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The New Westward Expansion: Settler Colonialism and Gentrification in Paula Fox's *Desperate Characters* and Kali Fajardo-Anstine's *Sabrina and Corina*

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The New Westward Expansion: Settler Colonialism and
Gentrification in Paula Fox's *Desperate Characters* and Kali
Fajardo-Anstine's *Sabrina and Corina*

A Thesis by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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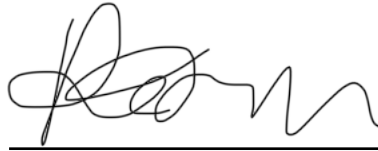
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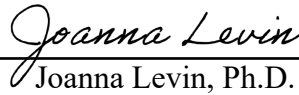
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Justine Van Meter, Ph.D.

May 2024

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Sabrina and Corina

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by Miranda C. Roberts

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ABSTRACT

The New Westward Expansion: Settler Colonialism and Gentrification in Paula Fox's *Desperate*

Characters and Kali Fajardo-Anstine's *Sabrina and Corina*

by Miranda C. Roberts

This thesis explores two underexplored works of gentrification literature—Paula Fox's novel, *Desperate Characters* (1970) and Kali Fajardo-Anstine's short story collection, *Sabrina & Corina* (2019). *Desperate Characters* offers a nuanced and critical examination of characters with privilege who move into Brooklyn in the 1960s, which involves the displacement of Black and Latinx communities; Fajardo-Anstine's collection introduces Denver as a site of dramatic gentrification in the new century, by portraying Latinx characters from older neighborhoods who must adjust to the disintegration and cohesiveness of their communities in the face of gentrification. In my discussion of these works, I draw from pre-existing scholarship as necessary to discuss how the writers use language which reframes gentrification within displacements involved in a longer history of settler colonialism in the U.S. In Fox's novel, newly-arrived gentrifiers, the Bentwoods, engage in a new iteration of conquest in the urban frontier, often frustrated by realities which undermine their aestheticized ideal. The novel maintains an uneasy tone about those who are causing displacement of others throughout, while Fox's language likens the endeavor to imperialist expansion of European powers. The history of Indigenous displacement is made more directly visible in Fajardo-Anstine's narratives, which include characters who are descendants of people first shaped by the Spanish colonial expansion in North America, prior to nineteenth-century U.S. cultivation of the American West. The themes of frontier and westward expansion manifest in new ways, so that the displacement of

underprivileged communities can also be seen as a form of modern-day settler colonialism. By highlighting these works, this thesis situates gentrification within a longer history of colonization, and centers the conflict of gentrification presented through opposing perspectives.

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1 Introduction

The notion of “gentrification” in scholarly discussions often emphasizes the role of the real-estate market and policy making in the changing city, but has always shown a concern for those displaced in the process. In 1964, when Ruth Glass first coined the now-omnipresent term, she saw it as a phenomenon of working class regions in London being overtaken by its middle class: “One by one, many of the working class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle classes—upper and lower. [...] Once this process of ‘gentrification’ starts in a district, it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed” (xviii). Three decades later, Neil Smith’s *Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (1996) saw the phenomenon as an accelerated one further driven by government policies in a global age, applicable to the real estate market in the United States: “It is no longer about a narrow and quixotic oddity in the housing market but has become the leading residential edge of a much larger endeavor: the class remake of the central urban landscape” (39). P.E. Moskowitz’s *How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighborhood* (2018) writes against a simplified characterization of gentrification as “hipster-fication” of neighborhoods that brings trendy food and drink establishments for new residents, and focuses more on its effects: “Gentrification is a system that places the needs of capital (both in terms of city budget and in terms of real estate profits) above the needs of people. [...] The policies that cause cities to gentrify are crafted in the offices of real estate moguls and in the halls of city government. The coffee shop is the tip of the iceberg” (8-9).

Cultural critics and creative writers have also shared this important concern about the displacement of less affluent urban residents in the city and the gradual disappearance of a pre-existing urban neighborhood in the gentrifying process on both sides of the Atlantic. When Sarah

Brouillette addressed the representation of gentrification in London's East End through Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), she writes that it is "at once about making places safer and more livable, and about property developers and real estate companies exploiting opportunities to sell expensive new condos, which leads to existing residents, often renters, moving out of neighborhoods they've come to see as integral to their communities and identities" (426). She recognizes that gentrification arises out of predetermined systems of policy and capitalism, while also underscoring the centrality of these neighborhoods to the culture and communal identities of the local populations. Sarah Schulman, whose novels have been staged in gentrified New York, similarly observes the aestheticizing often involved the representation of gentrification:

There is something inherently stupid about gentrified thinking. It's a dumbing down and smoothing over of what people are actually like. It's a social position rooted in received wisdom, with aesthetics blindly selected from the presorted offerings of marketing and without information or awareness about the structures that create its own delusional sense of infallibility. (50-51)

Recently, scholar and author Thomas Heise interacted with authors problematizing gentrification in their works by conducting a sustained study of gentrification as a central plot device in contemporary works of crime fiction set in New York City. In his comprehensive work *The Gentrification Plot: New York and the Postindustrial Crime Novel* (2022), Heise takes a geographic approach in the organization of his analysis, using each chapter to consider a different one of New York City's neighborhoods and crime novels set in each. In his own words, Heise describes his text as "a work of microgeographical contextualization" (9). His examination

is invested in literary representations of gentrification and crime, centering discussions on the decline in crime in New York City and authors' interest in the disruptive nature of gentrification. Specifically, Heise "analyzes how large-scale postindustrial changes, which are hastened by policing, real estate development, tax policy, and zoning ordinances at the local level, are given form in literary narratives anchored in specific environments" (9). Heise argues the authors whose texts he studies are interested in demonstrating crime plots involving such casts of characters and neighborhoods as would not and will not be found in the corporatized, sanitized spaces of the city. Ultimately, Heise's interest is the emergence of what he calls the "gentrification plot" in the crime genre, which is comprised of the convergence of themes such as "stories of urban displacement, racial conflict, class grievance, community erosion, and cultural erasure" in contemporary crime fiction (7). While Heise's analysis provides a thorough investigation of recent instances of gentrification within the crime genre, this thesis will expand Heise's work by turning to gentrification and urban displacement within pieces of literary fiction.

In this thesis, I focus on two underexplored works of U.S. gentrification literature: Paula Fox's novel, *Desperate Characters* (1970), and Kali Fajardo-Anstine's short story collection, *Sabrina & Corina* (2019). Though these works of narrative fiction maintain a steady focus on displacement of urban neighborhoods and offer an important critical engagement with the residents' psyche rather than interests of real estate industry or policy makers, they have largely been unexamined. They offer different viewpoints situated at different moments in the history of gentrification in the U.S. *Desperate Characters* offers a nuanced and critical examination of characters with privilege who move into Brooklyn in the 1960s, which involves the displacement of Black and Latinx communities; Fajardo-Anstine's collection introduces Denver as a site of dramatic gentrification in the new century, by portraying Latinx characters from older

neighborhoods who must adjust to the disintegration and cohesiveness of their communities in the face of gentrification. Both texts are interested in the intersection of gentrification and settler colonialism, specifically with the former as a proposed new manifestation of the latter. The relationship between concepts of gentrification and settler colonialism has been discussed by scholars such as Margaret Ellis-Young, who claims: “In an effort to sustain its dominance, settler society continues to remake the Indigenous land it violently claims. Gentrification, an inequitable process of reinvestment that assigns space new meanings, uses, and users in ways that privilege whiteness and white capital, is thus implicated in the reproduction of both settler possession and Indigenous dispossession” (4). Here, Ellis-Young argues gentrification plays the role of the reproduction of settler colonialism and possession, specifically in its dealings with Native populations in our country. Robyn Burns and Lisbeth A. Berbary are similarly interested in the role of gentrification as affecting Indigenous populations and remanifesting the settler colonial project, arguing:

Just as *terra nullius* was used to deny Indigenous land ownership and sovereignty around what was deemed “unoccupied nature,” the notion of urban space as underused and in need of “revitalization” [...] treats places as empty and void of meaning, ready to be made more meaningful through placemaking, rendering placemaking inextricable from the historical and pervasive violence of settler colonialism and gentrification. (646)

Burns and Berbary identify settler colonialism and gentrification each as “pervasively violent,” though the exhibition and severity of that violence differs. Although scholars such as these have been primarily interested in gentrification’s effect on Indigenous peoples, it has also been

discussed within the context of its effects on Black, Latinx, and working class groups, among others. Within the title of *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, Smith's designation of gentrification taking place on the "new urban frontier" signals his view of its role as the new arena for conquest. Fajardo-Anstine's *Sabrina & Corina* demonstrates the effects of modern gentrification and settler colonialism on Indigenous and Latinx groups in the ways Ellis-Young, Burns, and Berbary discuss, while Fox's *Desperate Characters* offers a vivid portrayal of the new urban frontier Smith discusses.

In my discussion of these works, I draw from pre-existing scholarship as necessary to discuss how the writers use language which reframes gentrification within displacements involved in a longer history of settler colonialism in the U.S. Despite the general lack of recognition, Fox's novel is groundbreaking in its examination of these themes and a precursor to many gentrification narratives often given greater focus. In her novel, the newly-arrived gentrifiers (the Bentwoods) engage in a new iteration of conquest in the urban frontier, often frustrated by realities which undermine their aestheticized ideal. The novel maintains an uneasy tone about those who are causing displacement of others throughout, while her language likens the endeavor to imperialist expansion of European powers. The history of indigenous displacement is made more directly visible in Fajardo-Anstine's narratives, which include characters who are descendants of people first shaped by the Spanish colonial expansion in North America, prior to nineteenth-century U.S. cultivation of the American West; much like the majority of her characters, Fajardo-Anstine herself comes from a local Denver community at risk of displacement from the same space inhabited by her family for generations. The themes of frontier and westward expansion manifest in new ways, so that the displacement of underprivileged communities can also be seen as a form of modern-day settler colonialism.

2 Representations of the Gentrifier in *Desperate Characters*

Desperate Characters is set in late-1960s Brooklyn, New York. The novel follows Otto and Sophie Bentwood, a couple living in an area of Brooklyn gradually being gentrified by upper class white homeowners, such as the Bentwoods. Fox situates the Bentwoods as participants in a preliminary wave of gentrification in Brooklyn and calls the practice into question, along with those who take part in it. When an interviewer commented that her middle-class characters were not permitted to enjoy their comforts, Fox simply responded: “No! That’s why I’m not read!” (Tillman 26). There is an unsettling tone maintained throughout the novel, intensified by the unpredictably volatile relationships between the characters. The novel’s preoccupation with this disconcerting tone seems to be as important as the depiction of the emotional turmoil her characters are experiencing. The Bentwoods are clearly struggling emotionally throughout the novel, and are often confused by their own distress, as if sensing their own lack of real entitlement to be in the spaces they now occupy; despite their comfortable life, they often experience bouts of inexplicably uncontrolled rage towards one another.

In many ways, *Desperate Characters* is a novel remarkable for its establishing and maintaining of a particular overall tone than in presenting a definitive narrative arc. Rather than moving towards definitive events that would dramatically alter the protagonists, the narrative offers a series of minor incidents in everyday life over the course of a few days that work more to characterize the Bentwoods than to advance a larger plot. The episodes maintain a flat tone throughout, while provoking a sense of defamiliarization and at times even discomfort. The reader is propelled forward by the curious, increasingly troubling nature of the environment they live in, as well as their unpredictably volatile relationship. Otto and Sophie, along with friends in their social set, seem to struggle living in a space that does not fully feel like it belongs to them.

The gentrifiers in this novel sense that they are causing displacement of others (“What happens to people [...] when the houses are bought? Where do they go? I wonder about that,” 5), while not fully questioning their own right to be in the spaces they have chosen to live.

2.1 Establishing and Unveiling Privilege

Otto and Sophie are identified as affluent (“They had a high income [...] they could purchase pretty much what they wanted,” 15) and well educated (36), while also highly self-satisfied. The novel opens with a description of the Bentwoods’ dinner table, with a “straw basket which held slices of French bread, an earthenware casserole filled with sautéed chicken livers, peeled and sliced tomatoes on an oval willowware platter Sophie had found in a Brooklyn Heights antique shop, and *risotto* Milanese in a green ceramic bowl” (21). The narrator’s meticulous depiction sets the scene for the rest of the narrative, directly placing the Bentwoods in an elevated social class that can afford finery in their home. The narrator goes on to describe the bright light illuminating the room which is “softened by the stained glass of a Tiffany shade” (21). The *art nouveau* lampshade further solidifies their positioning as wealthy, along with items such as “a bookcase which held, among other volumes, the complete works of Goethe and two shelves of French poets” (22). The contents of the bookshelf serve to elevate the Bentwoods in social standing through their education implied from the literary works on the bookshelf, not likely accessible to those from a financially challenged background, thus establishing a sense of the Bentwoods’ wealth and privilege.

Addressing this introduction to their way of life, James Peacock comments on its “carefully constructed picture of middle-class accumulation, sophistication, and authenticity” which serves to “[communicate] a studied cosmopolitanism achieved through an interior picturesque suited to a couple who share a name with a furniture style” (109). This emphasis

highlights a stark divide between the tasteful spread that is laid out inside their home and what is taking place outside their windows. As Otto and Sophie notice a cat on their back porch, Otto observes the poverty of their neighbors: “Across the yard, [...] he saw the rear windows of the houses on the slum street. Some windows had rags tacked across them, others, sheets of transparent plastic. From the sill of one, a blue blanket dangled. There was a long tear in the middle of it through which he could see the faded pink brick of the wall” (23). The contrast between the Bentwood’s bookcase full of German and French poetry illuminated by the Tiffany lampshade and the plastic sheets and rags their neighbors use as window covers is glaring. This contrast marks the couple as inhabitants of a space and neighborhood to which they are not native.

The Bentwoods have moved into a block occupied by other gentrifiers, with turn-of-the-century brick or brownstone buildings which were immigrant boardinghouses but now each house one family (12). This is underscored by Otto’s remark to Sophie about new occupants in the neighborhood: “I met Bullin on the street [...] He told me two more houses have been sold over there” (23). Otto’s comment implies that the Bentwoods are early in a line of many more gentrifiers who are trickling into their neighborhood. P.E. Moskowitz reminds us that there is a latent and insidious reality in gentrification: “We talk about gentrification at the interpersonal level because that’s how we see it in our daily lives—rents mysteriously rise, an art gallery opens one day, then hipsters follow. But in every gentrifying city there are always events, usually hidden from public view, that precede these street-level changes” (9). While individuals like the Bentwoods are certainly implicated in the implementation of gentrification, they are but one piece of a much larger scheme—one with larger consequences that Fox’s novel anticipates, long before it had been realized on the enormous scale that it has in the present day. Not only is it

clear in Fox's writing that Sophie and Otto are among the first of their "kind" in their neighborhood, but Fox herself was penning the novel in the very early days of gentrifying trends in the United States.

As the story unfolds, it becomes clear how the Bentwoods have always been accustomed to viewing those from lower socioeconomic classes as Other. The narrator describes how this mentality in Sophie was shaped by her earliest memories:

On a Sunday now and then, the three of them got into the Buick at her mother's insistence, and drove to where "the poor people" lived. It was the tail-end of the Depression, but in those streets they traveled the Depression could not end. Sophie's mother had driven the car with thick-skinned efficiency, her head locked into position like a piece of ordinance, eyes straight ahead, triumphant in her silence. When she said poor people, she *meant* poor people. (181)

Sophie's mother and her "insistence" on family practice of driving to observe "the poor people" as if they were animals on exhibit clearly fosters an attitude of dehumanization toward such people in young Sophie that she carries on with her into adulthood. Such a mentality even breeds some radical, yet never overtly discussed, viewpoints about poverty. For example, as Sophie and Otto drive to their vacation home—yet another clear marker of their wealth and class—the narrator implies that to the Bentwoods, poverty is a fate worse than death: "They drove through miles of Queens, where factories, warehouses, and gas stations squeezed up against two-story, two-family houses so mean and shabby that, by contrast, the ranks of uniform and tidy

tombstones rising from the cemetery islets that thrust up among the dwellings seemed to offer a more humane future” (149).

Sophie is not alone in situating of herself *above* the poor; Otto also repeatedly demonstrates a similar perspective. One of the most blatant of these instances takes place one morning when Sophie and Otto awaken to a naked Black man outside of their window, vomiting and eventually collapsed on the pavement. As Otto looks down on the exposed man, he does so both literally and figuratively. He also stands naked, though in the privacy of his home, peering at the man from the raised stature of his window. In his bedroom, he is not only secure in his safety from physical harm that might be inflicted on an exposed body in the outside world, but also in his superiority over the man on the street below. Though they are both bared, Otto is unquestioning in his certainty that he is elevated in relation to the *other* naked man. This man is Other in the sense that he is a Black man of a lower socioeconomic class than Otto, naked because he is living in precarity. Otto also seems largely unconcerned with the man’s plight, and only seems to be watching for entertainment. Sophie takes issue with this, but not for the sake of the man:

“Maybe he’s not drunk. Maybe he’s ill,” she said.

“He’s drunk,” Otto said. “Come along to bed.”

“How do you *know!*”

“Don’t shout.”

“Can’t you leave room for doubt? Maybe he’s had an epileptic fit! A heart attack! You’re so full of cunning, catching everyone out... the American form of wisdom! What if he *is* drunk! Isn’t that bad enough!” (92)

Sophie's exclamatory tirade does not appear to arise from authentic concern for the man, as much as her anger at Otto, and a desire for him to be wrong. Her cry that Otto is "full of cunning," which she names "the American form of wisdom," speaks more to a contempt towards Otto than empathy towards the man. This is further demonstrated when both Sophie and Otto are easily able to fall back asleep after witnessing the man and don't wake again until several hours later. When they do rouse for the second time, Sophie remarks disinterestedly to Otto, "He's gone," to which Otto asks, "Who?" (94). Otto's confusion feels almost impossible to believe, considering the shocking nature of the scene they both were part to just a few hours before. But the apathy with which they barely discuss the man, and even seem unable to remember his plight, again clearly exemplifies their lack of compassion or concern for him. Therefore, Sophie's initial outrage must be attributed to her anger with her husband's "cunning," rather than anger with his apathy towards the man.

The Bentwood's ostentatious privilege is further demonstrated through Sophie's lack of occupation and her leisurely status. Throughout the narrative, she continuously complains of boredom. The consistent struggle to fill her time denotes an excess of privilege. When asked by Charlie whether she is desperate (the question is presented with the implication that she is not happy with her life), she responds, "I don't know. I suppose I need something to do. I'm too idle. They sent me a novel to translate and I hated it. Then a few days ago, someone called and wanted to talk about a Marseilles longshoreman who's written some poems. I said I'd think about it, but I didn't" (65). Not only does Sophie demonstrate an almost egregious amount of privilege in bemoaning her supposed boredom, but she goes so far as to admit she does not bother to think about working opportunities when they are not captivating to her. Later, the topic of work arises again, this time with her friend, Leon. He asks if she is working and when she tells

him not at the moment, he responds: “How pleasant it must be not to be *working* on anything ... How pleasant to read, uncompromised by purpose. You must be rich” (105). However unwilling Sophie is to recognize the bearing her wealth has on her employment—which is demonstrated though her immediate response that “It’s not a matter of money”—Leon is correct that she would not have the luxury of boredom were she not so privileged (106). And though it is said flippantly, Leon’s comment that she is “uncompromised by purpose” has a ring of truth. Sophie moves through her life largely in a purposeless manner, seeming to only experience glimpses of excitement or meaning from bouts of conflict in her relationships.

There are several moments throughout the narrative when Sophie and Otto, and even other characters on occasion, find themselves in undesirable circumstances which are still reasonable occurrences in everyday life—yet the characters seem to react with disproportionate emotional response to these small events. Sophie is the character who perhaps exhibits the most uncontrolled outbursts and moments of volatility in her relationships. For example, towards the end of novel, she and Otto have a quarrel about their friend Charlie, and she experiences an overwhelming feeling of hatred for her husband: “She groaned aloud, then slammed down the butter dish. The hatred she felt toward him was so unexpected, so powerful, she felt as though she’d hurled herself across the table at him” (184). Anger or frustration during conflict are normal emotions, but for Sophie to feel such a powerful sense of hatred for her spouse is not a normative response to a disagreement. Shortly after this argument, she has a vitriolic outburst over the phone at a friend of hers who calls to tell her about an affair she is having: “Why don’t you make a retreat for six months! ... Don’t you know how *dumb* you are? You think because somebody’s husband sticks it in you, that you’ve *won*! You poor dumb old collapsed bag! *Who are you kidding!*” (187). Once again, it may be perfectly ordinary for Sophie to feel some

aversion or even disgust at hearing her friend describe the wife of her lover in disparaging terms, but the venomous words she uses to express these emotions are not.

Like Sophie, Otto also seems able to bear frustration or annoyance with his partner only to a certain degree, at which point he will become explosively angry with her. An instance of this occurs when he waits with Sophie in the local hospital to be seen about her injury from a cat bite. Sophie becomes increasingly uncomfortable until she tries to convince him to leave, saying she will see a personal friend of theirs who is a doctor instead—which serves as yet another reminder of their class and privilege: “‘Let’s go,’ whispered Sophie urgently. ‘I’ll go to Noel on Tuesday. It won’t make any difference now. There’s no need for us to sit here.’ Otto grabbed her upper arm and squeezed it violently. ‘Put up with it!’ he demanded through gritted teeth. ‘Put up with it!’ he repeated. ‘Everyone else does’” (132). In this moment, Otto’s wife is injured and seems to have a profound aversion to the hospital, as it has taken days for her to agree to even come. Rather than offering a caring approach to her fear, he demonstrates the same kind of explosive anger that Sophie is also capable of. These disproportionate reactions the Bentwoods demonstrate speak to their own emotional state as individuals, and betray a clear underlying sense of unease and fear they both suffer from. Elizabeth Gumport speaks to the negative emotions such gentrifiers may experience, arguing they are largely driven by guilt: “As fixated as they are on the appearance of their houses, characters in early gentrification novels recognize that there are consequences to their labor. The newcomers are not immune to guilt. Whether or not they believe what they are doing is wrong, they know others despise them for it, and with this knowledge comes fear of retribution” (109). Though the Bentwoods never let on an awareness about the problematic nature of their gentrifying, they are clearly motivated by the fear Gumport

discusses. The unpredictable anger they demonstrate is driven by an underlying fear that the frontier they are inhabiting will not allow them to remain without disruption or retribution.

2.2 Symbols of Frontier

There is more to the Bentwoods' discomfort than unacknowledged apprehensiveness about the future of the underprivileged neighborhood around them, as Fox casts gentrification in the novel as that of a modern-day colonialism and frontier invasion. Peacock has also noted that the novel invokes a lexicon of frontier and colonization, often used by the characters themselves in casual conversation, arguing that this kind of language works to "signal the Bentwoods' awareness that they are outsiders, that this is a frontier environment and that their beautiful interior functions partly as insulation against the material realities outside" (109). Further, he argues these constant intrusions of the "frontier" space consistently undermine the work of the Bentwoods in their efforts to enhance the value of their home: "Throughout the novel, the couple's agency is directed toward an aesthetic utopian vision, but they are constantly being reminded of the material circumstances upon which that vision rests, the larger economic structures at play in the background, ones which they try to disavow" (110). That constant tension between their attempts to realize this "aesthetic utopian vision" in their home and the persistent interferences from their surrounding serve to create the disconcerting tone maintained throughout the novel.

For example, early in the novel, Otto utilizes such terminology as "brave pioneer" when referring to fellow initial gentrifiers, distinguished from "the locals" when discussing the pre-existing residents in Brooklyn (22, 24). In response to Otto's remark about the "brave pioneer," Sophie observes, "It doesn't take courage, it takes cash" (24). Though Sophie herself is part of the privileged group with the ability to mold a neighborhood to their will, her comment serves as

a pointed reminder that conquest has little to do with courage and much to do with greed. Shortly after this conversation between the Bentwoods, the narrator describes the solitary remaining boardinghouse in the neighborhood, commenting that its tenants were “very quiet, almost furtive, like the last remaining members of a foreign enclave who, daily, expect deportation” (32). The likening of local boarders to immigrants expecting deportation again speaks to a culture of conquest. Much later, as Sophie cleans her home one late morning, the narrator describes how the quiet nature of the street outside is deceptive, stating that it is due to the siege of gentrification that is taking place:

There was a siege going on: it had been going on for a long time, but the besieged themselves were the last to take it seriously. Hosing vomit off the sidewalk was only a temporary measure, like a good intention. The lines were tightening—Mike Holstein had known that, standing in his bedroom with the stone in his hand—but it was almost impossible to know where the lines were. (188)

The metaphor of siege again contributes to the military lexicon Fox employs to demonstrate the conquering nature of gentrification. The commentary on the tightening of lines also augments the growing sense of tension and unease Fox has been crafting since the beginning of the narrative. The stone in Mike Holstein’s hand in this passage refers to an earlier moment in the novel when Sophie and Otto are at a house party. Sophie and the owner of the house are having a conversation when they discover a stone has been thrown through a bedroom window: “But he had left her and was standing near the window, staring at the floor. As he lifted his head, she saw what he had been looking at. She walked over to him. They both looked at the stone on the floor.

There were a few shards of broken glass around it. Mike picked it up. It filled the palm of his hand” (43). The image of his palm being filled with the stone emphasizes its size—it is not to be confused with any scenes of a boy throwing pebbles at the window of his love, but is clearly a statement of protest. This moment of violence again enforces the constant tone of unease that continues to propel the narrative forward. As Gumport argues, whether or not the characters are able to acknowledge to themselves or each other that their gentrification of these spaces is wrong, they are still not immune to guilt, and moments like these unveil the underlying anxiety they feel. As discussed, the plot of *Desperate Characters* is not what propels the narrative forward, but rather the series of episodes in the Bentwoods’ lives that we move through, which are characterized by a haunting and troubling undertone.

These episodes are often centered around moments in the Bentwoods’ lives that are disrupted by what Peacock defines as invasions of the frontier on the characters. According to Peacock, these moments impact the characters’ attempts to impose their aesthetic vision on the environment they aim to conquer:

In *Desperate Characters* the frontier upon which the gentrifiers live is not simply the one separating slum street from gentrifying block, black from white, rich from poor; it is also that between concrete materiality and the abstraction required to turn commodities into an exclusive vision. Each rude interruption of the Bentwoods’ life [...] reminds them how porous this frontier is, how supplementary the relationship between materiality and abstraction. At an early stage of gentrification, and still in a minority, they are unable to assimilate these intrusive elements successfully into a picturesque vision: the frontier narrative keeps invading. (110)

The entire narrative, and the movement of gentrification itself, hinges on the characters' attempted beautification of their Brooklyn neighborhood, but they are repeatedly and unknowingly unsettled both by their own attempts and by the frontier's resistance to such attempts. As Peacock argues, the boundary between concrete materiality and abstraction is where the Bentwoods find themselves as they attempt to manage the aesthetics of their surroundings. As they battle with this frontier as well, the existence of elements of the outside world do not align with their aesthetic vision and the "rude interruptions" feel like a personal attack on them: "[Otto's] fine, considering. I think he's better off than some, perhaps because he's not much given to introspection. He's too preoccupied with fighting off a mysterious effluvium he thinks will down him. He thinks garbage is an insult directed against him personally, and he's still trying to wash the dishes before we've finished eating" (115). For Otto, the perception of the tidy street is not only a preference about sanitation; it is a piece of the aesthetic ideal and the "picturesque vision" he has of the life he will live and the environment in which he will live it. Thus, the garbage on the street is not just an intrusion of the reality of the frontier upon that vision, it is at the same time perceived as a personal affront to him as an individual.

Fox also presents the notion of an invasion of the frontier through numerous references to markers of colonization and empire in the novel. These references reinforce the presentation of the gentrifying characters in the narrative as more than just opportunistic homebuyers, but as modern-day settler colonialists. When Sophie and Otto visit Mike Holstein, Sophie observes items from other cultures displayed as decorations around the bedroom: "A Greek rug covered the bed; a Mexican ceramic horse stood in front of the fireplace" (41). These displays speak to a view of culture as collectible, which could represent colonization on a smaller scale. The presence of the Mexican ceramic horse is especially ironic, considering the Bentwoods'

neighbors are Spanish-speaking, and likely are Latinx (176). Also newcomers to a Brooklyn neighborhood, the Holsteins are also likely to have moved in among the pre-existing Latinx population. The displayed cultural object in his home adds to a sense of conquest, especially as Sophie is struck by the presence of these items. She is especially troubled by the presence of some pre-Colombian statues—not because of the irony of the Holsteins’ collection, but because of the perceived threat of the Other: “On the mantelpiece stood a few small pre-Colombian statues, glaring with empty malevolence at the opposite wall, looking, oddly enough as though they were outside the room but about to enter and sack it” (41). Sophie serves as the focalizing medium during this third-person narration; therefore, it is her perspective of these statues that sees them as malevolent and threatening—Sophie’s interpretation of the statues is that they carry an “empty malevolence,” demonstrating her own fear of the Other as a belligerent presence. The irony here is that the Bentwoods are the true “malevolent” presence for the neighborhood, among those who have entered the space of the Other and sacked it in order to bend it to her will and make it her own.

Further reference to gentrification as a continuation of colonialism in the novel appears as Sophie is readying their things to visit their vacation home and packs a European colonizer’s narrative to read: “She moved quickly, packing the food, making an efficient pile of sheepskin-lined coats and gloves, the car blanket, a copy of *Out of Africa* which she would read to Otto on the way out” (148). The evidence of Karen Blixen’s 1937 memoir, about moving to what was British East Africa (present-day Kenya), emphasizes a continuum between British imperialism and the Bentwoods’ life in Brooklyn. Once they arrive at their vacation home, Otto’s impulse to demonstrate ownership over his land is underlined: “Otto had placed around it a low picket fence, not because they had close neighbors, but because he had been compelled by his sense of

order to distinguish between what belonged immediately to the house and what belonged to the open fields” (159). Otto’s compulsion for order further perpetuates the characterization of the Bentwoods’ disposition as a colonizer. Where the characters may see in him simply a need for cleanliness and order, or unexplained compulsion in his actions, there actually seems to be an underlying desire to achieve what Peacock called “a picturesque ideal” in the frontier wherever he has established an entitlement to occupying.

Central to the symbolism in the novel of the Bentwoods as a malevolent, colonizing presence and the existence of a harsh class divide is to be found in the relationship between Sophie and a neighborhood cat. Introduced just a couple paragraphs into the novel, the stray cat is a haunting presence throughout the novel, serving as a metaphor for the disenfranchised surrounding the Bentwoods, whose space they are gentrifying. This is evidenced in the charged words Otto uses to describe it, such as “thug” and “savage,” along with his admonishment of her when she feeds it, saying, “It does very well for itself. All these cats do well” (22, 29). His scolding and the reasoning behind it calls to mind unsubstantiated notions about unhoused populations or those in lower socioeconomic brackets somehow working the system and having untold, secretive wealth due to government programs or pity-driven handouts from the middle or upper classes. Otto appears convinced that if he does not offer food or assistance to the cat, it will not make any difference, as it is undoubtedly having its needs met elsewhere.

By contrast, Sophie feels compelled to feed the cat—though admittedly, only because she has witnessed its suffering. Otto is comfortable pointing this tendency out, but rather than seeing it as self-righteousness, he categorizes the impulse as self-indulgence: “Why do you persist? It’s self-indulgence. Look! You don’t mind at all as long as you don’t have to *see* the cat looking starved” (24). Sophie does not hesitate to admit her motivations are selfish, responding: “I don’t

care why I'm doing it, [...] The point is that I *can* see it starving" (24). Though she is aware that her response to such suffering that is outside of her immediate vision is apathy, Sophie still seems to find justification in her response to witnessing suffering. In a conversation which occurs directly before this one, Sophie had questioned Otto on the displacement of the current homeowners in their neighborhood: "What happens to the people in them when the houses are bought? Where do they go? I always wonder about that" (23). In both instances, Sophie demonstrates a surface-level interest in the welfare of others in need, but her actions and responses indicate an apathy at base level. Shortly after Otto warns her not to indulge her desires and feed the cat, she approaches it and offers it milk. The cat is initially friendly, accepting her attentions while it laps up the milk she offers in a luxury Meissen saucer, but as it cleans its whiskers from the milk, it unexpectedly turns feral and bites her. Throughout the entire interaction, leading up to the exact moment she is bitten, Sophie is smiling: "[S]he was still smiling as the cat reared up on its hind legs, even as it struck at her with extended claws, smiling right up to that second when it sank its teeth into the back of her left hand and hung from her flesh so that she nearly fell forward, stunned and horrified" (25). It is as if, through the persistence of her smile, even Sophie's body physically cannot allow for the idea that the colonized population may not be grateful for her patronage.

Peacock discusses the scene as both an invasion of the frontier and its transformation from an aesthetic ideal back into raw material:

So the bite, the accompanying pain, and the blood are better understood as representing a sudden, violent invasion of the material into an exquisitely constructed interior (matched by the novel's perfect prose) full of fetishized commodities so artful as to be absolutely

abstracted. The cat bite stands for the inevitable failure of the Bentwoods' symbolic system. If, as Sophie's friend Leon says, civilization occurs when "you take raw material and you transform it," then the bite is the moment when the abstract carapace of the gentrifiers' picturesque interior is transformed back into crude raw materials, the smooth surface of skin into ragged, damaged flesh. (110)

In this moment, Sophie's interior vision of how her interaction with the cat should be—which is comprised of a sweet, grateful moment in which she feels vindicated for her generosity and benevolence in taking time and resources to provide for it—is shattered; instead, she is confronted with what she perceives as ingratitude and an attack on the idealized and picturesque image of herself as a benevolent force she had envisioned through her charitable action. When Sophie and Otto see the cat calmly waiting again at their door to be fed, Sophie is shocked, which she realizes is senseless: "It had looked so ordinary, just another city stray. What had she expected? That it would have been deranged by its attack on her? That it planned to smash and cuff its way into their house and eat them both up?" (50). The questions she asks herself are rhetorical; the implication is that yes, she would have expected the cat to be rabid or wild after its attack on her. The image of the cat as some kind of monster or human-like terror that would have the intelligence and strength to break its way into their home and consume them is another example of her fear of the Other. And, ironically, Sophie and Otto are the ones who have entered a space where they are unwelcome, spelling ruin for its pre-existing inhabitants, so Sophie's fear serves as a projection of her own guilt. Ultimately, the Bentwoods capture the cat and Otto takes it to the A.S.P.C.A., where it is implied that it will be "disposed of." The scene of the capture of the cat is surprisingly violent in its portrayal and reads much like a murder: "The box shook

violently. Otto, with one free hand, began to wrap wash cord around it, letting it fall with a thud after each turn. The cat screamed. A smell filled their nostrils, acrid, vicious, nauseating. 'Fear,' Otto whispered. They stared at each other across the box as they both squatted there in front of the door. Then Otto tied a knot in the heavy line. It was done" (144). In this scene securing the cat's demise, it completes its thorough disruption of their idealized new life in the city.

Presenting the gentrifiers with an unexpectedly traumatic experience, the stray cat refuses to be easily tamed or dismissed, serving to set the tone of an exacting and rebellious critique on the Bentwoods' occupation of the urban frontier.

The Bentwoods' vacation home in Long Island (15) serves a dual purpose in Fox's narrative: while demonstrating their wealth and marking their status as solidly situated in the upper class, the vacation home located in Flynders (closely resembling Flanders in the Hamptons) also becomes a site for further destruction of their picturesque vision when it is revealed to have been vandalized. After the trauma of the cat attack, the Bentwoods look forward to visiting this home and enjoying themselves away from the city space. This vision is destroyed when they arrive and discover that it has been thoroughly defaced:

Whoever it was had gotten through the first-floor bedroom. The window had been smashed, the shutter torn from its hinges. From the foam-rubber mattress which had been dragged to the floor, the handle of a French chopping knife still protruded. The caning of the dining room chairs had been slashed, [...] and over every painting or photograph a giant X had been drawn with barn paint. Upstairs in the bathroom lay a decomposed catbird in the tub, and talcum powder, aspirin, disinfectant, and mouthwash had been emptied on the floor. (161-62)

The vehemence with which their home and possessions were damaged feels quite personal in nature, as though the culprits for this damage knew of the Bentwoods by reputation. The attacking of the mattress, a place in which one typically feels inherently safe enough to be vulnerable in sleep, is specifically destructive, as is the X drawn over the drawings and paintings, which removes their value and any potential for their resale. Finally, there is the corpse of the catbird left in the bathroom, which is another violent and disquieting statement.

2.3 Power Dynamics of Race and Sex

The Long Island episode in the life of the Bentwoods exemplifies the kind of disquieting scene Fox creates throughout her narrative that works both to propel the story forward through its unsettling effect, while she also factors racialization into the continuous and unflinching invasions of the urban frontier on the gentrifiers' idealized vision of their life and homes. As Sharon Zukin has observed about gentrification, social integration is not a given and only occurs at a surface level, at best as wary encounters in the street at first: "The gentrifiers' choice of neighborhood does not imply their social integration with existing neighbors of a different race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. In street encounters, they approach each other warily until familiarity with neighborhood routine ensures politeness" (133). As an example, the Bentwoods receive an unexpected visitor at their door in the form of a young Black man who is simply trying to borrow the use of a phone to call a train station. He is immediately transformed into a dangerous, menacing presence in the view of the Bentwoods: "The door opened to an explosion of babble. A man's voice rose and fell in accents of hysteria. Otto backed into view, followed by a young Negro man waving his hands. [...] Robbery and murder appeared before her in two short scenes [...] 'just want to use your phone, man. Like everyone around here thinks black men are *killers!* My God!'" (126).

Besides the apparent lack of openness for neighborly interaction on the part of the Bentwoods, there are a number of signals in this moment that exemplify their predisposition towards discrimination and racism. Firstly, the young man is clearly desperate to make his call, especially as he is trying to get home to his ill mother, but instead of noting that desperation, Sophie—who serves to focalize the third-person narrator—hears his words as “babble” and “hysteria,” which is both a trivialization of his plight and a dehumanization of him as an individual, since such words recall animalistic methods of communication. Secondly, Otto backs into the room from the front door, implying he is unwilling to turn his back on the young man. His entrance also conjures an image of a man being held at gunpoint and forced to walk facing his accoster with his hands raised—though no such thing is occurring. And finally, Sophie clearly lives up to his assessment of people like them as seeing Black men as killers, since her immediate fear when he enters the room is of him committing robbery and murder against them. Furthermore, when he has finished his call and is obviously leaving their home, she still holds this anxiety to an extent: “With an elaborate gesture, he snatched off his hat, smiled violently at her and nodded his head rapidly” (127). The young man is grateful for their assistance, and is simply expressing his thankfulness by removing his hat and smiling, but Sophie insists on viewing this as menacing. Though nothing truly concerning happens in this scene, at least in relation to the wellbeing of the Bentwoods, this moment adds a layer of racism to the disquieting tone of the frontier’s persistence that Fox established early in the novel.

As exemplified by this episode, as Fox examines modern-day settler colonialism through gentrification in her narrative, she seems mostly interested in class as a central factor of the conflict, but is also unafraid to consider the role race plays in attempts at setting up an aestheticized vision of gentrification. Sophie and Otto present a very specific example of

whiteness—an upper class, wealthy, prejudiced, fearful example. They care deeply about perceptions of power and whether they are seen as having it and can exert it. Additionally, they are unwilling to examine the problematic pieces of their identities, whether they are blatantly aware of them or not. For example, Sophie has deeply held beliefs on Blackness and specifically, the image of a Black caretaker that harks back to slavery, and she is aware of these feelings. She is in the hospital for the cat bite when she feels comfort at having a Black woman as her caregiver: “‘I’m not gonna take that hand away from you,’ the Negro said coaxingly. She felt that old-time reassurance that she had once thought the natural property of dark people—as though they were superior caretakers of frail white flesh” (134). Sophie seems to think the idea of caretaking white flesh as a natural talent of the Black community was only a previously held belief of hers, but in this moment of fear and discomfort in the hospital, that belief immediately emerges, suggesting it has only been simmering beneath the surface, ready to emerge at any moment. More of her fears—in this case, of being seen as coming from a lower class than she is—surface in the hospital. When she feels dismissed by the hospital front desk worker, she immediately ties it to class: “Her smile did not conceal from Sophie her judgment: emergency cases belonged to a low social order in the hierarchy of disease” (129). For Sophie, worth is clearly tied both to class and race, and she perceives the world around her as assessing her by the same measuring stick she uses. The continued judgment the Bentwoods cast on others, such as the young Black man who requested to use their phone, holds deep irony considering their own shortcomings. For them, the terrors they imagine involve being robbed or murdered by characters they view as unsavory. This is ironic, as they have metaphorically murdered pre-existing Brooklyn culture through gentrification, and have not only usurped the neighborhood through wealth to occupy, but demonstrate no qualms in stealing whatever resources they deem

necessary: “Here and there were several yew trees growing in tufts and patches of mountain laurel which the Bentwoods had *stolen*, cutting by cutting, from Route 9 on the Jersey shore of the Hudson” (98, emphasis mine). Doubtless, the Bentwoods would see such actions as alarmingly destructive and intrusive were they to observe such attempts from a lower class or a different race, but no such designation is assigned when they are themselves the culprits.

Sophie has clearly exhibited her lack of care to examine those parts of her character and identity that are troubling, but Otto is even more egregious a culprit of this. He demonstrates a total and complete disinterest in examining his prejudices, and even resents any suggestion he should change. After the young Black man has used their phone and left their home, Otto immediately claims the entire story was a ruse: “[His story] embarrassed me, for both our sakes, his and mine. But it was a good invention... because it was so ordinary. He even had a place picked out to ask about.’ ‘What makes you think he was lying?’ ‘My prejudices, I suppose’” (128). Otto has no reason to believe the young man was lying, except his own prejudices, and it seems to cause him no pain to admit this fact. Furthermore, he never offers any theory for why exactly the man may have lied in the first place; he is only set on making the accusation. Later, when he and Sophie are driving to their vacation home, he imagines Charlie scolding his prejudice and ignorance, and the thought infuriates him: “‘It’s so hopelessly ugly.’ ‘Don’t look at it,’ he said quickly. [...] He was not listening to her. He was staring intently through the windshield at the desolate road ahead. ‘Otto?’ ‘I was thinking of what Charlie would have said if he’d heard me tell you not to look. How he would have pounced on that! What an example of my lack of social conscience!’” (150). The area the Bentwoods are driving through is full of poverty, and Otto’s impulse is to deny its existence by telling Sophie not to look. He knows this response is willfully ignorant to some extent, as he is able to view himself through the eyes of another;

however, instead of serving as a moment for self-examination, this only fuels his righteous indignation. For Otto, so many of his tense interactions with other characters or these moments of intentional refusal to address his failings are inextricably tied to a desire to exert his own power. As Peacock writes, “Whether framed, like Fox’s, as frontier narratives [...] these novels, ultimately, all explore power relations and capital’s role in community formation” (134). Otto is concerned with both exercising the capital at his disposal and the power he has through privilege.

Among the most egregious and appalling of Otto’s displays of power comes at the expense of his own wife. After their return from the vacation home, they have an argument about Sophie’s desire for Otto to stay home from work the next morning. The argument itself is commonplace in its nature—a type of argument that doubtless many couples have had; however, Otto’s ultimate response to it is shocking. After they go to sleep, Otto wakes in the night to the sound of a baby crying in their neighborhood. It is then that he proceeds to violate his wife: “She grumbled once, but he ignored her complaint. She was lying on her stomach. [...] He began to push up her short nylon gown. He knew she must be awake. But he would not speak her name. He would not say anything at all” (177). Otto chooses to ignore Sophie’s somnolent protest, nor does he stop and ask for her consent at any point, which constitutes rape. Strangely, he becomes quickly incensed at her for not speaking: “He was suddenly angry, but he realized, as he maintained his own stubborn silence, it was not because of sexual disappointment so much as an exasperation similar to what he felt when he had to grab her arm to make her keep up with him when they walked together down a street” (178). Otto’s realization implies his abuse of Sophie comes from his need for power and domination over her, as opposed to sexual desire. He is satisfied only when he feels he has succeeded in exerting his power: “Then, with no ceremony and perversely gratified by the discomfort he was inflicting on them both, he entered her. When

he withdrew, after an orgasm of an intensity he had not expected, he had the fleeting thought that his sudden impulse had little to do with sensuality” (178). In contrast to his own admission that his compulsion was not driven by a sexual desire, the mention of the strength of his climax implies that he still derives sexual satisfaction through the exertion of power. This is underlined through his seemingly gratified response after the violation has occurred: “‘Sorry,’ he whispered, then was choked by a wave of laughter. He’d got her that time” (178). Otto’s callous response to the crime he has committed against his wife feels stark and shocking. This episode occurs very near the end of the book, and serves as a literal and metaphorical climax of the tension that has been building throughout, driving home the pervasive feeling of unease the reader has experienced and underscoring Otto’s ultimate motivation, which is the conquest of power.

With this portrayal of the Bentwoods, Fox’s challenging narrative thoroughly dismantles the image of the gentrifier as an “intrepid explorer,” doing so by driving home a deeply unsettling tone that emphasizes the settler’s fear and discomfort at occupying spaces where their insertion is unwelcome. At the closing of Fox’s novel, Otto has yet another fit of anger, during which he throws a bottle of ink at a wall, causing it to run down in lasting lines: “His arm shot out and he grabbed [the ink bottle] up and flung it violently against the wall. [...] [Sophie’s] arms fell away from his shoulders as they both turned slowly toward the wall, turned until they could both see the ink running down to the floor in black lines” (190). Fox has done the work of paving the way for other writers to carry the torch of unmasking the dangers of gentrification and demonstrating its devastating effects. Now, her work remains as the ink on the wall, offering a permanent stain on the literary landscape that refuses to be ignored.

3 **Latinx and Indigenous Resistance in *Sabrina & Corina***

While Latinx presence is a background in *Desperate Characters*, they take on the role of main characters in Kali Fajardo-Anstine's short story collection entitled *Sabrina & Corina*. The Latinx characters live with recent gentrification in Denver, and instances of racism and prejudice. Speaking on the research she conducted throughout the process of writing these stories, Fajardo-Anstine explains that she found a stark absence in the historical record of their lives: "Little exists in terms of the Hispano/Chicano presence in Colorado, which is shocking because I believe a third of the state was once Mexico. [...] Our families are still here, but we're not existing in this large historical way—in the record, at least" (Library of Congress 2020a). Specifically, one of the most disturbing aporia is to be found in the education system, also depicted in the work. Fajardo-Anstine also comments on similar patterns in education, stating: "When I would go to school, I didn't see any of us depicted in the history textbooks. I didn't see our lives or our histories in literature" (Library of Congress 2020b).

Interwoven into the loosely connected stories in the collection are signs of Anglo newcomers to Denver who are unaware of the destruction of the old neighborhoods which provide a setting for her stories. Repeatedly, Fajardo-Anstine draws attention to the existence of developing gentrification in Denver that troubles her Latinx characters. The presence of gentrifiers in Denver carries something deeper and more ancient with it as well—settler colonialism, implied in the short stories placed at the beginning and the end which signal Native presence ("Sugar Babies" and "Ghost Sickness").

Her collection casts gentrification as its newest iteration shaping the lives of her Chicana and indigenous characters; while Spanish colonizers first arrived in Colorado at the end of the seventeenth century, Anglo/U.S. settler colonialism expanded westward across the territory, with

Denver thought to be founded after Mexican-American War (1844-1846). Spanish settlers had long occupied Southern Colorado; her short stories prompt us to read gentrification as the newest form of settler colonialism. As Sarah Schulman writes, gentrifiers have no desire to care for—or even know—what came before, since they see its ownership now as their right:

[The gentrifiers] instead saw their dominance as simultaneously nonexistent and as the natural deserving order. This is the essence of supremacy ideology: the self-deceived pretense that one's power is acquired by being deserved and has no machinery of enforcement. And then, the privileged, who the entire society is constructed to propel, unlearn that those earlier communities ever existed. They [replace] the history and experience of their neighborhoods' former residents with a distorted sense of themselves as timeless. (27)

Fajardo-Anstine has been vocal in calling such practices into question, stating that this constitutes erasure:

During [the early 1990s to 2000s], Denver experienced rapid growth and rapid gentrification. So, there are areas in the city, areas like the Westside and the Northside and Five Points—neighborhoods where my relatives and my ancestors lived—that are no longer the same at all. And in fact, developers have tried to rename those places, and in a way, are completely erasing the history of what was once there. (Library of Congress 2020a)

In her work, then, Fajardo-Anstine is interested in how gentrification works to erase and unlearn the histories of communities that came before.

In this section, I discuss three stories (“Galapago,” “Tomi,” and “Ghost Sickness”), which share the way they each register gentrification and the arrival of East Coast transplants simultaneously as the demise of old Latinx urban neighborhoods or the displacement of Denver residents. Each story serves to counteract the effects of erasure and displacement.

3.1 Heritage and Forced Displacement in “Galapago”

In “Galapago,” the story calls attention to the renaming of Denver neighborhoods that has taken place: “Since the newcomers had started moving to Denver, they’d changed the neighborhood names to fit their needs, to sound less dangerous, maybe less territorial” (109). The main character, Pearla Ortiz, cannot help but notice the changes in the occupants of her own street: “In the past decade, couples with expensive cars and Anglo names had moved onto the block, altering the houses and gutting the yards, once hacking down old Mrs. Archuletta’s prized peach tree in a single afternoon” (107). Pearla has lived on the same street, in the same home, for sixty-two years. She has witnessed firsthand the gradual creeping of gentrification in her neighborhood, and until now, has outright refused to sell her home and leave, though her granddaughter says it would financially benefit her: “Alana had been suggesting for years that Pearla sell her home on Galapago and rent an apartment in a building for seniors. The Denver housing market was booming, Alana often said, and retirement homes were much more chic than they used to be. Even houses on the Westside were going for half a million dollars” (106). The word “booming” serves as a misnomer for what is really driving the Denver housing market, which is its market appeal for gentrification. Pearla’s own experience on Galapago has been vastly different from that of the Anglo couples with expensive cars that are arriving, as she and

her husband were the victims of more than one break-in in their early years of residence on the street. Now that the neighborhood's potential to achieve the gentrifier's aesthetic ideal has expanded, it holds more value to these modern settler colonialists, and they have little care for what came before them.

Though on its surface level, the plot of "Galapago" may be centered on a break-in and consequent unintentional killing in self-defense, at its core it is a story about displacement. The narrative takes a turn when Pearla encounters an intruder in her home in the middle of the night, and is forced to shoot him. Though she tries to aim for his legs, she inadvertently kills him. In the end, she is forced by Alana to leave as she deems it unsafe. Alana herself seems to struggle with an internalization of the racist stereotypes that are often imposed on Latinx people. She clearly desires to reject these stereotypes by lightening her hair, choosing to work in a downtown high-rise building that likely has contributed to the gentrifier's aesthetic ideal (and for a firm that specializes in gas and oil), and insisting that she and her grandmother would not attend Spanish mass because they speak English (105, 112).

Alana's choices and her insistent desire for her grandmother to leave Galapago Street causes Pearla great pain, especially because this was the first piece of property anyone in her and her husband's family had owned. As she shares this pain with her granddaughter, she hopes that her late husband is not in some way witnessing her departure: "'If your grandfather was alive, mija, he would be ashamed to live anywhere but our home.' Pearla glanced out the window at identical housing developments rolling over the foothills. They reminded her of locusts, devouring the land. 'I hope he doesn't somehow see any of this'" (115). Pearla's metaphor for the new housing developments as locusts devouring the land presents a new image of gentrification—one where it is nothing but a plague. This representation of it is doubtless

accurate, though others refuse to see it. For example, the police officer who helps Pearla and Alana at the police station after the break-in implies that once the area becomes fully Anglicized, they may no longer struggle with crime: “The city is in flux, ladies. Lots of mixed income levels. They say things will cool down once the area is fully gentrified, but I’m skeptical” (108).

Important to note is how the story changes the pervasive racial dynamic in *Desperate Characters*, and the common racialization of the intruder. The young man who breaks into Pearla’s home is white. He has an Anglo name—just like the ones the narrator describes—which is Cody Moore, and Pearla distinctly remembers his green eyes as he reached for his gun, which she had initially mistaken for a knife. Before the moment that Pearla encounters Cody in her kitchen, she has a momentary vision of what is to come: “A vision came to her, a young Anglo man with an exhausted heart, nearly dead as he shivered in a room without windows, without lights” (116). After one of the initial home intrusions that Pearla and her husband experienced in their younger days, they had boarded up the window in their bedroom, and it had stayed that way for forty years. The day that Pearla leaves, she is struck with a sudden determination to demolish the boards, drowning the room in sunlight for the first time in decades. Though she sees Cody in a place “without windows, without lights,” Pearla refuses to leave her home with this as a reality. Pearla has the last word as she and Alana rip the boards from the wall, refusing to let her vision of darkness remain an ultimate reality.

3.2 Rapid Development in “Tomi”

The evidence of gentrification feels accelerated in many ways in “Tomi,” as the narrator and protagonist, Cole, returns from jail to a gentrified Denver. As the reader witnesses the changes in the landscape of the city from her perspective, the modifications are marked both by the stark differences she is witnessing and by the emotional connection she has to the place

where she comes from: “We lived on Denver’s Northside, in the shadow of Mile High Stadium, a neighborhood that was now called Highlands, though only white people said that. [...] The gentrification reminded me of tornadoes, demolishing one block while casually leaving another intact. Our block, Vallejo Street, was unrecognizable” (141-42). While the language of natural disaster highlights how she feels about the transformation, there is nothing natural about the process of gentrification. Cole observes the presence of industry and corporate America in the form of a newly constructed high-rise building blocking her family home’s view, the needs of capital placed above the needs of people in an environment where gentrification is present: “I pointed to a glass high-rise that had appeared where a vacant warehouse once stood. It reflected the clouds, the winged tips of the mountains. [...] ‘It also ruins my view of the stadium. These property taxes are fucking me,’ said Manny. ‘But we were here first. I’ll be damned before I move to the suburbs’” (142-43). Her older brother’s comment that the property taxes are causing him financial trouble implies, again, that gentrification is directedly connected to the displacement of local populations seen as undesirable to those the city and developers wish to attract. And, according to Cole, they have been successful in that attraction: “Blond women with high ponytails pushed babies in expensive strollers while white guys in khakis stared at their cellphones, sidestepping fallen leaves. I went into a tea shop that had once been a liquor store and handed the frizzy-haired redhead my résumé. She wore beaded earrings and colorful New Age crystals around her neck” (145-46).

Not only is there clear evidence of gentrification in the form of white, upper-class occupiers of Cole’s neighborhood, there is also the irony of the redheaded barista wearing beaded earrings and crystals, items that have their roots in Cole’s culture, not hers. The consistent valuing of consumerism above lived experience produces a homogeneous aesthetic in

gentrified areas: “Gentrified thinking is like the bourgeois version of Christian fundamentalism, a huge, unconscious conspiracy of homogenous patterns with no awareness about its own freakishness. The gentrification mentality is rooted in the belief that obedience to consumer identity over recognition of lived experience is actually normal, neutral, and value free” (Schulman 51). In real life, the dismissal of lived experience is by a coffee shop in the Five Points neighborhood of Denver embracing and promoting the fact of its gentrification:

The Colorado coffeehouse chain ink! became a lightning rod for economic ire on Wednesday, after one of its Denver stores displayed a message on its sidewalk sandwich-board that read: ‘Happily Gentrifying The Neighborhood Since 2014.’ On the back, the sign said: ‘Nothing Says Gentrification Like Being Able To Order A Cortado.’ Photos spread on social media, sparking outrage. While ink! has 15 locations in Denver, the store in question is located in the Five Points neighborhood, an area traditionally known as a home for artists and people of color that has been steadily becoming more white and middle- to-upper-class, due to gentrification. (Hesse)

Local Latinx inhabitants of the area and supporters of those displaced by gentrification are rightfully incensed by the display. Bree Davis, who works as a community organizer specializing in housing issues, commented that this sign was a metaphorical slap in the face: “This is a coffee shop that took a marketing opportunity to brag about displacement. The sign was not taken as a joke because it felt intentionally dismissive in an area of Denver where neighborhoods are being re-named and land is being sold out from under long-time residents” (Hesse). The sign exemplifies a glib response to a real harm done to the lives of many in Denver. This kind of

response, one that involves a willful ignorance of lived experiences, perpetuates the erasure of those who are displaced by gentrification.

As Cole continues her reintroduction to the city, she becomes increasingly aware of a troubling presence of new and imposing structures: “I asked my driver what was the strangest place in Denver he’d seen, the worst area. I thought he’d say my neighborhood, before it changed, but he didn’t. He said, ‘Cherry Hills, all them mansions give me the creeps. It’s like the entire neighborhood, the whole city, died in its sleep’” (158). The taxi driver’s vision of the city as having died in its place aligns with a view of gentrification as an insidious, silent kind of settler colonialism. Further evidence of change in the city comes as Cole witnesses expensive structures near encampments of unhoused people: “The bus drove through a part of downtown where new metallic apartments jutted into the skyline, mimicking the view of the mountains. Traffic swarmed and coughed under the city’s haze and healthy-looking young people rode bikes through the streets, past the homeless who curled under wilted cardboard” (154).

There is a nod towards the harmful environmental effects of an industrialized city, with the traffic “swarming and coughing,” portrayed against the appearance of “healthy-looking young people” who have not been exposed to city living for long. The imagery of soaring buildings imitating the nature which surrounds them is a harsh contrast with the unhoused population struggling to survive. Zukin discusses how programs to support the unhoused are often laid by the wayside in favor of gentrification: “Moreover, highly visible reinvestment and rehabilitation by upper-income residents take place alongside continuing deterioration of inner-city housing, disinvestment in the CBD [central business district], and suburbanization of most new housing construction for the private market” (132). As she writes, under a system of

gentrification, “reinvestment and rehabilitation” are exclusive to the areas that are prioritized by a capitalist system, while the very real needs of the community are ignored.

Furthermore, in “Tomi,” the local populations become suspect once the landscape has shifted into a picturesque ideal:

“Ma’am,” the security guard said, “have you been drinking?

“Are you serious?”

He said, “I’ve seen you before. I know how you Northside girls are.” ...

People coming out of the library had turned to look at us. A slim woman in pink spandex, holding her toddler on her hip, spun around so that her daughter faced the brick wall.

That’s when I knew where Tomi had gone.

“That wasn’t me,” I said. “You must have me confused with someone else.” (157)

In this scene, Cole’s nephew, Tomi, has run away from her at the local library, and Cole understandably experiences a great deal of emotional distress as she tries to find him. Rather than assist her in her obvious anxiety, she is immediately called into question by the librarian, security guard, and bystanders. To these characters, just as the young Black man was to Sophie and Otto, Cole serves as a reminder that they are inhabiting a frontier that is unwilling to simply give in to its own conquest.

3.3 “Ghost Sickness” and Cultural Memory

In the final story of the collection, “Ghost Sickness,” the protagonist Ana’s mother has had to sell her home to a gentrifying couple from the East Coast, an attorney couple like the Bentwoods in *Desperate Characters*:

A decade ago, she sold her bungalow on the Northside to a young attorney couple from Philadelphia. They immediately painted the yellow house gray, marking it unrecognizable to anyone from the past. Didn't Louisa Garcia once live here? Wasn't this block the Hispanic or Italian side of town? No one asks questions like this anymore. No one remembers and no one cares. (200)

Ana visits her mother's home in search of comfort from her stress at the university but finds herself thinking of the constant appropriation of her family's spaces. Even the places where she seeks respite have been overtaken by new ones.

For generations, Ana's family has lived in the spaces that are now being overtaken, while her university has appropriated the buildings from a once vibrant Latinx neighborhood: "[She walks] alongside the Museum of Houses at the center of campus, tiny but elegant Victorians once occupied by families with names like Garcia, Santos, Rios. Ana remembers stories from her grandparents—how the block was alive with sounds of screeching children, running sleek in leather booties, their marbles blasting across sandstone sidewalks" (198). At Fajardo-Anstine's own alma mater, Metro State University (MSU), Denver, a historic district called the Auraria 9th Street Historic District is similarly preserved on its campus: "During the 1970s, a grassroots preservation effort saved the block from demolition and led to the rehabilitation of the buildings for use as campus offices" (*Auraria 9th Street Historic District*).

Ana herself attends the university on a displaced person's scholarship. At the beginning of the story, Ana expresses concern about the consequence of losing the scholarship, as she is struggling with a summer class: "If she fails, she'll lose her scholarship, the Displaced Fund, given to the grandchildren of Denver residents, mostly Hispano, who once occupied the

Westside neighborhood before it was plowed to make way for an urban campus. Then she'll lose her work-study job at the library" (197). The irony of the situation Ana finds herself in is that the subject she has trouble with but must succeed in to keep her scholarship is entitled, the History of the American West. Ana's instructor is new to the West: "She's a lecturer with a Ph.D. from an East Coast school Ana has never heard of" (194). She exhibits a lack of ability to represent the perspective of indigenous populations, contributing herself to settler colonialism through her presence, and offering a view of the region as historically immoral and uncivilized. She relays accounts to her students that demonstrate, in her words, "the absolute *depravity* of the West" (194-5). Such representations of the West contribute to exoticized views of it as the untamed, "Wild, Wild West"—ones that characterize Native populations as "savage."

Supposedly, the scholarship she has been granted will provide her relief. When her mother inquires if she is concerned about any of her classes, Ana responds that she is having trouble finding relevance: "Just History. None of the dates stick. Everything blurs" (196). She admits that her issues arise with remembering the dates she is required to memorize. This difficulty calls into question the performative and ultimately empty nature of such displacement scholarships. In real life, there are scholarships available at Colorado University, Denver, Community College of Denver, and MSU, Denver, which are entitled the "Displaced Aurarian" scholarships. At MSU, Denver, it is described as being "designed to provide funds for tuition and fees for students who were residents of the Auraria neighborhood at the time the campus was first built, between 1955 and 1973. The program also extends to all direct descendants of these residents" ("Scholarships for MSU Denver Students").

In order to succeed, Ana must conform to what has been deemed important for her to know from the perspective of settler history, not from her own perspective shaped by local

history. If she fails her exam, and ultimately loses her scholarship, she will lose her potential to earn an income at a middle-class level—a concern that the other classmates do not have. Many of these classmates are also taking part in gentrification, with Ana describing them as “Denver newcomers with trust funds and loft apartments” (198). These “newcomers” cannot have a connection to the physical spaces in the same way Ana does, and she is concerned about their presence: “The longer they stay, however, the more Ana worries that their world is collapsing on her own” (199). The presence of the universities and students contributing to gentrification can be seen as another form of settler colonialism. Unlike what Ana’s distant ancestors were subjected to, this new form of settler colonialism may not include actual and cultural genocide, but it does involve displacement and insecurity for the local Latinx populations.

In particular, Fajardo-Anstine demonstrates settler coloniality as layered through the discussion of the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 in Ana’s history course. The Pueblo Revolt was the singular rebellion of a Native population against colonizing powers that was successful, as it resulted in keeping colonizing powers from New Mexico for twelve years (Liebmann 196). The revolt, while having taken place on what is now United States soil, was a revolt against Spanish forces. Though there are detailed records of Spanish military journals that documented the perceived motivations behind the Pueblo Revolt, it is important to turn to the Pueblo people themselves for dissemination of their people’s history. The Indian Pueblo Cultural Center describes the causes behind the revolt, saying: “In the face of turmoil, suffering from prolonged drought, and fearing the complete loss of our culture, the Pueblo people resorted to armed resistance” (“A Brief History of the Pueblo Revolt”). Upon seeing a question on this rebellion in her study guide, Ana envisions the history of the revolt as she knows it, not as it has been told through the colonizer’s perspective:

What caused the Pueblo Revolt of 1680? Ana knows these things. She swears it. With the revolt, the Spanish burned the masks, the prayer sticks, the beaded purses. There is something about every man in the pueblos having his right foot sawed off. There is an image of wet blood dripping from meat and bone into dry sand. There are prayer songs lost forever in the gutted throats of the massacred. (203)

The violent image of blood on the “dry sand” that Ana envisions recalls the devastating drought of the time. Ana is surprised by herself when, after seeing these violent images in her mind, she asks her teacher: “The Pueblo Revolt of 1680, wasn’t there a drought then, too?” (204). In bringing up the drought, Ana calls attention to the lack of resources the Pueblo peoples were experiencing, showing their revolt to have been motivated by need and a desire to avoid cultural annihilation. However, in response to Ana’s observation, her professor misidentifies her as “Erica” and dismisses her entirely: “Erica [...] it’d be wise to follow along. I’m essentially giving you the answers, and right now we’re discussing the Land Act of 1820” (204). In misidentifying Ana, the professor renders Ana interchangeable with the other students Ana describes as newcomers. As Ana’s identity is grounded in her ancestors having occupied Denver for generations, this interchangeability serves as an erasure of her identity. In a conversation with her mother, Ana again references the topic of drought: “They say it’s supposed to get even hotter this week. [...] They say it’s the worst drought in four hundred years” (201). Here, the drought Ana mentions being the worst in “four hundred years” alludes to the drought that took place leading up to the Pueblo Revolt. Fajardo-Anstine again draws a parallel between the experience of Native populations centuries ago and the issues facing them today. Ana’s experiences

continue to demonstrate that a new version of settler colonialism may not appear as amputated limbs or executions but instead as a more gradual displacement of peoples and cultures.

Near the end of the narrative, Ana takes the opportunity to reclaim the history of indigenous peoples of the American West through her own telling of their history, rejecting the colonizing perspective of her professor. Ana's class has considered instances of settler colonialism from the Pueblo Revolt to the Sand Creek Massacre, but there is a clear irony in the discussion of historic settler colonialism in the classroom while Ana is present, acting as a direct result of settler coloniality's lasting nature. Furthermore, the course's focus is on the American West, examining the history of the land Ana's ancestors have populated for centuries. When asked whether or not she will include information on Native Americans in the course's final examination, the lecturer responds, "No, [...] but as extra credit, I often ask a question related to Native Americans" (203). Her response relegates Native histories to the margins, showing them as not valuable enough to center in the course. At the end of the course, Ana is concerned that she is failing the final when she turns to the ultimate page and reads: "*For a full letter grade increase, in detail, describe the origin myth of the Navajo people*" (207). Although he is absent from the story at this point, Ana immediately recalls hearing the Diné (the name preferred by the Navajo to refer to themselves) origin story from her boyfriend, Clifton, who is Diné:

Clifton told Ana the story of First Man and First Woman, how they were born of stardust and earth, scrambled out of the underground land of darkness and traveled through many worlds, leaving behind the blackness of their beginnings for a life of sunlight and air.

Clifton removed the tick while Ana, soundless and peaceful, listened in such a way that she knew she'd remember every word for all her life. (208-9)

Throughout the duration of the class, Ana has struggled to recall the facts and dates that are necessary for the course. However, when Clifton imparts to her the story of his people, she acknowledges that she will never forget it. Through Ana's vivid memory of the story, Fajardo-Anstine works to embody what she says was missing in literature—the lives and histories of Native people. Ana reclaims the history of the West that has been misrepresented by her professor, centering instead an Indigenous narrative. Ana answers the final question knowing that regardless of what her instructor may decide about her answer, she has delivered the truth.

The final line of “Ghost Sickness” comes when Clifton finishes telling the Diné origin story. He concludes by saying, “And that [...] is our story of everything” (209). With that declaration, Fajardo-Anstine ends not only “Ghost Sickness,” but her entire short story collection. She has provided a stark commentary on the deficiency of proper representation for indigenous voices within educational spaces. By closing both “Ghost Sickness” and *Sabrina & Corina* with Clifton's voice, she lends primacy to a Native character whose voice has traditionally been suppressed. Throughout the story, Clifton struggles with mental illness which Ana describes, saying: “Clifton often disappears. He has a problem with weariness, a tendency to binge” (195). Clifton serves as an embodiment of depression that is the consequence of generational trauma that he carries with him. Just as his ancestors suffered from a lack of resources that led to a revolt, Clifton has also suffered from that lack, as “his parents were killed on the reservation in a drunken brawl over seventeen dollars” (196). By centering Clifton at the end of her work, Fajardo-Anstine exits her story by paying final homage not only to the Native characters in her narratives, but also to those that have been silenced over centuries.

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