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# What's Race Got to Do With it? Looking for the Racial Dimensions of Gentrification

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## *Abstract*

*In popular conceptualization, gentrification is often a fundamentally racial transformation: the pre-gentrified neighborhood is inhabited mostly by African Americans or other people of color, and the in-movers are typically white. Many academic depictions of gentrification, on the other hand, either omit reference to the racial dimensions of the phenomenon, or acknowledge race and ethnicity but forego examination. This article describes the scholarship that does exist concerning how the process of gentrification affects persons differentially depending upon their race, but illuminates the absence of a consideration of race in the bulk of analyses of gentrification. Also advanced is evidence that gentrification not only replicates but amplifies the contemporary system of racial residential segregation.*

"White people walking their dogs." This simple sight has eyebrows raised and heads turning, in a predominantly black area of Nashville, Tennessee, which is said to be in the early stages of gentrification. The spotting of white dogwalkers—along with spanking new condos squeezed in between shotgun houses, a razed public housing project, and elegant crepe myrtles and street lamps newly planted alongside the once-bedraggled park—is heralding the vaguely familiar but undeniable transformation that is generally perceived to be, at least in part, racial. In urban lore, the pre-gentrified neighborhood is inhabited mostly by African Americans or other people of color when the rumblings of change begin, and the rumblers are typically white—white, upper middle-class, professional homebuyers, displacing the original residents.

It is, then, astounding that so very little of the scholarly endeavor around gentrification focuses on the issue of race. One might assume that much exami-

nation would have addressed the racial dimensions of gentrification, but one would be wrong. Although racial identity is frequently acknowledged in gentrification literature, race as a subject of direct inquiry and serious concern is conspicuously absent from many investigations of gentrification; it is even missing from most published definitions of the phenomenon. The result is that, urban lore notwithstanding, we know little of the ways in which the process of gentrification affects persons differentially depending upon their race, or of the degree to which gentrification supplements and exacerbates the historic and contemporary systems of racial residential segregation. This article reviews the relative handful of outright investigations of the racial implications and impacts of the gentrification process, and suggests that gentrification may well be found to play a significant role in perpetuating and supplementing the racist, segregating systems that have formed our residential landscape.



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## Definition of Gentrification

A considerable amount of time, space, and academic credential has been devoted to defining gentrification, since the term was first coined in the 1960s. In the course of scholarly investigation of this phenomenon, the definition has been refined in numerous ways, all of which incorporate an essential nod to gentrification's inherent class transformation. In *The Encyclopedia of Housing*, gentrification is explained as "the process by which central urban neighborhoods that have undergone disinvestment and economic decline experience a reversal, reinvestment, and the in-migration of a relatively well-off, middle- and upper-middle-class population" (Smith, 1998, p. 198). Likewise, gentrification has been defined as "the replacement of low-income, inner-city working-class residents by middle- or upper-class households, either through the market for existing housing or demolition to make way for new upscale housing construction" (Hammel and Wyly, 1996, p. 250). The concept encompasses nonresidential urban change as well, and may thus be expressed simply as "the production of urban space for progressively more affluent users" (Hackworth, 2002, p. 815). Gentrification is also characterized as fundamentally a struggle between a community's use value—the many facets of worth of the neighborhood to its original residents—and the exchange value of the property therein (Perez, 2004). Aside from abstract definitional phrases, academicians also refer to the more obvious, recognizable aspect of gentrification: a certain nebulous but know-it-when-you-see-it perspective that takes into account the lived experience and observations of urban dwellers and users. For example, the appearance of a Starbucks coffee shop has been described as a siren of gentrification, and part of gentrification is the change in the essential character and flavor of a neighborhood (Kennedy and Leonard, 2001).

Regardless of the numerous and varied attempts at explaining the phenomenon that is gentrification, the literature continues to acknowledge the difficulty of defining gentrification, and the definitions themselves continue, for the most part, to omit reference to race and ethnicity. The general concept of gentrification holds that the people moving in to a gentrifying area are usually white, and the residents who move out are typically people of color (Alejandrino, 2000; Kennedy and Leonard, 2001; Bostic and Martin, 2003). Regardless, however, of commonly held conceptualizations of gentrification, it is the rare characterization of gentri-

fication that names race as an explicit component (see Smith, 1996, describing revanchists as middle-class white folks); the racial element of gentrification is perhaps most notable for its very absence from scholarly definitions of gentrification and for its absence or merely cursory mention in much of the gentrification research (see, e.g., Vigdor, 2002; Hackworth, 2002). As others have noted (e.g., Atkinson, 2003), the racial dimension of gentrification has been underresearched.

Some contemporary literature concerning urban African-American and Latino/a communities provides rich depictions of neighborhoods situated squarely in the path of urban redevelopment (e.g., Gregory, 1998; Perez, 2004; Villa, 2000). Still, there is a need for an explicit examination of the racially differential impact of gentrification and the relationship of the gentrification process to the racial/ethnic characteristics of the gentrifying neighborhood, and questions about what race has to do with gentrification abound. How, for example, are residents of different races affected differentially by the process of gentrification? Are the ground-level forces of gentrification—the tactics used by gentrifying agents, or the urban development processes brought to bear by pro-gentrification policies—exerted differentially as to race? Are different racial groups displaced at different rates, and do they resist displacement with different degrees of success? Shy of displacement, are nonwhite original residents of gentrifying areas disproportionately harmed by gentrification? Looking beyond the household level, what are the racial impacts and outcomes on the neighborhood from gentrification, and how is the gentrified community transformed, or not, in a racial sense? How, then, are our cityscapes transformed by the racial aspects of gentrification? For the most part, scholars will give a nod to race—e.g., "Racial tension has been an important subtext of gentrification in many revitalizing neighborhoods" (Vigdor, 2002, p. 138)—but proceed to define, measure, and theorize the causes and impacts of gentrification without further reference to racial experiences and outcomes. It has been posited, indeed, that "much of the gentrification debate is actually a coded reference to the contestation of blacks and whites for urban space", and asserted that analyses that fail to consider race and the "shifts over time in racial as well as class composition within neighborhoods" are incomplete (Massey, 2002, p. 175, 176). The failure of gentrification studies to attend to race and ethnicity has been called "a huge omission" (Rivlin, 2002, p. 178).

### ***Consequences to Original Residents— Displacement and Other Harm***

If gentrification at its core is about class transformation, then implicit in that neighborhood change is, arguably, the displacement of original, lower-income residents (Kennedy and Leonard, 2001). Importantly, if widely held beliefs are true that the original residents who are most impacted negatively by gentrification are African Americans and other people of color, and if displacement is the most drastic consequence to original residents, then a failure to adequately study displacement is tantamount to a failure to adequately study the racial element of gentrification. Displacement is the most notable consequence of gentrification, and is generally understood as the process “whereby current residents are forced to move because they can no longer afford to reside in the gentrifying neighborhoods” (Freeman, 2005, p. 463), or, as alternatively defined, “when pressures on the housing market from affluent groups create inflated rents and prices which can push out the low paid or unpaid over time” (Atkinson, 2000a, p. 307). Gentrification, as distinguished from urban renewal, occurs relatively gradually, effecting a slow reconfiguration of the residential and consumptive aspects of a neighborhood, and displacing residents who cannot afford rising rents, rising property taxes, and higher costs of more upscale businesses, or who get evicted by landlords acting on the increasing exchange value (Perez, 2004).

Evidence of the extent of displacement varies greatly (Bostic, 2003), but early in the examination of the phenomenon of gentrification, “[a]necdotal reports of displacement and the demographic changes that were obviously taking place in gentrifying neighborhoods led many to believe that displacement was a widespread phenomenon and the engine behind demographic change in gentrifying neighborhoods” (Freeman, 2005, p. 464). Studies of the displacement effect of gentrification that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s include the following: one national study estimated that between 1.7 and 2.4 million people were displaced by private redevelopment in 1979, consisting primarily of tenants, the poor and female-headed families; a study of New York City estimated that between 10,000 and 40,000 households were displaced annually by gentrification in the late 1970s; and another study of nine revitalizing neighborhoods in five cities found that 23 percent of tenants had been displaced over a two-year period (Kennedy and Leonard, 2001). Displacement is not only “always a central axis of academic, policy and popular concerns

over gentrification” (Newman and Wyly, 2006, p. 24), it has frequently been considered a required element of gentrification, with scholars asserting that redevelopment and revitalization do not constitute gentrification where there is no direct, involuntary displacement (see discussion in Newman and Wyly, 2006).

Some recent discourse on gentrification, however, eliminates displacement from the definition and specifically rejects displacement as a litmus test for gentrification (Newman and Wyly, 2006). One argument goes that, while the forces of gentrification will generally lead to land price appreciation and may well increase the cost of living in that neighborhood, they will not necessarily cause displacement of the neighborhood’s original residents, particularly if moving costs for such residents are sufficiently high (Vigdor, 2002). Additionally, a focus on displacement as the sole or primary evidence of gentrification’s negative impact may serve to ignore or discount other negative effects of gentrification on low-status original residents of gentrifying neighborhoods. Residents who manage to avoid the direct displacement pressure may nevertheless, for example, “suffer as critical community networks and culture are displaced” (Newman and Wyly, 2006, p. 27, citing Freeman and Braconi 2004, Atkinson 2000b, Marcuse 1986). There may well be consequences short of displacement—including marginalization, isolation, alienation—wherein original residents remain in gentrified neighborhoods, but through the transformation of their neighborhood, their quality of life is diminished. It is often the case that an increasing share of family/household income goes to housing—and, therefore, is not available for health care, transportation, entertainment, etc.—as a result of gentrification; such financial pressures also often lead to families “doubling up” to manage costs (Newman and Wyly, 2006). Furthermore, it is asserted that the concept of displacement, and the concept of harm brought to original residents by the process of gentrification, is broader than the impact on original residents. The phenomenon known as “exclusionary displacement” refers to the impediments—namely, higher housing expenses and less availability of affordable housing—brought about by gentrification which preclude low-income homeseekers from moving into gentrified neighborhoods (Marcuse, 1986). The attention to displacement—as an exclusive, yes/no consequence of gentrification—excludes from consideration those original residents who may not have moved but have nevertheless experienced negative consequences from the gentrification of their neighborhood; the monolithic focus on displacement has restricted our understanding

of how gentrification may harm original residents of lesser means. The focus instead should turn to what harm is actually caused, and by what means, displacement or otherwise, to original residents—particularly, the poor—by gentrification (Vigdor, 2002). The point here is that eliminating displacement as a definitionally required component of gentrification should not lessen scholarly investigation of the harm caused to original residents by gentrification, nor does it deny the occurrence of displacement; to the contrary, eliminating it as a litmus test allows for a broader examination of the variety and extent of harm, including but not limited to displacement, that befalls residents of gentrifying neighborhoods.

Either way—whether displacement is considered an essential element of gentrification, or it is merely the most extreme among a variety of harms that may befall original residents of gentrifying areas—there is confusion and disagreement on the phenomenon of displacement. Despite the common wisdom that displacement is axiomatic in the gentrifying neighborhood, early research on the extent of displacement has been criticized (Vigdor, 2002; Freeman, 2005). Aside from the disputable, varied and perhaps irreconcilable examinations of displacement in the '70s and '80s, displacement arising from gentrification has been studied as it has unfolded in the postrecession gentrification of the 1990s and beyond. On top of the doubt cast on earlier findings of displacement, a trio of recent studies has refuted the occurrence of displacement in gentrifying neighborhoods. The first two findings of no displacement came from the examination of residential mobility for disadvantaged residents of gentrifying neighborhoods in New York City (Freeman and Braconi, 2004) and in Boston (Vigdor, 2002). The findings contravened common sense and earlier estimates, as well as urban lore: poor households and those without college degrees who resided in gentrifying areas were actually less likely to move, these studies revealed, than similar households residing in nongentrifying neighborhoods (Freeman and Braconi, 2004; Vigdor, 2002). In a third recent examination of the occurrence of displacement, this time of a national sample, there was yet again found to be no statistically significant link between mobility and gentrification, and no real susceptibility of poor renters to displacement or elevated rates of mobility (Freeman, 2005).

Regardless of these three recent gentrification studies showing very little in the way of displacement, the question of displacement and other gentrification-related harm remains in play; displacement remains an

issue of concern and study. For one thing, findings of no or minimal displacement must be read with great caution, we are reminded, because—to the extent that such findings are accurate—they may arise from market regulations such as assisted housing and/or rent regulation, which may allow poor residents, who would otherwise be displaced, to stay in the gentrifying neighborhood; the apt conclusion, then, would be not that gentrification does not cause displacement, but rather that market regulation and other housing policy protect original residents from the displacement that they would otherwise experience from gentrification (Newman and Wyly, 2006). Beyond that, however, a most recent examination of displacement contravenes the three prior ones and sounds a warning bell as well as a call for further study about displacement. Utilizing the Housing and Vacancy Survey for New York City, but analyzing this dataset—the same one used by Freeman and Braconi—differently, Newman and Wyly arrive at a substantially higher rate of displacement than the trio of displacement-discounters had shown. For purposes of these calculations, Newman and Wyly consider as displaced all those renter households who stated that their primary reason for moving was 1) they wanted a cheaper residence, or had difficulty paying rent; 2) they were harassed by their landlord; or 3) their space was converted to another use by the owner. In Newman and Wyly's analysis, nearly a tenth of all movers in New York City between 1999 and 2002 were displacees.

More study of displacement is necessary, as it is a key consequence of gentrification to original residents of color, and yet questions of its nature and extent are unresolved. Along these lines, recent scholarship on the topic of gentrification has called for less debate in the realm of theory and causality, and more investigation of the mechanisms through which gentrification proceeds as well as its repercussions (Slater, 2002); much of the gentrification literature is said to exhibit neglect of the working class and poor communities “which are at best severely disrupted by gentrification and at worst eliminated by it” (Slater, et al., 2004, p. 1141). It is necessary to more carefully scrutinize the effects of gentrification rather than its causes, to put the gentrification debate into a policy perspective (Wyly and Hammel, 1999). “[T]he true nature of the consequences of gentrification for people living in the neighborhoods experiencing it (or in adjacent neighborhoods) is an issue on which there has been almost total silence” (Slater, et al., 2004, p. 1142). One surprising finding from Newman and Wyly's (2006) displacement study was that racial and ethnic minorities—black, Hispanic, and Asian renters—

were significantly less likely to have been displaced than similarly situated white tenants. This rare look at race and displacement, with a finding that contravenes expectations, begs the question.

Efforts to study gentrification are notoriously fraught with difficulty, however, and the study of displacement and other forms of harm to original residents presents additional hurdles. Indeed, difficulties in methodology may, in part, account for insufficient understanding of the harms wrought by gentrification. While the middle- and upper-class in-movers may be accessible for research purposes, others involved in the gentrification process, such as developers, landlords, real estate agents, and political officeholders, may well be less so; the greatest difficulty, though, comes in studying the plight of displaced tenants, and tenants who are contending with the threat of eviction and may become displaced, who are difficult to find, to count, and to interview (Slater et al., 2004). By definition, the displaced residents are absent, and the research is akin to "measuring the invisible" (Atkinson, 2000b, p. 163). The mere matter, therefore, of accurately counting, not to mention understanding the experiences of, those whom gentrification displaces and those whom gentrification otherwise negatively affects, presents a significant challenge. For example, implicit in the recent studies of displacement is the strong suggestion that many more displacees exist but are not accounted for (Newman and Wyly, 2006). The dataset itself is inadequate: the particular survey used to account for displacees in New York City does not include those who move outside of the city or those who become homeless or enter the shelter system, nor does it allow identification of those who move in with other households. That is to say, three of the most likely actions of poorer residents—living on the streets or in a shelter, leaving the city altogether, or moving in with others—are unaccounted for in the attempt to quantify displacement in New York City. Further, the survey is structured so that respondents choose one reason for moving, which may obscure or simplify—and therefore under-represent—the phenomenon of displacement. Additionally, of course, a survey that examines a certain limited timeframe for neighborhoods excludes households displaced by earlier gentrification, as well as the exclusionary effect on households that will not move into the gentrified neighborhoods in the future.

In light of the only partial view of displacement, and other gentrification consequences, that are afforded by quantitative attempts at studying the phenomena, it seems clear that what is called for is more qualitative

assessment of the experiences of original residents in gentrifying neighborhoods. Newman and Wyly (2006) provide a model for field research in gentrifying neighborhoods. Preliminarily, they conducted a literature review to understand the changed landscape of the areas. For a snowball sample of interviewees, they compiled a list of neighborhood and citywide persons from the literature review, internet searches, and personal contacts; in addition, they sought out community residents, community organizers, staff members at community organizations, and persons who otherwise were coming into contact with residents threatened with displacement. The interviews, conducted as narrative conversations with persons as "equal participant(s) in the interaction", sought to illuminate the perspectives of individuals and groups on the gentrification process and its impact on low-income residents living through neighborhood changes (Newman and Wyly, 2006, p. 43). This type of qualitative investigation, on top of whatever quantitative assessment can be done, is crucial for an understanding of the consequences of gentrification to original residents, which in turn means it is crucial to our analysis of the racial impacts and implications of gentrification.

### *The Tactics and Mechanisms of Gentrification*

While the studies of displacement are contradictory, we lack good understanding of the mechanisms used in gentrification, and the tactics used by agents of gentrification against the original residents of gentrifying neighborhoods. Again, if indeed we consider that the tactics and strategies employed in the process of gentrification are largely enacted against or upon original residents of the neighborhood who are African American or otherwise people of color, then the lack of attention paid to such mechanisms is an inattentiveness to the racial aspects of gentrification. One common avenue taken in the course of gentrification is resort to local government and the legal system: housing code departments, zoning boards, historic preservation commissions, police, courts, city councils, community boards, and mayors' offices (Bryant, 2006). Research in a gentrifying area of Columbus, Ohio, details the difference between how original residents—low-income African Americans—and white middle-class in-movers were willing and able to employ legal/governmental means in their efforts to change their new environs.

The criminal law...was part of yet another strategy used to mold the neighborhood into what the

newcomers wanted. To some it seemed a nice change: community residents working with the police within the judicial system. However, this opportunity to collaborate was not afforded to everyone in the community, and it had not been afforded to anyone before the new people moved in (Bryant, 2006, p. 722).

Research in the West Town area of Chicago—which consisted particularly of interviews, and reviews of local community media—birthed a veritable laundry list of tactics in terms of “the less visible, day-to-day actions of speculators, mortgagers, realtors, developers, and the rest of the industry of gentrification” (Betancur, 2002, p. 805). There were the common pressures that attend heightened interest in real estate activity, including solicitation of sales, and “flipping” (the purchase of property at low price and sale to in-movers at a high price, with merely cosmetic improvement or no improvement at all). Beyond that, though, property owners were intimidated to sell; in some cases, agents would secure a signed offer for real estate that was not for sale and then pressure the owner to accept the offer, while in other cases agents would contract with a property owner to sell his or her home at a given price and then advertise and sell it at a higher price (to the agent’s profit). In particular, more vulnerable homeowners, including seniors as well as low-income households, were targeted with repeated visits and phone calls, graffiti, gang harassment, and unsolicited offers. Arson was documented, as well as calculated schemes, whether via rumors or actual down-zoning, to cause reduced property values and then cheaper purchase. Additionally, those interested in transforming the neighborhood were credited with “[t]argeting of specific blocks or buildings of minority concentration for concerted action to push them out” through such efforts as intensified police intervention and harassment, property inspections, and accusations of criminal activity (Betancur, 2002, p. 805).

### ***Resistance to Gentrification***

There is, on the other hand, a fair amount of literature describing the resistance efforts that take shape in the face of gentrification. That is, apart from the questions that remain of how and how many residents are displaced, there are certainly many who manage to resist the pressure exerted on them by gentrification and stay in their gentrifying neighborhood. The flipside of the displacement question, then, is the question of

how people avoid displacement and resist the various tactics and mechanisms employed in the service of gentrification. Recent years have seen a decline in the resistance to gentrification (Wilson, Wouters, and Grammenos, 2004). Hackworth (2002), in his analysis of postrecession gentrification, notes in particular the ways in which postrecession gentrification involves different versions of resistance from that manifested in earlier iterations of gentrification. Much of the resistance, it is said, has evolved into less aggressive groups, whose politics are less threatening, which have actually joined in cooperative relations with local government (Hackworth, 2002). Many anti-gentrification groups have become CDCs, which are dependent for some or all of their funding from the government and are necessarily more conciliatory; community opposition may focus on quality of life issues and the type and scale of development, rather than the danger of displacement. Additionally, Hackworth notes the aggregate spatial effects of ongoing reinvestment: as neighborhoods are increasingly inhabited by beneficiaries of gentrification, and as erstwhile or would-be activists are compelled to move out, resistance declines.

Nevertheless, a handful of studies provide a qualitative examination of the resistance to gentrification and provide several specific examples of ways in which original, low-income residents manage to stand their ground against the force of gentrification. At the household level, many poor residents find a way to stay in their gentrifying neighborhoods by “accepting poor housing quality, coping with high housing cost burdens and/or sharing housing with other residents” (Newman and Wyly, 2006, p. 48–49). Affordability of housing and quality of housing are described as trade-offs, as poor tenants fear that complaining about housing conditions will lead to their displacement (via, presumably, raised rents pursuant to repairs); thus, one mode of resistance is merely the act of accepting and adapting to substandard living situations. Other tenants manage to stay in the neighborhood by cohabiting; “especially single parents, the elderly, immigrants and younger families, remain in the city by doubling up with family or friends” (Newman and Wyly, 2006, p. 49). It is also not uncommon for tenants to benefit from a good relationship with their landlord and manage to pay rent well below what the property could earn, aside from such a personalized arrangement. Tenants, of course, are not the only residents at risk: “[h]ome-ownership is often viewed as a protection against gentrification but, as housing values increase, rising property taxes often

make home-ownership impossible, especially for the elderly and other residents on fixed incomes" (Newman and Wyly, 2006, p. 49).

It is in research of resistance at a community level that we see explicit enumeration of a racial dimension of gentrification. Organizations—including community groups, as well as CDCs and other nonprofit housing developers—are credited with playing an important role in combating displacement and ensuring the availability of affordable housing (Newman and Wyly, 2006), and oftentimes a neighborhood's racial and ethnic identity lends strength to community efforts in resistance. For example, a resistance movement has spanned more than two decades in a section of Park Slope, in Brooklyn, New York, in the form of a nonprofit community group with the mission of "developing and managing affordable housing, creating employment opportunities, organizing residents and workers, and combating displacement caused by gentrification" (Slater, 2004, p. 1205). The group is fueled by the desire to resist, in particular, the racial/ethnic change that they perceive attending gentrification in their area. The group has raised millions of dollars, which it has used to transform dilapidated, abandoned properties into livable, affordable homes; in addition, the group actually created a Displacement Free Zone with the aim of preventing evictions of low-income and moderate-income tenants. The group advocates, through various tactics, on behalf of any tenants whose rent is increased to a level that threatens displacement. Indeed, such antidisplacement campaigns and organizing efforts have been adopted throughout the country, designed to pressure landlords and stem the effects of displacement (Newman and Wyly, 2006), and such resistance efforts can be grounded in racial unity. Additionally, the imperatives of resisting capital development can spur the formation of interracial coalitions across ethnic enclaves in a community, which constitute not only a concerted contestation for space but also a transneighborhood struggle against a divide-and-conquer strategy (Gregory, 1998).

This race factor in community building (Betancur, 2002), however, can cut both ways. On the one hand, race and ethnicity has been studied as a unifying and creative antidisplacement force, in which communities can frame their neighborhoods as ethnic enclaves as a way to resist displacement. In the classic account of class struggle against gentrification, Neil Smith's *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, race stands out as a critical part of the process, particularly with regard to original residents who are African American and Hispanic. So, for example, the

resistance of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Chicago took the form of near-constant expression of shared cultural identity and solidarity, an overt campaign for Puerto Ricans and sympathetic non-Puerto Ricans to purchase property in the neighborhood, and the creation of physical structures (buildings, flags, etc.) to link the space with the culture (Rinaldo, 2002). This particular community group conceptualized itself as internally (in the U.S.) colonized and contended that it experienced gentrification in particular as part of this colonial relationship; it was "the concentration of colonialism and diaspora with local histories and relationships that spawn this resistance and fuel its intensities" (Rinaldo, 2002, p. 165; see also Wilson, et al., 2004, examining yet another neighborhood of Chicago, in which Mexican working-class residents resist displacement by highlighting the political nature of the struggle for land and representing the historic ideal of their space and community).

On the other hand, race and ethnicity, rather than presenting a unifying advantage, can sometimes present an added challenge for original residents of neighborhoods facing gentrification. So it was in the Chicago community of West Town, where racism and ethnic intolerance put people of color and white ethnics at odds with one another, preventing an effective convergence around the struggle against displacement or for housing affordability (Betancur, 2002). There, the mere clash of race and ethnicity was complicated and aggravated by economic differences: conflicts between mostly tenant (Latino) classes and mostly owner (European) classes, between white immigrants with relative economic power and Latinos in low-status jobs (Betancur, 2002). These and other explorations of resistance to gentrification illuminate the elements of race and ethnicity, especially in terms of its unifying or detracting effect.

### ***The Evidence of Race and the Intensification of Racial Residential Segregation***

A small sampling of resident interviews in North Nashville—an area that ranges from pockets of complete or near-complete gentrification, to dilapidated areas experiencing no reinvestment—yields commentary on gentrification as a racial phenomenon. To a person, black and white residents of long and short tenure see racial transformation as part and parcel of the gentrification in their midst. Longtime residents remember the days when the residents in the area were nearly all African-American. "When I was growing up here,

the neighborhood was all black....I graduated [from high school] in '66 and went to school with all black classmates. Now a good number of whites are living in the neighborhood." A newer resident, who is white and moved to one of the first gentrifying neighborhoods nearly 10 years ago, noted the continued rise in numbers of white residents and the evident lessening of diversity, by stating that "certainly the racial mix is decreasing, not increasing."

A white man who had moved to the area within the past few years expressed that gentrification was happening "both economically and racially"; while he opined that "gentrification is certainly not entirely about race," he noted that white people were coming to the neighborhood while black people were leaving: "It's almost that we're moving in opposing directions." One African-American resident, when asked whether his particular neighborhood, still ungentrified and in a state of disinvestment, was changing racially, stated,

No, not yet. It's coming. It's coming, but not yet. If you look at [an adjacent neighborhood that has been redeveloped], for example, that whole area before it became [the redevelopment], was all African-Americans, but now it's totally changed, where it's the opposite. So, it's starting, it's slowly starting to push its way.

One longtime African-American resident talked of her experiences with new white residents getting preferential treatment in neighborhood businesses, and she shared a story about having food prepared at a local sandwich shop; a white man came into the shop and immediately stood at the cash register, and the shop attendant left her order and said she had to attend to the white customer because he had been waiting. This interviewee drew a parallel to an earlier era:

Without question, I know for certain that I get treated differently....and it is like something that returned from a long time ago. It had been so long since I had this type of experience, I had forgotten about it. Until, it has been a little more than two years ago, that there were several circumstances and situations that took place that made it very clear that I was being treated not so good....And there is a very clear-cut change...to where it is noticeable.... It cannot be denied, it is blatant and clear.

A white man who moved to the area three years ago conveyed an understanding that City services and improvements were now coming to his particular neighborhood—which had been "almost entirely black"

and was now "probably 30% white"—concurrently with its racial transformation.

I think the fact that there's now more white people there, subconsciously, or consciously, I don't want to speak words for anyone, I think that [City officials] pay more attention to white voices and white faces than they did when it was pretty much a, I guess 95%, black neighborhood....I've heard this directly from some of the longtime residents, and I've heard it kind of coded, but basically, it took white people coming in here for anything to happen. I heard that directly from somebody that trusted me enough to say that out loud, and I've heard things kind of like that, you know the code word is "new people," and new people aren't all white but the vast majority of them are.

While race looms large in common conceptualizations of the original residents of gentrifying communities—particularly with regard to the ways in which gentrification is enacted upon original residents of color, and the displacement of original residents or other harm brought to them in the process of gentrification—race does not figure prominently in the research of these dimensions of gentrification. Although we may not know enough about the race of those original residents and how their race is associated with tactics of gentrification or displacement and other harm, important and revealing research has been done regarding the race of persons moving into gentrifying areas.

Gentrification is generally agreed upon academically as a process of class transformation, and gentrification is widely believed, popularly, to entail racial transformation. However, an argument persists that, contrary to urban lore and general conceptualizations, gentrification need not—in fact, does not—entail transformation, racially, of neighborhoods (*e.g.*, Bostic, 2003). It is certainly true that, as scholars have documented, there are areas of "black gentrification" (Patillo, 2005; 2003), in which middle- and upper-class African Americans move back into poor and working-class black neighborhoods, effecting a socio-economic transformation but retaining its original racial character. There are also instances—specifically tied to a period of economic recession—in which disproportionate default rates in gentrifying areas have made homes more affordable (see Lauria, 1998, on the "foreclosure hypothesis"). Additionally, an examination of the 50 largest U.S. metropolitan areas revealed that black homeowners were a gentrifying force in the 1970s, but not in the 1980s (perhaps, it is hypothesized, because of the easing



of race-based restrictions on where African Americans could live and purchase homes) (Bostic, 2003, p. 2428). Beyond that time-limited finding, though, there seems to be no support for the argument that gentrification does not entail racial transformation, aside from the isolated occurrences of black gentrification.

An additional position holds that there is racial transformation, but it comes from in-movers rather than displacees. One of the assertions that arose from the recent findings of no displacement in gentrifying neighborhoods is that displacement does not appear to be "the engine of neighborhood change in gentrifying neighborhoods" (Freeman, 2005, p. 483). Instead, it is reasoned, the neighborhood change which common wisdom attributes to displacement may be attributable rather to the effect of gentrification on who can move into a neighborhood. In other words, in-movers rather than out-movers are the driving force behind neighborhood change in gentrifying neighborhoods. Gentrification is thus described as a "gradual process that, although displacing some, leaves its imprint mainly by changing who moves into a neighborhood" (Freeman, 2005, p. 488). And, according to this data, being white is associated with an increased likelihood of moving into a gentrifying area, and being black—specifically, being black, poor, and without any college education—is associated with a decreased likelihood of moving into a gentrifying area.

Not only are the in-movers white, but it would appear that the gentrification process incorporates the racial discrimination that is rife within the contemporary system of racial residential segregation, and reinforces racial residential segregation, to a heightened degree, in the gentrified neighborhood. In an exception to the obviating of racial perspectives in gentrification literature, one line of inquiry examines the race component of mortgage lending in gentrifying areas. At least two studies have examined mortgage lending patterns in the period of postrecession gentrification, to explore the possibility that gentrification might be found to actually expand homeownership opportunities for people of color in gentrified neighborhoods. The clear conclusion of these studies is that, as distinguished from Bostic's time-limited findings and from the existence of pockets of black gentrification, gentrification in fact reinforces racial residential segregation and brings greater racialized exclusion. Wyly and Hammel (1999) first developed a neighborhood taxonomy for Chicago, in which they identified an "inner city" (central-city census tracts with median household income below the citywide median), and then divided the inner city into "core"

(intensely gentrified) and "fringe" (comparatively modest, spatially fragmented, or early-stage gentrification) segments. They compared African Americans seeking mortgages in the core and fringe (more and less gentrifying) tracts with similarly situated African Americans seeking mortgages in nongentrifying tracts of the city. Notably, they found that while African American loan applicants in fringe neighborhoods of Chicago experienced no significant difference in loan disposition compared with African American applicants elsewhere, African Americans seeking mortgages in the intensely gentrifying core neighborhoods were 1.45 times more likely to be rejected than African Americans applying elsewhere (Wyly and Hammel, 1999).

Subsequently, Wyly and Hammel (2004) have extended their study of the relation of gentrification to racial and ethnic discrimination through a taxonomy and analysis of 23 major U.S. metropolitan areas, again raising the hopeful question of whether, at a national scale, it is "possible to achieve reinvestment and diversity at the neighborhood scale without segregation, polarization, and displacement." Again, however, they found that postrecession gentrification not only magnifies class segregation, but also intensifies racial discrimination and exclusion in the affected neighborhoods (Wyly and Hammel, 2004). Wyly and Hammel conducted a metropolitan-level analysis, in which they examined the residential mortgage credit market to look for evidence of increased selectivity in gentrifying neighborhoods along racial and ethnic lines as compared with nongentrifying neighborhoods; they concluded that old patterns of racial segregation were strengthened, more recently, in gentrifying neighborhoods. Specifically, whereas in 1993 African Americans and most other people of color faced no different chances of loan approval or rejection in gentrified neighborhoods than in nongentrified neighborhoods, African Americans trying to buy homes in gentrified areas in the year 2000 were 1.25 times more likely to be turned down in core areas, and 1.23 times more likely to be turned down in fringe areas, compared with identically qualified African Americans looking elsewhere. As for Hispanic applicants, by the year 2000 they faced denial odds of 1.41 times greater in core areas and 1.59 times greater in fringe neighborhoods than if they had applied elsewhere, in nongentrified parts of their cities. (On the other hand, there were only slightly higher disparities for Asians and Pacific Islanders.) An additional layer of inquiry, which is not within the scope of this paper and post-dates Wyly and Hammel's research, concerns the housing market crisis and, indeed, the broader economic downturn; it remains

to be seen whether the increased foreclosure rates and decreased accessibility of home mortgage loans has an impact on the interplay of gentrification and race.

Wyly and Hammel (2004) make no conclusions about the cause for the greater racial exclusion in gentrifying areas, but they lay out a number of theories concerning the ways in which the neighborhood context—in this case, the flurry and intensity of gentrification—mediates lending discrimination. Gentrification, they assert, alters many of the exclusionary housing market practices that take place outside of the actual bank office, including racial steering and borrower preselection; there may be magnified disparities in this regard that accompany the influx of developers and affiliated industry during the gentrification period. Gentrification also, because it creates a diverse pool of white and minority borrowers, may intensify the cultural-affinity discrimination that attends the loan approval process: white loan officers, owing to their lack of familiarity with nonwhite applicants, rely more heavily on objective characteristics of the loan application (credit history and debt obligation) for nonwhite applicants than for white applicants, consequently holding applicants with marginal creditworthiness to a higher standard if they are not white (Hunter and Walker, 1996). Further, gentrification may create an intensified interest on the part of banks, interested in stability of value and profit, to exclude people of color, while they strive to put in place a substantially increased white population and thereby achieve some “reverse tipping point”. Finally, in the realm of property insurance, it is posited that insurers will be encouraged by gentrification that creates white upper middle class enclaves and thus reluctant to insure people of color or lower-income households that try to buy into those enclaves (Wyly and Hammel, 2004).

Aside from the causes for these gentrification-specific effects, it would seem to be important to place these findings within the context of mortgage lending discrimination research generally and to recognize the compounding implications of the findings of racial discrimination and exclusion particular to gentrifying neighborhoods. Quite apart from the phenomenon of gentrification and the categorization of neighborhoods along those lines, the mortgage lending system is infused with racial inequality. Analyses of Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (HMDA) data reveal racial disparities in mortgage loan approvals; for conventional home purchase loans in 2000, for example, blacks were twice as likely as whites to be rejected, and Hispanics were 40% more likely than whites to be turned down (Ross and Yinger, 2002). The seminal research study

of mortgage lending discrimination, the Boston Fed Study, which surpasses HMDA data in its contemplation of applicants' wealth and credit history, revealed that black and Hispanic applicants were 80% more likely to be turned down for mortgages than white applicants with the same personal and property characteristics (Munnell, Tootell, Browne, and McEneaney, 1996). The practice of redlining has been found to persist into the twenty-first century: studies show that, after controlling for other population and housing characteristics, an increase in the proportion of African-American residents in a neighborhood is significantly correlated with a decrease in mortgage lending (Silverman, 2005). Thus, the discrimination and exclusion occurring in gentrifying areas is in addition to the discrimination and redlining occurring elsewhere; those nongentrifying areas used for comparison purposes are rife with discrimination and exclusion of their own.

Additionally, Wyly and Hammel (2004) examined all homebuyers applying for mortgage loans in the gentrified neighborhoods of their 23 studied cities, seeking comparison of the approval/rejection rates, within gentrified neighborhoods, by race. They found that minority applicants in gentrified neighborhoods were much more likely than white applicants in those areas to have their loan applications rejected. Specifically, African Americans seeking to purchase a home in a gentrified neighborhood were 2.33 times more likely to be rejected for a home loan than identically qualified white homebuyers, and Hispanics were 1.44 times more likely (Wyly and Hammel, 2004). In other words, not only do people of color in gentrified neighborhoods face significantly greater odds in getting a mortgage than their comparable counterparts in nongentrified neighborhoods, but they also face vastly greater odds than comparable white homeseekers within the gentrified neighborhoods.

Gentrification would appear, then, to be amplifying the historic and contemporary system of racial residential segregation. The history of racial residential segregation in this country consists of a complex array of varied approaches, large and small, individual and communal, private and governmental. Historically, racial residential segregation was forged in this country in the early 1900s through numerous means, including outright violence, local legislation that dictated where persons of different races could reside, and neighborhood associations with techniques such as race restrictive covenants and other anti-integration actions (Massey and Denton, 1993). Agents of the real estate industry nationwide were active proponents, instigators,

and preservers of racial segregation (Gotham, 2002). By the mid-'30s, the United States Government had stepped into the fray, instituting a block-by-block rating system whereby property belonging to nonwhite people or located in neighborhoods where nonwhite people lived was ineligible for mortgage lending; the private banking industry adopted this racially exclusive approach, and for decades the color line of racial residential segregation was thus carved (Jackson, 1985).

Despite numerous examinations of the deleterious effects of racial residential segregation, particularly for African Americans, segregation levels remain high in U.S. cities (see, *e.g.*, Massey, 2004). The contemporary system of racial residential segregation, building upon the historic residential color line established over the first several decades of the twentieth century, consists of a multitude of components of discrimination and exclusion. Research studies demonstrate that the minority homeseeker faces possible racial discrimination from the moment he or she begins to look for a house or apartment, throughout the home-search process. In the simple initial act of picking up the telephone and calling a real estate or rental agent, or in visiting a real estate or rental office to inquire about a home, one is likely to get a different response depending on whether one is black or white. For African Americans and other people of color, the many increments of this system of racial residential segregation include, but are certainly not limited to, less likelihood than whites of being shown housing units, less likelihood than whites of being offered rent incentives for apartments and of getting advice on how to improve their loan applications for home purchases (Turner et al., 2002), and higher prices but fewer options for property insurance (Squires et al., 2001). Racial steering, long a mainstay of racial residential segregation efforts, is actually on the rise (Turner et al., 2002) and constrains the housing choices of minority households as well as those of whites who prefer integration. Aside from the obstacles faced by tenant applicants, the would-be homebuyer faces nearly twice the likelihood of being turned down for a mortgage if the applicant is not white (Munnell et al., 1996). Housing market discrimination is thus composed of small elements, each a singular act of exclusion, replicated ubiquitously and affecting individuals on a near-constant basis. The National Fair Housing Alliance, which collects information on housing discrimination from local, state, and federal government agencies and conducts its own testing as well, has estimated that more than 3.7 million violations of the Fair Housing Act occur annually. The myriad of

practices and policies that treat homeseekers differently, depending upon their race, may seem minor, taken separately, but in their cumulative and largely undeterred form they constitute the contemporary system of racial residential segregation. Specifically within the realm of gentrification, the findings of intensified mortgage discrimination and racial exclusion in gentrifying neighborhoods, taken together with the dearth of exploration of the racial dimensions of gentrification's harm to original residents, raise troubling questions concerning gentrification as a system for supplementing and perpetuating—perhaps even ratcheting up—racial residential segregation.

### *Conclusion*

In lay conceptualization, popular experience, and urban lore, gentrification is a racial phenomenon, but this understanding is largely unexplored in the literature on gentrification. There is scant accumulated evidence on the race dimension in most categories of gentrification, and it consists of some qualitative analyses of the racial aspects of resistance, and contradictory findings centered on displacement which reveal on the one hand a greater displacement rate for whites than for people of color and on the other hand that being African American is negatively associated with moving into gentrifying areas. Aside from that, we are left with a huge divide between our popular conceptualization of gentrification, which is cast so clearly in racial terms, and the academic depiction which to a great extent skirts the race aspect. Time and again, the very definition of gentrification makes no mention of race and ethnicity, and questions about the racially differential impact of gentrification, and about the racial transformation wrought by the process of gentrification, are largely unexamined. Given the silence, in the bulk of the analyses of gentrification, on the topic of race, it is legitimate to ask, *why?* Why is gentrification a racial phenomenon, and why is discussion and analysis of that phenomenon avoided? One plausible answer can be found in the work of Joe Feagin and others, regarding endemic racism, which is manifested particularly through control of geographic access and ownership. Historically, European Americans have wrested indigenous people away from their lands and wrested land away from indigenous people; they have striven to contain and control where and under what conditions African-Americans and other people of color can live. The argument may be made that gentrification and displacement represent not an anomaly but a

continuation of a longstanding pattern of the dislocation and subjugation of people of color in this nation. As for the absence of race as a variable in gentrification analyses, this is consistent with the general tendency for the avoidance of racial discourse, the denial of the magnitude of racism, and the evasion of the topic of racial impacts, disparities, and divisions.

Small wonder, then, that scholars identify "a need to explore the extremely difficult question of the intersection of race and class with respect to gentrification" (Slater, 2002). Add to that the work of Wyly and Hammel pertaining to homebuyers, wherein mortgage

lending patterns in gentrifying areas were found to be racially exclusive and to reinforce racial residential segregation, and the question looms of whether gentrification itself constitutes a supplement, not yet fully explored or understood, to the contemporary system of racial residential segregation. In sum, while common lore holds that gentrification is often a fundamentally racial phenomenon—where white in-movers wrest the space from African American displacees or other original residents of color—research to date falls short in a head-on examination of the racial impact of gentrification.

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