



“GENTEFIED” PORTRAYAL OF LATINX COMMUNITIES IN THE FACE OF GENTRIFICATION

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GENTRIFICATION AND GENTEFICATION:

STRIVING FOR BALANCE AMIDST URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Gentefied is a Netflix series first released in 2020, and whose first season revolves around the lives of three cousins and their struggle to preserve their family's taco shop in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of Los Angeles. The series deals with the intricacies of gentrification and so-called “gentefication”, showcasing the dilemmas and conflicts the cousins face as they strive to be catalysts for change in their community. They grapple with the potential repercussions of these transformations and the tensions that arise. The show explores how the characters must strike a balance between pursuing personal growth and progress while staying true to their cultural heritage and actively supporting their community in the midst of profound change.

Each character's perspective on gentrification in *Gentefied* reflects a unique facet of the gentrification issue, ranging from personal struggles to community-level activism. In 1964, the British sociologist Ruth Glass coined the term "gentrification" to describe the phenomenon of middle-class individuals moving into urban neighborhoods, displacing lower-class worker residents in the process. Her use of the term highlighted the transformation and revitalization of these neighborhoods due to the influx of more affluent residents. However, the series draws its name and central theme from a term created by Guillermo Uribe, a Mexican American proprietor, in 2007. According to the Los Angeles Magazine, he said “I started to see the potential of improving the community from the inside out. If gentrification is happening, it might as well be from people who care about the existing culture. In the case of Boyle Heights, it would be best if the gente decide to invest in improvements because they are more likely to



preserve its integrity.” Therefore, the term "gentefication" is a combination of *gente*, the word for "people" in Spanish, and gentrification. Uribe coined this term in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of East Los Angeles, where he opened the Eastside Luv Wine Bar. Gentefication reflects the idea of a gentrification process that is driven by and centered around the empowerment and inclusion of the local community, emphasizing the importance of preserving and celebrating their cultural identity throughout the neighborhood's transformation. *Gentefied* skillfully explores how gentrification affects individuals and communities, presenting a multifaceted portrayal of this complex social phenomenon.

EXPLORING THE NOTION OF FAMILISMO:

A REFLECTION OF LATINX CULTURE, FAMILY BONDS AND PERSONAL GROWTH

"Familismo" is a concept deeply rooted in cultures of Latin American heritage, particularly in Mexican communities. It emphasizes the importance of family and close-knit relationships within the family unit (Suárez-Orozco and Páez 2009, 256 -57). Familismo entails a strong sense of loyalty, mutual support, and solidarity among family members. It influences various aspects of life, such as decision-making, responsibilities, and emotional connections.

In *Gentefied*, the notion of familismo is likely portrayed through the interactions and relationships among the main characters, who are part of an extended family. They face challenges that test their commitment to their family, therefore, the show highlights how they come together to support each other through thick and thin, even in the face of the gentrification that threatens their traditional community. More specifically, the relationship between the grandfather, Casimiro (Joaquín Cosío), and his grandchild Erik (Joseph Julian Soria) can be described as paternal, characterized by a close bond and mutual respect, reflecting typical patterns seen in Mexican upbringing and the "engagement with familismo dynamics" (Crockett et al. 2007; Cauce and Domenech-Rodríguez 2002). Gender roles play a significant role in shaping both Erik's and Casimiro's personalities. Casimiro embodies the traditional values prevalent in Mexican American communities, emphasizing the importance of family and respect. On the other hand, Erik represents the challenges faced by Mexican American fathers in modern times. Latinx fatherhood and the notion of familismo are embedded in other themes such as work ethics, societal expectations, responsibility, commitment to one's own family and the significance of education (Marini 2021, 41).

Gentefied subtly emphasizes these aspects through the consistent display of care in Erik and Casimiro's interactions and their participation in everyday activities, often expressed through humor and a sense of shared masculinity. Additionally, the grandfather plays a role in passing down the keys to such a configuration of fatherhood. For instance, Erik is willing to sacrifice his own salary to help resolve the



taco shop's financial problems, showcasing the importance of prioritizing family, as he believes that "family comes first" (episode 1). Moreover, in the initial episodes, the series emphasizes the conflicts between the cousins. Chris (Carlos Santos), who has recently come back from Idaho, often becomes the target of criticism for fully embracing white hipster culture. However, as the 10-episode season unfolds, their stances become more nuanced. Chris grapples with a persistent sense that he doesn't quite fit in as Mexican within Boyle Heights, yet he also feels too Mexican for his prejudiced boss. On the other hand, Erik's desire is to establish himself as a devoted family man tied to his community.

On the other hand, there is Casimiro's daughter Beatriz (Laura Patalano), a Mexican immigrant woman employed at a textile supplier company, and she has raised on her own her two daughters, Ana (Karrie Martin Lachney) and Nayeli (Bianca Melgar), since becoming widowed. Throughout the series, she frequently expresses her conservative views, touching on topics like gender roles and mental health. She mocks the independence of women in modern times as she refers to her daughter's black girlfriend, Yessika (Julissa Calderon) as "[su] negra," projecting her struggle with internalized racism and colorism, indicating her need to address her own cultural biases. Furthermore, Beatriz sees life as a series of sacrifices and humorously remarks, "Yo no tengo tiempo de hashtag me-time" (Episode 8), indicating her perspective on motherhood and femininity as a sacrifice complies with traditional Latino patterns of womanhood. She struggles to comprehend her eldest daughter's selfishness to prioritize her own interests to spend time on social media and self-branding over the obligations towards the family, and consistently reminds her how hard she has worked all her life. Beatriz struggles to comprehend her eldest daughter's selfishness in placing her personal interests ahead of family responsibilities, repeatedly emphasizing the hard work she has put in throughout her life. This attitude is exemplified by the ironic tone she adopts when discussing Ana's passion for art and is evident in her actions, such as throwing her daughter's paints in the garbage as a form of punishment. Nevertheless, a character development is noted at the end of the series and Beatriz reaches an epiphany. She begins to take small steps on her personal journey to reevaluate the cultural norms that have been ingrained in her. She starts by apologizing to Yessika for her racist behavior, making an effort to grow closer to Ana, and becoming more open about her own limitations with her daughters. These newfound attitudes drive Beatriz's transformation.

Familismo serves as a cornerstone of Latinx cultures, fostering strong bonds, loyalty, and support within the family unit. In *Gentefied*, the show effectively portrays this concept through the interactions and challenges faced by the main characters. Casimiro's and Erik's relationship exemplifies a paternal bond influenced by traditional Mexican upbringing, while Beatriz's character showcases the complexities of conservative values and motherhood. Through these narratives, *Gentefied* highlights



the importance of family, cultural identity, and personal growth within the Latinx community.

CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES AND REDEFINING LATINIDAD:

GENTEFIED'S REPRESENTATION OF WORKING CLASS LATINXS

A more superficial approach to film and media criticism would likely interpret the characters in the show as contemporary versions of long-established stereotypes. In *Gentefied*, the characters might be seen as modern *bandidos* characterized by their loud and feisty behavior. Many of these characters are depicted as laborers, lacking refinement or "class," and are portrayed with heavy accents. This specifically happens in the case of first-generation migrants, for example Casimiro and And's mother. However, when considering intersectional analyses of media representations and studies on reception, these seemingly straightforward "negative" portrayals become more intricate (Bobo 1995; Gates 2018), especially when the creators of the show share similar marginalized identities as the characters they embody.

Nevertheless, critics of *Gentefied* draw on a history of negative depictions that have been condemned by Latinx film criticism. Throughout the history of the U.S. media industry, images of Latinx individuals, often produced by a white-dominated industry, have been prevalent with mediated stereotypes. These stereotypes originate in the silent era, where portrayals such as the *bandido* persisted (Rodriguez 1997, 368; Berg 2002, 17 -19). The portrayal of Latinxs from lower socio-economic classes in films as domestic servants, criminals, or service workers exemplifies the pervasive issue of stereotyping and marginalization within media representation. This limited representation fails to capture the community's diversity and complexity, contributing to the misconception that Latinx individuals exist only within a narrow spectrum of roles.

Economic realities further shape these portrayals, as systemic barriers and economic challenges historically directed many Latinx individuals into service-oriented jobs like domestic work and manual labor. While acknowledging these realities is crucial, it's equally vital to avoid reducing an entire community to these roles. The media's depiction of Latinxs as criminals also feeds into harmful stereotypes, fostering biased perceptions, racial profiling, and unequal treatment by society and law enforcement. Recognizing that criminal behavior is not inherent to any ethnic group is essential, and media should play a role in dispelling such misconceptions. The powerful influence of media on public perception underscores the need for more accurate and diverse representations. However, *Gentefied* nuances its characters in ways that are closer to real-life communities, articulating diverse characters who try to cope with forced assimilation and challenging these stereotypes. This is apparent in Erik's love for reading books and even classic novels.



In the case of *Gentified*, the criticism of marginalized Latinidades is projected through the various stories of working-class Latinx individuals who resist different forms of commodification. The most prominent character that showcases this critique is Ana Morales (Karrie Martin Lachney). Ana is a strong and ambitious young woman who has an aspiration of becoming a talented artist despite facing skepticism and criticism from her family and community. Ana's purpose is to freely express her experiences, culture, and sexuality while not "selling out". Her best opportunity for profitable employment and artistic success comes from an affluent gallerist named Tim (T.J. Thyne). Initially, Ana receives a commission to paint a mural in the barrio, on a wall that the gentrifying curator purchased to establish an art market to wealthy buyers (episode 5). Her task is to "beautify the location" with the aim of attracting people and artists from outside the community. However, her final artwork depicts two male luchadores in an intimate connection, provoking controversy among the locals. When she tries to paint over the mural, Tim intervenes, threatening her with the prospect of owing him a significant amount of money if she proceeds. Moreover, Tim justifies his gentrification efforts by claiming that they are ultimately beneficial for Ana and the local community. He asserts that he is "increasing property values" and disregards the need to seek permission from Ofelia, the building's owner, believing he knows what is best for her. It becomes apparent that Ana faces a dilemma in expressing her identity as a queer Chicana within the barrio. As Sandoval (2018) states in his work, the barrio is defined as a physical, spatial Latinx cultural milieu. It signifies a unique space where the Latinx community can prosper and preserve its cultural legacy, akin to a distinct realm where their heritage thrives. Besides her involvement in the gentrification process, there is a need for internal revitalization to create a space for her within her own community. The representation of openly queer Brown bodies presents a significant issue in the Chicano milieu, and addressing this concern is crucial. The mural scene also sheds light into a fundamental conflict concerning the concept of respect and its significance in Chicano community culture. Legally, the landlord possesses the right to paint on the walls of his property without seeking permission from the tenants, but out of respect, he should have asked for their consent.

As the series progresses, Tim invites her to a party and proudly declares, "You are my gift to this [non-Latinx] community." In response, Ana expresses her concern, stating, "That sounds a bit problematic." In addition, his Mercedes-Benz car has a license plate that blatantly reads "RU4SALE," despite his hypocritical claim that "we don't believe in commodification here." In spite of being fully aware of Tim's exploitative intentions, Ana must tolerate it in the hopes that he will fulfill his promise of holding an exhibition to present her artwork. Ana's character reaches its peak during the season finale when her exhibit opens. Filled with excitement, Tim introduces Ana to Vivian (Angelique Cabral), a crucial figure on the gallery's board of



directors (episode 10). Tim emphasizes each of Ana's marginalized identities to enhance her appeal, stating, "Ana is a queer Chicana from a low-income community". It is not until she found out that Vivian bought the building where Mama Fina's is located that she hit a breaking point. Mama Fina's was Ana's family taco shop, especially her grandfather's, who was in charge of the place. Therefore, Vivian became the new "gentrifier" who directly posed a threat to Ana's family restaurant.

In a pivotal moment introduced by extradiegetic 1990s hip-hop music, Ana decides to take matters into her own hands. With a spray can in hand, she boldly spray paints over her own 10-foot-tall art gallery work, defiantly writing in bright red letters, "RAZA NOT FOR SALE!" She eventually exclaims with confidence, "Y'all gentrifying motherfuckers can kiss my ass...Go choke on your manchego cheese, bitches." With a sense of finality, she drops the spray can in what can only be described as a "mic drop" moment and leaves.

This powerful act of frustration reflects Ana's reaction against the appropriation of not only her cultural identity but also the marginalized aspects that intersect with it. This scene in *Gentefied* promotes the show's anti-commodification theme by highlighting the significance of cultural productions like Ana's exhibit. Moreover, it showcases Ana's and the show's defiance against dominant and commercialized portrayals of Latinx representation.

EMPOWERING DESLENGUADAS: THE NEW GENERATION

During the 1980s, the Chicana movements, which were typically limited in scope, experienced a significant breakthrough thanks to the contributions of openly queer intellectuals and creators like Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Francisco Alarcón, among others (Aldama 2005, 21 -23). Aztlán, the mythic center of Chicana resistance, also underwent a transformation into a queered and inclusive heterotopia. This space allowed for the remapping of colonial oppression, racialization, patriarchy, and homophobia.

Gloria Anzaldúa introduced the term *deslenguadas* (Anzaldúa 2012, 80) to describe women who, like herself, courageously challenge the power dynamics of a system that restricts their life choices and relegates them to a marginalized position in society and culture. This system not only imposes their subservient role but also expects them to conform to it and embrace its fixed values. As the Chicana writer states, she was taught that "Muchachitas bien criadas... don't answer back" (Anzaldúa 2012, 76). Using the metaphor of "taming a wild tongue," Anzaldúa draws a parallel between the marginalization experienced by racialized women in both Anglo and Latino cultures and the stigmatization of certain linguistic practices, such as code-switching between English and Spanish, as deviant from the norms of the dominant and official language.

The women in *Gentefied*, these fearless *deslenguadas*, display bravery and boldness as they sow the seeds for a new consciousness and cultural shift using their voices.



Ana's art, Yessika (Ana's girlfriend) through her social activism and even Nayeli (Ana's younger sister) representing the younger generation are laying the groundwork for improved and more progressive societies.

Nayeli (Bianca Melgar) is Ana's younger sister and a 12-year-old Mexican-American girl. She has got a curious and clever nature, exuding joy and playfulness. Nayeli eagerly assists her mother and shows unwavering support for her elder sister, whom she loves deeply. Due to her innocence and limited life experience, Nayeli struggles to comprehend certain ironies expressed by the adults around her. For instance, when she expresses her desire to visit her friend Danny in Bakersfield and pick fruit from the famous fruit trees there, Norma (Brenda Banda), the Salvadoran employee at Mama Fina's, says: "I don't think they're gonna have a problem with the brown girl picking fruit" (S1 Ep8). Nayeli seems puzzled, presumably unaware of the underlying meaning behind Norma's comment. We can see that Nayeli's naivete and cultural awareness are not contradictory but rather a result of the love and healing provided by the adult women in her life. She stands on their shoulders, symbolizing a hopeful change for a future free from trauma. Just as Anzaldúa envisioned, the future relies on the creation of "new mythos" (Anzaldúa 2012, 102), and Nayeli embodies this vision. She effortlessly navigates the contradictions of the diverse cultures surrounding her, operating in a pluralistic manner. Nayeli doesn't suffer from the anxiety of an internally divided individual but instead presents herself as the culmination of diverse elements, representing the seed of a fresh and transformative consciousness (Anzaldúa 2012, 101-102).

CONCLUSIONS

Gentefied's reception, and production within the Latinx community highlight the representation of marginalized Latinidades, particularly focusing on working-class subjects. The show deliberately portrays Latinxs from various intersecting marginalized backgrounds, such as queer and Afro-Latinas, who are often overlooked and face limited access to media production. This intersectionality allows for a unique connection between media creators and their audience, forging a sense of kinship, celebration, and recognition. The show also skillfully navigates the intricacies of gentrification and gentefication, providing a captivating representation of the obstacles encountered by the Mexican-American cousins as they endeavor to safeguard their cultural identity and community legacy. The characters' challenges are portrayed through striking a harmonious balance between individual growth and progress while upholding their cultural principles. Through its diverse and multifaceted characters, the show explores the concept of familismo, underscoring the significance of family, allegiance, and backing within the Latinx community. By spotlighting the characters' viewpoints on gentrification, the series offers a sophisticated comprehension of the matter, transcending conventional stereotypes



and critically examining the commercialization of Latinx culture. Lastly, *Gentefied* emboldens the new generation of *deslenguadas*, represented by characters like Ana and Nayeli, who courageously challenge oppressive power structures and contribute to fostering a more inclusive and progressive society.

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