

Article

# Brooklyn Gentrification and the Act of Settling in Lionel Shriver's *The Mandibles*

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**Abstract:** Contemporary Brooklyn fictions, as a genre, are centrally concerned with gentrification and authenticity. This article situates literary Brooklyn and these concerns in relation to the United States at the national level. Thinking about Brooklyn's gentrification demands one to be necessarily cognizant of the borough as a social, cultural, economic, and psychological space within the context of the US as a colonial nation-state. I argue that Lionel Shriver's *The Mandibles* (2016), whose titular characters are enactors of both Brooklyn gentrification and a romanticized act of settlement in a fictional new nation-state, exemplifies this link between gentrification at the local level and a search for authenticity at the national level. Through a reading of the novel, I argue that Brooklyn gentrification is intimately bound with US settler colonialism, which in *The Mandibles* is sustained by the novel's representations of finance and the whiteness of its narrative focalization.

**Keywords:** Brooklyn; gentrification; settler colonialism; American literature; whiteness; financial fiction; Lionel Shriver; *The Mandibles*

## 1. Introduction: Brooklyn's Situation

Brooklyn, since the latter half of the twentieth century, is inescapably tied to gentrification. To think about gentrification in Brooklyn or, indeed, anywhere is to think about changes beyond just the physical. Understanding Brooklyn demands one to be necessarily cognizant of the borough as a social, cultural, economic, and psychological space amidst the backdrop of New York and, wider still, the United States. Critical accounts across disciplines have reckoned with this in recent years. These include studies of Brooklyn's geography and cultural history, such as of the borough's brownstone buildings (Osman 2011), of its aesthetic and cultural pull (Zukin 2010), and of its economic inequality (DeSena 2009). Neighborhood-level ethnographic studies have also examined class in various ways: for instance, the phenomenon of super gentrifying the already-gentrified (Lees 2003) and new forms of racial segregation (Chronopoulos 2020, 2016). Literary critical accounts of Brooklyn gentrification in fiction tend to focus on authors who are from the borough themselves and often speak either of notions of community (Peacock 2015), or of the semi-autobiographical tendencies of an author-narrator in search of a kind of 'authenticity' amidst cultural, economic, and aesthetic changes (Peacock 2019; Gumpert 2009; Godbey 2008). This article is born of these literary studies readings of Brooklyn. This article takes the idea that Brooklyn fictions are concerned with authenticity as a starting point and, rather than think about what an authentic Brooklyn *looks like*, seeks to locate literary Brooklyn and the pull of its authenticity in relation to the US at the national level. I do this through a reading of gentrification and settler colonialism in Lionel Shriver's *The Mandibles: A Family, 2029–2047* (2016).

The contours of gentrification are multifaceted. In a material sense, gentrification is, as sociologist Ruth Glass first coined in the 1960s, the movement of white middle-class homeowners into lower-cost inner city spaces, predominantly the neighborhoods of working-class renters. Over a period of time, this results in rising house prices, the business landscape changing, and the eventual turfing out of people who had understood their sense of self and their communities in that particular city space (Glass 1964). Such



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material processes of gentrification are predicated on the term's more abstract components, too: gentrification relies on the reconfiguring (even re-establishment) of class hierarchies within the inner-city space across racial, financial, familial, and gender lines. It is also, in this abstract sense, about the claiming of that most contestable of terms: authenticity.

*The Mandibles* is not obviously a Brooklyn fiction. Lionel Shriver does not write as a Brooklynite; rather, she was born in North Carolina and lives in London.<sup>1</sup> The novel, while set in a near-future Brooklyn, does not relate to the city in the same way as novels by authors such as Jonathan Lethem or Paul Auster do. By this, I mean that, while Brooklyn is *The Mandibles*'s setting (at least for its first two-thirds) and the novel does engage specifically with the East Flatbush and Fort Greene neighborhoods, Shriver's text does not have the same valorization of a local 'authenticity' as one would find in, for instance, Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* [2003] or Auster's *The Brooklyn Follies* [2005]. Instead, it valorizes a national authenticity. To be clear in my use of the word, in this paper, I read 'authenticity' as a complex and malleable term that speaks to both the "mythological and ideological" (Peacock 2015, p. 43). In one instance, on the individual level and from the interior, authenticity denotes a nostalgic connection for origin to a time or a place. We may think of this as a longing for 'how things used to be'; as such, authenticity in this first individual instance is in relation to one's own perception of history. In another instance, and relating to the exterior, Sharon Zukin argues that

authenticity differentiates a person, a product, or a group from its competitors; it confers an aura of moral superiority, a strategic advantage that each can use to its own benefit [ . . . ] it may not be necessary for a group to *be* authentic; it may be enough to claim to *see* authenticity in order to control its advantages. (Zukin 2010, p. xii)

Authenticity, in this second instance, is wielded as a power relation between subjects for social and cultural capital. For the purposes of this paper, when I use the word 'authenticity,' I am referring to both of these instances simultaneously; in short, authenticity describes a relation. So, with all this in mind, why look at *The Mandibles* specifically to think about Brooklyn? I argue that the novel's characters search for authenticity not in Brooklyn, but in a nostalgic and mythological version of a US origin story that has existed in the cultural imaginary. At the same time, the novel's narrative method parallels—and places in dialogue—Brooklyn gentrification with a journey to a new nation-state in Nevada.

In Shriver's novel, a national financial crisis in 2029 means that the wealthy, white Mandible family all move into daughter Florence's small house in East Flatbush. That the family are white is crucial for how the narrative codes social relations, as I will expand upon later. The inheritance that the family members stood to receive from their great-grandfather Douglas is wiped out—it was held in US Treasury bonds, which have been deemed null and void as collateral in the crisis. Later, the Mandible family are threatened at gunpoint by another family, who force them out of the house and onto the road. To survive, great-grandfather Douglas kills his second wife Luella, a Black woman with dementia, and then himself, under the guise of it being practical for the family's survival (after this moment, there are no more Black characters in the novel).<sup>2</sup> The narrative skips ahead some years later and, in 2049, son Willing and great-aunt Nollie leave for Nevada, which has seceded from the union and has become an independent nation-state in the vision of a colonial North America. Nevada (the United States of Nevada in the novel—also called the USN or the Free State) is coded as a fresh start. By the end of the novel, the remaining members of the Mandible family have followed Willing and Nollie to their new settlement just outside Las Vegas, paralleling their move into Florence's East Flatbush home some years before.

<sup>1</sup> Shriver does, however, in keeping with the themes of this paper, own a second property in Brooklyn's Windsor Park which she uses as a summer home.

<sup>2</sup> Following Lori Tharps, I capitalize the 'B' in 'Black' to recognise Blackness as a cultural identity (Tharps 2014).

The novel's narrative movement, triggered by the global financial crisis, from a gentrified and continuously gentrifying East Flatbush to a pilgrimage and resettling in another part of the US, facilitates an understanding of gentrification as entwined with the mechanisms of settler colonialism. An analysis of literary representation is uniquely positioned to facilitate this critical move, as it allows us to recognize gentrification and settler colonialism as both parallel processes and intimately bound structures. In this, I am thinking about settler colonialism through Eve Tuck and C. Ree, who write that

Settler colonial relations are comprised by a triad, including (a) the Indigenous inhabitant, present only because of her erasure; (b) the chattel slave, whose body is property and murderable; and (c) the inventive settler, whose memory becomes history, and whose ideology becomes reason. Settler colonialism is the management of those who have been made killable, once and future ghosts. (Tuck and Ree 2016, p. 642)

Tuck and Ree's definition of the triad is crucial because it ensures that the enslavement of Black Africans and the legacy of this history is central to an understanding of settler colonialism alongside the "[making] killable" of the Indigenous inhabitant. It distinguishes this from being a comparison of white European settler violence towards different *races*; instead, the triad of settler colonial relations registers a dialogue between race and indigeneity in the formation of the US nation-state. This is important for thinking about *The Mandibles* because Shriver's novel represents Nevada as a place of colonial opportunity, yet there is no mention of Indigenous inhabitants at all, of which there are many in Nevada, including Shoshone, Washoe, Northern Paiute, Southern Paiute, and (historically) Mono tribes. Such an erasure brings to mind Patrick Wolfe's assertion that "settler colonialism destroys to replace" (Wolfe 2006, p. 388). This is not to say that the novel should 'include' Indigenous characters, only that their absence in the narrative, even though it is based on US history, is emblematic of the settler colonial project: figuring the Indigenous inhabitant as non-existent. The critical move that this essay makes in connecting Brooklyn gentrification with the US's settler colonialism is through these relations in Tuck and Ree's triad, shown through the novel's overt whiteness, its representation and treatment of its Black characters in East Flatbush, and its coding of resettlement and subsequent erasure of Indigenous peoples in Nevada.

Gentrification is registered in the novel, but the *Mandibles* do not reflect upon their own relations to it, and implications in it. Literary scholar and cultural theorist Sarah Brouillette describes the problematic nature of gentrification succinctly, accounting for both what it describes and the deployment of the term itself:

Gentrification is thus 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. The difficulty of knowing what is fundamental and what is incidental to the process exacerbates its ambivalence. Is it refurbishment of the existing built environment or new development or both? Is it driven by home buyers, by property developers, by landlords, or by any or all of these combined? Is it only the initial phase that counts, when a blighted area is first isolated as desirable and then inhabited and fixed up, or is any kind of upmarket movement implicated? (Brouillette 2009, p. 426)

Brouillette's study focuses specifically on literature about Brick Lane—historically a home for much of London's Bangladeshi community, but perhaps known more in the twenty-first-century public imagination as a hub of young artist spaces and night clubs. What is crucial here is that the processes of gentrification that make places "safer and more livable" are entirely contingent on whose perspective this is. The apparent safety and livability of a particular urban space is predicated substantially on needing to sell property, and places with perceived limited cultural capital are at risk of being strong-armed into such

'development' (again, decided for by those in power, and are decisions which are inevitably tied up with identity: class, race, gender, sexuality). As Brouillette questions here, who drives this? Through her reading of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* [2003], both the novel and the controversies surrounding its publication, Brouillette positions this as being driven by capital, marketing, and branding.

Where Brouillette's analysis of London, influenced heavily by Glass's work, focuses on the material symptoms of gentrification (particularly property and conditions of labor), literary criticism surrounding Brooklyn gentrification focuses on a related but more abstract, even ideological, plane. This is predominantly in a prevailing sense of an authentic Brooklyn. Matt Godbey, writing on Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*, a novel about a white man's return to Brooklyn and his idealization of his 'real' and authentic adolescence in the city, asserts that "authenticity is essential for understanding the complex relationship between gentrification, race, and middle-class white identity that is at the heart of Lethem's novel. Moreover, it is a relationship that is central not only to *Fortress* but to gentrification itself and the particular brand of urban renewal it signifies" (Godbey 2008, p. 132). Authenticity is a logical pivot point from which to understand one's relation to economic, social, and cultural histories, particularly when centered on a particular space—in this instance, Brooklyn. The relations between gentrification, race, and middle-class white identity that is understood through authenticity in Godbey's analysis of Lethem's novel are similarly central concerns of *The Mandibles*. However, unlike Dylan in *The Fortress of Solitude*, the authenticity Shriver's characters search for is not in the local Brooklyn neighborhood, but in their vision for the national: the narrative seeks a return to the United States before gentrification, but also before liberal democracy.

Gentrification and settler colonialism are shown to be deeply entwined throughout *The Mandibles*, primarily through the intersection of the Mandible family's whiteness (and all the wealth-related structural conditions that come with this) and their search for an authentic (in their eyes) nation-state. The geographer Neil Smith posits gentrification as part of an ideological "new urban frontier," the imagery of which "is neither merely decorative nor innocent [ . . . ] but carries considerable ideological weight [ . . . ] the frontier ideology rationalizes social differentiation and exclusion as natural, inevitable" (Smith 1996, p. 16). Riffing on the American frontier during the expansion of colonies and the claiming of territory, the new urban frontier is not only a geographical delineation between 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' spaces but an ideological one through which structural violence is enacted. It is an imperial notion of making the savage space civilized; it is not something that is exclusive to the gentrifying urban space, but is always in relation to the origins of the United States as a nation-state itself. Gentrification's mechanisms, then, are part of a settler colonial history. Patrick Wolfe, writing on how settler colonialism results in the elimination of Indigenous populations, argues that "the primary motive for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory. Territoriality is settler colonialism's specific, irreducible element" (Wolfe 2006, p. 388). We can think of gentrification as a *refiguring* of territory acquisition within the structure of the capitalist nation-state. Gentrification is predicated on private property as a given (complete with legal rights enforced by the nation-state to protect it), and the acquisition of it in accordance with market movements. Settler colonialism is predicated on the acquisition (by force or otherwise) of territory upon which to establish a nation-state. If, as Wolfe says, "settler colonialization [is] a structure not an event," then through *The Mandibles* we can read the gentrification of Brooklyn as similarly a structure and not an event (Wolfe 2006, p. 390).

It is this centering of relationality, via a sense of authenticity as represented in the literary, that enables more complex and fruitful explorations of the historical and cultural valences of Brooklyn gentrification. Through the lens of Marxist geography, Liza Kim Jackson explains that "[g]entrification is a process that takes advantage of inherently unstable and constantly fluctuating land markets across urban spaces where the neighborhood as a whole is seen as a basis of economic competition within the context of the city" (Jackson 2017, p. 55). At the core of it all, gentrification is about financialized land

markets. Land, of course, existed before these markets. Taking Shriver's novel as an analytic object, Brooklyn gentrification does not take place independently of national-level histories and contexts. As such, we cannot think about Brooklyn gentrification and its relation to the US without also thinking about settler colonialism, the takeover of land, and the displacement of Indigenous peoples. Similarly, we cannot think about Brooklyn gentrification—especially through Shriver's novel—without being mindful of the historical circumstances for much of the Black population of Brooklyn. The Great Migration throughout the twentieth century as a result of the upholding of Jim Crow laws in many southern states saw huge numbers of African Americans moving north. The upholding of Jim Crow laws that created the conditions for the Great Migration was itself part of the legacy of transatlantic slavery. Thinking with Tuck and Ree's triad of settler colonial relations, these are interconnected histories. As such, questions of property ownership and the financing of land at the local level are tied to these (trans)national histories of the US as a colonial and imperialist nation-state. This article seeks to situate a literary analysis of Brooklyn gentrification within these histories.

How should we engage with gentrification, and its representation in the literary imagination? Moreover, how are we to critically examine the processes and structures of gentrification in fiction, and avoid reducing the argument to simply identifying its locations and verifying its existence? I am not asking 'what is gentrification?' or 'where is gentrification?' so much as 'how is gentrification (in relation to, and within the context of, local and national imaginaries)?' I am not asking this just because it is, I think, a more interesting and necessary question, but because it is a question which a literary analysis is well equipped to tackle. The answer to this question is not in narrative portrayals of the material (such as renovations of buildings, or acquisitions of property, for instance) in and of itself. Instead, if we are to critically examine gentrification as a structure, then we must focus on local, national, and transnational relations, which, in fictions such as *The Mandibles*, are fueled by a nebulous authenticity. To situate Brooklyn and work through these relations in the US's cultural imaginary, we must first look at the ways in which Shriver's novel represents the borough's neighborhoods.

## 2. East Flatbush, Housing, and Whiteness

The *Mandibles* imagines a financial meltdown in 2029, exactly one century after the Wall Street crash and the onset of the Great Depression. Alongside this narrative locating, the novel is clearly one written in the wake of the 2007/8 global financial crisis. Its satirical tone and broadly realist representations, combined with its genre riffing on speculative fiction and a narrative arc centered on financial anxieties, put it squarely alongside the financial crisis fictions of the early 2010s, such as Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* [2010], Teddy Wayne's *Kapitoil* [2010], and Ben Lerner's *10:04* [2014]. In Shriver's novel, the US dollar collapses because the President refuses to trade in a new global currency, called the *bancor*, and the sizable inheritance that the various Mandible family members stood to inherit from the family's great-grandfather Douglas is reduced to nothing overnight.<sup>3</sup> It is the state's decision to not engage with the new global currency (in a fiscal rendering of American exceptionalism) and its renegeing on the own policy of 'full faith and credit' that exacerbates the economic decline, causes a global (and local) lack of trust in the US state, and leads to the relative destitution of the Mandible family and forcing them to all move in to one house together.<sup>4</sup> Amidst this backdrop of financial collapse, the novel's engagement with gentrification is rooted in property. In this section, I will examine how the novel does this through Florence's house in East Flatbush, before, in the next section,

<sup>3</sup> The fact that the US refuses to trade in a currency called the 'bancor' is significant: John Maynard Keynes proposed the currency in the early 1940s at the Bretton Woods Conference as part of a global economic plan following the Second World War.

<sup>4</sup> The notion of full faith and credit is the principle that the US state will always pay back the securities it issues in the form of bonds, notes, and bills. It is what gives the US Treasury its reputation as one of the safest and lowest-risk investments in the world.

reading the Mandible family's narrative arc as a way to think through gentrification and settler colonialism together.

I want to be mindful here of the potential for an analysis of gentrification in fiction to be reduced to a simplistic 'gentrifiers are bad' line. Making a moral judgement is not what I am trying to do here; rather, I am more interested in the relations that constitute gentrification as represented in contemporary fiction. The satirical tone of *The Mandibles* presents the problem as overreaching government and a poor national response to a financial crisis, and the characters are arbiters of individualist 'common sense' in response to something much bigger than them. As such, while the novel's characters struggle to tackle structural problems with structural solutions, its narrative mode facilitates a reading of the relationship between the individual and the structural through its positioning of the individual gentrifying class within both the neighborhood space of East Flatbush and later a newly constructed nation-state in Nevada. I also want to register at this point that *The Mandibles* creates the conditions for imagining a kind of *de*-gentrification. This is exemplified by its depiction of Carroll Gardens, which had previously gentrified to the point of being "a shining citadel of the professional class" only to become, following the novel's financial crisis, a place of "not only more numerous, but older and better dressed" panhandlers (Shriver 2016, p. 177). However, rather than this becoming the basis of class solidarity and social rebuilding in the text, the individualist 'common sense' approach of the novel's characters means that such a *de*-gentrification instead becomes the catalyst for their move to an independent Nevada—itsself existing as a vision of an early colonial US.

Florence, her partner Esteban, and precocious teenage son Willing live in the "tiny, ramshackle, but larcenously overpriced house in a Brooklyn neighborhood notorious when they were growing up for murderous turf wars between crack dealers" (p. 28). "Florence's purchase of a house in East Flatbush had been savvy," reads an early sentence in the novel, "for the once-scruffy neighborhood had gone upscale" (p. 8). In 2029, work is scarce, as is homeownership. Notably, Florence relies on family wealth to buy the house in the first place: "[w]ithout Grand Man [Douglas], she'd have never managed the down payment" (p. 206). That Florence, *The Mandibles*'s most central character for the first two-thirds of the novel, owns the property she lives in is something to be celebrated, a "savvy" move. This is because, broadly speaking, in an economy where wage earning is low, assets—particularly houses—are a more secure financial investment.<sup>5</sup> The ownership of the house is central to the novel, both in terms of what unfolds in the narrative—other members of the Mandible family fall on hard times during the financial crisis and move into Florence's house—and in terms of this essay's analysis. The novel positions the house as a financial asset and nothing more:

It was touchy enough that she held the deed to 335 East Fifty-Fifth Street, and had resisted Esteban's offers to contribute to the mortgage payments. They'd been together for five years, but allowing him to build a claim to the equity would have meant trusting the relationship an increment further than felt fitting, given that a string of his predecessors had proved such spectacular disappointments. (pp. 17–18)

The house, then, is not a space to realize relationships so long as there is finance involved. Moreover, to pay some money towards the mortgage is to similarly "build a claim" to ownership of one's partner. One can only be owed a relation in the form of debt and a repayment structure.

Gentrification is neither a singular event nor an individual act with a clear cause and effect. It is a structure, but the novel can only render structures in individual cause-and-effect terms. What this does is enable the Mandible family to extricate themselves from responsibility to the structure of gentrification they are a part of. As the narrative is focalized through different members of the family, it has the effect of the novel itself doing the same. Florence laments what she sees as the effects of gentrification: "the [Flatbush]

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, the burgeoning cross-economic and cultural studies research into the value of assets, such as Piketty (2014) and Adkins et al. (2019).

Avenue was oh, so civilized, and oh, so dead” (p. 86). As far as Florence and, by extension, the rest of the Mandible family are concerned, they are not the gentrifiers, because “[t]he ‘gentry’ encroaching ever farther east into Brooklyn took private transport”—and she takes the bus (p. 85). The individual cannot see herself as part of the structure because such a structure does not exist. Instead, it is a particular group of people—the gentry—who live in other neighborhoods and take different transport, who are the real problem, if there is a problem at all. Florence’s disavowal of the slow, capitalistic violence of her own presence is part of a larger structure of gentrification that permeates through *The Mandibles* below the surface of its narrative. As such, the novel’s understanding of gentrification is at once removed from the central characters (either satirically or otherwise) and directly related to them.

*The Mandibles* is an overwhelmingly white narrative. Every named character who is not white has traits base upon their race or ethnicity: Esteban inserts Spanish into his sentences, President Alvarado is elected because of the Latinx vote, and in the novel’s most sinister turn, Luella gets so agitated due to her dementia that the family “[keep] their charge on a leash” (p. 342). Historically, East Flatbush has a majority Black and African American population—contemporary estimates are approximately 86% (NYU Furman Center). In Shriver’s novel, the interactions between the white Mandible family, primarily by way of narrative focalization through Florence, and the neighborhood’s Black population result in the latter being portrayed and treated with contempt. How Florence assumes both her moral and class positions is through locating herself in relation to a racial other. In one of the novel’s moments of satirizing white liberal thought, Florence believes that “the choice of a Mexican lover felt on the right side of history [ . . . ] In his otherness, he enlarged her world” (Shriver 2016, p. 16). How she sees East Flatbush’s Black population is yet more problematic. The day after a presidential announcement of measures that would inevitably send the US into financial meltdown, Florence is en route to work at a homeless shelter in Fort Greene: “As usual the only white passenger on the standing-room-only bus, Florence struggled to pick up any reference to Alvarado’s address. The Afri-mericans [sic] spoke their own dialect, only partially discernible to honks, infiltrated by scraps of mangled Spanish” (p. 85). It is not just Florence that has a problem with race. The narration through Florence’s father, Carter, upon an earlier visit to his own father, Douglas, at his lavish care home shows as such. “We’re all in this together, that was the conceit. Except we weren’t all in this one together,” the novel reads, before making a racial and class reversal of the ‘one rule for them, another for us’ cliché: “A Lat [sic] minding the desk at an old folks’ home was just the sort of person to have floated through the crisis, perhaps blissfully unaware that there was a crisis: no assets” (p. 49). The novel narrates the Mandibles moving into Florence’s house as a huge inconvenience for everyone (which it, of course, would be), but it positions this living arrangement—fourteen people in a two-bedroom house—as a hardship that is only afforded to the previously wealthy in this crisis because they have lost something. The effect of a structural financial crisis can only be judged, via racially charged observation, by individual property and asset ownership. Florence and Carter’s focalized narrations are based substantially, if not entirely, on racial othering, whereby only the white characters are those with assets to lose. Nestled within the Mandibles’s assumptions is an anxiety: that their plight puts them on an equal economic plane. As such, maintaining a sense of superiority is more openly racialized.

This is at its most present in the narrative arc of Luella, great-grandfather Douglas’s second wife. Luella is, because race is apparently chic, “trendily Afri-merican” (p. 53). She has severe dementia and requires constant care, but combined with the novel highlighting her Blackness, the fact that “Douglas now modelled his marriage on the relationship of master and pet” and that she is later tied with a leash takes on historical significance beyond the day-to-day interaction with someone with dementia—which itself alone would already attest to Douglas’s character (p. 54). Luella is seen as a hindrance, and her fate is determined by a cost-benefit analysis: in what seems to be indicative of the novel’s broader philosophy, Carter abides by the principle that “to have ‘value’ as a human being you

needed to be of some earthly use to someone else" (p. 334). Luella is murdered by Douglas, before he shoots himself, as the family are on the road; the narrative focalized through Willing later calls this "a selfless act" (p. 411). This act facilitates the novel's future in which Willing and Nollie survive and are then able to make the journey to Nevada some years later. Luella's death, after which there are no more Black characters in the novel, takes on a new significance, as I will examine next, with how the novel represents the United States of Nevada.

### 3. Finance, the Nation-State, and Settler Colonialism

In the second part of the novel, set some years further into the future in 2047, the narrative focalization is exclusively through Florence's son Willing, now in his thirties. Credit cards (and the novel's nouveau-smartphone FleX technology) have become obsolete as transactional devices: citizens now have a chip implanted at the base of their skull. This chip, the narration through Willing explains,

registered direct deposits of his salary. It deducted the costs of any products he chose to buy. It debited his utility bills. Though Willing had no experience of either, it recorded investments and received state benefits. It subtracted local, state, and federal taxes, which totaled 77 percent of his pay. It communicated every purchase to the agency known until 2039 as the Internal Revenue Service—what the item cost, when and where he bought it, and the product's exact description, down to model, serial number, or sell-by date. (p. 391)

The chip, then, is a security in two ways. First, for the individual citizens, it acts as the ultimate biosecurity for their personal finances as there is no cash or credit card to steal. The novel purports to ironise this by positioning the high taxes as theft by the state, which leads in to the second kind of security: the surveillance of monetary and capital flows for the fiscal security of the US nation-state.

The reason the taxes are so high is to provide welfare for the substantially aging population. The novel's characters harbor a deep resentment of this. Mass shootings at care homes have become somewhat commonplace, and Willing's girlfriend declares that "the shooter did those useless old coots a favor [ . . . ] and everyone else" (p. 410). Literature and disability scholar Lucy Burke correctly asserts that that such a position amplifies "the notion that the only good aging is unimpaired, independent, and self-sustaining," (Burke 2020, p. 36). The narrative abides by this logic following Douglas's "selfless act" of murdering Luella at the end of the novel's 2029 section (Shriver 2016, p. 411). The characters', and indeed the narrative's, disdain for those who need care (and the racialized nature of its eliminatory ideology) is paired with a distrust of US government. This provokes a longing for how things used to be—in other words, an authenticity. For Willing and Nollie, this is in a return to a pre-liberal democracy nation-state. Their journey to the United States of Nevada is not unlike the first settlers of what would become the United States of America. The novel explicitly makes this comparison in more than just name: a waitress in a diner near the end of their journey tells them that they get a lot of custom from people journeying to Nevada, noting that "the *pilgrims* have really picked up the economy round here" (p. 477, my emphasis). The economy certainly picks up with the Mandibles' arrival, as Nollie has, until this point in the novel, been keeping a stash of gold bars hidden. If the protestant separatists of the early seventeenth century colonized the New World in response to state-enforced Church of England service attendance, then Willing and Nollie Mandible's move to Nevada in response to perceiving taxation as indoctrination (and followed by all their extended family) is a notable comparison.

Though this reading of race and finance, the novel's authenticity is founded in a particular version of US history. The narrative's glorification of Willing and Nollie's journey, and its subsequent comparison to the that of the pilgrims, posits this as a legitimate or even preferable way to form a nation-state. It is in this narrative development, from local to national, that the novel defines, and searches for, authenticity. Against the backdrop of new financial and policing technologies in the chip, a vision of the nation-state rooted in the past



takes hold. Such a representation encapsulates Zukin's recognition of the contradictions in the term 'authenticity' itself: "on the one hand, being primal, historically first or true to a traditional vision, and on the other hand, being unique, historically new, innovative, and creative" (Zukin 2010, p. xii). It is this registering of authenticity's contradictions in the narrative development that makes this comparison between Brooklyn gentrification and US settler colonialism through Shriver's novel apposite. At two instances during the novel's timeline, the extended Mandible family move into the same space off the back of family assets (Florence's house in East Flatbush, and Nollie's gold bars in Nevada). In Brooklyn, the family's influx is ostensibly for survival. The economy has tanked and, at that moment, family ties backed by a potential inheritance are the only things of value that people have. In Nevada, the move is not necessary for bodily survival but for psychic survival following the overreach of governmental powers in the US. Nevertheless, the mechanics are the same: perceived pioneering members of the Mandible family move to a particular space, and the others follow. At this point, we may recall Florence's own pilgrimage from "liv[ing] with her parents in Carroll Gardens" (p. 9), the majority-white and gentrified South Brooklyn neighborhood, to East Flatbush, where she is "[a]s usual the only white passenger on the standing-room-only bus" (p. 85). The novel becomes proportionately populated by more white people as it goes on; there are no Black characters after Luella is murdered by Douglas at the end of the novel's first section, and the narrative only speaks of white people in Nevada. While the jettisoning of Black characters is not explicitly laid out as integral to the authentic vision of the nation-state, it nevertheless becomes so because of the novel's rendering of the Mandibles' journey as a pilgrimage, explicitly casting Willie and Nollie as akin to white settlers. The novel's racial politics are tied to its perceived solution to the financial crisis.

Surrounded by a crude fence, the novel's imagined future Nevada is a nostalgic view of a libertarian US, with a culture that valorizes reap-what-you-sow hard work. Fiona Allon, writing about new libertarianism and representations of currencies in contemporary fiction, notes how "Shriver's fictional solution to the economic woes of contemporary America is predictably libertarian: a gold standard, flat taxation, no state welfare, no social safety net, and aggressive isolationism" (Allon 2018, p. 231). Meeting an old man as they cross the border, Willing and Nollie are told "The USN don't trade, with nobody [ . . . ] Part philosophy, part practicality—'cause ain't nobody will trade with us. So if you can't make it, mine it, fix it, grow it, or invent it in Nevada, you can't get it" (Shriver 2016, p. 485). Nevada does, however, have an internal currency. Questioned by Willing whether they have one at all, the old man reveals an underlying political project underpinning Nevada beyond just escaping state control: "What do you think, we use beads? We're not *savages*. Carson City issues continentals. First currency of the original thirteen colonies. But it went to hell pronto in the late 1770s. 'Cause it wasn't backed by nothin'. We fixed that" (p. 485). The implication here is that the failings of the original thirteen colonies to continue to exist as they did was because they were not on the gold standard, which the USN is. The settler colony can continue, the problem "fixed," so long as particular economic conditions are in place. The novel's drive for national-level change is fueled by its seeming ambivalence to the existing conditions of the local and its search for a historical authenticity, leading to both the changing geographical and political landscapes of East Flatbush and Nevada. This ambivalence is that which connects gentrification with settler colonialism, mobilized and sustained by the novel's whiteness and its fiscal policy of codified value.

The novel is not unaware of the potential for history to repeat itself. Willing and Nollie are told in Nevada that a significant amount of the Latinx population left the state upon its seceding from the union, as they were "edgy that an independent state would turn into a racist repeat of the Confederacy" (p. 504). History has already repeated itself, though, through the novel's form. Willing and Nollie's move to the USN and their coding as "pilgrims" reaffirms a process of settler colonialism in the very act of settling, and narratively their arrival is an echo of East Flatbush's gentrification in the novel's first half. Settler colonial history is brought into the foreground of *The Mandibles's* narrative here, but

Indigenous peoples in Nevada are not mentioned. Instead, the threat of violence based on the events of US history is misrepresented as one to do with race rather than one to do with, as Wolfe says, territory. Such an erasure enacts the settler colonial mechanisms of the US nation-state at the level of narrative form, and its history can be tacitly registered without the difficulty of engaging with structural violence. There is no chance of it being “a racist repeat of the Confederacy” if there is no-one there to be racist too, it seems.

It is important to recognize that while gentrification and settler colonialism are categorized as distinct phenomena, they are far from distinct in their mechanisms, manifestations, and direction. Here, I want to be mindful of the concerns raised by Kanaka Maoli scholar J. Kēhaulani Kauanui in making use of Wolfe’s landmark phrase that settler colonialism is a structure and not an event, especially in working with Wolfe’s method for gentrification, too. Kauanui notes how foundational Wolfe’s thinking is to the development of settler colonial studies, and that Wolfe himself acknowledges, as a non-Indigenous scholar, that he was by no means the absolute originator of the discipline—as can seem the case when a single quotation, albeit an incredibly rich and provocative one, continues to be cited from scholars working nominally outside settler colonial studies but in adjacent field such as American studies (like myself). Kauanui argues that Wolfe’s work is complex and nuanced, and should not be reduced to an academic soundbite. Instead, Wolfe’s work should always be acknowledged as being in conversation with indigeneity and Indigenous studies. She writes that

[u]nderstanding settler colonialism as a structure exposes the fact that colonialism cannot be relegated to the past, even though the past-present should be historicized. The notion that colonialism is something that ends with the dissolving of the British colonies when the original thirteen became the early US states has its counterpart narrative in the myth that indigenous peoples ended when colonialism ended”. (Kauanui 2016)

To occupy the land is to also occupy history; to occupy space is to occupy time, too. Recognizing that these acts of settler occupation are continuous and ongoing is essential for reckoning with US history. This is no more evident than in the 2007/8 financial crisis—the crisis that Shriver’s novel takes as its inspiration for its imagined 2029 crisis. Lenape scholar Joanne Barker has written brilliantly on the 2007/8 financial crisis in relation to indigeneity, particularly through the Occupy Wall Street movement (Barker 2018). Kauanui succinctly summarizes this element of Barker’s work: “indigenous dispossession was the historical precondition for Wall Street itself—a street with a wall built by the Dutch, in part, to keep the Lenape people out of their homeland in what became lower Manhattan—what has become a metonym for the US finance industry—all built on indigenous dispossession” (Kauanui 2016). The geography of finance is always-already an occupation.

Through the 2007/8 financial crisis predicated on subprime mortgage collapse, and through *The Mandibles*’s 2029 financial crisis predicated on US government policy failings, a picture begins to emerge of the inherent connections between land, neighborhoods, and indigeneity, and between housing, gentrification, and settler colonialism. Not only are these parallel processes but they are intimately bound structures, sustained by whiteness and notions of crisis as reducible to single moments rather than as the fabric of American financial capitalism.<sup>6</sup> *The Mandibles*’s final lines—“In 2064, Nevada’s flat tax was raised to 11 percent. Of course”—imply that the USN will come to emulate the USA, first in financial jurisdiction and, it can be inferred, a history not dissimilar to the events of the novel thus far (Shriver 2016, p. 515). The cycle continues. From the narrative’s overtly libertarian political angle, this is a satirical take on the persistence of liberal democracy as a form of governance—but it would also imply continuous settlement.

<sup>6</sup> For more, see Lauren Berlant, who argues that “crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what’s overwhelming” (Berlant 2011, p. 10). There is room for a more sustained examination of the parallels between Berlant’s work in *Cruel Optimism* and Wolfe’s writing on the structure of settler colonialism, but, alas, elsewhere.

As such, *The Mandibles* can neither represent the ongoing (trans)national violence and erasure of settler colonialism, nor the local displacement and capitalist exclusion of gentrification. What reading Shriver's novel *can* do, however, is position the structure of Brooklyn gentrification alongside the structure of settler colonialism, and exemplify their shared, paralleled, and imbued processes. These entwined structures are sustained by the novel's representation of finance, and the whiteness of its narrative focalization. If, as Elizabeth Gumpert states, "[a]ll Brooklyn Fiction is historical fiction," then Brooklyn fiction is historical far beyond the borough itself (Gumpert 2009, p. 7). Thinking about the histories of the US as a nation-state in conjunction with reading Brooklyn at the neighborhood level provides an opportunity to elucidate a sense of authenticity that may sometimes find its psychic manifestation in the local, but will always be in conversation with knowledges and relations much farther afield.

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