies and programs to serve in the favor of their children often at the expense of Black and lower-income students (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Lukes & Cleveland, 2021). As sites of political and cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), schools have the potential to serve as both the instigator and the instigated upon in gentrifying neighborhoods, particularly as it pertains to documented shifts in racial and socioeconomic status.

Using collaborative autoethnographic (CAE) methods (Chang et al., 2016), we share stories through the lived experiences of three Black Philadelphians – a community elder, a young adult activist, and a mother-scholar. We operationalize these counter-narratives to interrogate the interconnection between zip code trauma, schooling, and Black communities in rapidly gentrifying areas of Philadelphia.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Historically, colonization refers to when a group of people settle among and establish control over a group of indigenous people in a certain area and can include a range of practices such as forced labor, displacement, genocide, and cultural eradication (Paradies, 2016). Due to these devastating effects, the lived experience of colonization is also an experience of trauma. Smallwood et al. (2021) claim that “colonization has affected Indigenous Peoples at multiple levels including health (mental/physical), social, spiritual, economic, and cultural levels” (p. 59). It is important to note that definitions of colonization often include the occupation of both the physical and psychological space (Fanon, 2001). In the context of gentrifying forces, Bailey-Fakhoury et al. (2022) refer to the psychological occupation as the colonization of one’s sociological imagination. The nuanced and complicated impacts of colonization on both place and mind continue to emerge.

Some perspectives highlight decolonization as terminology to describe the centering of indigenous voices, and others view it as a tool for political and performative activism (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Smith (2021) notes that even the term “indigenous” is problematic in that it “appears to collectivize many distinct populations whose experiences under imperialism have been vastly different” (p. 6). The conceptualization and impact of decolonization as an indigenous framework is founded in understanding individual perspectives which inform collective impact.

### **Gentrification**

Urban sociologist Ruth Glass first coined the term “gentrification” in response to changes in the social structure and housing developments in London through the displacement of lower-class populations by the investments of middle and upper class (Glass, 1964). The phenomena of gentrification began to be observed in urban areas worldwide. Previous research has also illuminated the traumatic consequences of gentrification in urban epicenters (Larsen & Hansen, 2008; Hwang & Ding, 2020; Iyanda & Lu, 2021). According to Williams (2015), the multifaceted gentrification

process begins with disinvestment and can have many indicators, such as economic changes in the rent (Smith, 1996), changes in crime (O'Sullivan, 2005) and policing (Laniyonu, 2018), and changes in the percentage of residents with a college education (Galster & Peacock, 1986). In the most severe contexts, gentrification has been considered a public health crisis (Brown et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2020).

Residential displacement is by far one of the most deleterious outcomes of the gentrification process (Sharkey, 2013). Displacement is most often experienced by Black families who are the least capable of keeping up with the financial burdens of remaining in gentrifying urban communities (Raymond et al., 2021). Supporters of gentrification often view the return of white, middle-class residents as a positive occurrence because of the direct investment in low-income communities (van Weesep, 1994; Lipsitz, 2011). Gentrification has developed largely since the 1950s as a process of physical and demographic change in cities across the world with disparate and damaging outcomes for people of color from low-income backgrounds (Randall, 1995; Garafalo, 2009; Laster Pirtle, 2020).

### ***Gentrification and Public Health***

There is a gap in the extant literature concerning the public health implications of gentrification (Brown et al., 2016; Smith, et al., 2020). This omission stands out because “while neighborhood environment is consistently implicated in health outcomes research, gentrification is rarely conceptualized as a public health issue” (p. 845). Smith, et al. (2020) asserts that gentrification has been repeatedly associated with undesirable health effects for Black and other economically vulnerable residents; claiming that gentrification can “foster negative conditions associated with poorer health outcomes such as disrupted social networks from residential displacement and increases in stress” (p. 845). This argument aligns with Fullilove (2004)’s concept of “root shock” where displaced Black people experience “severe emotional and psychological trauma from having their social networks and communities—their roots—destroyed” (Hyra, 2012, p. 499). The lack of attention to the public health implications of gentrification aligns with other instances of neglect to adequately and equitably serve Black Americans in the healthcare system (Laster Pirtle, 2020).

### ***Gentrification and Urban Schools***

Urban schools with majority minoritized populations are systematically and historically marginalized in terms of access, resources, and opportunities (Larsen & Hansen, 2008; Lukes & Cleveland, 2021). Gentrification in urban educational communities can be observed in large demographic changes in a school’s population due to displacement and replacement of local residents (Bailey-Fakhoury et al., 2022; Smith & Stovall, 2008). The literature on gentrification and schools has also shown how school closures disproportionately impact Black students, whose communities are most vulnerable to closures with large economic impacts on the local neighborhood (Ewing, 2018; Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019). Despite the centrality of a school’s reputation to community identity making it a primary indicator of gentrification, there have been few studies which highlight this relationship to date

(Bailey-Fakhoury et al., 2022; Makris & Brown, 2020; Smith & Stovall, 2008) with some of the few focused on Philadelphia (Nelson, 2020; Rothrock, 2017; Thomas-EL, 2019).

### ***Gentrification in Philadelphia***

Philadelphia is the sixth largest city in the United States, and in the top five metropolitan areas for the U.S. Black population (Pew, 2022). The city has had to contend with the outcomes of gentrification and Black residential displacement within the context of a stratified racial and class system (Franklin, 1980; Freeman, 2009). For example, Society Hill, one of the oldest neighborhoods in Philadelphia east of Center City, has also historically been home to a large African American population (McCall, 1966). When this neighborhood became a site for gentrification, displaced residents organized and utilized historic preservation as a form of social preservation through active resistance to urban renewal, calling attention to overall the importance of permanent rehousing in urban renewal endeavors (Ammon, 2018).

Many neighborhoods in Philadelphia have experienced change and the forces of gentrification. In the early 1900s, West Philadelphia was considered a suburb and its residents were largely wealthy white families seeking housing options outside of the city (Miller & Siry, 1980). West Philadelphia became populated by working-class residents including a large percentage of Jewish residents who lived by the various manufacturing factories in the region. By the 1930s, Black families began seeking refuge in West Philadelphia for increased economic and housing opportunities (Perkiss, 2014). As Black residents moved in, many white residents moved out, a phenomena now known as white flight, leaving Black families to occupy used and aging infrastructure (Perkiss, 2014). By the mid-1900s, West Philadelphia had become a largely Black community with local residents referring to it as “Da Bottom” (Kitchen & Associates, 2013) or the “Black Bottom” (Good, 2017, p. 874) in reference to the neighborhood’s racial composition and its geographic location at the bottom of the hill leading to the Schuylkill River. The disinvestment in infrastructure throughout the city resulted in a socioeconomic decline and left many West Philadelphia neighborhoods such as Mantua and Powelton with high poverty rates (Sharkey, 2013). Currently, nearly 44% of residents in Philadelphia are Black and despite higher levels of home ownership compared to other large cities, a high vacancy rate remains (Hwang & Ding, 2020). The cited demographic change and rates of change in homeownership among racialized groups persist as evidential outcomes of gentrification which repeatedly privilege white Americans over Black Americans in Philadelphia and many similar cities across the nation.

**Table. 1 Conceptual Framework**

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<b>Critical Race Theory</b> (Delgado et al., 2017)	→	<b>Racial Capitalism</b> (Robinson, 2020)	→	<b>Black Spatial Agency</b> (Montgomery, 2016)
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Our conceptual framework for this study is rooted in Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado et al., 2017), incorporates the socioeconomic lens of racial capitalism (Robinson, 2020), and, finally, utilizes the construct of Black spatial agency (Montgomery, 2016) to understand how three Black Philadelphia residents have experienced and processed the ways gentrification has disrupted their lives and educational communities.

Emanating from Critical Theory (Du Bois, 1903/2014; Habermas, 1989/2021; Hegel, 1807/2018), CRT is a framework developed by legal scholars in the 1970s to interrogate the relationship between race, racism, and power in the U.S. (Delgado et al., 2017). Critical race theorists believe in five central tenets: (1) racism is endemic to society in the U.S.; (2) racial equality will only be achieved when it converges with the interests of white people; (3) liberalism must be critiqued for how it legitimizes racism; (4) storytelling and counter-storytelling are essential means towards emancipation; and, (5) whiteness is intimately tied to property. CRT provides a useful frame when considering the racial motivations and effects of gentrifying forces which often privilege the property interests of people racialized as white while exploiting those of people racialized as Black (Harris, 1993). Furthermore, our use of storytelling as a means of exposing and documenting these lived realities of Black people who have experienced the forced dispossession of culturally significant institutions aligns with the core spirit of the CRT movement.

Gentrification is a market-driven force of urban development perpetuated by racial capitalism (Rucks-Ahidiana, 2021). The urban gentrification process of pushing out financially vulnerable people of color from their longtime homes and educational communities to serve the interests of people primarily racialized as white is a clear manifestation of racial capitalism (Robinson, 2020; Dantzler, 2021). This lens enables us to better understand the stories of residents as they experience the changes in racial demographics, specifically the accumulation/dispossession of financial wealth between white and non-white communities in Philadelphia over time.

Building upon the ideas of CRT and racial capitalism, we apply the concept of Black spatial agency. As theorized by Montgomery (2016), spatial agency is “the ability to be in, act on or exert control over a desired part of the built-and-natural environment” (Montgomery, 2016, p. 777). Spatial agency refers to both the ability to have physical occupation of a space as well as the ability to maintain psychological power while in that space. She further argues that as social movements such as Black Lives Matter continue to protest forces of racial capitalism “a new public” is produced with the potential for Black spatial agency (p. 777). In their case study, Bailey-Fakhoury et al. (2022) specifically apply this concept in the context of a primarily Black school community in Detroit, MI which who experience the traumatic effects of gentrification.

The school directly engages their youth in resiliency efforts which promote Black spatial agency as “an empowered way of living, experiencing, and understanding the racialized dimensions of spatiality” (p. 20). Black spatial agency offers an ideological path forward for resistance and place-making within a gentrifying society characterized by racial capitalism.

## **METHODS**

Through collaborative autoethnography (CAE) (Chang et al., 2016), this research compiles the experiences of three Black Philadelphia residents with gentrification and education. Emerging quantitative research has documented the effects of gentrification on communities in Philadelphia (Gibbons et al., 2020; Ding et al., 2016) and other major U.S. cities such as New York City (Sutton, 2020), Baltimore (Brown, 2015), and Atlanta (Raymond et al., 2021). However, only a few studies (Ammon, 2018; Bailey-Fakhoury et al., 2022; Freeman, 2011) have utilized qualitative methods to explore the complexities of people's experiences of gentrification and education. And even these studies use secondary source qualitative methods such as interviews (Freeman, 2011) and archival document analysis (Ammon, 2018; Bailey-Fakhoury et al., 2022). This study addresses a methodological gap in the literature on the human experience of gentrification and education by using CAE methods to forefront the unique stories of three Black Philadelphia residents in their own words.

Chang et al. (2014) contend that "CAE is a methodological variation of autoethnography in which the researcher utilizes his/her autobiographical data as a window into the understanding of a social phenomenon" (p. 376). As this study is deeply contextualized by the sociopolitical wave of gentrification occurring in a certain time period and geographic location, we use CAE methods to foster that recurring conversation with self and the world over time. In this study, we frame the window around the traumatic ways gentrification in Philadelphia has influenced the lives of three Black residents, with a specific focus on its effects on their educational communities. This study is guided by the following research question: In what ways has gentrification influenced the educational and socioemotional well-being of Black people in urban school communities in Philadelphia?

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The process of data collection and analysis for this study was conducted with deliberate care. The Principal Investigator (PI) Ayana met Carol and Co-PI Rachel (not an author on this paper) in February of 2017 during a community dinner event open to the public in West Philadelphia. Their conversation at dinner led them to share about the programming and research they each were doing, and their personal experiences of gentrification-induced trauma in their neighborhoods. Rachel, the founding director of Writers Room and Carol, a founding member shared Carol's recent displacement and the overall need for affordable housing options in our community. This community dinner conversation became the origin story of a friendship and professional partnership between these three women. Along with their teams at Writers Room and the School of Education, they secured federal grant funding from AmeriCorps to conduct a community-led participatory action research project researching gentrification, affordable housing, and the untapped potential of university-community cooperative living. While collection of empirical data was taking place, five of the intergenerational project team (the authors on this paper), committed to a collaborative autoethnographic process to document our lived experiences both engaging in the overall research process, and also our own experiences with gentrification and the implications for our educational communities. Factors considered when determining the size of this research team included the

purposeful inclusion of a diversity of identities and experiences, capacity of time and resources, methodological expertise, and feasibility for study completion.

Our team met bi-weekly for one-to-two-hour data collection sessions for six consecutive months. We were tasked to independently work on our personal writings and reflections on our weeks off, and then share and engage in the collaborative process together. During these meetings, the team applied the concurrent collaboration data collection model where according to Chang (2016), team members engage in “same tasks at the same time, often independently, and bring the fruit of their individual labor together for discussion and further progress” (p. 43-44). Using a shared web-based document to record notes, the team meetings would start with a check-in about everyone’s wellbeing, which reflects the team’s belief in centering one another’s humanity before all else, and then we took time for individual reflection and writing. Sometimes we used a prompt related to our larger study’s research question to direct the individual writing time and sometimes the sessions were unstructured. Lastly, we shared what we wrote, emotions that came up for us while writing, and any insights that emerged during the process. Chang et al. (2016) contend,

The strength of the concurrent model is to give researchers space and time for their individual reflection and consideration while collecting autobiographical data. Since their thoughts are formulated without the influence of their co-researchers, when the thoughts are shared, their individual voices can be heard at their full value (p. 44-45).

CAE is an “iterative process of interweaving self-reflexivity with group exploration” (Chang et al., 2014, p. 376). As such, we found that CAE methods allowed for our narratives to emerge in a way that felt true to our voices as well as to evoke an appropriately critical view of the phenomena. While all five members were involved in the data collection and analysis, the narratives of Carol, Keyssh, and Ayana are highlighted in the findings to focus on the experiences of Black Philadelphians. Kimberly and Karena acted as collaborators and confidants whose main role on the team was to map on empirical research and extant literature to the dynamic research process. The emotional labor required both to tell and to publish one’s story, especially of an experience involving trauma, should not be overlooked (Creswell, 2012; Geist-Martin et al., 2010). All five authors nurtured our personal relationships with each other over time, and these relationships are what have made the authenticity and vulnerability shared in this study possible.

### **Positionality**

We include the following positionality statements to explicitly disclose the extent of power and privilege (or lack thereof) that we each inhabit within the sociopolitical landscape (Bourke, 2014).

**Carol Richardson McCullough (she/her)**



I am a daughter of Appalachia, born and raised, having resided in West Virginia's capital city, Charleston, for half of my life before being transplanted. I landed in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, by way of Alabama and Washington, DC. A retired secondary Language Arts public school teacher who was the daughter of teachers, I have seen some things and lived through some more. One could say I am now a "Mountain Mama turned Philly Jawn," though only certain people would understand what that really means. (Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois might get it, if they could fast forward from their placement in history.) At heart, I am a poet and memoirist, as well as a founding member of Writers Room at Drexel University. Additionally, I am a community researcher for the Justice-oriented Youth (JoY) Education Lab at Drexel.

Currently, this study has finally afforded me the opportunity to work alongside academics, students, scholars, activists, and community members—writing, interviewing, researching, and recording ways to combat destruction and displacement in historically Black neighborhoods in spite of trauma accompanying the rapidly changing face of schools and the community.

Dr. Ayana, Kim, Keyssh, and Karena have become like my scholar sisters and warrior research family, fighting the good fight to lay groundwork for neighborhood preservation and residential uplift in the face of colonization and gentrification. In addition to my research family, I am mother to two adult children: an artist on the autism spectrum, and a consultant in corporate America. They are my North Stars who have kept me mining deeply within myself and my often-changing surroundings. However, many times we had to move around—which never was a part of the original plan—we landed together, upright, to rise again. Love is our wellspring for resilience and survival. There are many facets to my story I have not shared. Those I will leave undisturbed, for now. Yet there is, I hope, a glimmer of a wondrous sparkle shining through.

**Keyssh Datts (they/them)**

I am a somatic abolitionist and multimedia creator who uses art to help people learn and unlearn social issues regarding marginalized communities. I am from SouthWest Philly who uses the love of the past, the now, and Afro-futurism to help people learn and unlearn for the betterment of society and humanity. Growing up here not only have I experienced the deep effects of gun violence and gentrification, but I also experienced the harsh conditions of the educational system.

**Ayana Allen-Handy (she/her)**

As a Black woman, wife, mother-scholar, daughter, sister, and educator who was born and raised in West Philadelphia, and at the age of 5 moved to Broomall, PA and attended K-12 schools in the Marple Newtown School District (a majority white district where I was 1 of 4 Black students in my graduation class of nearly 300 students), navigating race, racism, and the juxtapositions of attending school engulfed in whiteness, yet spending my out of school time engulfed in family and Blackness, provided a critical lens by which I have learned to see and move in the world. I

currently work and live with my family in West Philadelphia, and I am ever navigating my positionality within and outside of familial, community, political, and institutional contexts. Working on this project with my co-authors has been life-giving as we have and continue to share space with each other over several years. Sharing our stories and being in what I would call authentic relationship across almost every axis of difference, offered a beautifully rare space in the academy-shared space to laugh, cry, and process the hopes and traumas of Black life mattering and women rights evaporating all together, real and unfiltered.

**Kimberly Sterin (she/her)**

I am racialized as white, of Jewish heritage, gendered as a cis-gendered female, able-bodied, and from a middle-class background. I am a dedicated scholar-activist who aims to bridge gaps between research, policy, and practice in education. I have seven years of experience as a public school English teacher in both middle and high school settings. Currently, I am pursuing a Ph.D. in Education Policy and Leadership. My research interrogates institutional racism and explores how school, district, and federal level finance policies can be leveraged to enhance resource equity and close educational opportunity gaps. Dr. Ayana Allen-Handy is my supervising professor who has overseen my doctoral journey for the past three years. I had the opportunity to meet both Carol and Keyssh in the context of a community participatory action research project that we have been collaborating on for the past three years. Also a Ph.D. student, Karena works with me on multiple projects in Dr. Allen-Handy's JoY lab and has become my good friend. I have developed deep relationships with all four of these amazing people that extend beyond the classroom.

**Karena Escalante (she/her)**

I identify as a first-generation graduate student with roots in El Salvador and Mexico. As a bilingual, able-bodied, heterosexual, and cis-gendered female and early career scholar, I recognize and acknowledge many intersecting identities of age, culture, and ableism that contribute to my own construction of reality. As a former educator and early-career researcher, I am passionate about understanding power relations that are socially and historically constituted. I believe knowledge is shaped by our various social and diverse environmental contexts and am committed to making connections beyond the academic abyss through the commitment of social transformation. I've enjoyed developing relationships with each of the co-authors and learning about the rich Philadelphia history that has helped us inquire about the longstanding impacts of both social and economical systems on this community.

**NARRATIVES**

In the following section Carol, Keyssh, and Ayana each share their own stories and experiences with gentrification in Philadelphia and how it has impacted their educational and cultural communities.

## **Carol's Story**

*\*Then: 19104*

There is nothing genteel, or even gentle, about the act of gentrification. It is in fact a violent act, not as violent as eviction but nonetheless resulting in uprooting of families from the soil of the neighborhoods where they have been planted. I know the meaning of that word. Beyond that, I know what it feels like. There were floods of youthful white faces flowing into my Mantua neighborhood and onto my street at the end of the summer like some kind of seasonal monsoon takeover. They came with their weekend parties and buckets of sand and cigarette butts with smokes that billowed through my open window, second handedly attacking my lungs.

The face of this block changed so much I did not even know many of my neighbors anymore. Then came the time I guess you could say I was gentrified, given notice I had to move out—so the building could be renovated and someone else with more financial means could move in while the new owner made more money. Of course that's not what they said. But that's what they did. Fortunately, I was able to move into a vacant spot on the same block. From my new vantage point that summer I contended with loud hammering and buzzing, sawdust swirling, and drilling in the street. After the painting and refurbishing was completed, the place looked much better than it ever did when I lived there. A sign went up, and not too long thereafter, the new people moved in. That's what gentrification looks like. It sounds like loud backyard parties on a warm springtime night, with beer bottles clanking in the moonlight, disrespecting what once was peaceful solitude. Dogs barking, howling, crying out like they are being neglected while their owners are away, "down the shore" for the weekend. People yelling like nobody else can hear them, as if they own most of the whole neighborhood now so who cares. It smells like somebody's dog took a dump in the yard across the hedges from your open bedroom window. Because it did.

It feels like you have been deemed unworthy of a place to call your own, like getting ready to roam a (food) desert again, searching for a safe place you can afford. It feels like the tick-tick-booming pressure of a countdown clock readying to signal moving time, again. Yes, gentrification means expansion and development at the cost of someone being swept up and swept away like street debris finally cleared off for the newest arrival of an old phenomenon. It means whitewashing Black neighborhoods while uprooting poor people like weeds in a big city's garden. It fills a word bank with terms such as intentional policies, deliberate design, capitalistic criminality, devaluation, social genocide, and trauma. Gentrification is a tool of colonization, the desire to claim, to rename, and to conquer all. It leaves more than a bad taste in the mouth as it empties long-established neighborhoods to refashion trendier ones while adding the word erasure to the bank.

Gentrification is all about taking over a community, redefining and re-branding it, changing and claiming it while pushing out its original residents, who eventually will be bought out or priced out of their own homes. As the financial status of individuals and families living in the neighborhood rises, schools within that neighborhood will change as an influx of people who look nothing like the original

dwellers impose a different set of cultural values and aesthetics, which leads to trauma. When dog parks, coffee shops and maker spaces start to appear, rents rise as schoolhouses close and educational opportunities in the neighborhood often disappear.

Once people are “gentrified out,” the questions always remain: “Where will they go?” and “What resources will they find to help them reestablish themselves in new surroundings?” Housing, schooling, access to food, quality of healthcare, safety from gun violence and crime, all must be navigated, often at once, when community residents are uprooted through gentrification.

Additionally, there is an unspoken assumption of worth tied into a zip code, like, “Tell me where you live and I’ll tell you who you are: how good your school is, how freely drugs flow, what your future potential looks like, how likely you are to live to full adulthood, what you imagine you can accomplish, if you still have an imagination left at all.” This is not right...but sadly, it often is what is.

**\*Now: 19148**

I was gentrified out of my neighborhood in the Promise Zone just beyond the bounds of the University after my apartment underwent a “change in ownership.” After three moves in nine years and facing two more if the new owners moved my family out during renovations and then back upon completion, I decided to relocate to another part of the city entirely, to simplify things for myself. I hate moving. It is disorienting, jarring, and destabilizing. Packing up all possessions and moving is like uprooting a flower and planting it in new soil in a different pot. There is always the question of whether or not it will flourish in its new environment, or wither and shrivel up. So it is with multiple (forced) moves. It is hard on families, especially on schoolchildren, who might be overcome by the newness of it all, having to deal with a new school, new classmates, teachers, and expectations. Things get lost or broken in the process of the move. Friendships may become distant. Quality of life is disrupted, depending upon how quickly the adjustment can be made to the newness. On some blocks, life itself depends upon making the quick adjustment.

My move took me from the west side of my city to its south side and into a zip code rich with an immigrant vibe. No longer did I live in a food desert, but in fact, my house is but a half block away from two well-stocked corner stores, one Mexican-owned and just across the street, Asian. The Mexican store has all manner of canned goods and fresh fruits and produce packed into its tiny frame, often brimming out onto tables outside. Foods like mangoes, pineapples, apples, citrus fruits, lettuce, carrots, eggplant, ginger, spinach, potatoes, yams, peanuts, watermelon, berries, asparagus, mushrooms, Brussels sprouts, and spices. Everything.

Thank goodness for this bounty so readily available and easily accessible. During the height of the Pandemic, had I still resided in my old neighborhood, the struggle to find healthy food while staying safe would have left me undone, because the closest grocery store was nearly two miles away, a long walk or the added expense of a ride. The corner store in the old neighborhood was somewhat of a joke, with not much in the way of healthy food for sale. Sure, there was bread, milk, juice, over-ripe bananas and apples if you were lucky. Lots of candy, starchy pasta noodles and canned sauce,

sugary sweet cereal, and deli style fresh cut sandwich meat laden with sodium that no doubt sent the elders' blood pressure sky high. Coolers were full of high fructose soda which carried an extra tax, supposedly to benefit the public schools (but did it really?).

There was such a contrast between the west and south sides of the same city. Now, if I look out my upstairs window in my newest home, I can see what used to be a secondary vocational school just blocks away. However, the District closed this school. The building was vacant for a time until someone purchased it to turn it into what they advertised as a "maker space." It angered me to see a school close that could have met the needs of a distinct population of teenagers who were not college bound, but it infuriated me to see the trendy ones move in and take it over. It first caught my attention a few years ago when I saw an advertisement for their rooftop bar with its "breathtaking views of the city." It was as if they moved in, took over, and positioned themselves in a prime spot to look down upon the people who still lived there—all on the site of what used to be a public vocational school. I swore to myself I would never go there, even though now it was so close.

Well, recently my favorite food truck anchored itself outside the place during an Open House, so I decided to pick up lunch with my family. My daughter, an alumna of the city's public school student union and a social justice warrior at heart, was curious regarding what had been done with the school, having heard it housed a wellness clinic, arts studios, and other small business sites, in addition to the requisite dog park outside. So we decided to pop in and take a look. The most striking room was a coffee shop called The Machine Shop, that most likely was once a place where teenagers learned how to build and repair different machines, a vocation which could offer them success away from the excess gun violence in the streets. I wondered what became of the former students, where they landed when the closure dust settled, and how they were faring today. Where were they now on the cityscape I viewed from the "breathtaking" rooftop vantagepoint?

### **Keyssh's Story**

The first thing the colonizer does is change the name, and when you do not know your name - you do not know your history. When you do not know your history, you are missing key and vital information to lead your community towards liberation. I stand here in a city undergoing a community memory amputation as its members are at a cry for help to save the last of what's left of a dying city currently being brought up by developers. Growing up in Philadelphia, losing friends to loose bullets, and watching family members go without shelter, I've slowly come to a deep observation about the state of our dying community. Black people are not born dangerous but they are born into dangerous environments that perpetuate them to be killed or pushed out, and to solve the crisis of gun violence and gentrification we have to look at how cities are constructed. "Of the 57 blocks where ten or more people were killed they were on federally deemed redlined maps..."

When you look at the construction of our environment you realize that Black people here are living in toxic environments. We are exposed to poor school conditions, pollution filled factories, food insecurity, over policing, and lack of resources. These toxic environmental conditions lead to toxic decisions. For example,

a 1 percent increase of food insecurity leads to a 12 percent increase of violent crime. Because a school's funding runs off the taxes that come into the neighborhood, low-income areas have been well exposed to these conditions. From asbestos to lack of school psychologist, students in areas at risk of gentrification are well exposed to these toxic environments, that lead to toxic decisions made to push them into the mass incarceration system or put them off the street.

When also looking at the construction of our environment you also slowly start to understand that Black hoods are looked at as colonies. This means that because the condition of hoods in Philadelphia is so degraded, developers look to target these areas which leads to the further displacement of families. For example, over 70 Black families will be displaced from the apartment complex on 40th and Ludlow some anchor institutions because they have an extreme amount of unfair capital power. West Philadelphia was also renamed to University City, not by community but by developers that had this plan to take over the land. It is also important to note city council members and structural racism embedded in policy has allowed for this to happen.

We are undergoing a state of emergency and the condition that the city is in is something we need to take deeply serious. There's no way elders should be pushed out of their homes they spent the last 50 years in and forced to relocate. Residents also shouldn't have to worry about their 6 year old being shot up when playing in sprinklers to ease their mind of the trauma of growing up in a country that has everything set up against you.

The fight to save our community in Philadelphia, is the fight to save every hood in America. The fight against gentrification is the fight for environmental justice. But to fight for environmental justice is to choose to go to serious war with a country responsible for genocide. However, even through all the observations, learning from history tells us that, in the end, we will win. And whether you choose to fight or not the climate will change, and whether everything is burned or torn down a lost city will soon find hope. The question just is how soon? How many of us will choose to look at the structure? How many of us will choose the side of nature?

### **Ayana's Story**

Gentrification's psychological toll is palpable when all five senses collide in service of an attempt (albeit measly) to process the changes happening all around me in my community-the 19104. I know it's happening; I can feel it happening, but internalizing what is truly happening is much harder. Yet and still I often struggle to put my lips to form words to express what I'm working through in the interior... but perhaps putting pen to paper can provide reprieve...provide a source of solace. Philly is my home, thus making me a Philly Jawn. In 1957, my grandparents who had migrated from Spartanburg, South Carolina during the Great Migration moved to the 58th hundred block of Addison St. in the 19143 and purchased their first home for \$7,000. The first time I saw the original deed to the house and physically held it in my hand was a few days after my Grandma had passed on to her eternal home at the age of 90. The loss of our family matriarch was of course heartbreaking, but also caused me to contemplate who was going to carry on our family legacy. Unbeknownst

to me, my Grandma's death on the morning after Christmas in 2014 was foreshadowing, for I would soon be moving back home to Philly in August 2015 to start my journey as an Assistant Professor, and in a sense stepping into a new role as the next generation in line behind my mom as the oldest grand-daughter in the family.

Today I live less than 10 minutes away from my grand-parents home, still in West Philly with my husband and son, a block from campus where I sit perched atop a tightrope ever striving to gain balance between my complex positionalities as a Black mother-scholar, university employee, neighbor, wife to a Black man, mother to a Black boy...in America. I can't fight the feelings that somehow I simultaneously wear the scarlet letter of the university and my Blackness and that my presence means that my family too are gentrifiers who are here to push existing residents out. In a conversation with a neighbor who lives across the street and who has lived in her home for over forty-five years, she disputes my feelings sharing that I am "one of us" and "you're a young Black family and we are glad you're here, you're not pushing us out, you're keeping us in". A sigh of relief as I breathe out my imposter feelings and breathe in a sense of belonging...I'm home. Deep down, I know exactly what my neighbor means because I too feel a sense of being displaced, of the erasure of my people, our culture, and our institutional treasures such as our churches in our neighborhood. However, perhaps the most visible place of gentrifying change is the local neighborhood school.

Being a teacher and school counselor for 11 years and now as an education professor couldn't have prepared me for dropping my own son off to Kindergarten this August. I just don't know how to be on this side of the table, the side of being the Mommy. For years, parents entrusted me with their babies, but it has been incredibly hard for me to let mine go. My son's school is a quintessential example of how urban schools reflect the ongoing gentrification process. About six years ago the land where the school was built was home to University City High School, a predominantly Black high school that served "The Black Bottom" neighborhood since the 1960s during the urban renewal of that era, yet was completely demolished in 2015. At the time, I lived a block from the school and witnessed its demolition daily. I often saw residents come to the school looking through the gates in dismay as they watched their high school become rubble. It was heartbreaking to watch them, and their disbelief was palpable as they reminisced and tried to hold on to the memories of yester-years. So, in the midst of this complicated past and even present tensions, the new school building was built as part of a 1-billion-dollar re-development project. The school building is now two years old and houses a K-4 elementary school and a 5-8 middle school. The school is bordered on every side by shiny brand new urban buildings, active construction sites with hard hat construction workers on every side and a beer garden practically on the school grounds. The buildings now house our brand new university health science building, science center buildings, and upscale apartments which many of the existing residents cannot afford; it's a concrete jungle if I've ever seen one. Drop off and pick up is like an episode of parking wars, while also dodging the many parents riding their kids on bikes to school so you don't get run over.

The school is racially and culturally diverse with many of the families coming from outside of the catchment area, and I can't help but feel the tension in the air, the stark differences between the white families and the Black and Brown families.

Neither one of us really making an effort to speak and get to know each other. Or the Home and School Association meetings that are held early morning and mid-day, inconveniently for many working families where I am one of few Black parents in the room, and some of the white Mom “Karens” monopolize the conversation, complaining and calling themselves advocating for their child(ren) and not all children. It drives me insane to feel like this school was built for a future that is less Black and Brown, for a neighborhood that holds so much history, culture, and pride for Philadelphia’s Black community. What will happen to the Black Bottom in the next 2, 5, 10 years? Signs of intentional and systematic erasure loom all around, and I can’t help but think about the traumatic impacts of witnessing these changes and watching one’s history forgotten. I think about the many alumni of the University City High School and their legacies. There is no physical edifice of their school’s existence, no artifacts that show that they once walked the hallways and developed life-long friendships in that building.

Now stands a school that will one day educate a student body that each year will become less Black and Brown, demographics shifting like a wildfire. Black and Brown families and those of low SES will be unable to afford to live in the catchment area due to the ensuing impacts of looming gentrification and development in this university-adjacent community. I can’t help but feel like this is intentional, that this is a strategic set up to push people out. I think of my complex role in all of this as university professor and school Mommy- reflecting back to my ancestors who came and put down roots here in West Philly and I wonder will and when we too will be forgotten? Then I look at my son’s smiling face as we dance to Philly’s own: The O’Jays song Love Train at his school’s Philly sports festival in the school yard to celebrate the Eagle’s undefeated record and the Phillies trip to the World Series. All the kids and their families, Black, white, Brown and everything in between dressed in their favorite Eagles, Phillies, 76ers, and Flyers attire eating hoagies, tasty cakes, and soft pretzels and drinking “hugs” (too bad it was too cold for “wooder” ice). Everyone doing the limbo, singing, playing, grooving down the Soul Train Line, having fun, and showing our school and Philly pride, and I think to myself - oh this is what the world could be if we all lived and learned together, my past and future colliding in a perfect harmony of “people all over the world, join in, start a love train, a love train”.

## **IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSIONS**

As we lift up the stories of our lived experiences across our intersectional identities and complex navigation of gentrifying communities, our narratives in and of themselves are enough. Like Miller et al. (2020), we, too, believe in narrative as a transformative tool for change but also recognize the need for explicating their application. Thus, we accompany our narratives with the following implications for educators, developers, policymakers, and community members.

One way gentrification manifests itself inside the classroom is through changes in enrollment. Carol advises: Teachers, be especially aware of “the new kid” and take time to look into the circumstances that led to their arrival. Consider possible traumatic uprooting; welcome them and help them grow in the new environment.



Watch out for the one who has “a lean and hungry look.” They probably are, and won’t be able to focus on feeding their mind when their body has not been fed. In addition to teach to the test, teach to the trauma and move towards a healing justice framework (Garo et al., 2018).

Gentrification is a choice. Developers and policymakers should not only acknowledge but address the damaging effects of uprooting people from their social support systems, cultural institutions, and longtime homes for purposes of urban development. We recognize and value that many community activists are continually advocating for the preservation of their community’s residential and educational institutions. We want to echo their calls and emphasize the necessity of listening to community voices. Carol shares,

Each time I have met it (gentrification) face to face, it basically paralyzes me, until I speak to the right person who can lead me to someone who can help me (find a new place, helping hands to physically move-pack & unpack). Perhaps a recommendation could be to form a grassroots organization of “helping hands: Black real estate agents, Black moving companies, church outreach folks. We must also consider what is being done to save communities such as the 40th St. townhouses and its residents. Examine how they are trying to fight the power and how they are trying to uproot them and expand whatever organization is behind this. It’s almost overwhelming to be faced with being forced to move out, leave your family surroundings, and come up with 1st-last-& securing money and moving expenses. These gentrifiers who put people out on the street should be forced by law to compensate displaced residents by paying them an amount to cover their reestablishment into a comparable home (apartment 1st/last security and moving). They should be forced to see that their greed has a negative impact on those individuals they uproot, and they should pay a price right off the top of the profit they gain from their transactions.

In addition, in situations where schools such as the example that Ayana shared in the story represent changing demographics and looming gentrification, a focus on the traumatic impacts of these experiences for children and families should be addressed. As Keyssh shares the fight against gentrification is a multi-pronged endeavor that must encompass broader fights for social justice.

### **Acknowledgement**

This paper emanates from a larger community-led participatory action research project that was funded by the Office of Research and Evaluation at AmeriCorps under Grant No. 18REHPA002 through the Community Conversations research cooperative agreement competition. Opinions or points of view expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of, or a position that is endorsed by AmeriCorps.

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**CAROL RICHARDSON MCCULLOUGH**, BA, is a Community Researcher in the JoY Education Lab at Drexel University. Her major research interests explore combatting gentrification and displacement effects on children and families. Email: [cm3525@drexel.edu](mailto:cm3525@drexel.edu)

**KEYSSH DATTS**, Community Researcher, in the JoY Education Lab at Drexel University. Their major research lies in the area of environmental justice and colonialism. Email: [kkeyssh@gmail.com](mailto:kkeyssh@gmail.com)

**AYANA ALLEN-HANDY**, PhD, is an Associate Professor and Director of the Justice-oriented (JoY) Education Lab at Drexel University. Her research interests include urban education, Black women and girls, social contexts of education, and youth and community-driven participatory action research. Email: [ama433@drexel.edu](mailto:ama433@drexel.edu)

**KIMBERLY STERIN**, PhD Candidate, is a Doctoral Fellow in the School of Education at Drexel University. She serves as the Research Operations Manager in the Justice-oriented Youth (JoY) Education Lab. Her major research interests lie in the area of K-12 school finance and resource management as it intersects with social justice in all its forms. Email: [ksterin@gmail.com](mailto:ksterin@gmail.com)

**KARENA ESCALANTE**, PhD Candidate, is a Research Fellow in the Justice-oriented Youth Education Lab in the School of Education at Drexel University. Her major research interests lie in the area of multicultural education in both U.S. and international contexts. Email: [kae88@drexel.edu](mailto:kae88@drexel.edu)

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