

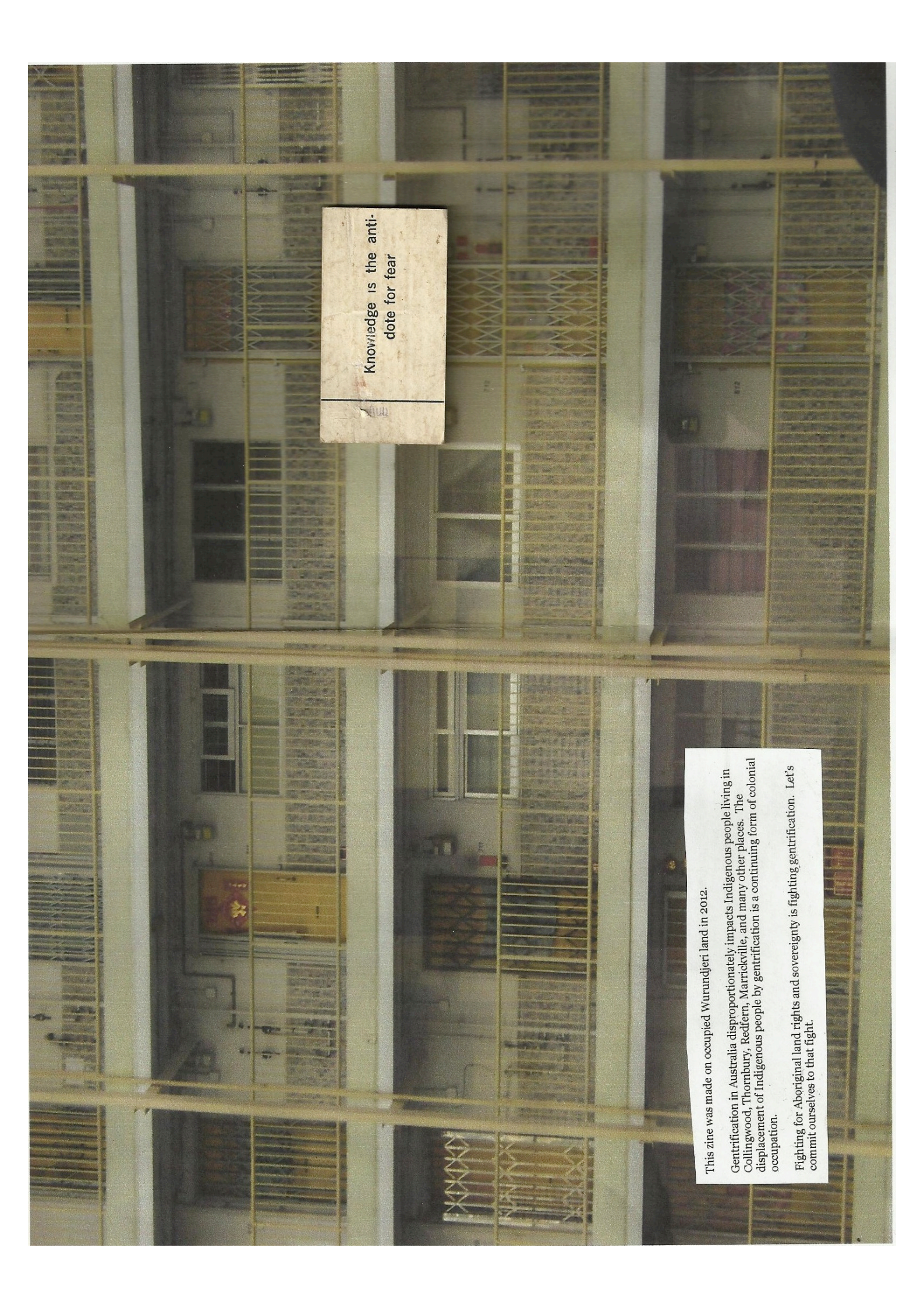
Environmentalism and Gentrification
A short introduction to an unholy connection

written by Lizzy P

agree/disagree/got more ideas? Write me!

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Knowledge is the anti-
dote for fear

This zine was made on occupied Wurundjeri land in 2012.

Gentrification in Australia disproportionately impacts Indigenous people living in Collingwood, Thornbury, Redfern, Marrickville, and many other places. The displacement of Indigenous people by gentrification is a continuing form of colonial occupation.

Fighting for Aboriginal land rights and sovereignty is fighting gentrification. Let's commit ourselves to that fight.

Further reading

Some great writers on gentrification are Loretta Lees, Wendy Shaw, Neil Smith, David Harvey, Damaris Rose, David Ley, Gary Bridge, and Tom Slater.

Check out these websites:

The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute:
<http://www.ahuri.edu.au>

Tenants Union of Victoria:
<http://tuv.org.au>

Victorian Public Tenant's Association:
<http://vpta.org.au>

The Socialist Party in Yarra Council, Melbourne, who keep a close eye on changes affecting public housing:
<http://www.yarrasocialists.net>

Notes

¹ Smith, Neil. 1996. *The new urban frontier: gentrification and the reanchist city*. London: Routledge.

² Ley, David. 2004. "Gentrification and the Politics of the New Middle Class." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*.

³ Cox, Wendell, and Hugh Pavlich. 2012. 8th Annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey. Belleville, Illinois: Demographia.

⁴ Bridge, Gary, and Robyn Dowling. 2001. "Microgeographies of Retailing and Gentrification." *Australian Geographer* no. 32 (1):93-107.

⁵ Pollack, Stephanie, Barry Bluestone, and Chase Billingham. 2010. *Maintaining Diversity In*

What is gentrification?

Gentrification is the transformation of a cheap or working-class place to live into a middle-class-and-up area, and the consequent displacement of low-income original residents. Because income and social class are so closely tied to race and migrant status, gentrification almost always makes an area whiter, too.

Gentrification is usually most noticeable in cities because they change more rapidly and experience more housing strain, though most people agree that it can happen in rural areas too.

There are a lot of things that cause gentrification. A lot of it is down to big policy decisions or decisions of finance capital. Real estate investment firms obviously stand to gain from buying low and selling high, and governments at most levels stand to gain politically from having more wealthy people in their tax base and some big construction projects on the go. Local and state government planning permissions can do a lot to help or hinder gentrification, but they often choose to help it progress.¹

It can also happen in a form of gradual creep through cultural change. Culturally middle class people without much money (often students and artists or single parents) start moving into less-desirable low-rent suburbs. They might even congratulate themselves for their broadmindedness. Other middle-class people see people who look and dress like them in the streets of those areas, and start to consider those suburbs as a place to live. It snowballs until the character of the area is totally changed.²

Gentrification can cause some short-term benefits for original residents, but they're not usually able to stay long enough to enjoy them. Usually, the influx of higher-income residents

raises property values, rents, even the price of groceries in the surrounding area. The upshot is that original lower-income residents get pushed out. Sometimes lower-income original residents can hang on for a bit in lower-quality housing but that's obviously not an ideal outcome either.

This causes a lot of suffering. It's obviously super expensive to move away from your community and your memories. For people without many financial resources, support networks are critical. Visiting a friend in a different suburb takes time and money. If someone is old or has a disability – which is true of a lot of low-income people – then even moving a few streets away from a long-time home can be very isolating. Plus, in a lot of places, including Australia, most doctors, support services, public transport, well-paying jobs, centres of education, and fun stuff is concentrated around the city centre and inner suburbs that are experiencing the strongest gentrification.

Gentrification is a huge issue in Australia at the moment. Most of us live in our cities and our cities have some of the most cut-throat housing markets in the world. These days, Melbourne is less affordable to live in than London or New York.³ So fighting gentrification as best we can should be a big concern for those of us who care about social justice.

How environmental activism can be a gentrifying force despite our best intentions: some examples

Green consumerism on the high street is a big one. I'm talking organic food stores, cafés with vegan, fair-trade menus, fashion boutiques with bamboo microfibre leggings.

I'm not saying that working-class people, people of colour, and migrants simply don't like or need these things. Many do. Anecdotal evidence suggests that like most health disparities, and due in large part to disproportionate experience of environmental pollution, food intolerances are *more* common in people of colour and low-income people. And of course, there's a long history of vegetarianism and veganism in non-European cultures.

But lots of people who aren't middle-class-or-up or white feel unwelcome and judged in their local organic food store. Plus, lots of people just can't afford to pay seven dollars for a loaf of bread.

The main problem with these shops, though, is that middle-class white people really really love them. It's basically a big "there are people like you here! And the kind of shops you need to maintain your lifestyle! Come gentrify!" sign.⁴

A lot of you are probably sceptical of this kind of green consumerism already. Good. But the same problems exist with many **community gardens, infoshops, food co-ops, and other "activist" community spaces.**

Some of these do wonderful things. And some of them are cliquy, exclusive, and unclear about their purpose. Many are both. It's complicated.

But ask yourself a question: what makes your local self-organised anarchist library so much more radical than the municipal library? I bet it's not its awesome collection of Vietnamese-language literature. In other words, it's not its accessibility to a wide range of people.

If the people who use and control a project are not long-term residents or demographically similar people, that project – no matter how rad its stated values – may be just as much a gentrifying force as the most apolitical bourgie organic food shop.

Improved public transport is also a dramatic gentrifying force. You'd think improved public transport would primarily benefit low-income people, right? With the rising cost of petrol, public transport is only becoming more of a saving for yourself as well as the planet.

Well, it turns out that public transport is actually an attractive option for many people. The savings from living close to reliable public transport may be outweighed by increased rents or mortgage repayments. This is particularly true of rail transport, including light rail (trams). Improved public transport is one of the top predictors of increased property values and rent rises.⁵

And we can't forget **outright greenwashing.** Never ever ever EVER trust a property developer no matter how much they tout the energy efficient urban village ethos of their new development. And these days, they all do that.

Solutions

The basic problem here is that movements for environmental justice can be victims of their own success. Most people want to live in a cleaner, greener, area. So an area that is cleaner and greener, or even looks like it could be, is going to be in high demand with a lot of different people – including people with a lot more money than original residents. Some things that cause gentrification are, in themselves, honestly good things – but the situation they exist in makes them really damaging.

So what is to be done? There are no easy answers, outside the early rounds of Who Wants To Be A Millionaire. But there are some guidelines.

First and foremost – and this goes for everything – **work with local communities to see what they need** and what is already happening.

Don't impose your own priorities or tastes. A better bus service might be more useful than a clearly marked bike path. An anarchist infoshop might not be as appreciated as a volunteer at the local library. See what's needed.

What if your biggest dream is to own an organic grocery? Well, if your activism simply cannot be brought into a marginalised area without gentrifying that area then the first solution is probably to stay out of that area. But I'd also ask you to **consider refocusing your activism.** Is your project really conducive to environmental justice if you have to keep it away from the most marginalized people in our society for fear of fucking up their lives?

Finally, never lose sight of the total picture. Nobody can do everything, and it's totally fine to have priorities in your activism. But keep sight of the effects your activist project is having – especially the ones you didn't plan for.

It's great to make your home a better place to live – a goal most movements for environmental justice strive for. But **making an area a better place to live increases demand for housing in that area. Advocacy for affordable housing has to be built into environmental activism, or that activist project is most likely a gentrifying force in itself.**

It's difficult and challenging, but so is everything worth doing.

