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Reclaiming Boyle Heights: Chicanx Identity and Gentrification in Netflix's *Gentefied*

ODZYSKIWANIE BOYLE HEIGHTS: TOŻSAMOŚĆ *CHICANX* I GENTRYFIKACJA W SERIALU NETFLIXA *GENTEFIED*

Summary

This article examines Netflix's *Gentefied* (2020–21) as a cultural text that problematizes Chicanx identity, gentrification, and undocumented belonging through the microhistorical lens of Boyle Heights, Los Angeles. The article explores how hybrid linguistic practices, panethnic traditions, and artistic production function as sites of identity negotiation within the context of neoliberal urban development. It further demonstrates that intra-community divisions emerge as upward mobility, self-gentrification, and cultural commodification undermine established social bonds. The article also addresses the show's portrayal of undocumented immigrant identity through the character of Casimiro Morales, emphasizing how detention, deportation, and the phenomenon of "crimmigration" position Latinx individuals as perpetually deportable.

Keywords: *Gentefied*; Chicanx identity; gentrification; undocumented status; detention

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje serial Netflixa *Gentefied* (2020–2021) jako tekst kultury, który problematyzuje tożsamość Chicanx, gentryfikację oraz przynależność osób o nieuregulowanym statusie z mikrohistorycznej perspektywy Boyle Heights w Los Angeles. Publikacja bada, w jaki sposób hybrydowe praktyki językowe, tradycje panetniczne i produkcja artystyczna stanowią przestrzeń negocjowania tożsamości w warunkach neoliberalnego rozwoju miast. Ponadto ukazuje, że podziały wewnątrz społeczności pojawiają się, gdy awans społeczny, autogentryfikacja i komodyfikacja kultury osłabiają ugruntowane więzi społeczne. Tekst odnosi się również do serialowego wizerunku tożsamości nieudokumentowanych imigrantów na przykładzie postaci Casimira Moralesa, podkreślając, jak detencja, deportacja oraz zjawisko „krymigracji” (ang. *crimmigration*) pozycjonują osoby Latinx jako nieustannie zagrożone deportacją.

Słowa kluczowe: *Gentefied*; tożsamość Chicanx; gentryfikacja; nieuregulowany status; detencja

Introduction

Gentefied (2020–2021) is a comedy-drama series created by Marvin Lemus and Linda Yvette Chávez that explores the cultural, economic, and emotional impacts of gentrification on a Mexican American family in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles.¹ Focusing on three cousins struggling to save their grandfather's traditional taco shop, the series foregrounds tensions between heritage, identity, and upward mobility within a rapidly changing urban landscape. In addition, *Gentefied* offers a pointed social commentary on detention and deportation, highlighting the disproportionate effects of U.S. immigration enforcement on undocumented immigrants and Latinx communities. Its use of satire, irony, and humor allows the series to address these serious issues without idealizing either the Morales family or the broader Chicanx community. Instead, its comic perspective exposes contradictions within the family and tensions among long-term residents, gentrifiers, and institutions of power. The title *Gentefied* combines *gente*, the Spanish word for “people,” with “gentrified.” Jennifer Medina, in an article published in *The New York Times*,² uses the Spanglish term *gentefication*, coined within Chicanx communities, to describe the process of self-gentrification among upwardly mobile Latinx individuals who return to their former neighborhoods.

This article is situated at the intersection of Chicanx/Latinx cultural studies, television studies, and scholarship on urban gentrification. Mary Beltrán has demonstrated the historically limited opportunities for Latinx representation and authorship on U.S. television, while documenting the emergence of increasingly complex modes of cultural visibility.³ Isabel Molina-Guzmán examines the construction of *Latinidad* in television comedy, showing how humor can simultaneously showcase and challenge racial, ethnic, and gendered assumptions.⁴ Beltrán has also emphasized the role of performers' established public identities in shaping the meanings associated with

1 Marvin Lemus and Linda Yvette Chávez, creators, *Gentefied* (Netflix, 2020–21), <https://www.netflix.com>.

2 Jennifer Medina, “Los Angeles Neighborhood Tries to Change, but Avoid the Pitfalls,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 2013, accessed December 23, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/18/us/los-angeles-neighborhood-tries-to-change-but-avoid-the-pitfalls.html>.

3 Mary Beltrán, “Latinas/os on TV! A Proud (and Ongoing) Struggle over Representation and Authorship,” in *The Routledge Companion to Latina/o Popular Culture*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Routledge, 2016), 39–49; Mary Beltrán, *Latino TV: A History*, Critical Cultural Communication (New York University Press, 2022).

4 Isabel Molina-Guzmán, *Latinas and Latinos on TV: Colorblind Comedy in the Post-racial Network Era*, Latinx Pop Culture (University of Arizona Press, 2018).

Latinx identity on screen.⁵ More specifically, Anna Marta Marini examines *Gentefied* as a depiction of gentrification-related Latinx conflicts and spatial tensions in Boyle Heights.⁶ While these studies provide important frameworks for understanding Latinx representation and television comedy's engagement with gentrification, they do not fully account for the ways in which the series links cultural identity, community space, and belonging. This article argues that *Gentefied* portrays the struggle over Boyle Heights as a multidimensional process of reclaiming cultural identity, community space, and a sense of belonging. Rather than presenting gentrification solely as an economic process, the series depicts it as a struggle over who has the right to define the neighborhood, participate in its cultural life, and claim belonging within it.

Scholarship on contemporary Boyle Heights further documents the relationship between gentrification, cultural production, and competing claims to urban space. Jan Lin examines hipster aesthetics and anti-gentrification struggles in Los Angeles,⁷ while Jonathan Jae-an Crisman focuses on cultural production and belonging in Boyle Heights.⁸ Carolina S. Sarmiento further examines confrontational forms of anti-gentrification activism, showing how community interventions can challenge displacement and expose the political and economic structures underlying gentrification.⁹ Taken together, this scholarship suggests that struggles over Boyle Heights are also struggles over cultural, social, and spatial belonging. In this article, "reclaiming" does not imply a return to an uncontested or homogeneous past but refers to an ongoing process through which Chicanx/Latinx residents assert, negotiate, and redefine cultural identity, community belonging, and claims to urban space. A microhistorical

5 Mary Beltrán, *Latina/o Stars in U.S. Eyes: The Making and Meanings of Film and TV Stardom* (University of Illinois Press, 2009).

6 Anna Marta Marini, "Gentefied and the Representation of the Gentrification Related Latinx Conflicts," *JAm It! Journal of American Studies in Italy*, no. 4 (2021): 35–57, <https://doi.org/10.13135/2612-5641/5277>.

7 Jan Lin, "Boulevard Transition, Hipster Aesthetics, and Anti-Gentrification Struggles in Los Angeles," in *Aesthetics of Gentrification: Seductive Spaces and Exclusive Communities in the Neoliberal City*, ed. Christoph Lindner and Gerard Francisco Sandoval (Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 199–220.

8 Jonathan Jae-an Crisman, "Art and the Aesthetics of Cultural Gentrification: The Cases of Boyle Heights and Little Tokyo in Los Angeles," in *Aesthetics of Gentrification: Seductive Spaces and Exclusive Communities in the Neoliberal City*, ed. Christoph Lindner and Gerard F. Sandoval (Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 137–154.

9 Carolina S. Sarmiento, "Defend, Disrupt, and Build: Guerrilla Urbanist Interventions and Fighting Gentrification in the Barrio," *Journal of Community Psychology* 49, no. 8 (2021): 3178–3193, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22703>.

perspective¹⁰ makes it possible to examine how these broader processes are experienced through everyday family relationships, cultural practices, and conflicts over community space.

The analysis examines three interconnected dimensions of reclaiming. The first considers cultural identity, focusing on language, cultural performance, food, artistic expression, and competing notions of authenticity. The second examines community space, focusing on responses to gentrification and the ways characters resist, negotiate, and sometimes participate in neighborhood transformation. The third addresses belonging under undocumented status through the character of Casimiro Morales, examining how detention, deportation, and immigration enforcement make legal status a condition of vulnerability and connects them to broader struggles over who is permitted to belong in the neighborhood and the nation.

Because the struggle to reclaim cultural and community belonging in *Gentefied* is closely tied to processes of gentrification, it is necessary to clarify how the term is understood in this article. The term *gentrification* was first coined by the British sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964 to describe new and distinct processes of urban change.¹¹ Loretta Lees et al. define gentrification as “the transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city into middle-class residential and/or commercial use.”¹² The gentrified group consists of residents living in inexpensive but architecturally desirable housing. At the same time, those known as gentrifiers seek to invest in and move into deteriorated areas due to their convenient locations in the city center.¹³ Proponents of gentrification emphasize its potential benefits, including the revitalization of previously derelict neighborhoods and improvements in public safety. Jackelyn Hwang highlights these outcomes, describing gentrification as a process leading to “the physical, demographic, and cultural transformation of a low-income area into a higher-value, middle- or upper-class neighborhood.”¹⁴ Critics, however, argue that gentrification often results in the displacement of original low-income res-

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- 10 Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó, *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 4; Jesse Paul, “What is Microhistory?,” *Social Evolution & History* 17, no. 2 (2018): 64, <https://doi.org/10.30884/seh/2018.02.04>.
 - 11 Lindsay M. Miller, “We Need to Change How We Think about Gentrification,” *National Civic League* 107, no. 4 (2019): 26.
 - 12 Loretta Lees et al., *Gentrification* (Routledge, 2007), xv.
 - 13 Antònia Casellas et al., “Artists, Cultural Gentrification and Public Policy,” *Urbani Izziv* 23 (supplement 1 2012): s105, <https://doi.org/10.5379/urbani-izziv-en-2012-23-supplement-1-010>.
 - 14 Jackelyn Hwang, “Pioneers of Gentrification: Transformation in Global Neighborhoods in Urban America in the Late Twentieth Century,” *Demography* 53, no. 1 (December 2015): 190, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-015-0448-4>.

idents,¹⁵ a phenomenon known as “class-based displacement,”¹⁶ which occurs when residents can no longer afford rising rents and property taxes.¹⁷ In Boyle Heights, these economic, demographic, cultural, and spatial processes intersect with longstanding histories of racialization, migration, and community formation.

The Boyle Heights neighborhood serves as an exemplar of an American urban area where gentrification has had a profound impact on low-income communities of color. Before the 1950s, the neighborhood developed as an industrial area connected to railroads and light manufacturing,¹⁸ with a multiethnic working-class population that increasingly included Mexican immigrants and migrants displaced by racialized housing policies and high rents elsewhere in Los Angeles.¹⁹ The 2009 extension of the Metro Gold Line to East Los Angeles,²⁰ alongside the emergence of a Latinx middle class, intensified the neighborhood’s demographic and class dynamics. Boyle Heights residents also face significant displacement pressures: approximately 78% were renters in 2018, compared with 63% citywide and 54% countywide.²¹ Many renters cannot afford homeownership, which increases their vulnerability to landlord practices and displacement pressures.

1. Reclaiming Cultural Identity in Boyle Heights

In *Gentefied*, the reclamation of Boyle Heights begins with cultural identity. The series presents it not as a stable inheritance but as something that must be actively asserted and renegotiated under conditions of gentrification. Practices such as speaking Spanish and Spanglish, maintaining the family taqueria (*Mama Fina’s Tacos*), displaying Mexican cultural symbols, and negotiating competing definitions of au-

15 Nico Kotze, “A Community in Trouble? The Impact of Gentrification on the Bo-Kaap, Cape Town,” *Urbani Izziv* 24, no. 2 (2013): 125, <https://doi.org/10.5379/urbani-izziv-en-2013-24-02-004>.

16 Lees et al., *Gentrification*, xxii.

17 Miller, “We Need to Change How We Think about Gentrification,” 26.

18 Ryan Reft, “The Shifting Cultures of Multiracial Boyle Heights,” *Tropics of Meta*, July 22, 2014, accessed February 2, 2026, <https://tropicsofmeta.com/2014/07/22/the-shifting-cultures-of-multiracial-boyle-heights/>.

19 Shashi Hanuman and Nisha Vyas, “Race, Place, and Housing in Los Angeles,” *Journal of Affordable Housing and Community Development Law* 29, no. 3 (2021): 452.

20 Christopher Hawthorne, “Critic’s Notebook: L.A. on Track: Eight New Metro Gold Line Stations Roll Toward an Exciting Future,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 14, 2009, accessed January 20, 2026, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2009-nov-14-et-goldline14-story.html>.

21 Miguel Diaz, “Violence Then, Gentrification Now,” *Community News Reporter*, October 26, 2023, accessed January 28, 2026, <https://sulauniversitytimes.com/violence-then-gentrification-now/>.

thenticity become ways of claiming the right to belong in Boyle Heights. Reclaiming cultural identity therefore involves more than preserving the past: it is a struggle over who has the authority to define Mexican, Chicanx, and Latinx identity in a changing neighborhood. Spanglish, for example, functions not merely as a reflection of Mexican American speech patterns but as a cultural practice through which characters handle belonging across Spanish- and English-speaking worlds.²²

The family patriarch, Casimiro Morales (played by Joaquín Cosío), commonly known as Pop, articulates the central message of *Gentefied* in Spanish when he states, “La vida no es solo sobrevivir; podemos prosperar” (Life isn’t just about survival; we can thrive) [S1E4]. The preservation of *Mama Fina*’s is therefore not simply an economic objective: it represents an effort to maintain a material site in which Mexican American family history, language, food, and social relations remain visible and viable within a transforming neighborhood. Cosío’s casting further reinforces the series’ construction of Mexican cultural identity. As a well-known Mexican actor with an established presence in Mexican cinema and television, Cosío brings a recognizable cultural identity to the role of Pop. His presence can therefore be read as a signifier of Mexicanness that operates not only within the narrative but also at the level of reception: for audiences familiar with Mexican popular culture, his recognizable persona may contribute to the cultural legibility and authenticity of Pop’s character and, by extension, of the series’ depiction of Mexican American life. At the microhistorical level, this casting choice is significant because it connects *Gentefied*’s fictional representation of Boyle Heights to broader histories and cultural memories associated with Mexican screen performance. The narrative also follows Casimiro’s grandchildren: Erik (Joseph J. Soria), Chris (Carlos Santos), and Ana (Karrie Martin), who all reside in the same community. Erik is employed at the family restaurant while seeking reconciliation with his progressive, career-focused former partner, Lidia (Annie Gonzalez). Chris, a business school graduate, works as a cook at an upscale Los Angeles restaurant, and Ana aspires to be an artist. Through his consistent use of Spanish and Spanglish, together with Cosío’s culturally recognizable screen persona, Casimiro “Pop” Morales embodies an effort to reclaim cultural continuity as a form of belonging.

Drawing on Stuart Hall’s conception of cultural identity as rooted in “common historical experiences and shared cultural codes” that provide “continuous frames of reference and meaning,”²³ *Gentefied* presents cultural reclamation as an active

22 Carmen Fought, “Language as a Representation of Mexican American Identity,” *English Today* 26, no. 3 (2010): 45, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0266078410000131>.

23 Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (Lawrence / Wishart, 1990), 223.

process rather than a return to an unchanged tradition. This is significant in the context of gentrification because reclaiming identity entails asserting the legitimacy of hybrid cultural practices within a neighborhood whose meaning is being contested. This process is closely linked to panethnicity, a “meaningful identity stemming from shared backgrounds, structural commonalities, incorporation into U.S. society, and the need to unite politically,”²⁴ through which Mexican, Indigenous, and other Latin American ancestries are incorporated into broader Latinx identities.²⁵ In *Gentefied*, these dynamics are reflected in cultural practices that blend Indigenous, Mexican, and American traditions: the presence of a Tonantzin statue on the Thanksgiving table [S2E6] honors Indigenous beliefs²⁶ and evokes the maternal symbolism associated with the Virgin of Guadalupe,²⁷ while Ana and Nayeli’s *Día de los Muertos* altar during Halloween [S2E5] and the family’s simultaneous participation in trick-or-treating and Mexican-themed costumes demonstrate how Chicanx communities reconfigure cultural traditions to express a distinctly hybrid Latinx identity.²⁸ Rather than presenting these combinations as evidence of cultural inconsistency, *Gentefied* frames them as practices through which cultural identity is continually remade. Reclamation thus operates through adaptation: the characters claim cultural continuity by transforming inherited symbols for contemporary circumstances.

Ana’s ethnic identity and cultural loyalty are challenged when her graffiti-style murals attract the attention of Tim, an affluent Anglo gallerist. Sharing queer solidarity with Ana, Tim commissions her to paint a “brown love” mural on a recently acquired building. Initially, Ofelia, who operates a shop there, welcomes the project, hoping it will attract customers and increase profits: “It’s gonna be much dinero” [S1E5]. However, after the mural is completed, customers react negatively, describing the image as offensive, and Ofelia fears it will damage her business. The mural depicts two masked male luchadores embracing and kissing. As symbols of Mexican cultural

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- 24 Eileen Diaz McConnell and Edward A. Delgado-Romero, “Latino Panethnicity: Reality or Methodological Construction?,” *Sociological Focus* 37, no. 4 (2004): 309, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380237.2004.10571248>.
 - 25 Dina Okamoto and G. Cristina Mora, “Panethnicity,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 40, no. 1 (July 2014): 220, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-071913-043201>.
 - 26 Gabriela Solís, “Is our Lady of Guadalupe Inspired by the Goddess of Tonantzin?,” *Mexico News Daily*, December 11, 2023, accessed January 25, 2026, <https://mexiconewsdaily.com/culture/is-our-lady-of-guadalupe-inspired-by-the-goddess-tonantzin/>.
 - 27 Timothy Matovina, “The Origins of the Guadalupe Tradition in Mexico,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (2014): 265.
 - 28 Regina Marchi, “Hybridity and Authenticity in US Day of the Dead Celebrations,” *Journal of American Folklore* 126, no. 501 (2013): 282, <https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.126.501.0272>.

tradition and collective identity,²⁹ the luchadores allow Ana to express both queer and ethnic identities visually. Ana's appropriation of traditional Mexican iconography, however, should be situated within a longer tradition of Chicana art that has reworked and contested established representations of both Mexican and Mexican American identity. Artists such as Yolanda López have reworked familiar Mexican and Catholic iconography in ways that foreground alternative forms of cultural and gendered self-representation.³⁰ Ana's intervention is distinctive in that it brings this tradition into the contemporary context of Boyle Heights, combining familiar Mexican imagery with an explicitly queer representation of intimacy and desire. Her mural therefore becomes a site where competing understandings of Mexicanness are negotiated: while the luchadores evoke a recognizable symbol of Mexican popular culture, their embrace and kiss disrupt conventional associations of masculinity, heterosexuality, and cultural respectability. While pursuing success as a Chicana artist, Ana risks alienating more conservative community members and undermining Ofelia's livelihood. In this sense, *Gentefied* does not present Ana's use of Mexican iconography as an entirely new challenge to tradition; rather, it dramatizes the continuing negotiation of cultural symbols in a changing Chicanx community, where queer self-expression, artistic autonomy, commercial interests, and communal expectations may come into conflict. The series ultimately suggests that commercial success and community acceptance are not always easily reconciled.

The complexity of Latinx identity is often expressed through the "coconut" metaphor, a colloquial term used to describe individuals who appear Latinx but are perceived as culturally detached from their heritage and aligned with Americanized values.³¹ This dynamic is evident in the experiences of Ana's cousin Chris, who, despite strongly identifying as Mexican, frequently has his cultural authenticity questioned by relatives and coworkers. Raised in Idaho and fluent in English, Chris is viewed as less authentically Mexican than immigrant colleagues. In one episode, his coworkers administer a playful yet socially significant "real Mexican" quiz [S1E3] that tests his knowledge of telenovelas, Mexican candies, cumbia, and lucha libre. Through this evaluation, Chris is implicitly categorized as a "coconut" – brown on the

29 Anna Bruce, "Lucha Libre's Culture Mixes Tradition, Family and Pure Adrenaline," *Mexico News Daily*, May 9, 2023, accessed January 25, 2026, <https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/lucha-libres-culture-mixes-tradition-family-pure-adrenaline/>.

30 Laura Elisa Pérez, *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities*, Objects/Histories (Duke University Press, 2007).

31 Ronald E. Hall, "Media Stereotypes and 'Coconut' Colorism: Latino Denigration Vis-à-Vis Dark Skin," *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 14 (2018): 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218810742>.

outside but white on the inside—revealing how cultural belonging is measured through performance and shared knowledge.

Nira Yuval-Davis's distinction between belonging and the politics of belonging helps explain why Chris's identity becomes contested. Belonging is not simply an individual feeling of attachment; it involves social boundaries that determine who is recognized as an insider³². Chris therefore experiences cultural identity as something he must repeatedly claim against competing definitions of authenticity. The "real Mexican" quiz [S1E3] therefore functions as a form of identity policing³³: it establishes cultural knowledge as a test that Chris must pass before his claim to Mexican identity can be fully recognized. His assertion – "My name is Christopher Ernesto Morales. I am from Boyle Heights, and I am 100 percent Mexican" – is consequently more than a statement of ethnic identity. It is an act of reclamation: Chris asserts the right to define his own cultural belonging against a community-based standard of authenticity that seeks to define it for him.

The series finale depicts Casimiro and Chris visiting a family grave in Mexico [S2E8], framing the journey as a symbolic return to the homeland that resonates with Gloria Anzaldúa's conception of the Borderlands as a site of cultural hybridity and historical rupture.³⁴ Rather than a simple homecoming, the scene evokes Aztlán, the mythical ancestral homeland of the Aztec people, often invoked in Mexican diasporic discourse as the American Southwest.³⁵ For Anzaldúa, such movements reflect a *mestiza consciousness* shaped by inhabiting multiple cultural and historical worlds simultaneously.³⁶ The cemetery thus becomes a liminal space where past and present, life and death, and Mexico and the United States intersect. Casimiro's presence alongside his grandson emphasizes the intergenerational transmission of cultural memory, while Chris's presence in Mexico complicates the assumption that cultural authenticity depends on geographic proximity to the homeland. The journey consequently reframes reclamation not as a recovery of a fixed Mexican origin but as an intergenerational negotiation of cultural memory across borders.

32 Nira Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations* (Sage, 2011), 3.

33 Michael L. Schwalbe and Douglass Mason-Schrock, "Identity Work as Group Process," in *Advances in Group Processes*, ed. Barry Markovsky et al., vol. 13 (JAI Press, 1996), 126.

34 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 3–4, 25–26.

35 Susana Rinderle, "The Mexican Diaspora: A Critical Examination of Signifiers," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 29, no. 4 (2005): 299, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859905278495>.

36 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 99–102.

2. Reclaiming Community Space: Gentrification and the Struggle over Boyle Heights

In *Gentefied*, reclaiming community space involves more than resisting the arrival of affluent newcomers; it also requires negotiating the contradictory ways in which Chicana residents themselves participate in the transformation of Boyle Heights. The series therefore presents gentrification as a struggle over who has the right to shape the neighborhood, determine its cultural and commercial uses, and remain within it. This struggle is complicated by class divisions within the Chicana community, as upward mobility can simultaneously provide opportunities for individual advancement and contribute to processes that marginalize less affluent residents. Chicana socio-economic progress is represented by Erik's girlfriend, Lidia, who accepts an academic appointment at Stanford University [S2E2]. Erik's postponed departure from Boyle Heights to join Lidia and their daughter, Delfina, underscores his attachment to the ethnic enclave, as he remarks, "Here everybody knows us" [S2E3]. Gentrification is portrayed through the gradual erosion of the neighborhood's ethnic character, exemplified by white tourists ignoring a mariachi band in a restaurant [S1E6]. The process is further reflected in conflicts between Casimiro's family and other Hispanic residents.

Chris's experimentation with fusion cuisine exemplifies this tension. To attract new customers, he introduces a "Taco of the Week" [S1E3], including a chicken tikka masala-inspired taco. Long-standing Mexican customers reject the hybrid dish, preferring traditional recipes. The conflict reveals that reclaiming community space does not necessarily entail preserving a fixed cultural tradition. Rather, it raises the question of who has the authority to redefine the cultural practices through which the neighborhood represents itself. Chris's "What do you want, tradition or innovation?" [S1E3] frames the conflict as a choice between cultural continuity and adaptation, but *Gentefied* complicates this binary: innovation can create new economic opportunities while simultaneously reproducing the pressures associated with gentrification. Chris's fusion taco therefore becomes a small-scale example of the larger struggle over who gets to determine what counts as legitimate cultural change in Boyle Heights. Chris consequently comes to embody the identity of a "Chipster" – a Chicana hipster who combines Latina cultural heritage with hipster aesthetics and consumer practices.³⁷

37 Lin, "Boulevard Transition, Hipster Aesthetics, and Anti-Gentrification Struggles in Los Angeles," 206.

Gentefied demonstrates how newcomers contribute to the marginalization of long-term residents³⁸ and weaken community bonds.³⁹ Gentrifiers also demand new services and cultural amenities that reshape the urban landscape.⁴⁰ The series portrays white hipsters transforming Boyle Heights' musical environment by rejecting mariachi, a signature genre of Mexican folk music.⁴¹ Members of Mariachi Los Lobos, led by Javier, remain committed to tradition, wearing the customary *traje de charro*.⁴² During restaurant performances, they often encounter Anglo-American customers who neither tip nor engage with the music, preferring electronic genres. When the group adopts a more pop-oriented repertoire, hipster customers begin recording the performance, revealing the conditional appreciation of cultural expression. Javier summarizes the neighborhood's transformation: "Everything changes: food and people" [S1E6]. The replacement of mariachi with pop music therefore represents more than a change in entertainment preferences. It illustrates how gentrification transforms the cultural uses of neighborhood space and determines which forms of local culture become legible and desirable to new consumers.

As Lin observes, Latinx artists can contribute to neighborhood revitalization while simultaneously attracting middle-class white tourists who may later become home-buyers. Local activists therefore protest against galleries, arguing that they facilitate a new form of colonialism,⁴³ which resonates with Henri Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city involving the ability of inhabitants to participate in producing and transforming urban space.⁴⁴ The season one finale dramatizes this tension. When Ana Morales is offered a new gallery project in Boyle Heights, she discovers that it involves

38 Gabriele Koehler et al., "The Politics of Social Inclusion: Introduction," in *The Politics of Social Inclusion: Bridging Knowledge and Policies Toward Social Change*, ed. Gabriele Koehler et al. (Ibidem Press, 2020), 15.

39 Nabin Rawal, "Social Inclusion and Exclusion," *Dhauagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology: A Review* 2 (2008): 167, <https://doi.org/10.3126/dsaj.v2i0.1362>; Hilary Silver, "Social Exclusion and Social Solidarity: Three Paradigms," *International Labour Review* 133, no. 5–6 (1994): 534.

40 Jay Sharma, *The Diaspora of Belonging: Gentrification, Systems of Oppression, and Why Our Cities Are Out of Place* (New Degree Press, 2020), 53.

41 Clifford R. Murphy, "The Intimate Circle: Finding Common Ground in Mariachi and Norteño Music," in *Art in the Lives of Immigrant Communities in the United States*, ed. Paul DiMaggio and Patricia Fernández-Kelly (Rutgers University Press, 2010), 115.

42 Leonor Xóchitl Pérez, "Transgressing the Taboo: A Chicana's Voice in the Mariachi World," in *Chicana Traditions: Continuity and Change*, ed. Norma E. Cantú and Olga Nájera-Ramírez (University of Illinois Press, 2002), 148.

43 Lin, "Boulevard Transition, Hipster Aesthetics, and Anti-Gentrification Struggles in Los Angeles," 200–203.

44 Henri Lefebvre, "The Right to the City," in *Writings on Cities*, ed. and trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Blackwell, 1996), 147–159.

transforming her family's former diner, *Mama Fina's*. The episode thus exposes a central contradiction of cultural reclamation amid gentrification: the cultural practices through which marginalized residents assert their presence can themselves become commodities that transform their neighborhood. Ana's art gives Boyle Heights cultural visibility, but that visibility does not necessarily strengthen residents' control over the space. Instead, it can increase the neighborhood's economic value while leaving existing residents vulnerable to displacement. Her destruction of the painting therefore constitutes an attempt to reclaim control over the meaning and circulation of her own cultural production. Her outburst in English directly addresses the predominantly English-speaking art-world audience. Yet her protest fails to disrupt commodification, as viewers interpret it as part of the performance rather than a critique.

The Chicanx characters repeatedly pursue projects intended to support their community, but these efforts often attract hipster gentrifiers instead. After Ofelia's shop loses customers due to a controversial mural, Ana organizes a social media "cash mob" to encourage purchases [S1E5]. The initiative backfires: the sudden influx of customers makes Ofelia's nephews feel unsafe, depletes inventory, and disregards Ofelia's wishes. She argues that dependable regular customers – even "drunks" – contribute more to her livelihood than activists who fail to consult her. Her objection reveals that reclaiming community space cannot be reduced to attracting more consumers. It also requires respecting the agency of the people who already inhabit and sustain that space. The episode therefore distinguishes between claiming a community on behalf of its residents and enabling residents to determine the terms of that claim themselves.

Similarly, Erik attempts to save *Mama Fina's* by including it in a neighborhood restaurant tour. Residents oppose the initiative, viewing the influx of white visitors as a precursor to gentrification. Media coverage highlights divisions within the Latinx community: some welcome visitors, while others protest with banners reading "Your tour is our erasure" and "Gent Sellouts" [S1E9]. In response, Erik organizes a performance-art counterprotest, urging viewers to "Save the shop and save Boyle Heights" [S1E9]. The tour participants – primarily white customers wearing sombreros – illustrate cultural appropriation.⁴⁵ The situation is paradoxical because preserving a business threatened by gentrification depends on attracting the very people who contribute to rising rents and displacement. This contradiction can be understood through George Lipsitz's analysis of the racialized distribution of resources and power, which helps explain why the ability to remain in and shape urban space

45 Jaime Serrato Marks, "Why Sombreros Hurt: How Cultural Appropriation Harms All Students," *The Cypress*, March 28, 2016, accessed February 10, 2026, <https://thecypressonline.com/20343/opinions/cultural-appropriation-hurts-all-students/>.

is unequally distributed.⁴⁶ The restaurant tour demonstrates that cultural visibility alone does not guarantee spatial control: the family may gain customers while losing influence over the neighborhood in which the business is located.

The series also shows how Latinx characters address gentrification through Spanglish. In emotionally charged situations, bilingual speakers often code-switch to express themselves more effectively⁴⁷. Ana's resistance to the commodification of her art and community culminates in her spray-painted slogan "RAZA NOT FOR SALE!" [S1E10], where *raza* refers to "the people" or the community. The phrase challenges both the commercialization of Chicanx culture and the transformation of Boyle Heights. In this context, Spanglish functions as an emotionally charged expressive mode,⁴⁸ enabling Ana to articulate anger and resistance more precisely than either language alone.

3. Reclaiming Belonging Under Immigration Enforcement

Hierarchical processes of inclusion and exclusion within the national community are shaped by legal status. In 2008, Congress mandated deportation for noncitizens convicted of felonies, regardless of the specific offense.⁴⁹ In recent years, immigration enforcement has expanded through increased use of 287(g) agreements, which authorize state and local law enforcement officers to perform certain immigration enforcement functions during routine policing.⁵⁰ During President Trump's second term, participation in the program grew significantly, reflecting intensified efforts to address undocumented immigration.⁵¹ UCLA analysis further indicates that en-

46 George Lipsitz, "The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the 'White' Problem in American Studies," *American Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1995): 369–387, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2713291>.

47 David Osborne, "Where It's Hip to Speak Spanglish," *The Independent*, April 2, 1997, 19.

48 Lizette Alvarez, "It's the Talk of Nueva York: The Hybrid Called Spanglish," *The New York Times*, March 25, 1997, 4.

49 Juliet Stumpf, "The Crimmigration Crisis: Immigrants, Crime, and Sovereign Power," *American University Law Review* 56, no. 2 (2006): 369.

50 U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, "Delegation of Immigration Authority Section 287(g) Immigration and Nationality Act," March 24, 2020, accessed January 31, 2026, <https://www.ice.gov/identify-and-arrest/287g>.

51 Michelle Watson, "How Local Agencies Are Participating with Ice to Arrest an Increasing Number of Immigrants," April 28, 2025, accessed January 31, 2026, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/04/28/us/ice-immigrant-arrests-287g-program>.

forcement during this period increasingly targeted Hispanic communities, with most detainees originating from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Venezuela.⁵²

Casimiro Morales's undocumented status transforms the question of remaining in Boyle Heights from a matter of cultural and economic attachment into a question of legal recognition and state power. His detention demonstrates that residence, family ties, and cultural belonging do not necessarily guarantee the right to remain. Immigrants' identities are reduced to their legal status, which functions as a bureaucratic marker of national belonging.⁵³ This reduction is evident when Casimiro introduces himself by stating, "I'm Casimiro Morales. I'm undocumented" [S2E1]. By foregrounding his status, he presents it as a defining aspect of his identity while also representing many undocumented individuals living in fear of deportation. Support from his granddaughter Ana – who hides his ankle monitor inside Nike shoes [S2E6] and later makes him the face of a marketing campaign [S2E7] – emphasizes both his "Americanness" and the strong intergenerational bonds characteristic of many Latinx families. Casimiro is culturally marketable but legally excluded.

David FitzGerald conceptualizes citizenship as a contested domain shaped by processes of ethnicization and racialization.⁵⁴ Within this framework, legal status acquires racial meaning, constructing nonwhite identities as foreign, suspect, or illegal.⁵⁵ These dynamics are evident in a televised interview intended to generate sympathy for Casimiro but instead expose the interviewer's bias. Questions about prior crimes, passports, and life after deportation focus on his undocumented status, reinforcing the association of Mexican identity with illegality and treating deportation as inevitable [S2E7]. The interviewer also dismisses Casimiro's restaurant and argues that the Nike campaign should feature an "American" rather than an "illegal immigrant," thereby reinforcing exclusionary notions of national belonging.

The detention practices of U.S. immigration authorities exemplify what Carlos Martinez terms "bureaucratic violence," a form of state-sanctioned harm enacted

52 UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, "UCLA Report Finds Latino Arrests by ICE Have Skyrocketed Under the Trump Administration's Second Term," October 28, 2025, accessed January 28, 2026, <https://luskin.ucla.edu/ucla-report-finds-latino-arrests-by-ice-have-skyrocketed-under-the-trump-administrations-second-term>.

53 Scott Zimmer, "Citizenship and Social Identity Among Migrants," 2021, accessed January 31, 2026, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/law/citizenship-and-social-identity-among-migrants>.

54 David Scott FitzGerald, "The History of Racialized Citizenship," in *The Oxford Handbook of Citizenship*, ed. Ayelet Shachar et al. (Oxford University Press, 2017), 130, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198805854.013.6>.

55 Cecilia Menjivar, "The Racialization of 'Illegality'," *Daedalus* 150, no. 2 (2021): 92–93, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01848.

through administrative procedures that generate stress, uncertainty, and hopelessness.⁵⁶ Immigration court hearings further demonstrate the punitive nature of the system. In *Gentefied*, this is symbolized by a judge wearing a MAGA cap, violating principles of judicial impartiality [S2E8]. The judge's accusations that Casimiro mocks American values and exploits the Nike campaign frame Mexican cultural participation as both a moral and legal transgression. The series thus illustrates how immigration authorities and the legal system construct Mexican identity as inherently undocumented and perpetually deportable. Within this racialized regime, Latinx identity becomes associated with criminality through what Juliet Stumpf calls "crimmigration," the convergence of criminal and immigration law.⁵⁷ This process reinforces racialized notions of foreignness and illegality while disproportionately targeting Latinx communities.⁵⁸

Mexican Americans have long been portrayed through stereotypes that associate Latinx identity with criminality and illegal immigration.⁵⁹ Such representations were amplified during Donald Trump's 2016, 2020, and 2024 presidential campaigns, which frequently employed anti-immigrant rhetoric portraying Mexicans as criminals and drug traffickers. Against this backdrop, *Gentefied* offers a critique of these assumptions. Casimiro ultimately secures an American visa and leaves the courtroom wearing cowboy boots, a symbol of Americanness. Yet his struggle to remain in the country he considers home contrasts with his grandson Chris's decision to work at an upscale restaurant in Oaxaca, Mexico. After the Morales family loses its diner in California, better opportunities emerge in their ancestral homeland. This narrative reversal challenges the mythology of the American Dream by suggesting that Mexican Americans may find greater prospects in Mexico than in California.

Conclusion

Gentefied frames Boyle Heights as a contested cultural and political space where Chicana identity, economic survival, and belonging are continuously negotiated rather

56 Carlos Martinez, "Waiting in Captivity: Slow Borders, Predatory Bureaucracies, and the Necrotemporality of Asylum Deterrence," *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 39, no. 2 (2023): 3, <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.41069>.

57 Stumpf, "The Crimmigration Crisis," 368.

58 Yolanda Vazquez, "Constructing Crimmigration: Latino Subordination in a 'Post-Racial' World," *Ohio State Law Journal* 76, no. 3 (2015): 599.

59 Hana E. Brown et al., "The Racialization of Latino Immigrants in New Destinations: Criminality, Ascription, and Countermobilization," *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 4, no. 5 (2018): 119, <https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2018.4.5.06>.

than definitively resolved. Through a microhistorical focus on a single family and neighborhood, the series demonstrates that gentrification operates both as an external force associated with white, middle-class newcomers and as an internal process shaped by class mobility, entrepreneurial aspirations, and the commodification of culture. The Morales family's experiences reveal the tensions between cultural preservation and economic adaptation, illustrating how these objectives are often constructed as competing imperatives within neoliberal urban contexts. By foregrounding linguistic hybridity, intra-community conflict, and cultural performance, *Gentefied* challenges essentialist notions of authenticity and instead presents Chicane identity as fluid, relational, and deeply rooted in place. Within this context, reclaiming emerges not as a return to an unchanged past but as an ongoing process through which characters assert, negotiate, and redefine their claims to cultural identity, community space, and belonging.

This dynamic reflects Anzaldúa's concept of *mestiza consciousness*, which the series explores through transnational journeys to Mexico, code-switching, syncretic rituals, and everyday negotiations of belonging. Identity formation emerges not only at geopolitical borders but also within urban spaces where cultural memory, economic pressures, and racialized forms of governance intersect. Boyle Heights thus functions as a symbolic borderland in which residents continually navigate overlapping social, cultural, and political boundaries. The series consequently complicates the idea that reclaiming necessarily means recovering a singular cultural origin; belonging is instead produced through movement, adaptation, memory, and negotiation across multiple boundaries.

At the same time, the series exposes the structural inequalities that shape these negotiations. Through its portrayal of undocumented life and the racialized enforcement of immigration law, *Gentefied* demonstrates how legal status can function as a mechanism of exclusion despite longstanding community ties. Yet the series addresses these serious forms of inequality through comedy, satire, and irony rather than through straightforward social realism. Comedy thus becomes part of the series' political and cultural intervention, allowing it to critique gentrification and structural inequality while resisting idealized or essentialist representations of Chicane life.

This article extends existing readings of *Gentefied* by bringing together the series' representations of Chicane identity, gentrification, undocumented status, and cultural production within a single framework centered on the negotiation of belonging. Rather than treating these issues as separate forms of conflict, the article has argued that they constitute interconnected struggles over the right to remain, participate, represent, and belong in Boyle Heights. The series does not simply portray Chicane communities as victims of gentrification or immigration enforcement; it depicts them

as internally diverse communities whose members negotiate, reproduce, and resist these structures in contradictory ways. By connecting cultural identity and representation to the material politics of urban space and legal status, the article demonstrates how *Gentefied* uses the intimate scale of family and neighborhood life to illuminate broader struggles over who can belong, who can define belonging, under what conditions, and with what consequences.

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