

# The nice and the not-so-nice

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Sylvie Tissot

GOOD NEIGHBORS

Gentrifying diversity in Boston's South End  
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One quickly starts to like American cities", Jean-Paul Sartre reported in 1945 to readers of *Le Figaro*, many of whose own cities lay in ruin. "Of course they all look alike." (My translation.) Sartre had spent two months on an American road trip after the liberation of Paris, and already spoke as a weary veteran of suburbia. "I have seen those 'colonial style' inns on the outskirts of town where, at two dollars a head, middle-class families go to eat shrimp cocktails and turkey with cranberry sauce in silence while listening to the electric organ", he wrote. The natives and their urban outcroppings were viewed as menacing, but Sartre was too mischievous to serve his countrymen a purely condescending portrait. "It's a bit stifling in our beautiful, closed cities, full as eggs", he continued, while the "slight cities" of America were places where "every one is free – not to criticize or reform customs – but to flee them, to leave for the desert or another city." In America's never-ceasing internal migrations, the existentialist sensed the exercise of a particular kind of freedom.

Sartre could not have known it, but he was witnessing a pivotal moment in the history of the American city. The internal migrations he registered would proceed in three distinct phases after the war. The first phase, which lasted until the 1970s, consisted of the "second great migration" of American blacks from the South to the North, and the mass exodus of whites to the suburbs. "White flight" was driven less by the interpersonal racism of those leaving than by the structural racism of the US federal state housing apparatuses, which underwrote suburbanization while encouraging real estate developers to segregate suburbs by race and class, and disproportionately targeting "red-lined" black neighbourhoods for freeways and other teardowns. By the late 1960s, the combination of municipal tax shortfalls and city uprisings produced the so-called urban crisis, which was as much ideological as material.

The second phase in American urban development started in the 1970s, as local governments tried to "recolonize" the cities. In this period, "gentrification" – the "reclaiming" of working-class and ethnic urban centres by suburban whites – transformed from a counter-cultural lifestyle choice into official policy. Gentrification had already been under way in the early 1960s, when the term was coined by the British sociologist and critic Ruth Glass. The phenomenon also found eloquent, if unwitting, early advocates in figures such as Jane Jacobs, who resisted the plans of high-handed urban developers, whose unswerving commitment to high modernism and functionalism had been an additional source of white flight since many white-collar workers did not want to live too close to the massive, impersonal office-mausoleums that increasingly loomed over America's downtowns. Jacobs and others refocused public attention on ideals such as neighbourhood vitality and historic preservation, but it was not too long before historic preservation became yet one more way of dressing up the gentrifiers' spatial ambitions as civic ideals. This was possible only after white families, attracted to the prospect of maintaining their status as property owners, or simply bored of the suburbs, followed the vanguard of artists

and other low-income whites, who themselves were attracted by cheap rents, en masse back into the cities. In 1971, the first great New York gentrification novel, Paula Fox's *Desperate Characters*, appeared, starring a white intellectual couple, the Brentwoods, who valiantly restore and maintain a brownstone in under-siege Brooklyn Heights (which, for the record, the gentry never actually left). By 1978, the New York City Mayor Ed Koch was hailing people like the Brentwoods as "urban pioneers" who were "working and sweating to restore the most exciting city in the world to prime condition". In the late 1970s and 80s, New York became, in the phrase of the doyen of urban geographers, the late Neil Smith, the "revanchist city", in which American city governments encouraged rent gaps, and did not shy away from evicting old tenants or violently confronting squatters. This new-found political will, along with "broken windows" policing, made capital investments in the urban core much safer, and by the 1990s returning white property-owners began to feel that the city governments were, finally, on their side.

Seventy years after Sartre declared American cities to be promising refuges for experimental living, Sylvie Tissot, a French sociologist working in the tradition of Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski, sees them as something like the opposite: zones made safe for a particular kind of freedom-management. *Good Neighbors* joins a recent wave of scholarship – Don Mitchell's *The Right to the City* (2003), Suleiman Osman's *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn* (2011), Sarah Schulman's *The Gentrification of the Mind* (2012) – that has identified a distinctly new and still evolving third stage in post-war American urban development and the policing of city spaces. This phase does not involve any mass movement of Americans as in the first two stages, but rather centres on a recasting of urban strategies by urban white gentrifiers. The third phase does not yet have a name, but Tissot proposes one: "gentrifying diversity". This consists not in expelling previous inhabitants, as in the earlier stage of gentrification, but rather managing public space and real-estate so that the new urban dwellers can control what they want to see. Back in 1992, Neil Smith expected the logic of gentrification to culminate in large squatter settlements surrounding the urban core, which would threaten the centre, as in medieval Europe. Tissot's book explains why that has not happened, but more importantly it illuminates how a rather more subtle, insidious and complicated social geography has come into being.

Based on two years of fieldwork in Boston's heavily gentrified South End neighbourhood, where her Frenchness only aided her entrée into gentrifier confidences, Tissot found that the new class of urban whites was determined both



The South End neighbourhood, Boston, Massachusetts

to consolidate their status as the legitimate guardians of the space and to preserve their reputations as progressives with Civil Rights bona fides. While their citizen boards co-ordinated with municipal officials who wanted to overhaul the neighbourhoods and clear away vestiges of the "ghetto", they also identified themselves as sympathizers with the social struggle of the 1960s, and wished to carry on its legacy by maintaining "diversity".

Tissot makes the sharp point that Boston's South End is not a "revanchist" neighbourhood; it has not been subject to the mass eviction of previous tenants through a sudden rent hike. Rather, much of the new civic power has been directed towards managing public spaces, with wealthier new residents banding together to pass new regulations and standards. Higher safety regulations have been one traditional way of going about this, but Tissot shows that the new civic strategy is even more visible in public spaces. She gives the example of a Chinese man no longer allowed to plant his garden in the public commons (where new wealthier arrivals have freely started their own gardens) for having "disorderly seedbeds". In cases where their private donations have made up for a lack of public funds, wealthier inhabitants sometimes exercise control over park entry. Tissot gives the example of watching a young man expelled from one of the South End gardens for playing a guitar on the grass. New rules proliferate about the proper etiquette for dogs, and at one community meeting that Tissot attended, the gentrifiers debated the cost of allowing a wine shop to open in the neighbourhood, which may reattract "not-so-nice people". More troubling are the triumphant tones set off in this letter one South End resident wrote to the Boston City Parks bureau, which Tissot quotes:

Our park . . . is probably the most diverse pocket of activity you will ever see: Gay men walking their dogs, Hispanic kids playing baseball, Asian women practicing tai chi, white refugees from the suburbs planting flowers, African American toddlers tumbling about the playground, yuppie adults playing basket ball, and homeless residents snoozing under the trees.

What is striking in this hymn to peaceful coexistence is that all of the groups mentioned appear as background for the gentrifier to enjoy,

not much different from the Victorian architecture that drew so many of them to the neighbourhood in the first place. Tissot makes the claim that the gentrifiers are perfectly accepting of blacks, gays and others who swim in the same tax bracket, but that it is the urban poor who must be kept, if not completely out of sight, then at the edge of the frame.

*Good Neighbors* is less an indictment of second-wave gentrification than a careful study of how its political and social legitimacy is nurtured and built. While Tissot comes close in some places to lamenting that the forces of collective resistance to this new type of gentrification appear to have been exhausted, her book's main strength is its moral inquiry into the minds of the gentrifiers. She shows a distinct type of moral self-deception taking place, in which gentrifiers cleanse their consciences by contrasting themselves to the first wave of more ruthless gentrification and cultivating blindness to the new democratic deficits they are creating, all the while feeling themselves to be cashing in on the dividends of authenticity. This new mode of gentrification has yet to find its Paula Fox, but its most tireless cheerleader must be the *New Yorker* journalist Adam Gopnik. To experience it, however, is to begin to feel some nostalgia for the immediate post-war decades, when urban classes mixed more regularly, when the doctor's daughter from the first floor might possibly run into the maid's son from the eighth outside the building, where the coffee was not very good but the dogs were bigger – an era that, in literary terms, gave us the bouncing high-low registers of Saul Bellow and Philip Roth rather than the single-note, authenticity-hankering prose of Paul Auster and Jonathan Lethem. The only weakness of Sylvie Tissot's account is that her study often slips into the sort of pure sociologues that makes one long to see her thesis explored by a novelist, since it can be trying to visualize scene after scene where people do little more than "deploy" social markers with mechanical precision as they glide through space. But *Good Neighbors* does make good on its Bourdieu-esque pedigree, and it is a powerful contribution to the rising tide of scholarship on global gentrification. It will make you think twice the next time you hear a neighbourhood celebrated as "vibrant".