Unsettling Class: Gentrification and Racial Capitalism in Denver

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Abstract

This thesis examines how the gentrification of Denver over the last decade has unfolded across the city's preexisting geography of class and race. Specifically, how systemic racial discrimination positioned certain neighborhoods as economically and politically vulnerable to gentrification and displacement through processes of multi-generational economic exploitation and the specialization of racialized working class communities. In other words, how racism fosters community vulnerability to gentrification. I examine the historical formation of the city’s two largest minority groups - the Latinx and Black communities; and in particular their relationships to 3 neighborhoods in north Denver adjacent to downtown: The Highlands, Globeville, and Five Points – as a window into the particular ways Denver’s geography of gentrification is spatialized. This work contributes to scholarship on gentrification by providing a new way of analyzing the role of race in gentrification – a role that is frequently debated and discounted – and to extend the analysis of gentrification beyond the time that it is occurring by connecting it to the particular history of each neighborhood undergoing processes of gentrification. Focusing on Denver’s development challenges the pernicious myth that cities in the western US minimally participated in, nor were significantly shaped by, racial discrimination and segregation. I found that Denver not only was influenced by national policies of racial discrimination, but that white supremacy was influential there from its very founding in ways that are still observable in the city’s current topography. Furthermore, I argue that the struggle for civil rights did not end in the late 1960s with legal and legislative changes, but continues up to the present day. Today’s activism is often organized around the same issues of housing, employment, education, the role of municipal government, and the use of police force. I demonstrate that the ways Denverites have been racialized in relation to these issues has a direct bearing on the ways gentrification unfolds and is contested.
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Chapter 1: Intervening in Gentrification Scholarship with Racial Capitalism

“This typically American assumption that success should be equated with more industry, an expanding population, and an ever-growing urbanization was so pervasive that it prevented all but the most eccentric from suggesting that perhaps ‘success’ itself was the cause of urban problems.”

-The Queen City: A History of Denver, Lyle Dorsett, 1977

Why do certain neighborhoods gentrify and not others? Standard gentrification theory posits the existence of rent gaps\(^1\) that attract higher class homebuyers and investment, which results in the transformation of a working-class neighborhood into a higher class neighborhood (Lees et al., 2008). I argue that racial discrimination prevents and destroys wealth for marginalized communities, as well as concentrates them into racialized neighborhoods. Many scholars have examined the connections between racial discrimination, housing, and gentrification. My analysis contributes to this body of work by connecting theories of racial capitalism to gentrification. Racial capitalism, as developed by Cedric J. Robinson, connects how capitalist modes of value differentiation coevolves with Eurocentric notions of racial differentiation to permit exploitation of differentiations in human value (Robinson & Kelley, 2000). An analysis of discriminatory housing practices through the lens of racial capitalism clarifies the systemic logics that permit profit and racism to work together in shaping neighborhood formation in relation to gentrification. Racial discrimination systemically creates rent gaps, neighborhood-scale spaces of low real estate value, through coercion and predatory economic arrangements. The resulting marginalized neighborhoods are then vulnerable to processes of gentrification when their real estate values are significantly lower than adjacent neighborhoods.

\(^1\) A rent gap is the difference between the actual rent charged for space compared to a higher potential rent. Long-term disinvestment permits neighborhood degradation, resulting in significantly undervalued neighborhoods. When adjacent to areas of rising real estate values, this rent gap can attract new investment flows and more affluent residents causing gentrification. See: Lees et al., 2008 and Smith, 1996
While many gentrification scholars prioritize class and real estate markets in their analysis of gentrification, I argue that gentrification in certain places, such as Denver, CO, requires a geo-historic understanding of institutionalized and systemic racism. Furthermore, while analysis of class does go much of the way toward exposing power relations within gentrification, a strict class perspective also elides the intersectional experiences of those under threat of gentrification-led displacement and community destruction. Simply put, different racial groups are affected by gentrification in different ways depending on the ways in which processes of gentrification replicate or amplify systemic racial discrimination in the production of space for marginalized populations (Kirkland, 2008; McKittrick, 2011). When gentrification occurs in a neighborhood that has been historically segregated and exploited along racial lines then that neighborhood not only has a rent gap, but it has a *racialized* rent gap. Using evidence from Denver, Colorado, I demonstrate how historical patterns of racial discrimination continue on into the present and shape communities’ vulnerability to gentrification.

In this thesis, I draw on racial capitalism to connect how concepts of racial difference, inscribed in legal and property relations, translate into material differences in terms of how processes of gentrification negotiate and affirm value. Racial capitalism was a concept originally developed by Cedric J. Robinson (Robinson & Kelley, 2000) how capitalist modes of value differentiation coevolves with Eurocentric notions of racial differentiation to permit exploitation of differentiations in human value. Under a regime of racial capitalism individuals gain, or are denied, economic and social value from their racialized identity. Racism is a logic that seeks to naturalize differentiation and therefore racialization precedes race as a category of differentiation. Property and rights in the US have been structured along lines of racial identity from the founding of the country: starting with the creation of real estate by the seizure of indigenous land, limiting property ownership to a subset of white men, to the classification of
Black\(^2\) persons as property, to the whole suite of rights and privileges granted to white persons, such as voting and serving on juries, that were denied to those not categorized as white, male, or wealthy enough (Harris, 1993). Social forms of discrimination continue and the centuries of discrimination have material effects still experienced today.

Gentrification is a specific process of urban transformation that relies upon the existence of areas of relatively low real estate value that, through investment and material upgrading, is transformed into a higher value area. An analysis of discriminatory housing practices through the lens of racial capitalism clarifies the systemic logics that permit profit and racism to work together in shaping neighborhood formation in relation to gentrification. Racial discrimination systemically creates rent gaps, neighborhood-scale spaces of low real estate value, through coercion and predatory economic arrangements. The resulting marginalized neighborhoods are then vulnerable to processes of gentrification when their real estate values are significantly lower than adjacent neighborhoods. This scholarship has studied the roles of government, infrastructure construction, policing, affordable housing, capitalism’s economic cycles, education, demographic change and displacement, ideology, and environmental factors, in shaping and creating gentrification (Bryant, 2005; Lees et al., 2008; Marcuse, 2015; Smith, 1996). This paper contributes to this broader conversation, but most directly addresses how racial identity and systemic discrimination interact with housing market processes and racial wealth

\(^2\) I use the term Black firstly because that is often how community members within Five Points often refers to itself. While cognizant of differences, I consider it essentially interchangeable with African-American. For example, not all those that are Black claim or highlight Africa as their heritage. Black is therefore a more general term. Black (lowercase) is also a problematic but widely accepted categorization deployed by the U.S. government in statistical data. I use the capitalized noun “Black” in agreement with Kimberlé Crenshaw in that Blacks, Latinx and other minorities constitute specific cultural groups and thus require a proper noun. See: Crenshaw, Kimberlé W., Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law, HARV. L. REV. 101, n.2 (1988). In the final estimation, persons choose their own identifiers. Since I must chose for others in this case, and use a consistent and clear term, I have chosen Black as the best compromise.
gaps to produce racialized spaces and multi-generational disadvantages that translate into gentrification.

Scholarship, focusing on spaces outside the US provides useful analyses for examining gentrification through intersectional analysis of race and class. There remains significant debates about gentrification as a Eurocentric process (Ghertner, 2015), and whether or not gentrification is deployed globally as an arm of capitalism (Lees, 2000). However, other work, such as Krijnen’s (2018, p. 438) examination of Biruit, highlight the intersections of “political, cultural, and social” processes to shape gentrification as well as the conditions of capitalism. Of particular relevance to Krijnen’s work as well as my study of Denver is examining the relevance of state violence in relation to gentrification. The state is an important agent in the creation and formation of rent gaps because of its legal and regulatory capacities, its place within structural violence, as well as physical violence perpetrated by the state’s officers. The role of the state is to make possible a form of accumulation by dispossession in closing rent gaps (Krijnen, 2018). Race, as a social concept and a state-manufactured designation with legal and economic consequences plays a role in rent gaps. In centering social identities (such as race) as part of the political economy of rent gaps challenges common understanding that the existence of rent gaps is a sufficient explanation for gentrification. To better understand gentrification, therefore, one must attend to how the opening and closing of rent gaps relates to the political, cultural, and social forces of a given place and time. In the US, studies of gentrification must include the intersection of race and class.

Wealth is unevenly distributed in the US among racial groups and these differences connect to deferential housing experiences. Thus, there is a preliminary connection between racialized wealth gaps and the potential for gentrification in racially segregated neighborhoods. As noted in one recent study, “In 2009...the median wealth of white families was $113,149 compared with $6,325 for Latino families and $5,677 for black families” (Shapiro et al., 2013). Research has shown that the racial wealth gap, once established, plays an important role in the persistent racial homeownership gap. Income streams are
racialized, with Blacks and Latinx\textsuperscript{3} workers earning less than whites, which limits their opportunities to purchase a home on the basis of their own earnings (Charles & Hurst, 2002). Inter-generational wealth inequality between racial groups is also an important factor in the racial disparity in home ownership. White families have more liquid assets, regularly access more profitable financial instruments, and most crucially of all, are better able to pass wealth down to their children through inheritance (Charles & Hurst, 2002; Shapiro et al., 2013). Because of these factors, white home ownership is 28.4% higher for whites than Blacks in the US (Shapiro et al., 2013).

It is imperative to understand the connection between housing insecurity and racial discrimination. For example, racial discrimination 1) is embedded within the “rational” market and legal frameworks (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Pulido, 2016; Robinson & Kelley, 2000), 2) prevented nonwhite persons from exercising their rights and accumulating wealth (Hillier, 2003; Rothstein, 2017), and 3) transformed and maintained whiteness as a valuable property (Harris, 1993; Lipsitz, 2006). I am referring to ways that discrimination prevents equal employment and equal pay, denies access to fair credit, prevents opportunities for acquiring housing in areas of individual preference, criminalizes and penalizes populations, which I will discuss in more detail throughout this thesis. Typically, outside of gentrification, white homebuyers have strong preferences for homogeneity and exaggerated notions of criminality in minority neighborhoods (Hipp, 2012). These tendencies in white homebuyers contributes to neighborhood segregation. Gentrification may represent, to these homebuyers, a breach in homogenous preferences. The racial wealth gap, along with residential segregation, therefore directly

\textsuperscript{3} Unless in a direct quote, I use the term Latinx rather than Latino, Chicano, or Hispanic to acknowledge non-binary gender identification and resist masculine defaulting. Although this work does not center non-binary, queer, Trans, or non-conforming experiences, I aim for an inclusionary terminology. Many treat “Latinx” with skepticism and prefer other nomenclature, reflecting the wide diversity within the group. It is an imperfect portmanteau, utilized with some reservations, but becoming increasingly common. See: Torres, L. (2018). Latinx? Latino Studies; London, 16(3), 283–285.
relates to the ways that neighborhoods categorized as nonwhite are susceptible to gentrification. This conceptualization of racial capitalism fits well within the theorization of gentrification as a structural process tied to economic cycles of uneven development and capital accumulation in the racially segregated American city, especially the rising importance of real estate as a site of capital investment in post-industrial economies (Kern, 2016; Smith, 1996).

Therefore, this thesis focuses on Denver, Colorado as a key site for a geo-historical analysis of systemic racism and how this continues to influence contemporary processes of gentrification. Denver, Colorado is a regional economic hub for the Rocky Mountain West whose metro area currently contains close to three million people. The city government itself has identified the processes of gentrification occurring across many of the neighborhoods adjacent to the Central Business District (Gentrification Study, 2016).

In this thesis I demonstrate how race and racism effected the formation of the Highlands, Globeville, and Five Points neighborhoods in Denver by critically examining their histories of racial discrimination. In doing so, I draw connections between their gentrification today and their histories of racialized marginalization and class formation.

In this thesis I connect Denver’s current gentrification processes to the city’s formation through racial capitalism – the ways that different racial identities relate to different economic and social positions. First, I will discuss the founding of the city, an event of illegal and violent appropriation. Then I describe how the city’s two largest nonwhite populations, the Latinx and Black communities, because of racial discrimination, were categorized as working-class from Denver’s beginning through to the present day. Both communities experienced similar forms of racial discrimination, but the differences between them, in particular their separate spatializations, demands distinct considerations. Therefore, to tell this story in detail, I focus on three adjacent neighborhoods in north Denver: the Highlands, Globeville, and Five Points. The city’s Latinx experience is predominately focused in the Highlands and Globeville neighborhoods. Discrimination against Black residents focuses on the Five Points neighborhood. After
these histories, I discuss the dismantling of formal discrimination and its replacement with forms of market-based, color-blind, forms of exploitation that perpetuate patterns established under overt racial discrimination. Finally, I discuss Denver’s current period of gentrification, relating racial capitalism to the vulnerable positionality of the Highlands, Globeville, and Five Points neighborhoods.

Gentrification studies have examined race and there have been calls to include the study of race within the context of gentrification, based upon the belief that minorities are disproportionally displaced (Kirkland, 2008). The lack of extensive inclusion of race in the gentrification literature stems from the focus on class transformation and displacement of lower-income residents. Peter Marcuse (2015), for one example, has extensively studied gentrification-led displacement. Others have traced racial tension as a consequence of gentrification. For example, the anti-police violence protests that occurred in suburban Ferguson in 2014 occurred in a suburb because inner city gentrification displaced a portion of St. Louis’ Black population to the suburban margins, where they were followed by aggressive police enforcement strategies (Bledsoe & Wright, 2018). Scholars examining gentrification in the Global South have already called rent gap formation into question by highlighting local specificities that diverge from the theory’s origin in the global North (Ghertner, 2015; Krijnen, 2018). I am also drawing on gentrification scholarship that moves beyond a focus on the middle-class, preferring instead to highlight the consequences experienced by established, low-income groups (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2019). This focus on the experiences of those most negatively impacted by gentrification also aligns with intersectionality scholarship derived from Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Quarles & Butler, 2005).

Some argue (See: Freeman, 2005) that there could be displacement-less forms of gentrification owing to extensive rent control and increasing infill that does not require destruction. Colorado has no rent control, but Denver has converted much former industrial space into residential space. These areas tend to rapidly appreciate and then gentrify. Furthermore, the displacement-less argument does not adequately consider interactions that increase rent such as high demand (See: Lees et al., 2008; Marcuse, 2015), the difficulty in actually observing displacement, and conceptions of gentrification that consider displacement to be intrinsic to the process (See: Elliott-Cooper et al., 2019).
2018) and, importantly, scholarship on racial capitalism (Harris, 1993; Leong, 2013). By considering the racialized, working-class history of north Denver, as connected to the capitalism-produced violence of historical settle-colonialism that was ideologically motivated by white supremacy⁵, I show the ties between racial capitalism and Denver’s current period of gentrification.

The ties between gentrification and racial capitalism are made clearer by the additional theoretical application of intersectionality. Intersectionality provides a useful analytic that opens new lines of inquiry and forces re-evaluation of widely-held notions in gentrification studies, in particular regarding the role of race. Patricia Hill Collins (2019, p. 167) says that while no single definition of intersectionality exists, most people associate it with at least four principles:

“(1) racism, sexism, class exploitation and similar systems of oppression are interconnected and mutually construct one another; (2) configurations of social inequalities take form within intersecting oppressions; (3) perceptions of social problems as well reflect how social actors are situated within the power relations of particular historical and social contexts; and (4) because individuals and groups are differently located within intersecting oppressions, they have distinctive standpoints on social phenomena.”

In other words, intersectionality is an analytical lens focused on the myriad ways that categories of identity, such as, but not limited to, race and gender shape interactions with power (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Within the context of gentrification, intersectionality offers ways to systemically integrate the

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⁵ The terms “white supremacy” and “racism” frequently in this paper. “Racism,” in agreement with Kimberlé Crenshaw, is more than person-to-person hatred or discrimination based upon skin color. Racism is the ideological underpinning of an entire coercive system that maintains white supremacy (Crenshaw et al., 1995). I use the definition of “white supremacy” utilized by Cheryl Harris, originally formulated by Frances Lee Ansley: “By ‘white supremacy’ I do not mean to allude only to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings” (Quoted in: Harris, 1993, p. 1747). White supremacy is inherently violent.
multiple factors influencing neighborhood change. Bringing intersectionality into the study of
gentrification focuses attention to the role of power as it cuts across economic and historical
trajectories, social perceptions, the protean nature of identity politics, and the agency to act or be acted
upon.

An intersectional approach to questions of causality, however, does not search for hierarchies of effect,
but rather views multiple power relations operating simultaneously to co-produce lived experience as
well as material reality (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Another, crucial, aspect of intersectionality is that its
relational perspective permits the influence of various relationships to wax and wane according to
context and time (Collins, 2019). This facilitates the analysis of power relations upon neighborhoods
across scales, so that the socio-economic changes of gentrification can be seen from individual and
affective ways (Quarles & Butler, 2018) to historically and legally informed macro perspectives (Johnson,
2011). These analytical moves offers ways to study both the multiple powers that shape neighborhoods
through time, and also permits exploring how individuals’ relationships morph as a consequence of
gentrification.

One of the most important re-considerations brought forth by including race is a more critical view on
the alleged fairness and neutrality of housing markets and the law. Intersectionality, by focusing its
examination on power relations, makes visible discriminatory practices that otherwise appear neutral
(Collins, 2019). The view of the free market in gentrification takes existing conditions ‘as is’ with little to
no historical context. This perspective sees few obstacles to minority groups accessing housing other
than their ability to access capital, and therefore reads market outcomes as fundamentally fair and
unbiased (Crenshaw, 2017). Conversely, framing analyses of gentrification through intersectionality
approaches the positions of government, community, and capital in gentrifying neighborhoods as a
matrix of power relations that are entrenched through mutual reinforcement. For these reasons,
Kimberlé Crenshaw argues against reading market activities as neutral, ahistorical, and deracialized. Rather, when free market ideology intersects with racist ideology, inequality is naturalized:

“Believing both that blacks are inferior and that the economy impartially rewards the superior over the inferior, whites see that most blacks are worse off than whites are, which reinforces their sense that the market is operating 'fairly and impartially'; those who logically should be on the bottom are on the bottom. This strengthening of whites' belief in the system in turn reinforces their beliefs that blacks are indeed inferior. After all, equal opportunity is the rule, and the market is an impartial judge; if blacks are on the bottom it must reflect their relative inferiority. Racist ideology thus operates in conjunction with the class components...to reinforce the status quo, both in terms of class and race” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. 116).

The assertion that fair and neutral markets dictate gentrification make no sense in a world with historical racial discrimination. Rather, as this thesis argues, ideologies of political and economic neutrality can operate in conjunction with racist ideologies of hierarchy and social control. Nonetheless, gentrification is often justified with the argument that it can ameliorate racially structured disadvantages and poverty (Lees, 2008). There is a lot of debate about how true this premise is versus the argument that gentrification fuels the replacement of working-class and minority households, not their uplifting, and is motivated by social concerns such as anxiety over immigrants and the poor (de Koning, 2015; Freeman, 2005). Intersectionality combined with racial capitalism present critical tools to interrogate the assumptions that surround free market ideologies of gentrification and its benefits.

Almost no scholars of gentrification have taken the opportunity to apply an intersectional approach to discover new understandings to old questions. Paula Johnson’s (2011) examination of New Orleans after Katrina is one notable example of how historically informed intersectionality is able to highlight the interconnections of race, class, legal equality and historic racial discrimination within the market-driven
processes of gentrification. New Orleans had long been segregated along lines of class and race, so that many Black residents lived in areas vulnerable to flooding (Johnson, 2011). The positioning of so many Black bodies below levies and in substandard housing was deliberate and legally enforced for a time, and the general poverty of the city’s Black population, as well as community bonds, helped keep them in these spaces after formal equality was achieved in the 1970s. Their positioning in areas of environmental danger reflects a “racial state of expendability” (Pulido, 2016). Their lives were not viewed as being worth the investments in flood protection, relocation, or efficient emergency services required to counterbalance their neighborhoods’ precarious positions. This lower valuation of Black lives is an expression of racial capitalism as well as environmental racism. The hurricane disproportionately killed and displaced the Black residents in the environmentally vulnerable neighborhoods that had been formed through legal white supremacy (Johnson, 2011). When New Orleans began to rebuild itself after Katrina, the flows of capital went into development benefiting the whitened city which sparked gentrification in formerly Black neighborhoods now that so many had been displaced and those neighborhoods were physically devastated (Johnson, 2011). Post-Katrina New Orleans is a dramatic example of how the destruction and removal of Black bodies can facilitate gentrification, and how the possibility of removing them arose because of the precarious position Black neighborhoods were situated in because of racial discrimination. Historical legacies of overt racism established a racial topology of precarity that could be revalorized through gentrification.

Connecting race to gentrification in Denver has been under researched topic. Firstly, because little gentrification scholarship deals with Denver. Secondly, the role of race in gentrification is debated. One paper discussed the construction of Auraria campus at the expense of a Latinx neighborhood, and how
that campus development sparked adjacent gentrification (Page & Ross, 2017).

Near the part of north Denver I will be discussing here, there has been some work that examines Latinx identity in the context of gentrification-led changes to public space (Langegger, 2013; Langegger, 2014). There have been PhD dissertations on the history of Black migration to Denver (Lyles, 1977); and the ethnic transformation of the neighborhoods in this paper (Hunt, 1999). There have even been PhD dissertations which have situated Denver’s Black experience of discrimination and violence alongside those of Native Americans as an intrinsic part of Denver’s quest for global city status (Matjaka, 2017). I am building off of those contributions in this examination of Denver’s gentrification through a lens of racial capitalism.

For many decades after its founding in the 1850s, Denver and Colorado were governed by overt white supremacists who maintained power with an elite of white, Protestant men supported by a nativist white working-class. These groups consistently framed minorities and foreigners to be in competition with white labor, at odds with dominant values, and frequently supported violence against them. Even when white supremacy was not overt, it fed undercurrents populist nativism, xenophobia, anti-Catholicism, and racism. Notions of white supremacy have been present, from the poorest white worker to the heights of the governor’s office to maintain power over space and labor in Denver. As I show, race
has shaped neighborhood composition in the city from its founding. Persons of color were denied fair access to housing, employment, and education which together formed a de facto racial and class hierarchy. Although different than the de jure segregation of, for example, Jim Crow (Junne, Jr., 2012; Rothstein, 2017), Denver’s racial segregation is nonetheless historically documented. Racialized populations in Denver have had their communities bisected by transportation projects even while transit access has been denied to them (Hunt, 1999). Periodically, Denver communities and community members have been subject to mob violence and threats because of racial and religious identity (Goldberg, 1981; Hunt, 1999, Leonard & Noel, 1990; Wortman, 1965). For these reasons race has played a decisive role in class formation and the neighborhood topology of Denver. Rooted in white supremacy and xenophobia, racial discrimination in Denver has had material effects. This means that neighborhoods in Denver have been shaped by processes of segregation and not merely class differentiation. One of the long-term impacts of white supremacy upon Denver’s racial geography has been the concentration of marginalized nonwhite communities into neighborhoods that have lower real estate values. Under conditions of rapid urban growth, such as those experienced in Denver after the Great Recession, those marginalized and segregated neighborhoods are then vulnerable to gentrification.

Contemporary Denver is undergoing an economic and population boom after the Great Recession 2007-2009. The high demand for housing so soon after the collapse of the home construction and finance markets caused a rapidly increasing cost of living that left many Denverites feeling left behind compared to newer arrivals. Hardest hit in this wave of gentrification were many of the neighborhoods defined by strong minority and immigrant communities. The very same neighborhoods created through historical and systemic racism are now facing another dispossession seemingly at the hands of a new generation of educated, white, professionals with little or no knowledge of the histories they have stepped into (Gentrification Study: Mitigating Involuntary Displacement, 2016; A Story of Displacement, 2017; State
Demography Office, n.d.). The government of Denver has been of little help in the face of these challenges. To better understand why some neighborhoods are gentrifying, and why some communities are forcefully fighting against gentrification, it is necessary to understand the histories of neighborhood formation in relation to the connections between race and class – racial capitalism.

Historical and Racial Antecedents to Gentrification—Denver, CO

The question of why some neighborhoods gentrify and others do not, is one of extensive scholarly debate. The most accepted mechanism is that of the rent gap. The rent gap is the difference between the low rent charged in an area compared to the higher rents that could be charged due to increased demand and expense in adjacent neighborhoods (Lees et al., 2008). Neil Smith, who popularized the concept of the rent gap, maintained that gentrification was animated by a “frontier ideology” that rationalized social differentiation and exclusion (Smith, 1996, p.18). In his view, gentrification furthered an ideology of a “wild” inner city that needed to be “tamed” and therefore naturalized the domination and incivility intrinsic to gentrification. The concept of gentrification operating along a frontier, and forming a sort of neo-colonialism wherein bourgeois professionals take the place of pioneers, and the displacement of working class residents taking the place of indigenous cultures is controversial and not widely accepted by scholars (Lees et al., 2008). However, there are many disturbing parallels and through lines to be found in the case of Denver, a city that was quite literally colonized in pursuit of manifest destiny and whose wealth was rigidly racialized for most of its development. The displacement and destruction of communities through gentrification in contemporary times has been justified as necessary for a new period of growth (Brenner & Theodore, 2005; Lees et al., 2008; Lees, 2008). The ‘necessity’ of growth at the expense of non-white, working-class communities today is an echo of Denver’s original dispossession during its founding.
However, this picture of racialized primary accumulation differs from Smith’s original conception of the rent gap. He, and those that followed him, portrayed the rent gap as developing from the long-term disinvestment of landlords and government leading to decaying values that are then re-valorized through the creative destruction of gentrification (Smith, 1996). In my reading of the racial intersections of gentrification of Denver, this is only partly true. Some areas, such as the majority Latinx neighborhood of Globeville were never highly valued in the first place, but since their founding near toxic industrial sites have long been containers for the poor and marginalized. This relationship between marginalized bodies and space highlights the incorporation of nonwhite bodies into economic processes, including the distribution of pollution and its impact on real estate value (Pulido, 2016). Only now, with the ore smelters torn down, the Superfund site covered with green parkland, and an influx of well-paid professionals looking for homes near downtown is Globeville being valorized. Globeville therefore reflects a pattern where working-class communities and toxic pollution are maintained so long as that space is not wanted for other uses. Once demand for housing in other areas becomes saturated, then the marginalized space is rehabilitated for wealthier migrants’ use and revalorization by capital. When this new demand causes a spike in prices and the displacement of the original community: that is gentrification. In other neighborhoods, such as the predominantly Latinx Highlands, or the cultural center of Denver’s Black community in Five Points, Smith’s conception of rent gap formation is incomplete without examining why racialized populations came to live in a devalued neighborhood. Barred from opportunities due to racial discrimination and violence, these non-white communities were forced into substandard housing due to their marginalization. The marginalization of the Black community in Five Points, and its dismemberment through gentrification, shows how racial identity is a form of property that is valued or devalued according to white supremacy (Harris, 1993; Lipsitz, 2006). Now that real estate in their neighborhoods can be made profitable they are being displaced once again.
Chapter 2: Denver’s Founding: Legal Theft and White Manifest Destiny

“This is the way-travel of all the white races, of the commercial activity and industry of the zodiac of civilization! … Room is discovered for industrial virtue and industrial power. The civilized masses of the world meet - they mutually explain and understand one another - they are mutually enlightened and fraternize to reconstitute human relations and institutions in harmony with nature and with God.”

- William Gilpin, territorial governor of Colorado, 1874 (emphasis original)

Colonized by white European’s in 1858 at the confluence of Cherry Creek and the Platte River, Denver City was a small settlement along the eastern bank. On the west bank was the equally small town of Auraria. Before colonization, the area had long been a favorite camping spot for the Arapahoe who enjoyed the wild cherries that gave the creek its name (Leonard & Noel, 1990). Platted by the Denver and Auraria Land Companies respectively, aspiring pioneers purchased plots from these companies on which to build their houses and start businesses catering to miners and other westward bound migrants. The cheap land and discoveries of gold, silver, and other valuable ores in the nearby Rockies ensured steady growth. Eventually the city would become a regional economic hub, the last stop for smelting ore and gathering the cattle raised on the plains before sending those commodities east to cities such as Chicago.

However, neither the Denver nor the Auraria companies had any legal title to the land they were selling. Not until the Treaty of Ft. Wise in 1861 did the United States convince some Native American chiefs to sign away ownership of the land (Hunt, 1999). The Treaty of Fort Wise was necessary to undue the Ft. Laramie Treaty of 1851 which had reserved vast tracts of land, including where Denver was established,
for tribal use (Leonard & Noel, 1990). The Treaty of Ft. Wise transformed the traditional homelands of the Arapahoe and Cheyenne tribes into property available for white settlers, and white use of that property became post hoc legal. The Treaty thus transformed theft into commodity exchange. Three years later the U.S. Congress, in 1864, granted the land, on the basis of prior occupation, to the squatters and colonists that had been moving there since 1858 (Hunt, 1999). The property system was racialized by this act of theft from indigenous communities to white American pioneers (Harris, 1993; Pulido, 2016). The Treaty of Ft. Wise transformed the traditional homelands of the Arapahoe and Cheyenne tribes into property available for white settlers, and white use of that property was made post hoc legal. The initial land theft in the colonization of Denver, and its violent racial implications, were reflected in 1860 when a drunken mob of Denver settlers attacked and raped Native Americans settled near the town (Leonard & Noel, 1990). Typical descriptions of the situation of Native Americans around Denver at the time regarded them as “uncivilized” and with contempt described how “overworked squaws were busily engaged...cooking their vile compounds, and making the skins of wild animals into the uncouth garments that they wore. Loafing around in the sand and dirt were the indolent and unemployed braves, while their filthy and vermin covered offspring, played naked in the sand” (quoted in Dorsett, 1977, p, 28-29) No one was held responsible for the attack on Cherry Creek. This proved to be far from the last instance of white mob violence dictating who was permitted to enjoy the new city, and where they were permitted to do so.

In sources describing its early days, Denver is portrayed as a mostly lawless,
filthy, and poverty stricken town that belongs in dime novels. What passed for law enforcement was a marshal, first elected in 1859 who was charged with keeping the peace and empowered to appoint deputies, however in the frontier town the lawless usually had the upper hand (Leonard & Noel, 1990; Rider, 1971). One illustrative incident in 1860 was described by journalist Ovando Hollister: “There was a man, or fiend, named Charley Harrison, who boasted that he had a jury in Hell, sent there by his own hand. He was the king of the desperadoes. One day he deliberately shot to death a negro, we suppose, for being a negro. For denouncing this, the editor of the Rocky Mountain News, William N. Byers, was forcibly taken from his office by Harrison’s pals and conveyed to their den on Larimer Street—the Criterion Saloon” where the gang intended to kill him, but for some reason let Byers go free (quoted in: Rider, 1971, p. 11). One gang member was unsatisfied by this and rode to the News’ office and fired into it through the window. A reply of two shots came from the office, wounding the assailant, and as he rode off toward the prairie he was chased by a posse that finished the fleeing rider off with a charge of buckshot (Rider, 1971, p. 11). This incident illustrates that, for some at least, the lives of Blacks in Denver were worth very little. In those eyes even the public denouncement of the murder of a Black man was sufficient enough to justify murdering a fellow white man. These were brigands and not ‘respectable’ Denverites, but ample evidence indicates racial prejudice cuts across white Denver’s class lines.

Segregation between Blacks and whites, epitomized by Jim Crow in the South, is what many think of when we think about racism and housing. Because Denver was not racially segregated like the South many assume that it does not similarly share a history of segregation and overt white supremacy. However early Denver was segregated. From the mid-19th century to the early 20th discrimination and segregation in Denver was more focused upon those born in the US against those who migrated here, and distrust of Catholics, often filtered through ideas of ethnicity and nationalism such as Anglos versus Italians (Goldberg, 1981; Hunt, 1999). Discrimination was structured in this way in part due to national political trends that promoted chauvinism for white “native born” Americans, Protestantism, and
peoples from northern and western Europe. National prejudices such as these were present in Denver as well. In its first decades Denver possessed small numbers of Black, Latinx, Asians, or Native Americans, and so these groups were discriminated against as part of a general sense of white superiority and only occasionally were specifically targeted for oppression, exclusion, or violence.

The political and business elite were Protestants of English, German, and Northern European descent who viewed themselves as “native born Americans” distinct from more recent immigrants (Hunt, 1999). At this time, the late 19th century, the category of “white” did not yet apply to the Italian or Eastern European migrants that had joined the westward migration seeking new lives in Denver (Alba, 1990).

Gradually, the Italian, Irish and Eastern European migrants that formed the initial marginalized working-class in Denver were assimilated into the dominant identity of “white.” As the non-white population of the city grew due to increased Black and Latinx migration, spatial differentiation along racial lines grew as well. At first the Black and Latinx population in Denver were scattered across downtown, living proximally to their work; later they were concentrated in the migrant neighborhoods established by the Italian, Irish, and Eastern Europeans (Lyle, 1977; Hunt, 1999). Once the minority population grew to a certain size, efforts were made to contain those racialized populations within those places reserved for them. Unlike their predecessors, Latinx and Black Denverites faced greater obstacles to integration and assimilation. In the neighborhoods of north Denver I examine, Five Points, Globeville, and the Highlands. These neighborhoods have remained spaces of marginalization from the late 19th century to the present. This spatial marginalization is now being transformed via gentrification, but the social, economic, and political marginalization of the minorities that built those communities is not being significantly improved via gentrification. As I show, gentrification deepens historical forms of racial marginalization and fosters racialized displacement.

As statehood for Colorado became more and more likely, the legal struggle around racial equality here rose alongside the growing population and economy. In 1861, the territorial government passed a law
permitting all men over twenty-one years of age to cast ballots, with so few Blacks in Colorado the white majority did not see a need to explicitly disenfranchise them (Dorsett, 1977). For example, in the 1860 census only 23 persons were listed as “colored” in the territory (Dorsett, 1977, p. 53). This open enfranchisement was later addressed when a law specifically denying Black men the vote was adopted in 1864 by the territorial legislature and signed by Gov. Evans (Dorsett, 1977). It is worth noting that in 1864 Colorado was fighting on the side of the Union in the Civil War and that the Emancipation Proclamation had already been declared in 1863. While the true motives behind this disenfranchisement are obscure, it is possible that it was motivated in reaction to the growing acknowledgement that equality under the law was coming and they hoped to undercut these changes before they reached Colorado. The status for non-white persons in the soon-to-be state was more or less settled when the 1867 bill for Colorado’s statehood contained an amendment guaranteeing “Negro suffrage” and the next day the Senate passed the Territorial Suffrage Act prohibiting color-based discrimination in territories (Junne, Jr., 2012, p. 184). It was through these Federal actions, not local liberality that Black men in Colorado gained the ballot. The period of 1861-1864 was also one marked by extreme violence between white colonists and bands of Cheyenne and Arapahoe. This includes the notorious 1864 massacre at Sand Creek when the Colorado militia attacked a peaceful encampment, brutally killing more than 130 persons, including children, and displaying trophies such as scalps in Denver to widespread public approval (Dorsett, 1977; Leonard & Noel, 1990). It was not until 1895 that the state passed a law prohibiting discrimination in public facilities, although in practice this law was widely ignored (Dorsett, 1977). Communities of color, facing such legal and social opposition to equality, began to organize and fight for equality, a struggle that continues today.

When Colorado achieved statehood in 1876, and Denver gained state capital status, the small settlement transformed into a hub of commerce and governance. New developments sprung up on top of farmland. Along the Platte River, below the middle-class Highland neighborhood, in a slum dubbed
“The Bottoms”, and north of downtown amongst the great ore smelters settled Italian and Slavic migrants (Hunt, 1999). These immigrant groups formed the initial underclass labor pool for Denver, in contrast to a “native” white Protestant elite that immigrated from the east coast or better off norther European immigrants (Dorsett, 1977). The types of work available also relied on gendered divisions of labor. Men worked in the meat packing plants and smelters that eventually lent their name to the communities that grew around them: Globeville, Elyria, Swansea. Women found working in the service and entertainment industry in the adjacent downtown or as domestic help in the surrounding middle-class neighborhoods (Hunt, 1999; Leonard & Noel, 1990). Although many of those seeking fortune in the west found impoverishment, destitution, and an early death instead. Poverty and filth were major problems for early Denver. Numerous abandoned children roamed the town begging, stealing, and forming gangs. The usual way of handling them was to “bind them out” which was a form of indentured servitude, where the children were given to an adult who promised to find them work and pocket their wages (Dorsett, 1977, p. 99). Eastern and southern European immigrant groups formed the initial underclass labor pool for Denver, in contrast to a “native” and white Protestant elite that emigrated from the east coast or generally better off northern European immigrants (Dorsett, 1977).

From the 1870s through the turn of the century, anti-Catholic and xenophobic sentiment ran high. Although racial prejudice was wide-spread, during this period animus towards Latinx and Black residents was secondary (Rider, 1971). In the 1890s the American Protective Association (APA) was a national organization espousing discrimination against Catholics and immigrants on account of their perceived un-Americanness and undercutting of wages for white labor. In the 1891 elections APA candidates secured the Mayor’s seat as well as that of Arapahoe county sheriff (Hunt, 1999). While projecting an image of patriotism, faith, law and order, nativist sentiment could become quite ugly. Many of the small towns that comprised the growing Denver forbade drinking, but unincorporated Globeville had a number of saloons serving the packing and smelter workers. In 1893 one such saloon owner, an Italian
immigrant named Daniel Arata, was accused of killing a native-born American. He was arrested by the police, but a mob broke him out of the jail, hung him from a cottonwood tree, shot and burned his body (Hunt, 1999). Blood splattered branches were cut down and sold as morbid souvenirs (Dorsett, 1977). Such horrible scenes were rare, Colorado’s lynching problems were never as severe as in the South, but the incident reflected the dangers persons faced when they were accused of harming a ‘white’ person.

A significant incident of white mob violence was the infamous “Hop Alley Riot” also known as the “Anti-Chinese Riot” in October, 1880. The Rocky Mountain News, owned by Colorado Central Railroad founder W. A. H. Loveland, and prominent Democrat, began publishing a series of anti-Chinese articles (Wortman, 1965). The News on October 23rd painted a picture of Chinese labor “invading the state, forcing men into starvation and women into prostitution” (quoted in Wortman, 1965, p. 278). The Chinese were also portrayed as running opium dens that lead to the debauchery of white women (Zhu, 2013). This period is shortly after wide-spread Chinese immigration to the West coast accompanying the construction of the transcontinental railroad. At the time, Chinese labor was recruited by railroad companies to do the most backbreaking and least ‘skilled’ work in railroad construction, while in Denver the city’s Chinese population were consigned to work in laundries (Dorsett, 1977). While it is difficult to precisely gage white supremacy of the latter 19th century because it was so pervasive, Denver police records show that, for example, Chinese prostitutes were disproportionately arrested and harassed by the police although they were a tiny fraction of Denver’s thriving sex industry (Dorsett, 1977). There was a nation-wide backlash against Chinese labor that would eventually lead to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (Zhu, 2013). In Denver, however, anti-Chinese resentment boiled over ahead of Congressionally sanctioned institutionalized racism.

On October 30th, the local Democratic Party held a pre- election march at which anti-Chinese signs were displayed (Wortman, 1965). The next day the riot broke out. The exact cause is unclear, but it possibly began when a group of drunk railroad workers accosted a pair of Chinese men who were playing pool in
a saloon on Wazee Street, the heart of Denver’s Chinese community (Rider, 1971; Wortman, 1965). The harassment became a fight, one of the Chinese men was hit with a pool cue, one of the Chinese men allegedly fired a shot at the drunk men but did not hit him. However, a rumor quickly spread that a Chinese man had killed a white man, and within minutes a large and angry crowd gathered (Rider, 1971). The crowd called for the Chinese man to be lynched and began to rampage through the Chinese district, burning, looting, and attacking (Dorsett, 1977). The Denver police and fire departments attempted to disperse the crowd but were outnumbered and overwhelmed with thrown bricks and bottles. The rioting mob of whites raged through the district shouting “Kill the Chinese!” and targeting Chinese businesses and homes for looting, arson, and searching for Chinese victims (Rider, 1971, p. 198). By the end of the day, the entirety of Denver’s nascent Chinatown along Wazee Street had been looted, many homes and business had been burned to the ground. One Chinese man, Sing Lee, was lynched at Nineteenth and Lawrence Streets, and many more were wounded (Leonard & Noel, 1990; Wortman, 1965). Some Denverites did stand up to protect their neighbors, notably a group of prostitutes brandishing a shotgun, fire pokers, bottles, and high heels sheltered a group of Chinese people from the raging mob (Wortman, 1965, p. 283). The city’s police marshal, David Cook quickly raised a force of about 30 armed men to counter, by his account, the 2,000 rioters and rescued 308 Chinese people who were brought to police headquarters for safety (Rider, 1971, p. 201). The city reimbursed Chinese property owners about $54,000 to cover damages in the aftermath of the riot (Dorsett, 1977). All of the men arrested for rioting and arson were acquitted because “it was not possible” to accurately connect them to a specific act of violence (Rider, 1971). However, Denver’s Chinese community was thoroughly

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6 According to the 1880 census, Denver had only 250 Chinese residents, so the others probably were either new migrants or passing through. By 1890 Denver’s Chinese population reached 1,000, but government attacks upon their rights successfully drove many away, and by 1900 their number dropped to 306 (Dorsett, 1977, p. 103)
terrorized, many left the city, and the city’s “Hop Alley” lined with restaurants, laundries, saloons, and houses of ill-repute was never rebuilt as a Chinese community.

The Anti-Chinese riot of 1880 is an extreme example of how racism in Denver affected the city’s racial and demographic geography. A section of town was razed and a neighborhood displaced because white supremacists’ judgement of the race of the persons who lived there. Xenophobic bigotry rooted, ironically, in notions of ‘native’ identity was combined with electoral working class populism to transfer downtown’s space from a visible and politically undesired minority into space for the white majority’s use. This is not the same as gentrification, but it highlights Denver’s long-standing linkages between white supremacy, politics, and real estate. It is more accurately identified as “urbicide” as Katherine McKitterick (2011) defines it – the pattern of anti-Black violence manifested in the destruction and demolition of peoples and their communities because they are defined as ‘enemies’ or simply ‘disposable’ and whose elimination in normalized by genocidal white supremacy. Today, it is worth noting, the area is a prosperous section of the central business district and has been greatly built up as Denver gentrified. No marker commemorates the area’s connection to Denver’s Chinese community or the riot.
The violence and dispossession that founded and shaped Denver’s birth did not end in the 19th century. Racial discrimination in housing and law are well documented, and had similar negative impacts in Denver. Famously, during the New Deal, the Federal government began the a process known as “redlining” in which the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) categorized neighborhoods across the US according to value and mortgage security, furthermore the FHA published a mortgage underwriting manual that reinforced a racist and xenophobic home finance system nation-wide (Hillier, 2003). To produce neighborhood information, the FHA created the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), which hired local professionals to canvas and map their cities (Rothstein, 2017). Denver was included in this system. The minority and migrant dominated neighborhoods of north Denver were given the lowest grades, making it exceedingly difficult for residents living in those areas to access fair credit and build generational wealth. During the bulk of the 20th century, officially ending in the 1960s with the passage of the Civil Rights Act, Denver maintained a system of public segregation along racial lines. While not as brutal and total as Jim Crow in the South, it was still a part of legal white supremacy. Theatres in Denver maintained “Crows Nests” for black patrons, taxis had special rules for black patrons, public pools would

Figure 3 A section of the 1938 HOLC map of Denver, formalizing the city’s redlines. Nearly all of the Highland, Globeville, and Five Points neighborhoods are coded red, shown in box. Source: Mapping Inequality

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have “blacks only” and “Hispanics only” days for minority use, and the area’s largest grocery chain, King Soopers, refused to hire Blacks well into the 1960s (Cherland, 2014). It is important to keep these forms of generalized racial discrimination in mind as I discuss more specific cases below. The bonds of legal, economic, and social white supremacy were pervasive and had long-term effects in Denver.

The above narratives of discrimination, prejudice, dispossession, and violence are illustrative of widespread attitudes and practices in early Denver. Those discriminatory attitudes and violent practices evolved over time, but have never been totally erased. The racial geography of Denver today is shaped by the discrimination and bigotry of the past. Denver’s racist founding, stolen land transformed into white property, has continuity with the communities whose claim to existence are under threat today. Its current transformations, in the form of gentrification, plays out on top of this history. As many community members in Denver’s gentrifying neighborhoods are aware, their relative poverty and the location of their communities is no accident. The neighborhoods of the Highlands, Globeville, and Five Points in north Denver, and the ways these spaces have been centers of marginalized communities are examples of this story. The history of how Denver’s Latinx and Black communities were established is relevant to how the neighborhoods under examination came to be.
Chapter 3: The Latinx Migration to Denver & Spatialized Discrimination

The southern part of Colorado was part of Mexico until the Treaty of Hildago in 1848 (Leonard & Noel, 1990). The majority of the Latinx population of Colorado resided there, and had done so for centuries. In the early years of Denver’s formation, there were very few Latinx families settled in the city, but they were there prospecting for gold and setting up shops catering to settlers from the very beginning, which changed during WWI (Hunt, 1999). Colorado had developed a sugar beet industry that was very labor intensive. The corporate beet farms sent recruiters to New Mexican and Mexican towns to find labor to the region in the nineteen-teens and twenties (Cherland, 2014; Hunt, 1999). Whole families, including children as young as six, would be employed in the summer working fields of northern and eastern Colorado and then would winter in Denver (Hunt, 1999). This seasonal migration meant that their population in Denver varied widely, and limited their ability to set down roots. Their low wages, about $600 for the whole family’s summer work, at a time when a family in Denver needed about $2000 to sustain themselves, also meant that they were unable to buy houses or property (Hunt, 1999, p. 124). Many of these families wintered in the substandard housing common in the immigrant communities in the meatpacking and industrial areas in the city of Globeville and the adjacent Elyria-Swansea neighborhoods. Gradually, more and more families began to settle in Denver permanently, particularly north of downtown. Women and men both worked in the meat packing plants around the Denver stockyard, and the railroads concentrated in that part of Denver hired many men as well (Hunt, 1999).

The growing presence of a Latinx population was noticed by Denver’s nativists. Being paid abysmal wages for their labor, the Latinx community was portrayed as competition with white labor, and their Catholicism as an additional threat. In 1934 Colorado’s Governor Ed Johnson deployed the National Guard along the state’s southern border to keep Mexican migrants out of the state (Cherland, 2014). Stoking these fears for political gain was a profitable political stance to take. “Big Ed” Johnson went on to serve three terms as governor and three terms as Colorado’s United States Senator, with a political
career lasting from the early thirties into the 1950s. During that time he opposed New Deal relief programs, supported the internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII, and reinstated his ban on Mexican migration during his third term as governor in 1958 (Colorado Governors: Edwin Johnson, n.d.). Big Ed and the other racist forces in Denver politics were ultimately unsuccessful at stopping Mexican-American and Mexican migration. From the twenties through the present day, Latinx communities have settled and developed across north Denver.

**Denver’s Latinx North: Two Neighborhoods, Two Types of Formation**

The story of Latinx communities in north Denver neighborhoods now undergoing gentrification is the story of ethnic community formation and discrimination. It is a story that cannot be told without addressing class and community identity. From their early days as itinerant labor to their presence today as a vital and vibrant community, the contribution of Latinx residents is one that defines much of Denver’s culture and economy. However, it would perhaps be too much to claim that their story has always been a happy one. Racial and religious discrimination have also influenced Latinx patterns of neighborhood settlement, as well as shaped the formation of the Latinx working-class in Denver. Their settlement in working-class and migrant neighborhoods north downtown represent, in terms of real estate value, areas consistently undervalued and underinvested in. This long-term lack of investment is a key factor in the pressures of gentrification since 2010. As recent growth in Denver has pushed up cost of living and added more than 100,000 new people to the city (State Demography Office, n.d.), the comparatively affordable Latinx neighborhoods have become prime targets for gentrification. Fears of displacement, and actual displacement, have reactivated networks of mutual aid and political activism to fight back against gentrification.
Early discrimination against Latinx people in Denver did not distinguish between Mexican-American citizens who had lived in Colorado before it was a state, and later Mexican and Central American migrant labor. At first, only being able to gain work for poverty wages, the Latinx community settled in the run-down migrant neighborhoods of north Denver along with the Italian and Slavic migrants who were also Catholic (Hunt, 1999). These neighborhoods were affordable, and became hubs of chain migration. Migrants from similar parts of Mexico, for example, would move to live with and near friends and family already established in Denver (Hunt, 1999). This settlement pattern in neighborhoods such as Globeville and North Denver/Highlands made those parts of Denver working-class and largely Latinx from the early 20th century to the present. Although these neighborhoods are adjacent to each other, their different trajectories have resulted in different rent gap formations that would later make them vulnerable to gentrification. To understand how two Latinx neighborhoods, both part of a single ethnic community, could develop rent gaps in different ways requires understanding the shape and causes of Latinx settlement in Denver. I tell this story by focusing on the neighborhoods of the Highlands, and Globeville.

The Highland neighborhood follows a standard pattern of disinvestment as laid out by gentrification theory: A middle-class neighborhood gradually declines to house working-class families with a high proportion of renters; landlords neglect upkeep, furthering decline and divestment; eventually the difference between that area’s low ground rent becomes substantially different from more expensive adjacent areas which attracts investment and an influx of wealthier residents leading to displacement (Lees et al., 2008). Globeville, in contrast, was never affluent and its history is one of consistent neglect and segregation. At one point, Denver city planners decided to demolish the whole residential part of Globeville (Hunt, 1999). Despite being bisected by highway projects, subject to industrial pollution, and a persistent level of general poverty, Globeville’s story is also one of community activism and resilience (Hunt, 1999; A Story of Displacement, 2017). The people of Globeville have fought, time and time again,
for their homes and their right to live in the city they call home. The story of the Highlands is a useful contrast to the story of Globeville, whose development shows an alternate pattern of rent gap formation. A pattern of what I term racialized rent gap formation.

Racial rent gap formation differs from the original definition of the rent gap in that the disinvested neighborhood has a significant history of racial discrimination as well as disinvestment. Middle-class black neighborhoods, for example, while perhaps formed in response to racial prejudice do not suffer from disinvestment in the way working class neighborhoods do. This is one way that racial capitalism manifests materially in urban space. Working-class neighborhoods that have been marginalized along racial lines suffer from a double burden of racial discrimination combined with the economic marginalization commonly found in lower-income neighborhoods. Working-class and low income areas are more likely to suffer from industrial pollution and environmental hazards, and less access to public amenities (Pulido, 2016; Rigolon & Németh, 2018). The positioning of a racially marginalized (as opposed to a racially dominant group, i.e., white populations) near to, or in the midst of pollution or environmental hazards is bad enough. Structural racism is exemplified when communities of color are spatially fixed in place with limited economic opportunity. The racialized gap formation occurs when this type of structural racism intersects with neighborhood devaluation prior to gentrification. If gentrification is an intrinsic component of capitalist urban organization, then a consideration of racialized rent gap formations are necessary. I am not arguing that every instance of rent gap formation is racialized, even in the US. Rather, I am arguing that wherever possible, research on gentrification in the US must include analyses of racial formation in addition to class and real estate market formation.

Additionally, environmental racism remains a component of racial capitalism (Pulido, 2016). Environmental racism offers new layer of analysis to deepen the study of gentrification and Denver’s history. To re-analyze Globeville’s potential gentrification as part of a racial capitalist process is to partly take up the challenge of Katherine McKittrick and discover new forms of urbicide. Urbicide is a
multitude of acts of deliberate destruction and violence against human infrastructure (McKittrick, 2011, p. 952). As I will discuss below, Globeville’s lack of infrastructure, isolation due to infrastructure, and repeated razing, are intimately bound up with the presence of negatively racialized people. Because of this, Globeville’s rent gap is not just the result of landlord and government disinvestment leading to devaluation. Its rent gap is racialized by being a part of racial capitalism.

The Highlands: The Klan and The Home Owners Loan Corporation

The Highland neighborhood was platted and settled early immediately north and west of the young Denver City, appropriately enough, on high ground across the Platte River. The neighborhood began as an independent city serving as a feeder suburban community for Denver in the 1860s (Leonard & Noel, 1990). It remained a middle-class and affluent community up until the 1940s when modern suburbanization and white flight drew white residents to the west and south of Denver (Lyle, 1977). At this juncture the growing Latinx population, that lived in the adjacent North Denver neighborhood (today they are often both referred to simply as the Highlands), moved in to the old Victorian houses that characterize the neighborhood. This new generation of Latinx residents were still mostly working-class, and few could afford to buy their homes (Hunt, 1999). In a 1950 survey of the area most of the homes were deemed “substandard” and only 10 percent were owned by the Mexican-Americans who lived there (Hunt, 1999). This reflects the standard pattern of disinvestment and material decline that leads to depressed ground rent, a precursor to gentrification (Lees et al., 2008). However, the residents themselves, many of whom claim Mexican ancestry, established small businesses

There is some historical irony to Highland’s shift from white Protestant to Italian to Latinx. The neighborhood was founded exclusively for use by white Protestants, and had a restrictive covenant to that effect (Leonard & Noel, 1990). This exclusivity ended when the town was annexed by Denver in 1904, and although Italians began to change the neighborhood’s character the influence of immigrants
was mostly east of Zuni Street (Hunt, 1999). Early Denver was a center of membership for the anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant American Protection Association (APA) in the 1890s. Later on it became an important source of KKK members in the 1920s (Hunt, 1999; Goldberg, 1981) (See Figure 3). At its height, the APA attracted about 10,000 men in Denver, and dominated local government (Goldberg, 1981).

After the APA collapsed, popular anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant sentiment did not abate, and its former members turned to a variety of similar white Protestant groups. Eventually, many residents in Denver turned to the Klan when it arose in the early twenties. One example, Rice Means, grew up in the Highland neighborhood, his father was a policeman and adamant member of the APA in the 1890s. The younger Means co-led the Colorado KKK in the 1920s, and served as Denver’s District Attorney and in Congress (Hunt, 1999). The 1920s were a high point of Klan membership across the United States, and Colorado was no exception. There were members in every single county, but Denver, having about a quarter of the state’s population at the time had the largest klavern in Colorado (Goldberg, 1981). The Klan’s influence was strong enough that they were able gain control of many political offices including
Denver’s mayor’s office in the person of Benjamin Stapleton from 1935-1947, as well as the Governor’s office with Clarence Morley during his 1925-1927 term (Colorado Governors: Clarence Morley, n.d.; Goldberg, 1981). Both men were open members of the KKK promoting anti-minority, anti-immigrant, and anti-Catholic politics. However, they were ineffective at getting actual Klan legislation passed, except for requiring the American flag to be displayed in classrooms (Colorado Governors: Clarence Morley, n.d.). During this period there were regular cross burnings on the hill that is now at the intersection of I-25 and 58th street (Hunt, 1999). The burning crosses were visible in the Globeville, and in the North Denver neighborhood, which is considered part of the Highlands today.

In the 1920s the Highlands were a center of a thriving Italian, Catholic community. Their faith and the perception of them as immigrants made the area a target of Klan attention. This was the time of prohibition. Catholic churches and convents had licensed exceptions for sacramental wine, which was sometimes abused, and organized Italian crime controlled illegal alcohol distribution in the neighborhood (Hunt, 1999). Denver’s authorities were powerless to stop rampant bootlegging, and the Klan’s appeal to “law and order” was attractive to many Denverites desperate to stem the crime wave (Goldberg, 1981). Some saw the Klan as the only effective tool against social decay in the face of government failure. While the KKK was never able to actually stop bootlegging, the cause did serve as a recruitment tool and positive public image campaign (Goldberg, 1981). The end of the Klan’s official influence in Colorado came to an end in the early 1930’s. The Great Depression closed the doors of the Klan’s Colorado State Bank and their Young Men’s Christian Association, and financial hardship made membership dues a luxury many could no longer afford (Goldberg, 1981, p. 147-148). Although KKK membership and influence were greatly diminished, shedding one’s robes did not equal shedding one’s prejudices. Former Klan members carried on running businesses and were active in politics.
Institutionalized Racism and Housing

The Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) map categorized the Italian immigrant community in 1938 as grades “C” and “D”, displayed as yellow and red, respectively. This type of grade made it difficult for residents in that area to get government-backed mortgage or fair credit ratings (Rothstein, 2017). The anti-immigrant stance of HOLC cannot be understated. The maps were accompanied by Area Descriptions, notes that listed basic statistics such as income, percentage area built, and a concluding space for commentary. For the “C” grade area of the Highlands, there is a single detrimental factor listed: “Italian influence” (Nelson, n.d., C19). In the Clarifying Remarks section, the appraiser felt the need to include the area’s history of bootlegging,

A truly spotty area with a wide variety of houses, some good brick bungalows and many old, poor ones...The area is Italian dominated. During prohibition days, the illicit liquor traffic centered here. Repeal and consequent destruction of bootlegging, affected residential values, particularly the better houses which had been built by prosperous Italian bootleggers. The ambition of the Italians in this area is to move up with the higher class Italians in B-12. The area is 50% Italian including those of the 2nd and 3rd generation (Nelson, n.d., C19).

The assessor shows their hand in counting 3rd generation migrants as still Italian. How long would it take to be considered “native” by the government’s employees? This power to determine who is and who is not “white” enough to reap legal and financial benefits is a key power relationship within racial capitalism (Harris, 1993). Redlining of communities was a product of Federal law, and the appraisals were not made solely on an area’s income and home quality. The racial and ethnic qualities of a neighborhood were considered as well. The white supremacy inherent in this process is only underscored by the appraiser’s implicit assumption that homebuyers would share their distaste for Italians.
As the forties and fifties progressed, the Highlands and North Denver neighborhoods became less Italian, and more Latinx. By 1948 both the Our Lady of Guadalupe on West 36th and the Monastery of Our Lady of Light were serving the need of the areas Mexican-American Catholics, as Our Lady of Caramel served the Italians, and St. Patrick’s served the Irish (Hunt, 1999). The burgeoning Latinx community in the Highlands at this time coincided with the rise of the automobile and the construction of the Highway system. The state decided to build the Valley Highway, the precursor to I-25, to speed north-south traffic. Completed in 1958, the Valley Highway cut through western Globeville and eastern North Denver, bulldozing whole blocks of houses (Hunt, 1999). The Highlands were now separated from downtown by eight lanes and a high concrete wall.

The construction of the Valley Highway was the last major development shaping the character of the Highlands neighborhood until Denver’s next period of significant growth in 2010. From the forties to then the neighborhood remained an enclave of mostly Latinx families and businesses. The business district along 38th Ave came to reflect this shift away from the Italian influence, although a few Italian spots such as Gaetano’s remain to this day. From here I will discuss the formation of Globeville, then the pattern of black migration into the Five Points neighborhood, and then pick up the neighborhoods’ stories in the context of recent gentrification.
Globeville and Environmental Racism

Globeville always has been a heavily industrialized part of Denver, and a part of the city that was immigrant and working-class. In fact, it is named after the Globe Smelter that operated there from the 1860s to the mid-20th century (Leonard & Noel, 1990). Globeville is one of the most heavily polluted zip codes in the United States, a legacy of its historical industrial activity (ASARCO, INC. (GLOBE PLANT), n.d.; Leonard & Noel, 1990). The neighborhood is also categorized as a “racially and ethnically concentrated areas of poverty” by the city of Denver (Housing an Inclusive Denver, 2017, p. 139). The original
inhabitants were Eastern European and Italian migrants who worked there or at the neighboring smelters such as the Colorado, the Elyria, or the Swansea (Leonard & Noel, 1990).

The residential part of Globeville began as an informal settlement of self-built houses and shacks in the 1870s and 1880s, but eventually incorporated as its own city in 1891 (Hunt, 1999)\(^7\). Globeville’s low tax base and low population meant that the city could barely sustain itself, and they eventually voted to be annexed into Denver in 1903 (Hunt, 1999). Although now a part of Denver, the neighborhood was never given much investment or official attention. Denver viewed Globeville and Elyria-Swansea, “as an industrial district with a few residences rather than as a residential neighborhood situated in the middle of an industrial area” (Hunt, 1999, p. 241). Globeville’s abundance of industrial and menial jobs along with relatively affordable, small, single-family homes, meant that it frequently served as first stop for Denver’s newer migrants who faced similar forms of discrimination in different periods (Leonard & Noel, 1990). Employment in smelters, meat-packing plants, and for the railroads meant that locals could join the working-class and eventually buy a home, but those were demanding and low-wage jobs that only occasionally could support a single-income family (Hunt, 1999). Because of this history, the racialized rent gap that developed in Globeville, creating vulnerability to gentrification, resulted from working-class formation and environmental hazards. Both of these challenges are related to the ways the Globeville neighborhood has been positioned in relation to the “greater” economic good due to the presumed disposability of the racialized lower-class residents. This is not due to gradually declining values because of landlord disinvestment as the standard rent gap hypothesis would describe it. Globeville’s rent gap is the result of sustained marginalization under a regime of racial capitalism. The

\(^7\) In addition to gentrification and environmental racism, it would be interesting to approach the formation of Globeville from the perspective of auto-construction developed to describe informal settlements in the Global South. I am thinking of work such as: Roy, A. (2005). Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning. *Journal of the American Planning Association, 71*(2), 147–158.
resulting rent gap represents a vulnerability to gentrification just as assuredly it would if generated by other means.

Industrial pollution requires a “sink” – a place where pollution may be deposited (Pulido, 2016) – when racialized communities are situated so as to become a pollution sink, capitalism’s organization of space and nature overlap with capitalism’s (de)valuation of racialized life. Pollution sinks are unlikely to overlap with affluent communities, and working-class people are more likely to live in cheaper areas since that is what they are able to afford. Industrial activity, and the resultant pollution, when adjacent to residences are thus likely to be found in lower value areas. These areas may therefore be seen as affordable, as long as long-term health is not calculated. This is not necessarily due to malicious intent, but is an all too common structural feature wherein capital reproduces itself at the expense of particular racialized bodies.

Globeville has officially and unofficially been used as a location where Denver placed its “undesirables”. The area was originally settled by European migrants, in particular Italians, Slavs, and Slovenians who largely worked in the dangerous and unpleasant smelters and meat-packing plants (Leonard & Noel, 1990). Laborers and their wives frequently found additional income streams to make up for low wages, such as day labor or laundry services (Hunt, 1999). Services were sparse to non-existent. Water, sewer, and electric companies all attempted to establish services but, invariably withdrew due to the unprofitability of serving such a poor community (Hunt, 1999). It was part of the area’s primary site of ore smelting and meat packing, both heavily polluting industries with long-lasting environmental consequences (Leonard & Noel, 1990). It was also the site of a city farm that was an indigent labor program for the very poor. Women, children, and men lived in crowded shacks growing vegetables and milk cows for the county hospital (Hunt, 1999, p. 199). The Stapleton Homes, a public housing project, was built in the neighborhood, another attempt by Denver to locate people it had no use for. By the 1970s, the Stapleton Homes project was denounced in the Denver Post newspaper as a cause of
neighborhood decline, specifically noting the black and Latinx residents living there (Hunt, 1999: 250).

This style of journalistic moral panic dates, in Denver, to the 1880 anti-Chinese riot at least. The eventual outcome was the dismantling of Stapleton Homes as part of the broader government shift towards vouchers rather than concentrating recipients in government apartments (Hunt, 1999; Vale & Freemark, 2012). Despite official hostility mixed with indifference, the people of Globeville have never been passive victims of their marginality.

The smelter men banded together with their neighbors to agitate for an eight-hour workday, leading to the 1899 strike at the Globe along with other nearby smelters (Hunt, 1999). The Colorado Supreme Court had found a recently passed eight-hour law to be unconstitutional. The men, forced to literally work twelve-hour shifts with seven day weeks, wanted shorter hours, and safer working conditions, in particular protection against lead exposure already impacting their ability to earn a living. The lead poisoning, the workers claimed, shortened their ability to work the most demanding, and high paying jobs. Disability would then force them into less well paid positions. The company, ASARCO run by the Rockefellers, replied that workers should shower and hired strike breakers (Hunt, 1999, p. 152-153).
When the time came for HOLC to grade Globeville in 1937 a 4th grade, “D” was probably more or less inevitable. As the assessor noted, under Detrimental Influences, that the neighborhood suffered from a, “Stench from packing plants” and also from, “[A] Mixture of foreigners and negroes - lack of improvements” (Nelson, n.d., D14). Interestingly, in their Clarifying Remarks, the assessor spoke positively about the Globeville’s housing market: “This section has a reasonably high degree of home ownership for this type of cheap section, due to the high regard of foreigners for home ownership. As long as there is a demand for the type of small low-cost houses found in this section, on the part of industrial workers, sales will be good, especially with small down payments. A good 4th grade section” (Nelson, n.d., D14, emphasis added). While it is oddly tautological to state that home ownership is high because people want to own homes, the assessor eventually gets closer to the truth. The homes in Globeville are small, cheap, and has a “mixture of foreigners and negroes” (Nelson, n.d.). Globeville’s “D” rating made it extremely difficult for residents to get mortgages, cutting them out of Denver’s larger housing market. However, the cheapness of local housing remained within reach of many households thanks to wide-spread industrial employment. Redlining had an impact, but it is also reflective of

![Figure 6 Globeville’s detrimental influences: “mixture of foreigners and negroes.” Source: Mapping Inequality](image-url)
pervasive attitudes and practices of the time (Hillier, 2003). We can speculate about the potential racial biases of Globeville’s residents at that time, but whatever those may have been they did not preclude living next to one another. This assessment comes only a decade after peak KKK membership in Denver, and although the organization had been dispersed many former members continued to live and work in Denver (Goldberg, 1981). White supremacy did not rely upon a single organization like the KKK, but operated in many sectors simultaneously embedded in lived experience. Official forces, reflecting popular prejudice defined Globeville for itself. With the official stamp of approval, Globeville, despite good home sales, was too dirty and not white enough to grant affordable mortgages. This intersection of white supremacy operating in many sectors of life simultaneously is an example of how the framework of racial capitalism is constructed.

During the first decades of Globeville the area was dominated by the smelters as centers of employment and sheer size. A smelter was actually a complex of buildings covering several city blocks with numerous tall smokestacks. (See Figure 4) By 1899 the Globe Smelter, and several others in the area, were consolidated by William Rockefeller into the American Smelting and Refining Company (ASARCO), but bankruptcy forced him later to sell it to the Guggenheim Trust (Hunt, 1999, p. 55). The legacies of pollution from industry are still felt today. Starting in the 1970s and 80s a series of environmental studies showed high levels of cyanide and cadmium in the soil from the smelters, including at the local elementary school (Hunt, 1999). Almost exactly one hundred years after the 1899 strike for an eight-hour day, in 1987, a third-generation Globeville resident sued the company that ran the Globe smelter, and won twenty-eight million dollars in neighborhood compensation and clean-up funds (Hunt, 1999, p. 254). The site of the old Globe Smelter was declared a Superfund site, and the top soil was removed as one part of remediation (Asarco Inc. — Globe Plant, 2014; ASARCO, INC. (GLOBE PLANT) Site Profile, n.d.; Colorado Department of Health and Environment, n.d.; Hunt, 1999). Operating until 2006, the smelter was torn down and the site redeveloped in 2015 as a light industrial park (Rusch, 2015).
this redevelopment is interesting
because 2015 is around the
same time that fears of
gentrification were spreading
across the Northside.

In the 1950s people of
Globeville protested the
construction of I-70 through the
heart of their community (Hunt,

Geographer Daniel Doeppers
(1965) surveyed these changes
in the 1960s and captured a
picture of a neighborhood in
transition. By that time, he
found, Latinx residents had overtaken Poles as the second largest group, and the churches that offered
mass in German were facing declining attendance. The new I-70 highway was already acknowledged as a
significant factor in Globeville’s isolation and continuing poverty, if not a factor in the neighborhood’s
further decline. Doeppers (1965, p. 514) reported that residents sometimes referred to it as “the
Chinese Wall” both because of its height, and because of the way it isolated them by restricting north-
south access to only Lincoln and Washington Streets. The railroads to the north and east, as well was I-
25 (known then as the Valley Highway) to the west completed the encirclement.

Today, Globeville and Elyria-Swansea residents are using their organizing skills to protest the expansion
of the legal marijuana business into their community, as well as an I-70 expansion project that, for a
second time, is bulldozing blocks of houses in the name of cars (A Story of Displacement, 2017). The I-70 expansion project is currently under construction. City planners, once again, plan for Globeville to bear the cost of infrastructure that would benefit the rest of the state. This time they would sink the highway down below street level and restore street connections between Globeville and the rest of downtown (A Story of Displacement, 2017; Freeways Without Futures, 2019). This is framed as righting a historical wrong, by bringing Globeville back into easy reach of the rest of the city, and traffic sunk out of sight, its residents could now more fully participate in Denver’s prosperity Freeways Without Futures, 2019). However, restoring surface street connections to Globeville also increases current resident’s exposure to gentrification by increasing accessibility. The reactions of community activists to the contemporary moment is further discussed below, in the section on Globeville’s current gentrification pressures. I raise it now only to highlight the historical connection.

Globeville was established very early in Denver’s history as a place for heavy industry and was settled as a working-class migrant neighborhood. The relationship between work and social position seem particularly intertwined in Globeville in that it has “always” been a place where the newcomer and the marginalized alike could live and begin their American Dream. Unfortunately, the city never cared much about growing what worked in Globeville – affordable housing, close community bonds, ethics of hard work – but preferred to view it as a place to situate its unwanted – polluting industry, undesired migrants, facilities to contain the poor, a place to build a highway through rather than to. Globeville, in short, has been marginal since its founding and its current problems have their roots in that positionality. Race, space, and class have intersected there in unique and important ways. That Globeville continues to exist at all is due to the perseverance of its residents who have fought for their homes at every challenge.
Chapter 4: The Formation of Denver’s Black Community: the Five Points Neighborhood

"...no Negores in the city shops, city attorney’s office, city garage, city yards, public bath house, . . . art commission, city auditorium, city market, coroner's office, Sand Creek hospital, detention home, Juvenile Court, County hospital, city park, city park greenhouses, city park barn, city park pavilion, Chessman park, Berkeley park, Highland, Rocky Mountain Lake, Curtis Street, East 28th Avenue, and Washington parks, . . . License department, Board of Health, Police Court, plumbing, electricity, highway department, city engineers, surveyors, sanitary inspections, cleaning streets, digging and excavating for city, driving the sweeper wagons, cutting trees and sprinkling in forestry service, driving and hiring teams to the city, and many other jobs in the offices at the city hall, and No Negro employed."

- The Denver Star, 1915, quoted in Lyles, 1977

The first Black residents of Denver were recorded in the 1860 census, the first census to include Denver (Lyles, 1977). At first only a very small number settled in Denver. After the Civil War, the violent backlash to Reconstruction as well as antebellum legacies prompted many thousands of Blacks to seek new lives out of the South. A steady flow of Black migrants began to move north and west, including to Colorado. These migrants were called “Exodusters” and their migration was a form of resistance to white supremacy, and a search for independence and group solidarity (Marable, 2011). Escaping the South did not ensure escape from white supremacy or the logic of racial capitalism. Denver’s Black population was coerced into the worst employment and segregated housing. A century after arriving in Denver, the city’s Black population in 1970 had a segregation index of 85 (on a scale where 100 = complete segregation), which is astonishingly high for a city that is not known for enforcing racial segregation (Rusk, 2003). School segregation in Denver has been, and is again, similarly stark (Bailey, 2017; Horn & Kurlaender, 2006). The last decade’s increasing gentrification in Denver effects the city’s
Black communities in particular ways that are directly related to how they were controlled and resisted
the pressures of racial capitalism; the pressures of systemic racism and economic exploitation that
shaped Denver’s Black geography. The story of the Five Points neighborhood is central to the story of
Denver’s Black community. The ways in which race and class intersect with housing in Five Points
illustrate how positionality is everything in gentrification.

Roughly bounded by Thirty-Third Street on the north, High Street on the east, East Twentieth
Avenue on the south, and Twentieth and Larimer streets on the West, Five Points is the most well-
known Black neighborhood in Denver. The neighborhood gradually became the center of Denver’s Black
community because of coercion, restrictive covenants, discriminatory practices such as redlining, and
popular custom. By 1920 fully 90% of Denver’s Black population was segregated in Five Points (Five
Points-Whittier Neighborhood History, 2014). Five Points came to be the heart of Denver’s Black
community in terms of population, but it was a
commercial and cultural hub that attracted the best in
music, art, and food. During the period of the 1940s-1950s
in particular, Five Points was the destination in Denver to
catch famous musicians such as Ella Fitzgerald and Duke
The neighborhood was also home to Manual High School,
founded in 1894 with a progressive pedagogy, it was coed,
rare for the time, and admitted Black students as well
(Cherland, 2014). Many of Denver’s most prominent Black
and Latinx citizens are Manual alum (Cherland, 2014; Ross,
2016). Today, Five Points is also at the center of
gentrification-led displacement and development. Yet,

Figure 8 Cowboy Nat Love settled in Denver found work as a Pullman Porter. Source: Denver Public Library Digital Collection

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Five Points was not originally established as a Black community. It grew into one as a result of Denver’s growth in the 20th century, white flight to the suburban margins, lack of economic opportunity due to racial prejudice, and the perseverance of Denver’s Black community.

The evolution that brought Five Points to gentrification would follow a standard rent gap model, if not for the impact of race upon housing access. Five Points began as a suburban neighborhood with many two-story Victorian houses immediately next to Denver’s original core (Five Points-Whittier Neighborhood History, 2014). When Denver hit a period of population and economic growth around the First World War white households largely abandoned Five Points for newer houses along the city’s margins, in their place more Black residents began to buy and rent in the neighborhood, gradually establishing themselves as the majority group (Lyle, 1977). This was accompanied by widespread discrimination and coercion. While segregation was imposed from without, within Five Points Denver’s Black community resisted and organized. The most visible form of resistance was the construction of a vibrant and valuable community that valued local businesses and creatives; but also political organizing such as the founding of the local NAACP chapter in 1915 (Leonard & Noel, 1990). The story of Five Points real estate is one that appears to fit a standard model of gentrification, the neighborhood’s home values fell and rose in correlation with housing market conditions and quality of stock. When demand rapidly rose in the 2010’s for housing near downtown, Five Points began to undergo gentrification (Gentrification Study: Mitigating Involuntary Displacement, 2016). Except that Five Points holds a vaunted place in local Black culture for the same reasons the neighborhood was identified as predominantly Black – racial capitalism established the uneven economic and demographic terrain upon which capitalism relies to generate profits. The community that found itself pressured by gentrification in the 21st century is the inheritor of the systemic racism and racial capitalism of the 20th. This makes the contemporary vulnerability to gentrification and displacement in Five Points a racialized rent gap.
The initial wave of Black settlers in Denver worked mostly in low wage service jobs such as porters, cooks, and domestic help (Lyles, 1977). Although they were now legally free they continued to be restricted to low-wage and undesirable jobs. Denver held a reputation for relative open-mindedness in regards to race, but some businesses and city services were segregated (Leonard & Noel, 1990). Many of the jobs permitted for the first Black Denverites were not only low paid, but often required living near or with the family one worked for. Accordingly, the first generation of Black Denverites lived scattered across the small city, what is now downtown (Lyles, 1977). Historian Lyle Dorsett notes Denver’s racial hierarchy was apparent even among the subset of the city’s few Blacks. According to him, the 1870 census shows that the few men of color who had attained slightly better jobs, three saloon keepers, two restaurateurs, nine barbers, and one clergyman were mulattos almost to a man (Dorsett, 1977, p. 53.).

Lighter skin helped gain better employment opportunities. In the 1880s and 1890s Blacks were dispersed along Blake and Larimer streets, but gradually over the years tended to move northeast until concentrating in Five Points in the 1920s (Leonard & Noel, 1990). Why this racial accretion occurred, according to historian Lionel Lyles (1977), is because of Denver’s economic boom after the First World War. War industry, military installations such as Lowery, railroad expansion, drew many people to Denver stimulating a home construction boom. Upwardly mobile whites and professionals moved away from the Victorian era homes of Five Points, now in a state of disrepair and unfashionable after being built during Denver’s initial founding. Because Five Points’ housing stock was in generally poor condition by the 1920s, that is where most Blacks could afford to live (Lyle, 1977). As more Black families moved in, more white families moved out. Five Points came to have predominantly Black residents due partly to legal segregation. More importantly within the context of Denver’s neighborhoods, housing in Five Points was cheap, and near employment in the city center. The Black community here occupied the lowest rungs of employment, and thus were predominantly working-class and poor.
The Black underclass persisted from the mid-1800s through the early 1900s due to racial discrimination in employment. Black workers were still forced into the same low-wage jobs their parents and grandparents had been when they first came to Denver. Black residents were almost invariably boarders and renters, subject to a landlord, or doubled up in houses to afford mortgages (Lyle, 1977). Without job advancement and without the means to secure real estate of their own, Denver’s Black middle-class remained small. As the Denver Star quote in the epigraph above notes, Blacks were also excluded from all government jobs. Resultantly, one of the best jobs available to Black men at this time was as a Pullman Porter working as a servant on passenger rail. This job was highly sought after despite the fact that Pullman porters were paid less than a living wage and relied on tips (Bates, 2001). Porters were still able to earn more than many of their peers. Porters were also able to successfully unionize, eventually, through which they gained significant concessions (Bates, 2001). These are some of the reasons significant numbers of Blacks in Denver had difficulty rising up into the middle class and became gradually concentrated in Five Points.

Denver did not have legal segregation any stronger than was common at the time in the US generally, but it was segregated nonetheless (Cherland, 2014; Leonard & Noel, 1990). Public housing was racially segregated by government design between white and black, and racist financial practices like redlining severely limited access to Federal mortgages for people of color, putting homeownership out of reach for millions of Americans of color (Rothstein, 2017, Vale & Freemark, 2012). Violence also played a crucial role in maintaining Denver’s color line. People who tried to move into white neighborhoods did so at their own peril. Blacks were discouraged from moving across Race Street through intimidation and violence. When a black fireman, Claude DePriest, moved into a house two blocks east of Race Street in 1920, members of the Clayton Improvement Association sent him a threatening letter, and two hundred and fifty angry white people protested outside his home (Leonard & Noel, 1990). DePriests decided to sell. In 1921, post office clerk Walter R. Chapman moved to Gilpin Street. One night his house was
bombed. After he left, another brave soul, Charles A. E. Starr moved in to the same house and was bombed out as well (Leonard & Noel, 1990, p. 193). While bombing was rare, threats, harassment, and white mobs were not. There were less visible barriers to black migration to other neighborhoods – the market.

Some neighborhoods such as the Highlands, Montclair, Park Hill, and Berkeley used restrictive covenants that dictated home price, size and use (such as boarding) that effectively prevented working class and minority home ownership (Leonard & Noel, 1990). Real estate agents were in on it too. One example is that agents would show Black homebuyers only selected listings in ‘appropriate’ parts of town (Leonard & Noel, 1990). This practice continued in Denver well into the 1980s. Furthermore, realtors and their clientele were segregated. There was a strong tendency for Black realtors to work with black clients on listings in black neighborhoods, and whites with whites (Palm, 1985). One of the first notable black residents to successfully break this color barrier was Combus “Cubby” Chapman. Chapman started as a waiter for the Union Pacific Railroad before starting a successful landscaping business in Denver. Using a “Straw buyer,” a white person willing to buy the home and then sign it over to a black family, the Chapmans purchased a house in the Park Hill neighborhood just north of Five Points in the early 1950s (Cherland, 2014). The family received death threats, but persisted and stayed in their home. Eventually, times and attitudes softened and the Chapmans came to be accepted as good neighbors and valuable members of the community (Cherland, 2014). Breaking down this color line took many years, but it inaugurated a flow of black middle class families into the Park Hill neighborhood. We should not read the Chapman’s as a ringing success story either. Their isolation, and the significance that it is recorded at all, speak to its exceptional character. Theirs is a story of racism eventually making an exception for a successful businessman, not the end of discrimination.

Zoning laws have played a part in tandem with covenants to ensure that only the right kind of person could live in those neighborhoods. The first zoning laws in the US were passed in the early 20th century
with two major objectives: land use and social control (Silver, 1997). In the strict segregation of the south, explicit racial zoning laws were passed, while in the north zoning was deployed to protect the value of white property owners through exclusion and slum clearance (Silver, 1997). The maintenance of white property values can be attained through exclusionary zoning—regulations such as size requirements that raise building and purchasing costs, or placing strong limits on apartment construction—to ensure that an area is solely for the wealthy (Rusk, 2003, p. 26). David Rusk (2003) claims that exclusionary zoning best explains how and where Denver’s more expensive housing came to be concentrated in a handful of neighborhoods. The cumulative effect of zoning, in addition to the other discriminatory methods described, has long lasting impacts. As 1970 Denver’s Black population had a segregation index score of 85 (on a 0-100 scale, with 100 being complete apartheid (Rusk, 2003, p. 29).

Inclusive zoning, in contrast, mandates a modest portion of new housing development is guaranteed affordable for a period of time, which grows the supply of affordable units, distributes them across the city, and at least goes some of the way toward social mixing (Rusk, 2003). Denver did not adopt inclusive zoning until 2002 (Rusk, 2003). According to Rusk’s calculations, if Denver metro cities had inclusive zoning laws in place during the 1980s to 2000, there would presently be about 16,000 more affordable homes for working class people, and an additional 8,000 units managed by a regional housing authority (Rusk, 2003, p. 12). The implications of zoning, then, go a ways toward explaining why some neighborhoods have remained higher value and whiter, while others face concentrated poverty along with disproportionate numbers of minority groups.

An example of how zoning shapes the geography of race and class in Denver’s housing as to do with the development of the city’s public parks, and the role such amenities have in creating and maintaining home values. Public parks, despite the name, were not intended for everyone. The first city parks in Denver were placed in wealthier, whiter neighborhoods. They were amenities to attract higher prices for the large homes that were built. Zoning regulations around flagship Denver parks such as Washington
Park and Cheesman Park required single family homes on large lots, resulting in real estate values and construction requirements far out of reach for working-class Denverites (Rigolon & Németh, 2018). No large parks were built in, near, or for the neighborhoods of Globeville, Highlands, or Five Points. Mayor Speer, in particular, used government investment in parks and public amenities as an effective way to maintain his political power base among Denver’s elite neighborhoods (Dorsett, 1977). The flagship parks in Denver, many remodeled during the City Beautiful period, remain majority white, higher-income neighborhoods to this day (Rigolon & Németh, 2018). The neighborhoods studied in this paper still have far less access to park space than those older neighborhoods that benefited from public investment and beatification.

In 1932, a group of activists decided to challenge the de facto segregated status of Washington Park’s lakeside bathing area through direct action. The park is one of Denver’s most well-known public spaces, famously redesigned as part of Mayor Speer’s City Beautiful program (Dorsett, 1977). As related by historian George Junne Jr. (2012), a small group of Black and white activists went to the lake and were soon confronted by the manager of Denver parks as well as the park Safety Manager who told them to leave. When the Blacks responded that they were citizens with equal rights, the park managers acknowledged they were right, but warned they were putting themselves in peril. At this point:

"They then went swimming. Whites quickly left the water, armed themselves with sticks and stones, and advanced on the newcomers who fled toward the trucks which [they] had brought with them. Two of the trucks would not start. Unable to make a quick exit, the African-Americans were pursued and beaten as nearly a thousand onlookers watched. The police arrested seventeen people, ten blacks and seven whites who had encouraged the black to assert their rights." (Junne, Jr., 2012, p. 195)

In the aftermath of this event, rather than apportion blame to the white people who engaged in mob
violence to enforce white supremacy in violation of the law, other sources were blamed for causing trouble. *The Denver Post* laid the blame on outside agitators, specifically “Communists” (Junne, Jr., 2012, p. 196). The Denver police demonstrated their perspective on the events by arresting the activists rather than the rioting or threatening white people. Although Denver parks were not officially segregated by law, the above incident shows how wide-spread prejudice could join with official reluctance to enforce anti-discrimination laws can combine to produce a segregation as effective as if multi-racial swimming in parks was literally outlawed.

The multigenerational wealth denied to Blacks in Denver by the means described above — job discrimination, terrorism, bureaucratic and financial barriers - shapes the position of who is able to gentrify versus who is likely to be gentrified. For many of those less critical of gentrification or unpersuaded by arguments regarding racial capitalism, the “free market” is alleged to be the most efficient and rational system for the allocation of scarce housing resources (Lees et al., 2008). This line of argument is maintained, in part, by the erasure of race from class in discussions about gentrification. As argued earlier in this paper, conceiving of markets as neutral, ahistorical mechanisms works to validate and support white supremacy because any apparent inequality is attributed to individual market behavior, rather than systemic dispossession (Crenshaw et al., 1995). If markets are rational, then inequality is rationalized. Oppressed and marginalized groups, in this line of thinking, are therefore not victims of historical injustice. But rather are ineffective market subjects whose weak position likely arises from personal irresponsibility, not exploitive systemic power relations. History is the antidote to this pernicious myth. Five Points’ vulnerability to gentrification is greatly clarified by understanding why and how it came to be home to Denver’s Black community, and their struggles for economic and social rights.
Chapter 5: The Civil Rights Movement and the Maintenance of White Value: 1950-2010

By about 1950 the neighborhoods of the Highlands, Five Points, and Globeville had all become predominantly nonwhite and working class identities. The Second World War and its aftermath brought significant numbers of Black and Latinx immigrants to the booming war economy and their housing patterns fit into pre-existing arrangements (Leonard & Noel, 1990). Neighborhood change and discrimination did not cease, but critical post-war shifts in politics and society rearranged the terms by which the struggle for equality and economic security were negotiated. Nationally, the mid-century began a period of dramatic change in US race-relations due to what can be broadly called the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Denver, along with the US generally, entered what critical legal and critical race scholars identify as a period of “formal equality” under the law accompanied by a conservative backlash against economic equality that came to dominate political discourse (Hall, 2005; Rothstein, 2017). CRM organizing and protests, the passage of legislation, and a handful of Supreme Court victories did not end or dismantle all racist structures. Instead, as overt discrimination became legally restricted and socially less acceptable, institutional racism assumed more covert and subtle forms operating through discourses of “meritocracy” and the goal of a “diverse” society mediated by a “free” capitalist market that was “now” “fair” to all (Hall, 2005; Harris, 1993). This shift from overt to more covert forms of racism was a reconfiguration of the American system of racial hierarchy conforming to classic liberal and conservative norms, and not a radical uprooting of systems of racial oppression (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Furthermore, the legal and structural changes towards racial equality did little to displace the exploitive relationships of racial capitalism. To demonstrate this, I discuss critical scholarship on the CRM to unpack the achievements and limits of racial reform of the latter 20th century
as well as its connections to struggles over affordable housing, and continued neighborhood segregation during a period of massive economic growth. Throughout, I continue to focus on north Denver as a local example of national trends. Then I discuss gentrification in Denver within the milieu of urban redevelopment, civil rights activism, and the displacement of a working-class neighborhood of color. In outlining the methods and tactics deployed to exploit predominantly Black and Latinx households in a recently free and equal housing system, I demonstrate how the racialized differentiation of value persists within formal equality.

Before addressing north Denver’s neighborhoods in the latter 20th century, it is important to contextualize the CRM, its strategies to change legal discrimination, and the wide-reaching impacts of how race and discrimination have come to be understood. The CRM evolved out of the labor and racial agitation during the Great Depression and New Deal eras (Hall, 2005). Many of the iconic and defining moments of the CRM are envisioned as being geographically concentrated in the South and focused on political enfranchisement, such as voter registration drives, and protests against segregated public services. Above all, the struggle for civil rights is portrayed as a triumphant moment in American progress. Important social gains were made, of course. However, a more critical history of 20th century civil rights struggle acknowledges systemic racism was and is nation-wide, and the CRM fought for civil rights as intrinsically bound up with rights such as union organizing, welfare, healthcare, and housing (Hall, 2005).

One prominent example of Black labor fighting for civil rights simultaneously with labor rights is the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP). The BSCP was the first all-Black union, formed in 1926, and it fought for a living wage as well as fundamental dignity, for example of being called by their own name rather than “George” after George Pullman, a relic of antebellum Southern culture where slaves were called their master’s name (Bates, 2001). The currently dominant image of the CRM prioritizes the struggles for voting rights and desegregated education, but the labor militancy and organizing that was
also intrinsic to the movement have been elided to separate race from class. One result of this historical revisionism is that it permits pride in the progress of areas such as voting while ignoring the lack of progress on issues of labor and economic justice. This supports the notion that gradual progress in America is possible within a fundamentally fair and neutral democratic system, rather than progress being a product of a broad-based social movement pushing for systemic change.

In light of the very real struggle of the CRM, critical scholars challenge “the central ideological myth” of gradual, neutral, and rational progress away from racism as being possible under the current hegemon of American social institutions, in particular the law (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Specifically, critical legal scholars argue that the dominant conception of racism as a “discrete and identifiable act of prejudice based on skin color” is extremely limited and fundamentally incorrect (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xv). The conception of racism as simple appearance-based prejudice places “virtually the entire range of everyday practices in America...beyond the scope of critical examination and legal remediation” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xv). Relying upon the legal system, with its narrow liberal8 understandings of racism and focus on singular perpetrator/victim binaries places strong limits on the law’s ability to provide remedy. Conversely, the “myth” of American progress positions racism as individual prejudices redressed through a neutral legal system of reasoned debate. The myth of progress distacts from the fundamental injustices of racial capitalism, shifting attention away from capitalism pointing instead towards racism alone, which is then found to have been solved. In short, the myth of progress is a myth not because there was no progress, but because progress is glaringly incomplete. Kimberlé Crenshaw points out that, “the extension of rights, although perhaps energizing political struggle or producing apparent victories in the short run, as ultimately legitimating the very racial inequality and oppression that such extension purports to remedy” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. 103). While Crenshaw’s arguments

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8 Liberal in the sense of Liberalism, not the common use of the word “liberal” contrasted with “conservative.”
were written some 15 years ago, they continue to resonate in contemporary US societies. The erasure of labor and economic demands, including demands for decent housing, from the CRM is partly the result of its reliance upon legal strategies and the extremely narrow scope of racial redress permissible in liberal legal American thought. But the mythic history of the CRM is also an outcome of a backlash in media coverage of civil rights agitation and conservative political ascendancy.

The CRM adopted a strategy that relied on targeting specific legal questions of segregation, not merely to redress specific wrongs, but with the goal of bringing down the whole racist edifice. Led by organizations such as the NAACP and brilliant lawyers like Thurgood Marshall, the CRM legal strategy chose issues such as school segregation not just because they were legally egregious, but also because school children provided sympathetic victims in the court of public opinion (Crenshaw et al., 1995). In their view it was likely easier to win cases when they could be seen as standing up for innocent children rather than trying to change the public’s mind about seemingly less harmful segregation, such as in movie theatre seating. This strategy was broadly successful. Court victories like Brown v The Board of Education not only forced the integration of schools, but eventually demolished precedents such as “separate but equal” (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

Civil rights victories began the deconstruction of legal racial discrimination, including in housing. Additionally, this legal strategy, along with similarly sympathetic protests utilizing nonviolence, generated positive media coverage. At least as long as the CRM could produce charismatic leaders and telegenic confrontations (Hall, 2005). However, when aspects of radical leftism within the CRM grew in influence during the 1960’s and 1970’s media coverage became decidedly negative (Hall, 2005). This was a cost the movement paid for drawing attention to white supremacy outside of the former Confederacy, calling for wealth redistribution, welfare, linking the war in Vietnam to capitalism, a growing embrace of Black Power identity politics, and the increasing number of urban uprisings. Resultantly, popular opinion, which barely supported the goals of the CRM in the first place, swung back against the
movement generally. The passage of significant laws such as the 1968 Fair Housing Act during this time further reinforced the perception that enough had been done and radicals were becoming a real danger (Massey, 2015). Under these conditions, a conservative backlash formed in the 1970s and 1980s that still dominates perceptions of the CRM, and thus the terms under which housing justice is considered.

The discursive and political aspects of the backlash against the CRM are important to gentrification and the racial capitalist valuation of residential space. By the late 60’s when milestones such as the Fair Housing Act were passed, there was a certain national mood that was ‘tired’ of political and urban unrest (Hall, 2005). Simultaneously housing and urban space were being rearranged. In particular, the values that were idealized in the backlash to CRM were those of private property, self-reliance, individual merit, and free-markets embodied in the suburban dream. All of which flattered white, middle-class interests, promoting a certain sense of economic mobility being achievable through a “colorblind” market (Hall, 2005). That is, there was a certain politically conservative sense that segregation and discrimination resulted from Big Government. By repealing discriminatory laws Blacks would finally become emancipated by participating in the exceptional American free market system. However, this is not what happened. Rather than arriving at economic parity with whites through participation in a free market, people of color were merely shifted into a more laissez faire form of racial capitalism.

There were at least three important elements shaping the economic impacts of de jure equality after the CRM. First, urban spatialization of race and class were reorganized through processes of suburbanization. The mid to late 20th century was a period of “white flight” to the suburbs that moved significant real estate wealth and white people to the urban margins. This positions mobile, and privileged persons and capital outside of the city center, ready to flow back and gentrify when conditions are favorable. Second, the CRM was partly a victim of its own success. The passage of significant civil rights legislation, Supreme Court victories, and the beatification of martyrs like MLK gave
the impression that “formal equality” (Crenshaw et al., 1995) had been achieved. Therefore the
dedicated militant struggle of the CRM was no longer needed. This attitude, in particular, helped
mobilize the conservative backlash against civil rights gains. This severs the connection between race,
justice, and housing making gentrification appear to be a remedy for urban “decay” rather than
revanchist policy of urban displacement. Third, the backlash to the CRM brought with it the rise of
neoliberalism. That is, a belief in the fundamental fairness and rationality of the market in distributing
resources (like housing) was reaffirmed now that overt racism could no longer be blamed for racial
inequality. However, the “colorblind” financialization of life wrought by neoliberalism unfolded upon a
topology of already existing inequality, deepening it. The “decay” and “blight” of marginalized
neighborhoods put them into more expensive housing markets because they were perceived as being
higher “risk” investments than their white counterparts (Chakravarty & Silva, 2012; Rugh & Massey,
2010). Together, the processes of suburbanization, white flight, the establishment of formal equality,
and the domination of neoliberal free-market ideology set the stage for later waves of gentrification in
urban cores. This, as I discuss below, allows the exploitive socio-economic relations of racial capitalism
to persist unexamined and unchallenged.

Suburbanization and White Values

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9 Revanchism or vengefulness is a concept that describes the entrenched violence and inherently unequal
class-based dynamics of gentrification. Specifically, the sense of resentment and revenge that urban space belongs
to the middle-class/gentrifiers and that the most oppressed – workers, single mothers, immigrants, homeless, etc.
– have “stolen” the city from those it rightfully belongs to. See: Smith, N. (1996). The New Urban Frontier:

10 Neoliberalism is a broad, but critical term describing the post-WWII shift in the economic order away from the
statist-welfare and capitalism mix of Keynesianism in favor of minimal government services, market-based
Neoliberalism. Oxford University Press. See also: Lees et al., 2008 for more connections between gentrification and
neoliberal ideology.
Explicitly racist neighborhood covenants along with government programs that disproportionately benefited white families ensured that suburbanization was primarily for white people. Government policy, from programs such as the GI Bill and Federal Housing Authority at the federal level, to local municipalities making land available for development, to the lower developer costs of standardized housing, drew large numbers of white households to the outskirts of cities (Orfield, 2001; Rothstein, 2017). Government intervention in the housing markets targets segments that most benefited white families and neglected segments, like public housing and fair credit, that would bring more nonwhite households into home ownership (Massey, 2015). The forces of white flight and suburbanization destabilized the US’s spatial constitution of race, where “middle-class aspirations conjoined upward economic mobility with outward residential mobility and whiteward institutional mobility through the privileged realms of education, job markets, and of course housing markets” (Wyly et al., 2012, emphasis original). The whiteness of suburbia was not an accident. Laws forbidding racial discrimination in housing did not begin to come into effect until the very late 1960s, and even then regulators had no mechanisms to enforce compliance (Massey, 2015). When Levittown, the famous Ur-suburban community, was designed in the late 1940s it explicitly forbade nonwhites from purchasing houses due to white fears their presence would negatively impact property values and social cohesion (Rothstein, 2017). This concern, the linkage between home values and the racial identity of homeowners, is an aspect of racial capitalism and is part of the concept of a racialized rent gap. It would make little sense to attempt to separate the valuation of property and racial identity in analyzing this phenomenon even though very few scholars are willing to connect the two explicitly. The segregationist stance of Levittown, New York was common for the era, legally permissible, and used in promoting the community to prospective buyers (Rothstein, 2017). Importantly, Levittown was in the North, not the stereotypically racist South. As suburbanization grew as a general mode of development, Levittown had set the pattern that suburbs would follow for decades.
The building and home buying boom brought about by suburbanization animated real estate markets. It was a powerful formula: land cheaply acquired, homes cheaply built en masse, and a large pool of eager consumers enjoying extensive government subsidy and protection. Pushing so much economic activity and growth to the suburbs at the expense of urban cores is a form of a spatial fix (Bledsoe & Wright, 2018) - making capitalist accumulation possible by shifting the location and focus of investment to different spaces away from spaces where its contradictions have become problematic. In the example of suburbanization, the CRM activated disenfranchised communities of color and their white allies to demand social and economic justice. To avoid responsibility, reparations, and a reckoning of the injustices of racial capitalism meant that capital needed to move out of the reach of these demands. Ensuring that suburbs were white therefore meant that value generated in suburban spaces accrued to white families, leaving the decaying city centers and plummeting real estate values for minorities who could no longer be so easily contained (Lipsitz, 2006). Drained of so many middle-class residents city tax bases collapsed, forcing municipalities to slash budgets to austerity levels, further hampering efforts at affordable housing and racial equality (Lees et al., 2008; Logan, 2013). The wealth gap resulting from this racially discriminatory housing system contributes to a massive wealth disparity between white and non-white families that persists to this day (Charles & Hurst, 2002). The current median white family’s wealth is $113,149 while the median Black family’s wealth is $5,677 and the median Latinx family’s wealth is $6,325 (Shapiro et al., 2013). In Denver, for example, 65% of Latinx households today qualify as low-income and are a tiny share of homeowners, even though they comprise more than a third of the city’s total population (Housing an Inclusive Denver, 2017). The structural changes of suburbanization created disinvested, minority dense, urban cores – a racial and economic spatialization ripe for rent gap formation whenever the white, middle-class decided that they would prefer urban living over suburban sterility.
Denver experienced this same pattern of white flight to the suburbs and political resistance to desegregation (Lyles, 1977). Both education and housing equity are extremely important aspects of class reproduction (Lees et al., 2008). Some scholars draw connections between white flight to the suburbs to avoid desegregation, in particular integrated public school systems (Reardon & Owens, 2014). In Denver, a year after court ordered bussing to desegregate public schools, the Colorado legislature passed the Poundstone Amendment which hardened the boundary between urban student populations and the whiter, wealthier, suburban school districts (Horn & Kurlaender, 2006; Lee, 2006). Couched in language of “local control” reminiscent of “state’s rights” the Poundstone Amendment was in fact motivated by wide-spread opposition to racial integration (Rigolon & Németh, 2018) and crippled Denver’s efforts at school integration (Horn & Kurlaender, 2006). One suburban mayor declared:

We will fight Denver in all ways possible like Poland did when Hitler decided he needed more land. We will fight until they are as bloody as a bull’s hock’ (Leonard and Noel, 1990, p. 293).

The links between suburban segregation and opposition to school integration were forged under a concept of “consumer citizenship” (Lipsitz, 2006, p. 114) that encourages the wealthy to hoard their resources and preserve structural advantages. They limit connections to larger metropolitan integration, like the Poundstone Amendment, because they seek to have their taxes serve only themselves while arguing for cutting services to groups such as minorities, immigrants, or the poor. Anti-bussing and anti-tax activists found common cause in defending segregated housing and segregated schools. They sought to maintain the financial, social, and political advantages that segregation brought to them precisely because of the ways wealth and education could be divided along lines of race and class. Fighting school integration and housing desegregation meant having your white children attend higher quality schools and protected suburban home values from affordable housing.
It was a failure of the court system to permit suburbs to exclude themselves from desegregation, and focusing instead on desegregating smaller areas limited to urban boundaries (Orfield, 2001). In his analysis of mobility patterns in Denver, Lyles (1977) found that between 1940 and 1950 white residential mobility was greatly determined by the educational achievement of white males. Furthermore, he found that during this period the census tracts that comprise most of the Five Points neighborhood lost up to 45% of their white population (Lyle, 1977). That is, the shift in white population to the suburbs was caused by a multitude of policies and structural factors, which then fostered white political power blocs in the suburbs that worked to mitigate desegregation’s impacts upon their communities, home values, and children’s education. Gentrification has been called, and criticized, as a “back to the city” movement (Smith, 1996). Insofar as that is true, the story of suburban formation indicates that gentrification may represent a “whites to the city” movement as well.

**Formal Equality, the Backlash, & Neoliberalism**

The CRM unquestionably achieved significant progress towards racial equality. The dismantling of explicit racism, such as the removal of “whites only” signs and public school integration, is a progressive and extremely important moment in US history. The sum of this progress is what some scholars identify as “formal equality” (Crenshaw et al., 1995). That is, persons of color had become essentially equal on paper, but staggering inequality remained in social, political, and economic domains. This new chapter recast the struggle over racial capitalism into an era where racial politics rhetorically repositioned both liberals and conservatives as “color-blind” on civil equality while maintaining racialized economic inequality. In this section I discuss how the post-CRM period, which we still occupy, utilizes discourses of economic progress and equal opportunity to effectively mask the perpetuation of inequality established under more explicit regimes of racial exploitation. This is a critical intervention into the issue of gentrification and race. Gentrification, a concept minted in the post-war, de-industrialization economic boom, is a shibboleth of urban development. Its proponents consistently portray gentrification as either
an essential mode of economic growth for cities, or an uncontrollable aspect of contemporary urban economics depending on the rhetorical need. Either way, the political use of the CRM in relation to gentrification today is to obscure racial capitalism behind an ahistorical “rational” and “fair” neoliberal ideology. Ignoring history, color-blind neoliberalism idealizes the ability of individuals to successfully compete in a marketplace where positionality has been determined by more than 400 years of racial exploitation. These moves excuse municipal governments and middle-class home-buyers extracting wealth from white supremacy as racialized rent gaps are taken advantage of.

Establishing formal equality under the law within a system that evolved to expand and protect notions of white property does not establish social relations free of white supremacy by itself. As the status of formal equality was gradually built up during the CRM new ways of conceptualizing race and power began to develop alongside. The embracing of formal equality in the mainstream of conservative and liberal thought positioned the inequalities of racial capitalism as due to supposed moral failures of Blacks themselves now that they were no longer explicitly repressed (Hall, 2005, p. 1237). The political limits for civil rights were bound up with a resurgent conservativism, often referred to as neoliberalism, which sought to contain challenges to the pre-existing political and economic order (Crenshaw, 2017). The rise of neoliberalism did much of the legwork in fashioning the necessary political transformations. In line with the ideological equivocation of laissez faire with freedom, neoliberalism endorsed “neutral” “merit based” systems of individual competition as replacements for explicit white supremacy (Crenshaw, 2017). Merit permitted institutions to defend continuing to hire almost exclusively white people for high level jobs by claiming there weren’t enough “qualified” candidates who applied, and to hold up examples of individual success as evidence of the system’s overall fairness (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Considering the multigenerational and intersectional nature of white supremacy, this misrepresented the amount of progress possible after the neoliberal turn.
Cities were decisively effected by the rise of neoliberalism and its laissez faire economic logic. While notions of race are not central to neoliberalism, the two still intersect in American cities because racial capitalism is an enduring and adaptable set of social-economic relations. The dismantling of public housing was near the top of the neoliberal agenda along with the financialization of the housing market. By the 1970s and 80s public housing projects were on the budgetary chopping block since they had served their purpose: elements of the white working class benefited from subsidized housing during the wars, then were able to access cheap real estate and housing immediately before the exceptional post-war boom (Vale & Freemark, 2012). Many working class whites were therefore able to ride the wave of respectable blue-collar wages and job security right out to the suburbs and join the middle-class. Resultantly, the inner city working class and underclasses that relied on public housing increasingly came from the nonwhite population (Massey, 2015). After this shift in the racial composition of public housing arose the idea that public housing primarily benefited the undeserving became a politically useful problem of surprising resiliency to push privatization and program elimination. Presidents from Nixon and Reagan to Clinton were able to portray the post-war generation of subsidized public housing recipients as undeserving and dependent on government generosity; a political stance that resulted in shifting the housing insecure out of government-run units into means-tested, voucher programs, pushing them onto the private market (Vale & Freemark, 2012). This rise in neoliberalism with its utilitarian and competitive ideology, along with the post-CRM shifts towards color-blindness as an ideal of integration, was premised on a sense that a free market operates equally towards all, and therefore would not perpetuate the racial discrimination of the past (Crenshaw et al., 1995). However, as described above, the shift toward supposed formal equality occurred at the same time government housing support dried up. That is, now that persons of color were assured of equal access to government programs those programs were slashed and made more inaccessible. This is one example of
how color-blind economic ideologies, in this case neoliberalism, maintain and perpetuate pre-existing racial inequalities without explicit appeals to racial bigotry or legal sanction.

This political shift in the role of government in public housing is not coincidental. Government–run public housing arose in response to the Great Depression, but it was a project limited by racial segregation primarily for the benefit of whites (Vale & Freemark, 2012). Political-economic structures in the US changed after WWII away from Keynesianism and towards neoliberalism. During this shift, the re-spatialization of race was imbricated with housing and suburbanization, a preference for minimal government combined with a revanchist attitude towards the urban working class as it began to look less white. As the calls for reduced government welfare programs grew in strength, the economic logic of austere budgets combined with crass moralizing of the poor, embodied as the single Black mother “welfare queen” myth (Vale & Freemark, 2012). Through neoliberalism, racial capitalism commodifies racial identity in harmful ways. The performance of racial identity in ways that are not palatable to mainstream, Protestant white mores are punished as “welfare queens” leeching the body politic, simultaneously positioning welfare programs themselves as wasteful (Leong, 2013). Together these notions provided the political power to cut social services, and to do so in ways that continued the reification of white dominance of housing wealth.

These connections between neoliberalism and housing are first and foremost utopian myths obscuring the material realities that operationalize race within the context of housing. This myth is also central to the ways gentrification is debated and understood, namely that gentrification is primarily an economic process and that US cities are somehow ‘post-racial.’ According to this post-CRM neoliberal myth, systemic racial discrimination and exploitation no longer play a significant role and are not centrally relevant to gentrification. However, in addition to the historical and legal forms of racial discrimination in housing discussed above, the post-CRM shift to neoliberalism disproportionally pushed people of color into exploitative and predatory financial arrangements, such as subprime loans instead of
government-backed mortgages (Rugh & Massey, 2010). The explicit white supremacy of legal redlining had ended, but alarmingly similar mortgage practices continued into the 21st century.

The post-CRM shifts to neoliberal financialization changed how mortgages we denied to nonwhite households. The US went from a redlining system that denied capital and housing stability to persons of color because they were legally categorized as not white, into a system that broadly denied the same communities equitably access to affordable and secure mortgages because the inheritors of racial discrimination were too poor and too working class to be eligible for them as evaluated by the banks and government regulators – the selfsame institutions responsible for gross housing discrimination during the redlining era.

The neoliberal shift towards financialization opened predatory lending practices to new entrepreneurial actors who functioned to link housing to the profit of Wall Street-style investors. These new “subprime” mortgage entrepreneurs were not banks, but middle-men who sold extremely risky mortgages to low-income households and then bundled many loans together to be traded as a commodity between investors (Chakravartty & Silva, 2012). This permitted predatory lenders to reap profits while passing obscured risks onto investors. Preexisting segregation facilitated the racial targeting of subprime lending and, resultantly, magnified the impact of the housing upon minority neighborhoods when the market went bust (Rugh & Massey, 2010). Some scholars argue that not only did segregation fuel foreclosures, but they furthermore destabilized integrated neighborhoods and disrupted neighborhoods on integrationist trajectories (Hall et al., 2015). The differential impact of predatory lending upon formerly segregated communities was made possible by evaluating the ‘merit’ of each applicant. While this process was allegedly ‘color blind’ and strictly financial, the lower positioning of formerly segregated neighborhoods ensured greater subprime market saturation in those neighborhoods.
Because of the racialized nature of the subprime markets, white households effectively maintained their property values by financially segregating white households into mortgage markets with access to cheaper and safer credit (Wyly et al., 2012). While the economic fallout of the 2008 housing crash impacted the entire global economy the poor and working class, inheritors of multi-generational discrimination and exploitation, suffered worst, as usual. The subprime story is therefore also a story of racial capitalism shaping modern housing. Thus, when Denver begins to gentrify in the immediate aftermath of the Great Recession the racial aspects of that process cannot be discounted. As I discuss below in the specifics of Denver’s gentrification, the boom/bust of the early aughts occurred in an already existing geography of inequality.

With this larger context in mind it is now time to look more closely at Denver as a place remade by these changes. The resurgent conservatism in the wake of the CRM, accompanied by the extreme laissez faire ideology of neoliberalism, came to dominate Denver along with the rest of the US. After the 1950s the city enjoyed a post-war economic and population boom (Leonard & Noel, 1990). The city’s economic and political elite worked to position Denver as “competitive” within the flourishing national context, growing the state’s economy to include more services in addition to the extractive and government sectors (Page & Ross, 2017). Denver was, of course, at the very heart of these changes. This notion of governance directed towards enhancing economic competition positons the city itself, in a sense, as entrepreneurial. In doing so Denver was merely following the larger national trend of cities adopting neoliberalism’s ideal of entrepreneurialism as the dominant mode of governance (Brenner & Theodore, 2005). Denver’s shift towards neoliberal governance, intensely focused upon growth, is essential to understanding the city’s gentrification and the struggles that arose from it. In part, it also explains why Denver’s government and media often appeared to be baffled at opposition to gentrification. To those able to profit from it, gentrification is economic growth. To the inhabitants of Denver’s segregated and marginalized communities, gentrification threatened the destruction of their home. These differing
perspectives animate much of the gentrification debate. The beginnings of this can be seen in the city’s first big post-war redevelopment downtown, Auraria Campus.


In 1968 the neighborhood of Auraria was selected by the Denver Urban Renewal Authority (DURA) and state education officials to be the site of a new college campus (Page & Ross, 2017). The business and political elites that ran DURA wanted a college in the heart of the city to produce and attract highly educated professionals that could drive Denver’s economic growth. The development of a campus in Auraria necessitated the removal of the neighborhood and the mostly Latinx residents who lived there. This threat of removal helped catalyze and renew Latinx activism in defense of their homes in Denver. The activist organizations that emerged in this period were inflected with the political and racial identity radicalism of the time, and so some of the resistance to Auraria came under the banner of “Brown Power” (Page & Ross, 2017). Although unsuccessful in blocking the construction of Auraria Campus, these activists continued to organize and protest for decades to come. The building of Auraria Campus is notable for two reasons: first, it initiated the modern era of gentrification in Denver; second, for Latinx activists it deepened the connections between identity, power, and place within Denver.

Immediately adjacent to Denver’s central business district, Auraria was founded shortly before the Denver City and was an early competitor until it was absorbed into the growing mining boom-town
(Leonard & Noel, 1990). Auraria occupied the left bank of the Platte, Denver the right. By the late 1960s the neighborhood was a mix of residential and industrial uses, almost entirely working-class Latinx. Upwards of 80% of the residents there were of Latinx origin, nearly three-quarters rented their home, and the neighborhood was one of the poorest in the city (Page & Ross, 2017). The city classified the area as a blight due to the concentration of impoverished households, dilapidated and overcrowded housing stock, and poor infrastructure (Page and Ross, 2017). The city’s official distress about overcrowded homes reflects how municipal government regulates familial habitation. Municipal codes regarding habitation were written by the city government that had always been dominated by white, upper class Protestants who were generally uncomfortable about multi-generational households. In some cases this moralizing came dressed as official regulation in disregard for other cultural norms of family habitation. The overcrowding also highlights the fact that many of Auraria’s residents were simply too poor to afford larger homes. The official classification of blight was a significant factor, along with its central location and proximity to the new I-25 interstate, in Auraria’s selection for the proposed campus.

The announced campus development divided the community in Auraria between those who vociferously opposed the destruction of their homes, and those who supported the development or at least accepted the city’s promise of being relocated into equal or better housing (Page & Ross, 2017). The late sixties was a time of wide-spread activism and radical politics across the nation. In Denver a prominent component opposing the proposed campus was a group of young activists that were part of the growing Chicano Movement11.

In contrast to the city’s depiction of Auraria as a blight needing redevelopment, the coalition of groups opposed the project on the grounds that it would break-up their Latinx community, and that the imposition of the development upon them reflected their longstanding marginalization (Page & Ross, 2017).

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11 In this section I use the term Chicano in place of Latinx because this was the wide-spread term of racial/cultural self-referral amongst these activists at the time.
The categorization of blighted housing in Auraria at a time when Denver’s downtown was considered far seedier than it is today, and its landscape dominated by parking lots, destruction of Auraria only makes sense if dozens of homes and places of business were viewed as less valuable than the office buildings just east across the Platte. The campus was eventually built and the residents relocated, but the political organizing in opposition bore some fruit. Historic structures, such as the Tivoli brewery and some Catholic churches, were integrated into the redesigned campus. More importantly, many of the organizations and political organizers continued to work towards social justice goals and civil rights such as funding for affordable housing, and better police treatment of minority youths (p. 1311). Many of the concerns voiced by those in opposition were validated later on, such as the influx of wealthier and whiter residents and higher real estate prices in the wake of Auraria’s destruction and redevelopment.

Although Chicano and Latinx activists were unsuccessful in stopping the redevelopment of Auraria and the displacement of its community, they forced DURA to alter their plans and it helped propel the Denver Chicano Movement towards its social justice and civil rights goals. Many of the people and groups involved in protesting the campus remained involved in activism around Latinx issues. Notable victories won by this “Westside Coalition” in the following years included securing funding for a health clinic, the establishment of a Westside Auraria board to manage community relations, and many activists began entering electoral politics (Page & Ross, 2017, p. 1311). They also centered issues of housing in their activism on behalf of the city’s Latinx population such as working to build more affordable housing, subsidize home purchases, and money to rehabilitate homes (Page & Ross, 2017). Yet, the long-standing marginalization of Latinx residents and the unstoppable power of the city’s business elites in reshaping Denver to better suit their desires left a sour taste that helped fuel the Chicano Movement for years to come.
Denver’s Chicano Movement

Many of these radicalized Chicano activists viewed their struggle in terms of race and class. For example, in 1969 Denver played host to The Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, organized by the Crusade for Justice and Corky Gonzalez (Vigil, 1999). The title of the conference clearly indicates the ambition of the participants taking place at a critical moment of the CRM. Many of the older activists had come of age with the CRM and the optimism of Kennedy, and now at the close of the decade, a year after MLK Jr’s assassination, the time of liberal politics was over. What was needed, instead, was radical change growing from radical politics. Film-maker Jesus Salvador Trevino (2000, p. 104) provides his memory of the debates inside the conference:

One vocal contingent, mainly Chicanos from Berkeley and the San Francisco Bay Area, argued from a Marxists perspective. The Chicano struggle, they said, was part of a larger struggle of oppressed people in the United States that included blacks, Native Americans, and poor whites. They believed we had to unite with other groups to overthrow the present system.

This approach was soundly rejected. Marx was just another gabacho. And, after all, it was gabachos who had stolen our land from Mexico more than one hundred years ago. It was gabachos who ran the United States, who arrested us in our barrios, who locked us up in jails, who sent us off to fight their wars, and who kept us as an oppressed labor force. True liberation for our people could only come about if we joined together as a nation of Chicanos, united by language, culture, and race.

As the discussions continued, a clear consensus emerged: the ideology of cultural nationalism. A caucus was convened to hammer out the specifics of a national plan of liberation that would become known as the Plan de Aztlan.
The Youth Conference was one highlight of a notable year of agitation. Also in 1969, students at Denver’s West High School students staged a walkout in protest of racist comments made by a teacher (Page & Ross, 2017). These protests were taken note of at very high levels. In response to the agitation of activists the FBI’s Denver field office was instructed to interview and attempt to entrap Chicano activist Corky Gonzalez (Vigil, 1999, p. 203). The attempt did not bear fruit. Director Hoover also chastised the Denver field office in 1969 for not being aggressive enough in reporting antiriot law investigations to them as part of the Bureau’s efforts to break up civil rights activism (Virgil, 1999). The involvement of the FBI in those types of COINTELPRO operations in Denver were not known until years later. More relevant to Denver’s Chicano activists at the time were the actions of Denver’s city government and its police force.

The poor relations between Denver’s police force and Denver’s Chicano community were rooted in their recent history. In the early 60’s a series of police killings of young Chicano men strained community trust and energized young activists. In one such incident in 1962, two police officers at a 3.2 beer establishment, the Cowboy Inn, had an altercation with 19 year-old Edward Larry Romero that ended when Romero was shot in the chest after fleeing from the officers (Vigil, 1999). There was controversy over precisely what happened. Mayoral candidate Thomas Curriagan proposed establishing an independent review board to investigate police killings (Vigil, 1999). The investigative board failed to materialize once Curriagan was in office. However during the Curriagan administration in 1966, under pressure of activists, the Denver police ceased using the terms “Spanish,” “Mexican American,” and “Latin American” and from then on would only refer to them as “Caucasian” in police records (Vigil, 1999, p. 23). City Safety Manager Al Capra declared in response, “as far as I’m concerned, Spanish Americans are now a member of the white race” (quoted in Vigil, 1999, p. 23). Further action organized by groups like the Crusade were able to persuade the majority of Highlands residents to identify themselves as “Caucasian” in the 1970 census, out of their hatred of the term “Hispanic” (Langegger,
2012). Thus census date for that time shows the Highlands as a majority Caucasian neighborhood, even though it was not. Progress in nomenclature did little to address the material needs of Denver’s marginalized communities or advance calls for justice very far. Of far more impact to the rights of Denverites was the US Supreme Court.

In 1973 the Supreme Court delivered their opinion in Keyes v Denver School District No. 1. The case concerned the contention of several parents of students that the Denver School District maintained a system of deliberate racial segregation. The school district did not have an official policy of segregation, instead it was achieved through several mechanisms such as gerrymandering school district boundaries, expanding the use of optional enrollment zones, and the construction of a new elementary school in the Black community in Park Hill, adjacent to Five Points (Horn & Kurlaender, 2006). The parents sued in 1969, and after four long years, the court agreed with them instituting a system of court monitoring and bussing to desegregate Denver’s public schools. The victory in Keyes was significant in that it was a directive to desegregate Denver public school. Also, because it was the first major case outside of the south it highlighted the national scope of the issue.

The fight over desegregating public schools was bound up in the issue of suburban whiteness. Fears began percolating through the minds of affluent white suburban homeowners. Unwilling to outright name race as a factor, opponents discussed concerns about things like stunting the academic achievement of their child by forcing them into an underperforming school (Leonard and Noel, 1990). Because it was the federal government that ordered desegregation, conservatives framed it as violating local sovereignty and threatening private property. Opponents of integrated classrooms utilized the law to cut themselves out of the Denver system altogether.

After a state-wide vote of approval, Colorado’s legislature added the Poundstone Amendment to the state constitution in 1974. Motivated by opposition to integration in public schools, the amendment
made it more difficult for Denver to annex more land by putting annexation up to a plebiscite. Thus, making it harder to bring the mostly white suburbs into the city’s public school system and its court-ordered bussing scheme (Rigolon & Németh, 2018). After all, if one opposed bussing then they would be unlikely to vote for annexation into Denver’s public school system. This modification of a technical aspect of municipal growth made it virtually impossible for the city to maintain desegregation within its borders, considering the concurrent demographic shifts of suburbanization (Lee, 2006). Court supervision and bussing remained in effect in Denver until 1995 when a judge decided that segregation had been eliminated “to the extent practicable” (Horn & Kurlaender, 2006, p. 3). Conversely, the Poundstone Amendment remains law in Colorado.

As the Keyes case worked its way through the courts, tensions around race and desegregation continued to intensify in Denver. In 1970 24 public school buses were destroyed, and 15 more damaged, in a bomb attack, allegedly motivated by opposition to integrating Denver public schools (Ripley, 1970). Three white men were seen running from the site immediately before the bombs detonated (Ripley, 1970). In this environment, it is unsurprising to see politics became more extreme and community relations with Denver’s minorities became more tense.

There was a party in March of 1973 in an apartment owned by Crusade for Justice, near the intersection of Downing Street and 16th Ave. It was crowded with young Chicano radicals and their friends. As the evening grew late some began to leave. When Ernesto Vigil and a couple friends went outside to sit on the porch they saw a police cruiser parked in the street with a young Chicano in the backseat. They approached and asked the police officers what they had detained him for, to which Patrolman Snyder replied that the young man had jaywalked and that he had just witnessed them jaywalking as well so Ernesto and his friends ought to leave unless they wanted to be detained as well (Vigil, 1999, p. 209). The young Chicanos began arguing that there were no problems at the party, other than police provocation when the detained man suddenly jumped out of the backseat of the patrol car and made a
run for it. Patrolman Snyder tried to follow, but Vigil or his friends pushed the door shut on him again before running as well. Snyder chased after the young men who had shut his door on him, and ended up following one named Luis Martinez (Vigil, 1999, p. 217). Meanwhile, his partner drove to cut off the jaywalking suspect in the alley (Vigil, 1999, p. 211). As she drove the patrol car into the alley someone fired two shots at her, immediately after the gunshots two more police officers arrived and gave chase to the gunman who ran back into the apartment where the party had been (Vigil, 1999). At this point in the story there are two simultaneous series of events, the details of both were hotly debated in court and in the media. I am relying on Ernesto Vigil’s (1999) version since he wrote the only full first-hand account of the events.

Witnesses had come to their windows and porches along Downing to see what the common was. They reported seeing Patrolman Snyder, hand on his holstered gun, following Martinez, who was walking backwards repeating, “Just leave me alone, man. I don’t want any trouble. Just leave me alone, man” (Vigil, 1999, p. 219). What happened next was obscured by buildings, so the only account comes from Snyder’s statement. He said that as he followed Martinez down an alley, trying to talk him into a custody Martinez lunged at him, they wrestled, and Martinez fired a pistol twice at Snyder, which wounded him in the face (Vigil, 1999, p. 219). Snyder drew his own weapon after being shot and fired at Martinez, 20, killing him (Vigil, p. 1999, p. 221).

Inside the apartment, having heard the gunshots and commotion, the mood became tense and frightful. They turned off the lights and began talking about what was happening when they heard the gunshots from Snyder and Martinez’s altercation (Vigil, 1999, p. 211). Some of them began to leave, others turned the lights out and hid, while still more people were arriving to the party, only to run into more police officers who had begun to fill the area and arresting everyone they could grab. Mario Vasquez ran from the party, found the alley full of police and jumped over the fence and ran back into the Crusade building into the apartment he shared with Louis Martinez (Vigil, 1999, p. 212). The police had begun
clearing out the apartments, Vasquez was in the last one. As the officers approached the front and back
doors they were fired upon, with three officers wounded (Vigil, 1999). The police retreated and engaged
in a gunfight for a few minutes with Martinez when the apartment exploded. Martinez was found
unconscious in the rubble. The police claimed that it was likely a cache of explosives had been hit by
gunfire and detonated; the Crusade for Justice claimed that the police had lobbed an explosive device
into the apartment (Vigil, 1999). The event galvanized Denver’s Chicano radicals, confirming for them all
of the worst perceptions of the police, and the city in general. It appeared to them that they were
targeted because of their race and their politics, and that it was police aggression that brought about
the tragic circumstances.

Figure 9 The destroyed Crusade for Justice apartment building in 1973. Source: Denver Public Library Digital Collection

The fear around radical Chicanos lingered for some time after the 1973 shootout and explosion. As the
1970s progressed, the militant activism of racialized activists continued to be surveilled by law
enforcement and transgressors were heavily criminalized. In 1976 a Denver SWAT team raided the Our
Lady of Guadalupe church in the Highlands, searching for guns and explosives. All they found was the church’s food pantry (Hunt, 1999). It is unclear if the police were acting on a legitimate tip, or if the operation was intended to send a message to the community.

For the residents of the Highlands, and the adjacent Latinx-majority neighborhoods in the Northside, the swimming pool at Columbus Park was the place for neighborhood kids to spend their hot summer afternoons. The park at 38th Avenue and Navajo Street is just across from the Highland’s northernmost boundary. However, the pool was run by the city and most of the staff were white. The Crusade for Justice therefore began to organize “splash-ins” at the pool where local kids would swarm the pool and make life difficult for the staff (Langegger, 2013). Eventually as staff left locals were able to take their place. In 1971 the Crusade celebrated the “Grand Opening” of the pool to mark this symbolic transition (Langegger, 2013). This became an annual event and many locals would come to BBQ and picnic in the park while the kids swam.

However, over the decade issues of gang violence began to rise, and Denver police began to intensify their presence in the area. Racial profiling of Latinx and Black youth became standard protocol for the police, which further deteriorated community relations (Langegger, 2013). Meanwhile Highlanders and the Latinx communities of the Northside continued to deepen their relationship to their neighborhoods, with some considering them a part of Aztlan – the home of Mexicanos and Chicanos (Langegger, 2013). This identification of these neighborhoods as a homeland rather than just home meant that transgressions against the community would be felt and interpreted more harshly than outsiders would likely understand. The coming clash between locals and the police was therefore somewhat unsurprising.

In 1981 while celebrating the Eleventh Annual Grand Opening by taking over the park, people began noticing numbers of police vehicles throughout the area (Langegger, 2013). At 3 o’clock the police
mustered at the park, and using bullhorns, declared the Grand Opening to be an unlawful gathering, and gave the approximately 1,500 people just five minutes to vacate the park (Langegger, 2013). This obviously absurd order was impossible to follow, and so while parents tried to wrangle their kids out of the pool and gather up their picnics the police began firing tear gas canisters into the park. A riot began. Distraught and now panicking residents began to throw bottles and other objects at the police in retaliation. Windows of businesses along 38th Ave were smashed. Police locked the area down with force, and officers with assault rifles and dog units patrolled the area into the night (Langegger, 2013). Afterwards 3 bombs were mailed to persons presumed to have been accomplices in the police action, including to a white-owned motorcycle shop across the street from the park that some alleged were police informants (Langegger, 2012). No one was injured by the mail bombs.

In the wake of the riot in Columbus Park, the city acted quickly to ensure there would not be similar occurrences in the future. The next year the Department of Parks and Recreation filled the pool in with concrete and the city changed parking regulations near the park to make it more difficult for drivers to access it which, the city claimed, was done in response to homeowner complaints (Langegger, 2013). In place of the pool, a large gazebo-like concrete structure was erected, shaped in a way to evoke an Aztec pyramid. However the gazebo is raised off the ground on a concrete platform, turning it more into a stage than a shaded place to relax. In the tough-on-crime atmosphere of the 1980s the Denver police began strictly enforcing curfew rules in the park, at times even using the SWAT team to do so (Langegger, 2013). All in all, the changes immediately after the riot killed the park as a public space. Kids no longer had a pool to swim in, and any youths spending time in the park were targeted by police as potential gang members and loiterers (Langegger, 2013). City Councilwoman Debbie Ortega proposed in 1988 to rename the park La Raza Park, which was unsuccessful, although that is the common name people use today (Langegger, 2013). The community still uses the park for annual celebrations, including political action, but its role in the community is much reduced.
The punitive actions taken towards residents around La Raza Park, and the reconfiguration of the park as a space open for surveillance are emblematic of the revanchist attitude of the city towards its Latinx community. Rather than find ways to foster social cohesion and promote expressions of local identity, the city instead sought out ways to control and repress those it viewed as potentially dangerous. That is, dangerous to white, middle-class norms that are uncomfortable with public expressions of Latinx life. By reorganizing the La Raza Park space to better align with white normativity, the city helped prepare the area for gentrification (Langegger, 2013). The connection to gentrification comes from the notion that gang activity and boisterous public life are seen as deterring business investment, which accelerates blight and rent gap formation (Langegger, 2013). The repression and removal of people and ways of life deemed threatening to business or incomprehensible to middle-class whites operates to make gentrification possible. It transforms the social conflict of neighborhood succession into one of repressing the “criminality” of an uncivil class of persons. It positions their removal as necessary and inevitable, and rationalizes the conversion of racialized working-class areas into white enclaves (Smith, 1996). The result of the repressive changes in the area, along with the rising real estate values of the last decade, have caused many low-income homeowners in the area to leave, creating a supply of houses for gentrifiers (Langegger, 2013). Today, the Highlands can boast that “expensive restaurants outnumber taquerias” (Langegger, 2013, p. 3361). However, many Latinx still make Northside their home. Perhaps one day Columbus Park will officially be changed to La Raza Park and the city will cease its pretense toward color-blindness, and acknowledge the history and contributions of the people who live there.

Urban Redevelopment, Radicals, and Race

This brief discussion of urban redevelopment and radical Chicano activism highlights the interconnections between racial identity, politics, and power over urban space. Auraria served as a
template and test case for gentrification in Denver. The Chicano Movement petered out over time, but it still exists, and its activism in the latter 20th Century helped reshape the meaning of being Latinx for many Denverites. This history has been largely ignored and forgotten by Denver’s current political class, but it has not been forgotten by the city’s Latinx activists.

The creation of Auraria’s campus bear the hallmarks of gentrification. First, the need for capital reinvestment in real estate near downtown, accomplished with government assistance, employing rhetoric of economic growth and general benefit. The removal of working class people, stigmatized as blight, and their replacement by high-income groups. Additionally, the neighborhood was racialized as Latinx, and part of the city’s condemnation of Auraria derived from the ways the residents did not conform to white, middle-class mores and lifeways. The new construction, and the elements of the old working-class neighborhood permitted to remain, were repurposed to serve the interests of the higher-income groups. Previously dilapidated and insufficient infrastructure that poor residents simply had to live with, was now worthy of investment and upgrading for use by college students and staff. The displaced Latinx residents of Auraria may have received “equivalent” housing somewhere else, but equivalent is hardly remarkable when considering the poverty many of them were living in. Furthermore, as the majority of them were renters, it is difficult to see how any of them were to benefit from later increased land values. Importantly, this gentrification was not the outcome of wealthy people choosing to live in a quaint neighborhood. The neighborhood was not razed by some invisible hand of the marketplace. I argue that Auraria was targeted by a coalition of business and political elite to serve their goals because it was a poor, politically marginalized, and racialized population. Redeveloping Auraria presented an opportunity to seize cheap land near downtown. These factors made it far more feasible for large-scale displacement and development to occur precisely there, and not some other neighborhood with more political and financial clout.
Chapter 7: Denver and Gentrification: 2008-2020

The histories of Globeville, the Highlands, and Five Points neighborhoods demonstrate the close relationships between housing, neighborhood demographics, race and class. Although each neighborhood followed its own path, all three neighborhoods became spaces where working class people of color were coerced into living as well as spaces that residents have fought to live in with some dignity and security. From the national to the local scales these communities have been valued, not purely on the basis of material qualities within a free and fair housing market, but all too often according to how a white supremacist society valued those who lived there – a hierarchical categorization produced through racial capitalism. If the answer to “why some places gentrify and others do not” is due to a rent gap, then north Denver neighborhoods have much to tell us about racialized rent gap formation. They tell us of how places for the racialized working-class are deliberately created and maintained under legal white supremacy and under de facto white supremacy. The market, being a
reflection and an instrument of social relations, is capable of nurturing white supremacy just as well as
the Supreme Court or a lynch mob. That is a story of racial capitalism. These Denver neighborhoods tell
us too of the community-based struggle to gain equality and dignity in the face of hostility, indifference,
and ignorance.

The neighborhoods and the communities that characterize north Denver demonstrate that history can
be ignored, but it cannot be separated from the problems and opportunities of today. Because history
retains great importance in the positionality of communities vis a vis the market, and in particular
because of the ways race has been defined and enacted in the US, much of the rhetoric and debate
around gentrification ought to be critically interrogated if not disposed of outright. Scholars of
gentrification continue to critique the role that the private market plays in gentrification. However, it is
not enough to attribute gentrification to landlords capitalizing on creative destruction of low-income
neighborhoods with the government acting as accomplice (Smith, 1996). Nor is it sufficient to point to
the macro-economic shifts that made a section of the professional class prosperous and looking for real
estate investment (Lees, 2000). Incorporating those theories with racial capitalism into the study of
gentrification, on the other hand, provides insights into the histories and systems that make such
market activity possible. This is not to abandon the scholarship on gentrification that came before, but
to improve upon it.

Wake up to New Denver - Boomtown

Just a few short years after the Great Recession seemed to have undermined the foundations of home-
ownership and frozen credit markets, Denver bucked the doomy national economic trends and began to
rapidly grow. The city’s moribund housing market suddenly became hot and stalled development plans
were restarted. However, the vast majority of Denverites were still feeling the impacts of the Recession, including stalled wages and frozen credit, and so the increasing scarcity of housing began to put more and more of the city’s housing out of reach. Instead of a general economic comeback for the city, the increasingly expensive homes and apartments, and the good-paying professional jobs, were seemingly going to new arrivals. Tensions around increasing cost of living, clueless new-comers, and a construction boom changing the character of older neighborhoods all came together under the banner of “gentrification.” The city government was placed in a delicate position. On the one hand it has an obligation to serve its residents and constituents. On the other, economic and population growth are considered to be unquestionably good. What to do? The city chose to lean into growth while pretending to address affordable housing.

The period of Denver’s rapid growth, which occurred roughly from 2010 to 2018, was nothing short of exceptional, even for a former mining boom-town. Denver county reached a total population of 717,796 by 2018, up from 556,738 in 2000 (Colorado Department of Local Affairs, n.d.). That equals nearly a 29% increase in Denver County alone. If you were to include the neighboring counties of Adams, Arapahoe, Broomfield, Douglas, and Jefferson, the metro area grew by more than 700,000, or nearly 34% since the year 2000 (Colorado Department of Local Affairs, n.d.). This huge influx of people, and low unemployment, occurring on the heels of a building freeze brought a predictable rise in real estate values and rent. Renters are the most vulnerable to displacement, and Denver renters saw
median rents rise from about $800 in 2008 to over $1240 in 2015 (Gentrification Report, 2016). An increase of over 50% over a seven year period. At the same time wages have stagnated for most, placing affordable housing of any sort, let alone home ownership, out of reach for growing numbers of Denverites (Gentrification Study: Mitigating Involuntary Displacement, 2016). Housing costs continued to quickly rise, even though Denver was also one of the most active construction markets during 2010-2017 (O’Brien, 2018). The concerns around rising costs and the changing character of Denver led to news stories, government studies, policy proposals, and community organizing around gentrification. Many long-time residents in the downtown adjacent neighborhoods of Five Points, Globeville, and the Highlands felt their communities were threatened by the economic growth that seemed to benefit new arrivals more than them (Langegger, 2014; Turkewitz, 2017; A Story of Displacement, 2017). While this paper focuses on the period after the Great Recession, some point to gentrification beginning much earlier, by 1990, and continuing through the present (Goetz, 2013; Page & Ross, 2017). Neighborhoods

Figure 11 Indications of gentrification related demographic changes. Source: Gentrification Report, 2016
near the more expensive downtown suddenly found themselves caught in a wave of skyrocketing house
and rent prices. Gentrification quickly became a buzz word and epithet to describe ‘New Denver.’

Was Denver truly gentrifying though? The city of Denver commissioned a study in 2016, modeled on a
similar one for Portland, OR, in an attempt to answer this question from their perspective. The
Gentrification Study: Mitigating Displacement (2016) examined trends in investment and population
from 1990 to 2013 at the census tract level. The study utilized a definition of gentrification as a process
that, “occurs when a neighborhood has attractive qualities— for example, location or historic
architecture—but remains relatively low value...When the area becomes desirable to higher-income
households and/or investors, there are changes in the housing market. As demand rises for the
neighborhood, higher-income households are able to outbid low-income residents for housing, and new
development and economic activity begins to cater to higher-income tastes. Lower-income households
and/or households of color migrate out of the neighborhood and new in-migrants change the
demographics of the neighborhood” (Gentrification Study, 2016, p. 4, emphasis added). This definition
has two noteworthy aspects. First, the source of gentrification is assumed to be the inherent attractive
qualities of a neighborhood that drive demand. This is simply not true, as should be clear by now.
Second, they acknowledge the sometimes racialized context of gentrification, but in their actual
methodology they have dropped the racial category altogether due to “limitations of data”
(Gentrification Study, 2016, p. 34). While racial data from the Census Bureau does indeed have many
problems with accuracy and completeness, this methodological decision also sidesteps the question of
how racial segregation is or is not impacted by gentrification.

The city’s gentrification typology identified the Highlands as being in late-stage gentrification, Globeville
as “under threat,” and Five Points did not fit into their model or was missing data (see Figure 7;
Gentrification Study, 2016, p. 16). The conclusion is that many parts of Denver were gentrifying, or at
risk of gentrifying, in particular neighborhoods north and west of the central business district. For the neighborhoods focused on in this paper, the story of gentrification is complicated and uneven.

The *Gentrification Report* (2016) also highlights a number of meso-level economic factors influencing gentrification process in Denver. In 2012 median income in Denver had gone down more than 15% since 1997; but between 2010 and 2014 median incomes increased by 21.9%, far more than the national average (p. 18). But even that was not enough to keep up with increasing real estate prices. Rents had increased by an astonishing 50% between 2011 and 2015 (*Gentrification Study*, 2016, p. 18). The report authors also note the differing challenges gentrification poses along lines of class. Those making 60% of area median income (AMI) or less could not afford a one bedroom apartment in Denver, while workers in service jobs making the median hourly wage of $8.96 would have to work 114 hours a week to afford a median one-bedroom apartment (*Gentrification Study*, 2016, p. 19). In essence, the average renter earned significantly less than was needed to avoid being cost-burdened (paying more than 30% of income on housing), and large numbers of them were in positions that made maintaining housing difficult. The above statistics, and others, led the study’s authors to the conclusion that just over 42% of
tracts in Denver were “eligible” for gentrification, and that this presented numerous challenges to maintaining an affordable housing average for the city (Gentrification Study, 2016, p. 12). But that did not stop the authors from characterizing gentrification and a mostly positive process, aside from displacement. They note that, “gentrification can often bring improved neighborhood schools, a decrease in crime, improved retail offerings and services—and jobs—that can help all residents, as long as they are able to stay in the neighborhood” (Gentrification Study, 2016, p. 14). Furthermore, the authors position gentrification as a process that could support their goal of “mixed income neighborhoods, that maintain some of their traditional character” (Gentrification Study, 2016, p. 16). This optimism regarding gentrification is wildly uninformed regarding the challenges those processes pose to affordability, and displacement.

The alleged benefits of gentrification only accrue to those that can afford them. Either those who are able to stay and resist displacement, or those who are able to afford to move into these areas of increased rents. Gentrification is a reflection of socioeconomic class, while these processes must also be
understood through the lens of race. The notion that gentrification brings about “socially mixed” neighborhoods, rather than the destruction and replacement of working-class communities is a neoliberal illusion, premised on reassuring middle-class liberals that their participation in gentrification is a net positive, rather than a perpetuation of economic and racial inequality (Lees, 2008). This is because it is not at all clear how much ‘locals’ are able to share in the benefits, even if they are able to remain in the neighborhood. Some of the new businesses and services are more expensive than the small businesses they replace (Freeman, 2005).

Figure 14 Increasing home values in Denver County, 1997-2019. Source: Zillow.com

Furthermore, even when they are literal neighbors, persons from different classes rarely interact with one another in ways that could be construed as “mixing” or integrated (Lees, 2008). People tend to stick with their own kind, however they define it. One implication of this is that when gentrification-caused displacement does occur, the destruction of networks of mutual aid, such as with childcare, are
broken and not rebuilt (Lees, 2008). These issues of integration and mixing go to the heart of why gentrification and race are intertwined concepts in the US.

In addition to higher cost services, locals, especially racialized locals, may not feel welcome in the new spaces that cater to wealthier and whiter clientele (Freeman, 2005). That is, skin color can operate as a signifier of membership in a community. In the predominantly Black neighborhood of Harlem, New York, for example, Blackness operated there in ways that confirmed belonging and somewhat obscured class differences whereas the appearance of white people was interpreted as a sign of gentrification (Freeman, 2005). This somewhat simplistic racially-based sense of belonging could be the result of the fact that so many US neighborhoods are racially segregated, and have been for generations (Freeman, 2005). The importance of racial identity as a significant part of gentrification therefore deserves more academic consideration.

Those who promote gentrification as a method to achieve a social mix often do so from the patronizing perspective that the poor will benefit from the model of virtuous living as embodied by the middle-class gentrifiers. The process of gentrification therefore represents an official process of “social cleansing” wherein an undesirable group is removed and controlled to be replaced and dominated by a “law-abiding” population that better aligns with mainstream values (Uitermark, 2003). This discourse of improvement, often masked by phrases such as “urban renaissance” in place of “gentrification” (Lees, 2008; Smith, 1998), rationalizes the processes of displacement and the replacement of middle-class residents that occurs. A poor, working-class, and marginalized neighborhood is therefore made politically disposable, and justifies the economic expropriation of their space because they will be replaced by a population of property-owners allegedly “invested” in “improving” the community through their self-interested property improvement and higher tax base (Blomley, 2004). One example of this process is the criminalization of Latinx residents in the Highlands based upon fears over gang violence from the 1980s to the 1990s. While gentrification began there after the worst of this gang
period had ended, the lingering associations of criminality and Chicano radicalism helped position the neighborhood as in need of “renaissance.” Much like when the HOLC assessor noted the area’s connection to bootlegging more than a decade after end of Prohibition as a reason for its continued undesirability from the perspective of the government.

The urbicide (McKittrick, 2011), or cleansing of space through gentrification is almost never described as such. But rather, in the Denver report and elsewhere, as an opportunity for integration. This assertion is therefore susceptible to the critiques of integration that arose from the CRM and CLS movements. First, the beneficial perspective of gentrification aligns with the post-CRM idea of meritocracy. That is, with the removal of official discrimination all are able to freely and equally partake in a market society. This completely ignores the production of multi-generational poverty in segregated neighborhoods.

Especially the many barriers to home ownership that would otherwise buffer one from displacement, or at least permit one to truly “benefit” from the selling of their home at a higher price. In areas with large numbers of renters, or with a majority of working-class persons unable to access homeownership, this is simply unrealistic. An idealized notion of a meritocratic and free market for housing furthers the conservative neoliberal canard that poverty is rooted in cultural and moral failures, ignoring the material, historical, and social realities that shape inequality (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Positioning the poor as entirely responsible for their own poverty due to ‘culture’ and criminality, not stagnant wages, rapidly rising costs of living, discrimination, or a gutted welfare system, makes their gentrification and removal that much easier.

Secondly, the notion of “integration” is bound up with valuing “diversity.” However, social justice is based upon material and historical power relationships, not upon the proximity or multiplication of difference. As in the CRM struggle to integrate schools, the purpose of integration is not premised on the supposed magic of proximity to white students, but rather “based on a belief that the dominant group would keep control of the most successful schools and that the only way to get full a full range of
opportunities for minority children was to get access to those schools” (Bailey, 2017, p. 30). Race is a
socially lived fact, not a biological one. Therefore the goals of the CRM included gaining access to the
institutions that maintained and replicated power, as embodied by the segregated school system.
However, the CRM also changed the way race was discussed in the US. Expressions of explicit racism
became taboo, and policies that explicitly promoted white supremacy were outlawed. In its place came
the idea of integrationism, that is, the replacement of prejudice with neutrality and reason became the
proper way to understand racial justice, and that race-consciousness like Black Power or Chicano
identity was somehow a form of reverse-racism that ought to be sidelined (Crenshaw et al., 1995).
However, sidelining marginalized racial identities also obscures the history of racialized injustice and
exploitation. Instead of providing redress, the ideology of integrationism sweeps the whole mess under
the rug and makes the implications of race even more difficult to talk about.

Therefore, even if mixing and integration were possible in gentrification it would still not address the
imbalance of power that permit one person to gain a home loan while another is denied, or that
permits one person to visibly exist in public space while another is targeted by violence. Additionally,
this mixing goes only one way – the wealthy move into working-class neighborhoods, almost never
working-class mixing into wealthy areas (Smith, 1998). Attempts to study the impacts of transferring
disadvantaged persons into wealthier settings, such as HOPE IV, have not produced consistent or
appreciable gains for their subjects (Lees, 2008). Perhaps because of these failures, gentrification
remains the preferred policy for “deconcentrating poverty” adopted by municipal governments across
the US, in part because its neoliberal structure downloads the investment and improvement
responsibilities onto property-owning individuals rather than cash-strapped (another aspect of
neoliberalism) local governments (Formoso et al., 2010). Furthermore, projects like HOPE IV that are
designed to address poverty also do so in ways that reify nuclear family structures and single-generation
occupation that do not align with the complexity of family life in impoverished or ethnically non-
European neighborhoods (Fritz, 2009). The benefits of gentrification, a fair housing market producing social mixing and economic growth, therefore accrue only to those able to afford them and liberal government poverty-reduction programs tend to fail due to their own contradictions. Gentrification can “improve” a neighborhood at the scale of the neighborhood in terms of real estate values and taxes, but do very little to improve the circumstances of the working-class and marginalized people who live in it. In fact, gentrification simply displaces many of those it is allegedly benefits in order to make space for the economically and politically more powerful.

In light of all this, Denver’s official response to gentrification appears to be rather sanguine. For example, in 2016 the mayor’s announced $15 million dollars over ten years dedicated to the crisis in affordable housing as well as establishing a new Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE) to better coordinate and leverage city investments in housing (Housing an Inclusive Denver, 2017). Around the same time Mayor Hancock made this announcement, journalists reported that Denver’s police department spent close to the same amount, $14 million, in just three years settling claims of abuse alone for the police and sheriff departments, with the most prominent instances being against minorities (Murray, 2017b). The largest of those claims was $6 million dollars for Marvin Booker, a Black man, who died in jail after being beaten by sheriffs (Murray, 2017a). The disparity between budgeting for affordable housing and spending money to cover law enforcement abuse is only one example of how Denver organized its budgetary priorities. Still, the mayor’s stated commitment to affordable housing looked promising when housing and cost of living were increasing problems. Sadly, not even that commitment was lived up to. The promised $15 million fund fell short by $6 million because after the announcement that part of the budget would come from developer fees, developers rushed to get project approvals ahead of their implementation (Walker, 2017a). Then, a year after it was created, Denver’s office of HOPE was shut down, its director resigned, and the HOPE was folded into the Office of Economic Development (Walker, 2018). Thus the program that was intended to coordinate Denver’s
housing policy became another small office within the preexisting system. The short-lived tenure of HOPE and budget disparities beg the question whether the city was willing to seriously address the problems of affordable housing and how much of their energy was motivated by politics.

Meanwhile, the multiple crises of gentrification continue to unfold, making Denver a difficult place for anyone not in the upper classes. The city needs as least 15,500 affordable housing units, just for folks at the extreme-end of low-income renters, those making below 30% of area median income, and 10,500 additional units suitable for low-income renters were occupied by higher-income persons (Housing an Inclusive Denver, 2017, p. 35). If one was fortunate enough to have purchased a home before the latest market boom, rising property taxes are an additional burden to contend with. Between 2013 and 2015, assessed property values increased 30%, and rose and additional 26% between 2015 and 2017 (Housing an Inclusive Denver, 2017, p. 158). During this same period, 2011-2016 average rent in Denver increased by 46% (Housing an Inclusive Denver, 2017, p. 34). While Colorado does not have rent control, Denver has placed certain restrictions on rental units to keep them affordable. Currently about 21,000 units, 15% of the city’s total rental stock, has some restriction ensuring it remains affordable (Housing an Inclusive Denver, 2017, p. 76). However, more than 2,200 of those will expire in the next five years without further action (Housing an Inclusive Denver, 2017, p. 76). Faced with rapid increases in housing
costs and stagnant wages, the poor and working class don’t have many options about where they can live.

The majority of the recommendations in Inclusive Denver focus on “preserving” affordable housing, a defensive strategy. Its stated commitment to assist those facing eviction is promising, although that commitment is to “continue to support” these programs, not expand them (Housing an Inclusive Denver, 2017, p. 83). Only one of its 6 recommendations is for the development of new affordable housing units, and these are to be in “mixed-income” and “mixed-use” rentals (Housing an Inclusive Denver, 2017, p. 83). None of the plan’s recommendations are bad, per se, but they are mostly reactionary, not proactive. Considering the scale of the housing crisis a defensive approach is too conservative. It certainly lacks the ambition that accompanied the mayor’s announcement of the office of HOPE just the year before.

Housing an Inclusive Denver (2017) categorizes neighborhoods according to a 5-part typology. Globeville and Five Points are both categorized as Type 1, which means they possess “the widest variety of culture and diversity” in Denver, have more affordable housing options, but have experienced the sharpest rent increases and are the most vulnerable for displacement (Housing an Inclusive Denver, 2017, p. 119). The Highlands is categorized as Type 2, which is “highly engaged in the labor market” but earn less than Denver’s median, and have a mixed housing situation of high home prices and lower rent (Housing an Inclusive Denver, 2017, p. 120). Type 2 neighborhoods are almost 70% renters, while Type 1s are roughly 50/50 renters and owners (Housing an Inclusive Denver, 2017, p. 127). The report also classifies Globeville and Elyria Swansea as “RECAP” areas, meaning “Racially and Ethnically Concentrated Poverty” area (Housing an Inclusive Denver, 2017, p. 139). The Highlands and Five Points are not classified as RECAP areas. Although Five Points is adjacent to Park Hill, which is RECAP classified and immediately south of GES. These same areas, GES and neighborhoods adjacent to Five Points and the Highlands, are also noted as being at risk for displacement (see figure 12, below), along with much of west Denver’s

The *Gentrification Report* (2016) and *Housing and Inclusive Denver* (2017) are two of the clearest documents produced by the city of Denver that address gentrification and displacement in the current period. They classify and depict the neighborhoods in north Denver in ways that acknowledge their vulnerabilities and offer policy prescriptions for the city’s decision makers. Below, I discuss each of the three neighborhoods in finer detail.

**The Highlands – Latter Stage Gentrification**

The Highlands had become a piece of *Aztlan* for many of the Latinx community, but that did not change the larger economic and demographic forces that brought gentrification to the neighborhood. After close to eighty years of disinvestment, criminalization, and underperforming schools (Hunt, 1999;
Langegger, 2013) the demand for housing close to downtown began to drive changes. By the time the city of Denver issued its *Gentrification Report* in 2016, their gentrification model detected that the Highlands was already in the latter stages of gentrification. However the changes were uneven across the area. The neighborhood was essentially divided in half, according to Denver’s study. The eastern portion had already begun gentrifying and was continuing, while the western half was in an earlier phase of gentrification but also undergoing continued losses of pre-existing residents. The beginning of this pattern was noted back in the late nineties in Rebecca Hunt’s (1999) dissertation on north Denver which she described as:

“The section north and south of 32nd, west of Federal has been the place for young, middle-class couples to buy from about 1985 until the present. The Federal to Zuni section to the east has become increasingly gentrified as housing costs rise. Immigrants are being forced to relocate to less expensive areas. Yet, the area from Zuni to Federal on 32nd, the heart of the Mexican-American community, is still pulsing with life... One final irony is the new apartment expansion along the Platte River at 15th Avenue. What was once the Bottoms [one of Denver’s original slums situated along the Platte River] will now
house young professionals who want to live close to both work and play downtown. As in the past, those with money get to choose where they live, only now the old ethnic neighborhoods are their choice” (p. 263).

Considering the history of the Highlands, its early susceptibility to gentrification is perhaps not surprising. It was built as a moderately affluent community to provide respectable single-family homes in a time during the late 19th century when Denver was growing rapidly, but much of the city was still poorly developed and poorly planned. Its ‘decline’ into a working class neighborhood took a generation, and was the result of incorporation into Denver proper, rapid growth along the city’s margins, and economic trends, such as the Great Depression, which permitted the succession of Italian and then Latinx communities to take the place of the neighborhood’s original western European and WASP inhabitants.

The fundamentals of the Highlands neighborhood, however, made its gentrification quite likely given the right circumstances. It is immediately adjacent to the CBD, the abundance of Victorian houses is charming, its elevation provides a good view over the city, and the large numbers of Latinx working-class residents helped keep the area affordable. In the late twentieth century the first signs of the coming change began to appear. The mid-nineties was another period of growth in Denver (State Demography Office, n.d.). That period saw a renewed interest an investment in the downtown area, with the cleanup of the gritty 1980s being accomplished by the construction of large public projects such as the Rockies baseball stadium and Denver International Airport, the conversion of old “Lower Downton” or “LoDo” brick warehouses into trendy apartments, funded by the increasing expansion of oil and gas extraction in the state (Goetz, 2013). Immediately south of the Highlands the new Broncos football stadium was constructed in 2001, further boosting business and traffic in the area. The trend toward rapidly rising home values is clear: in 1998 the median home value per square foot was $100, values have doubled
and then doubled again, so that by 2019 the median per square foot value was almost $500 (See Figure 10). The Great Recession of 2008-2010 barely dented the increasing values, but Denver’s boom immediately after is clearly visible in the steep rise in home prices.

These events point to the conclusion that the racialized rent gap had already begun to be exploited before the wave of gentrification that began around 2010. It also points to the ways that the spatialization of race informs residential development. Federal Boulevard operates as a 21st century Race Street, a symbolic boundary lined with taquerias and quinceanera shops, beyond which gentrifiers hesitate to tread. As hip restaurants arrive, and more and more of the older houses are “scraped” to be replaced with asymmetrical post-modern versions of standalone houses and duplexes, the boundary becomes more and more visible as changes tend to stop along that western boundary. To the north, north of 38th Avenue, a similar boundary has emerged. A couple blocks north of 38th the community is still largely Latinx, perhaps kept somewhat free of gentrification by the presence of public housing and increasing proximity to I-70. Although, considering the dramatic changes along I-25 in the Highlands, the highway may not be a permanent deterrence to redevelopment.

**Five Points: Ongoing Gentrification**

Five Points is the historic center of Denver’s Black community, a role foisted upon it by systemic white supremacy, and the importance of that identity shapes the perception of gentrification in that neighborhood. Although Denver’s report on gentrification classified Five Points as “does not the typology” (*Gentrification Report, 2016*, p. 16) for gentrification, there can be little doubt that the area is changing. Five Points therefore sits in an interesting position, where traditional modeling presents an ambiguous picture of change, community members and development point toward gentrification as the culprit. This makes the area a sort of Rorschach test for those interested in Denver’s evolution. It also points to the limitations of statistical analysis to identify gentrification. If a community claims to be
undergoing gentrification, but the official model does not agree, is the area in fact gentrifying? I argue, in part because of the ambiguity of the meaning of gentrification, that residents tend to know best. If they claim their neighborhood is being gentrified it very likely is. Gentrification, after all, has colloquial meanings as well as academic.

The response of residents and activists to the processes of gentrification in Five Points are informed by their knowledge of history, their memories of community discrimination, and their desire to remain in their homes. One recent episode in Five Points helps bring tensions over gentrification into focus.

In the winter of 2017, the Ink coffee shop chain in Five Points put a sign out in front on the sidewalk proclaiming that they were “happily gentrifying” the neighborhood (Turkewitz, 2017). This sign soon became emblematic of the unwanted changes that were bringing about a “New Denver.” Protestors gathered to denounce the café and its sign, and the café wall was defaced with graffiti condemning “white coffee.” The owners apologized, they claimed the sign was a bad joke, politicians sputtered predictable lamentations, and the media made hay from the incident. But, the reason the story became so galvanizing should only be surprising if we view gentrification solely as an economic process centered on the value of housing. If, instead, the history of a place is included, if its meaning for those who call it home is included, then the definition of gentrification is broadened in ways that better account for the shifting meanings of race.

Including the meaning and history of a neighborhood as it is understood by its residents complicates the understanding of segregation. To be crystal clear, racial segregation is violence and it is unjust. However, segregation into a homogenous community may provide some benefits. For a marginalized and repressed community a segregated space can provide sanctuary and a rearrangement of power relations within a minority or low-income area (Lees, 2008). The history of how the Black residents of
Five Points built their own businesses, churches, political organizations, and centers of culture shows some of the ways they met segregation with excellence.

Five Points became locally famous as a place for jazz music and good food, so much so that it has been called the “Harlem of the West” (Leonard & Noel, 1990). The local branch of the NAACP was founded in the neighborhood in 1915, and has been an advocate for civil rights for Coloradans ever since (Five Points-Whittier Neighborhood History, 2014), including organizing protests against KKK screenings of the film Birth of a Nation that same year (Junne, Jr., 2012). Many of the famous artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance, from Duke Ellington to W.E.B. DuBois visited and performed in Denver and stayed in Five Points since at the time that was the only area Black persons were allowed to stay (Junne, Jr., 2012). When Denverite Benny Hooper returned from WWI he opened the Ex-Servicemen’s Club because there was no hotel that Blacks could stay in Denver. Mayor and KKK member Stapleton visited the Club one day, put his arm around Hooper’s shoulders and told him to find a new location for his business. Hooper relocated to Five Points, reopened his business as the Deluxe Recreation Parlor and Ex-Serviceman’s Club as well as an adjacent jazz club (Junne, Jr., 2012). These are only a very small number of examples to help illustrate how Five Points has been a center of life, culture, and resistance for Denver’s Black community. When gentrification began to creep into the area in the 21st century the importance of the area came under threat as local businesses shut down, long-time families were displaced, developers initiated projects in the area, and new arrivals came, often totally ignorant of the area’s history. In the face of rapid neighborhood changes, it was historical memory and community pride that made Ink coffee’s tasteless gentrification signboard strike such a nerve.
Five Points: School Segregation and the Stapleton Development’s Impacts

Gentrification in Five Points arises from a set of structural vulnerabilities that have been developed over generations of racial discrimination. Of primary importance to Five Points’ gentrification is partly due to the redevelopment of Stapleton Airport to its east, into a middle-class neighborhood. Stapleton was the city’s airport until 1995 when Denver International Airport was completed on the city’s eastern margin. The 4700 acres of former airport were converted into a range of housing options and mixed-use spaces in the style of “new urbanism” principles (Goetz, 2013). The conversion of a busy airport into residential space had profound impacts on the belt of Black neighborhoods to its west: Park Hill, Whittier, and Five Points. First it opened up a large area for investment and profit for developers, and provided an opportunity for infilling a central part of the city. Second, it altered the racial and political dynamics in the area. By 2010, the neighborhood had 10,000 residents (Goetz, 2013). The development of Stapleton also brought about a chain of consequences that highlight the disempowered position of the community.
in Five Points compared to their more affluent neighbors. Because gentrification and racial capitalism permeate social relations it can be seen in unlikely places, even outside of what would be considered “the market” such as in public schools.

One outcome of the Stapleton development, was an increased demand for schools to serve the young families that were drawn to the new development. Simultaneously, a generation after the Keyes case, the Denver Public School system was still grappling with finding ways to desegregate their schools without the tools and authority of the court. At the same juncture, the utilization of standardized testing expanded as the basis of evaluating school performance. The testing regime was expanded and made more important after George W Bush’s neoliberal educational reform, No Child Left Behind, was rolled out across the country (Boo, 2007). Studies show that a student’s socioeconomic background greatly impact motivation, success, and the ability to capitalize on educational opportunities (Aske et al., 2011). The tensions and contradictions of Denver’s public school system and the struggle over racial equality came to a head in Manual High School. Located in Whittier, only a couple blocks from the official boundary of Five Points, Manual was one of Denver’s earliest schools and considered one of it’s finest until the area came to be dominated by Black and Latinx families in the mid-twentieth century (Cherland, 2014). Manual was also one of the first schools in the area to teach male and female students together, and one of the first to admit Black students (Cherland, 2014). The school also played an important role in civil rights when in 1927 a group of Black parents there successfully sued the school superintendent for establishing separate social functions for students on the basis of race, in violation of the State constitution (Five Points-Whittier Neighborhood History, 2014). Manual has produced numerous influential alumni, such as the Chicano activist “Corky” Gonzales, the city’s first Black mayor Wellington Webb, as well as Denver’s current Black mayor, Michael Hancock (Cherland, 2014).

By the time gentrification began to pick up after the Great Recession, Manual High School and its neighbor Smiley Middle School were struggling, among other things, to meet testing benchmarks. Both
schools were overwhelmingly Black and Latinx with high ratios of students enrolled in the Free and Reduced Lunch program, often used as a proxy for student poverty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Manual and Smiley were closed in 2006, leading parents and students to accuse DPS, as well as the district’s superintendent, future senator, Michael Bennet, of racism in the destruction of a local institution (Abramson, 2008). Student enrollment have been cut in half, gang activity was on the rise, and Manual had become such a well-known example of failure that the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation intervened to divide the school so the each floor was transformed into a “mini-school” in an effort to deepen social connections (Boo, 2007). From the perspective of many of the students, much of this attention derived from the coming wave of white families and students, rather than the benevolence of the school system (Abramson, 2008; Boo, 2007). The arrival of a fair-trade coffee shop appeared to portend changes in their area that was still dominated by liquor stores, dialysis centers, and a juvenile detention facility (Boo, 2007).

Figure 19 Trends in public school segregation in Denver. Source: A+ Colorado (2015)
After Manual re-opened in 2007 with new teachers, administration, and refocused on helping students, the changes only slightly improved circumstances for struggling students (Boo, 2007). This is in part due to the fact that the challenges many students face go beyond the classroom and are rooted in problems such as multi-generational poverty and the undocumented status of many parents (Bailey, 2017). The impact of these socio-economic problems on students and their families meant that, whatever the positive efforts made by the school system, there is only so much that can be achieved by a school district. The problems are larger than education and include housing, economic security, and political power. Furthermore, Denver public schools had quickly resegregated after the end of court monitoring and bussing (Lee, 2006). By 2014, 70% of Latinx students and 52% of Black students attended schools that were 90% or more students of color, compared to only 11% of white students (A+ Colorado, 2015). The school district’s reports stressed the connections between neighborhood segregation and failing schools, including the ways that gentrification threatened to reinforce historical patterns of discrimination (Bailey, 2017). In one study, DPS examined its efforts at using expanded enrollment zones to help desegregate schools, ironically one of the tools developed to help whites flee desegregating schools (Reardon & Owens, 2014), and found that their efforts had almost entirely failed (Denver Public Schools, 2016). Without a broader mandate for structural change and assistance from institutions such as the court DPS has found desegregation of its classrooms and the neighborhoods it serves to be elusive.

The one school that DPS felt had been slightly desegregated, was Smiley Middle School in Park Hill (Denver Public Schools, 2016). Smiley had also been a majority Black and Latinx school with failing test scores. The school district closed it in 2013, and reopened it as McAuliffe International School the next year. Most of the former students did not return, instead many white students living in nearby Stapleton enrolled to take advantage of the better-funded and revamped programming. The index for segregation
at Smiley/McAuliffe dropped from .26 in 2012, to .13 in 2016 (Asmar, 2016). This is more integrated than before, but achieved through displacement and replacement rather than integration.

The situation for students of color in the Five Points-Whittier area is depressing, and seemingly intractable. It is also deeply connected to the trends in demographics and urban development. Five Points had gradually developed into a predominantly Black neighborhood, as well as a home for many Latinx. Its proximity to the airport more or less ensured it would remain neglected, even after the end of formal discrimination. When Stapleton closed and was redeveloped within the context of Denver’s growth in the late 90s, thousands of wealthier and whiter moved adjacent to Denver’s central Black neighborhoods. The resulting pressures for public services interacted with long-term, systemic problems generated by white supremacy and neoliberal approaches to governance. Educators attempted to address these problems within their sphere of control, the schools, but they could not and cannot do much to influence society outside of school. Poverty, official neglect, and punitive approaches toward immigrants are some of these problems. Taken together they point toward the vastly different valuation placed upon the futures of students of color compared to their white counterparts. This is an outcome of racial capitalism, where schools and even students themselves are seen as investments promising a return. Because public schools are so intrinsically related to the neighborhoods they serve they provide a proxy for larger struggles for equality and desegregation. Denver has failed the students and families of Five Points in this regard.

Globeville – Under Threat from Gentrification

Denver’s Gentrification Report classified Globeville as “Susceptible to gentrification” (2016, p. 16) primarily due to its proximity to the gentrification of the Highlands. The residents of Globeville were already well aware of their vulnerability. Rather than only becoming “susceptible” around 2016,
Globeville’s residents have fought against their precarity and second-class status since the first shacks were erected in the shadows of the Globe smelter. The proud working-class and immigrant community there had long partnered with its neighbors, such as those in Elyria-Swansea, for generations in fighting against injustice and exploitation. They fought to keep their homes against wholesale eviction and destruction of Globeville when they were first annexed by the city, as employees of the smelters and meat-packing plants they had fought and unionized for better conditions, they had fought against the pollution and poisoning of their neighborhood by those same industries, and they had fought against the forced removal and bifurcation of their neighborhood during the construction of I-25 (Hunt, 1999). Since the early days of Globeville the fight had been for the recognition that they lived in a neighborhood dominated by industry, and not an industrial area with a neighborhood in it (Hunt, 1999, p. 242). Knowing their history and positionality, some community members prepared a response to Denver’s official report.

To face the new threats presented by gentrification and city policy, activists organized themselves into the Globeville Elyria-Swansea Coalition Organizing for Health and Housing Justice (GES). Appropriately enough, their report was titled “A Story of Displacement” (2017) and in it they set about dismantling Denver’s official narrative of gentrification and growth. Two key elements make A Story of Displacement an impressive counter-narrative. First, the residents performed their own household survey of community members that emphasized their agency and successes in opposition to official statistics that emphasized their poverty and their supposed need for intervention. Second, they attacked head-on the notion that the city’s brand of economic development via-gentrification would address the alleged blights of their community. Rather, they point out the city’s policy proscription for their neighborhood would facilitate their removal, rather than their improvement.

In contrast the grass-roots approach of GES, Denver’s official documents such as the Gentrification Study (2016) and the city’s affordable housing policy as laid out in Housing an Inclusive Denver: Setting
Housing Policy, Strategy & Investment Priorities (2018-2023) (2017), focus on policies such as issuing bonds, setting fees, worrying about impacts of too much affordable housing investment on the city’s credit rating, prioritizing new mixed-development, and increasing density. Both official documents proclaim their fundamental goals to be “the ongoing development and preservation of inclusive communities...that help residents reach their full potential” (Housing an Inclusive Denver, 2017, p. 20), and a “city where everyone matters” (Gentrification Study, 2016, p. 3). However, community activists in GES highlight the disconnect between the lofty rhetoric of inclusion and the reliance upon a neoliberal mode of urban development, willfully ignorant of the potential impacts of that development model within systemic class- and race-based oppression.

First, GES was able to canvas their neighborhood far more thoroughly than city officials. Gathering their own better-quality data allowed GES to draw very different conclusions about the state of their community vis a vis development. Denver’s five-year affordable housing plan, Housing and Inclusive

Figure 20 Median home value per square foot in Globeville 1997-2018. Source: Zillow.com
Denver (2017) noted that the city was 35% “Hispanic,” that this group made up a disproportionately smaller number of homebuyers, and that 65% of the city’s Latinx households qualified as low-income (Housing an Inclusive Denver, 2017, p.111). However, this commitment to inclusivity and “mattering,” Denver’s planners did astonishingly little outreach to the Latinx community. Planners held numerous public meetings and conducted a bilingual survey regarding housing policy and development which garnered precisely zero Spanish language responses (Housing an Inclusive Denver, 2017, p.155).

Conversely, GES gathered more than 500 household survey responses, 66% of them were in Spanish, 87% self-identified as “Hispanic” or “Latino”, 80% had a high school diploma or less, 76% earned less than $35,000 a year, half of renters reported having no lease at all, and 48% reported having three or more adults in the home (A Story of Displacement, 2017, p. 4). Despite these indicators of poverty and marginalization respondents noted their strong multi-generational bonds to their home and community – 73% responded that they had “great relationships” with their neighbors, landlords, and tenants (A Story of Displacement, 2017, p. 4). Furthermore, home-ownership rates in Globeville and Elyria-Swansea are 50%, in-line with the city’s overall home-ownership average, even though the estimated income needed to afford a mortgage in Denver in 2010 was $93,000 (A Story of Displacement, 2017, p. 8).

Clearly, the Latinx community of Globeville has managed to secure rates of home-ownership and maintain community bonds far better than what economic and social indicators would imply. It is also unlikely that if they were displaced that they would be able to afford to buy a home in another part of Denver.

The second purpose of GES’ A Story of Displacement (2017) was to offer an alternative view of what housing stability, affordability, and development could look like from the perspective of the residents themselves. The vulnerability to gentrification and displacement that the activists in GES highlight include not only city-wide pressures of immigration and the housing crisis, but the development efforts of the city government itself that foster and shape those pressures. A whole slew of large-scale
construction projects threatened to bulldoze, displace, and divide Globeville all over again such as expanding the National Western Center, expanding and sinking I-70, the redevelopment of Brighton Boulevard, and four new RTD light-rail lines (A Story of Displacement, 2017, p. 2). Furthermore, the residents note that their community hosts a high concentration of marijuana growing and dispensing operations, located in the abundant industrial properties. The sum of these conditions and projects reinforce trends that make residents vulnerable to involuntary displacement, especially since the majority are already mortgage or rent distressed (A Story of Displacement, 2017, p. 2). Pushed out from their home, either by imminent domain seizure for the city’s vanity projects, high property taxes, or landlords looking to cash in on higher property values, displaced residents would be forced into a highly competitive housing market with little to no public or private relief.

Pointing to the “[p]ublic investment and governmental decisions that have caused local residents harm and failed our neighborhoods for more than a century” (A Story of Displacement, 2017, p. 3) GES notes that their community bears the brunt of Denver’s growth and gentrification. Informed by their struggles against destruction-by-interstate and their struggles for environmental justice (Hunt, 1999), today’s residents of Globeville and Elyria Swansea have fought against the expansion of the National Western Center and I-70. Activists organized a “Ditch the Ditch” campaign to fight the expansion of I-70 that bifurcated their neighborhoods and largely severed them from Denver. The new I-70 expansion project would sink the highway below the surface, adding lanes for more traffic volume, covering parts of the top with green parks, and improving street connections to the city’s grid (Freeways Without Futures, 2019). Costing $1.2 billion, this project threatens a further 5% of Globeville’s residents with displacement, as well as bringing more residents into contact with harmful vehicle air pollution (Freeways Without Futures, 2019, p. 22). The expansion requires the destruction of 56 residences, seventeen businesses, and the playground at Swansea Elementary. Globeville is already among the most polluted zip codes in the US, and CDOT’s environmental review admitted that construction could
potentially pollute groundwater even further. Ditch the Ditch sued CDOT for violating their civil rights, which CDOT agreed to settle out of court in December of 2018 with a contribution of $550,000 toward an independent study of the public health impacts to Globeville (Freeways Without Futures, 2019, p. 23). Construction is currently ongoing. This is reminiscent of the decade-long court battle to force the American Smelting and Refining Company to pay $28 million in clean-up and compensation to Globeville residents (Hunt, 1999, p. 255). These payments do help address health and justice concerns somewhat, but ultimately the lives and homes of Globeville are still considered expendable in the name of Denver’s economic growth.

Figure 21 Artist rendering of the I-70 expansion once complete. Source: CDOT
The political outcomes of these contemporary struggles is ongoing. One of the most prominent activists in the Ditch the Ditch campaign, Swansea native and Manual graduate, Candi CdeBaca chose to become more involved and entered the election for City Council. The Swansea native won a hotly contested race against incumbent, and close ally of former Mayor Webb, Albus Brooks by just 752 votes (Ensslin, 2019). CdeBaca’s victory put a socialist into city government where she has continued to advocate for the residents against displacement and gentrification. CdeBaca frames the threats to GES in terms compatible with this paper’s racial capitalism framework. In an interview immediately after her victory she said:

Capitalism, by design, is extractive, and in order to generate profit in a capitalist system, something has to be exploited...In fact, I feel like a lot of government-sanctioned violence and abuse and too much control is what catalyzed my race to protect my community. As far as the political structure around it, I do believe that in a democracy we should have control as the people over labor and resources and what happens to our tax dollars...There’s that group of neoliberals or corporate democrats that really believe that the economic system works and that there’s ways we can reform it to work a little bit better (Burness, 2019, paras 5, 14, 26).

Meanwhile Brooks left politics to work with a large development firm, putting his knowledge of government to work for private profit (Ensslin, 2019). The victory of CdeBaca could be read as an indictment of the neoliberal model of growth and its unjust impacts upon marginalized communities. It is also another chapter in the fight of Globeville’s residents to exist as a community despite the repeated moves to displace them in favor of more economically or racially desired populations.

It remains to be seen exactly how gentrification may reshape Globeville. The expansion of major infrastructure projects are already unleashing a new wave of dispossession for the neighborhood’s economically vulnerable. The current construction along I-70 is extremely disruptive, suppressing
demand for the area. Once construction is complete, Globeville will be re-connected to Denver in a way it hasn’t been since the interstate was first built in the 1960s. Except this time, in the near future, the smelters and packing plants will be gone. The viaduct will no longer be a wall. In its place will be green spaces and straight roads into the neighborhood. The neighborhood will be only a few minutes from downtown by car, bike, or from the brand new light-rail stations – a grotesque echo of the tram connections never built in the 19th century. How long will the residents and homeowners be able to resist the higher valuations that will come with improved amenities and infrastructure? Twenty years from now will a neighborhood survey portray a community with multi-generational connections with more than 70% of respondents believing they have “great” relationships with their neighbors? Will more the vast majority of its residents still identify as Latinx? Will Globeville still be a place that welcomes migrants? Perhaps it will become more like the Highlands. Where a handful of small *tacquerias* compete for business with upscale eateries serving the brunch crowd, hung-over from their Tinder date at the microbrewery the night before. Or will it become another Stapleton, a sterile place of cookie-cutter suburban homes and strip malls catering to the upwardly mobile consumer, whose sense of public space includes willfully ignoring the historical injustices that made them? The fight of groups like GES give some hope that policies and solutions originating from the community itself may have some positive impact, even though the social justice warriors from Globeville have historically lost most of their big fights and gotten short shrift instead.
Chapter 8: Conclusion: What Can Racial Capitalism Do for the Study of Gentrification

This thesis began by asking “why do certain neighborhoods gentrify and not others?” If gentrification is driven by the opening of rent gaps over time, which are then capitalized on when market conditions shift, then gentrification ought to be a general process across neighborhoods adjacent to the central business district. However, looking at the way gentrification has unfolded across Denver, the geography of gentrification is uneven. Gentrification scholarship already has established ways of viewing the role of government in setting market parameters, the role of mobile capital in compressing space to open new neighborhoods up to investment, how large infrastructure and transit projects can foster gentrification, and many other economic and political factors in gentrification (Lees et. al., 2008). However, the role of race is contested and is obscure in many cases. To better theorize the place of racial identity in gentrification I argue that a neighborhood’s vulnerability to gentrification is not only an economic process of rent gaps and unequal class relations. In the United States, systemic racial discrimination has played an important role in the placement of marginalized communities by legal means as well as market-based means which prevent and destroy wealth across generations. In my view, vulnerability to gentrification can arise from historic economic vulnerability rooted in sustained racial discrimination. I have brought in the theory of racial capitalism to begin tying the disparate historical threads of racial discrimination together in such a way as to illuminate how race has been tied to class in the United States through time. Utilizing a race-conscious historical analysis I have traced the ways that race significantly contributed to the formation of three Denver neighborhoods and their resulting vulnerability to gentrification. This contributes to the uneven geography of gentrification in that some neighborhoods became enclaves of exploited racial groups, concentrating and sustaining the structure of class and social inequality within specific neighborhoods.

Gentrification scholarship already acknowledges that the economy of housing is vitally important. In the United States race has been a social relation of such importance legally and financially
that to attempt to examine gentrification as an economic process alone is insufficient. However the
cyclical pattern of investment and disinvestment are not dictated purely by “rational” market actions.
Because markets are composed of people, and regulated by government, markets and laws are entities
that reflect and validate social values – including mores of white supremacy (Beeman et al., 2010;
Crenshaw et al., 1995; Rothstein, 2017). Taken together, these forces create not just laissez faire
capitalism, but a racial capitalism that differentiates value according to Eurocentric notions (Robinson &
Kelley, 2000). Racial capitalism provides a way into understanding how and why a neighborhood is
working class, and the processes that facilitate the expansion of gentry into that space. It can provide
insights into why a neighborhood is vulnerable to gentrification as well as inform understandings of
which power inequalities make gentrification possible and legible. I proposed the idea of a racialized
rent gap to supplement the standard conceptualization of gentrification’s economic inequality between
places. Denver, Colorado is a case in point. The city has a complicated history of racial discrimination
that is both particular to the ways the western US was stolen and settled, but Denver’s history is also
follows national trends of urbanization.

Blacks and Latinx persons in Denver are both undervalued in racial capitalism. Though their experiences
have not been the same, there are enough similarities in their relationships to white supremacy that
comparisons can be made. The most obvious critique of my connecting gentrification to racial capitalism
would be that “the market” does not care what race one is. All that matters is dollars and cents. To an
extent that is true. Wealthy and successful persons of color are better able to manage the inequities of
racial capitalism. Some of them, like Denver’s Combus “Cubby” Chapman, were even permitted to live in
white neighborhoods, and to do so long enough for their white neighbors to begin appreciating them. In
Denver’s political history the racialized “threat” of low-wage immigrant labor underbidding and out-
competing “native” labor has been repeated many times. Almost as many times as migrant labor was
actively sought out and recruited to work here. The anti-Chinese sentiment of the 1880s is one example,
the later panics over Latinx migrants is another. The spatialization of race and the racialization of class seriously challenge any pretext of equality-deriving from the market. This is especially true when government intervention in the markets defines who is and who is not permitted to participate in the market, such as the egregiousness of redlining.

The idea of a color blind market is a myth, because race is a social fact intertwined with the economy. The issue of racism is an uncomfortable one for many reasons. It implicates all of us to some extent, and if systemic discrimination has truly been so pervasive then it calls into question the history we tell ourselves, as well as our assumptions surrounding cherished freedoms and democratic values. However, one cannot separate race from the economy or the law in the US any more than one could separate peanut butter from jelly and put the bread away clean. Still, this is what many defenders of the economic order attempt to do. Pushing back against charges of systemic, inherent racism in capitalism is of primary importance to defenders of the status quo (Crenshaw, 2017; Harris, 1993). Rather than honestly grapple with the implications of how race and class intersect, dismissal and denial are the preferred options. When gentrification manifests within a crisis such as Denver’s affordable housing crisis after the Great Recession, it becomes impossible to ignore. Something must be done, even if key elements are avoided. One example is the city of Denver’s refusal to account for race in its gentrification analysis. They did so in service of their quantitative model, and perhaps in an attempt to dodge the difficult political issues that would arise if systemic racism was faced directly. The dominance of quantification as method in policy is supposed to direct effective intervention, as well as provide clear metrics of an intervention’s effects. Solutions are demanded when crises arise. However, if an important variable such as race is simply ignored, or difficult to quantify, then how successful should we expect our policies be?

There are many potential policies to address gentrification, and race does not have to factor into all of them. For example, fully funding housing assistance programs so that all who are eligible can participate.
would help immensely (Rothstein, 2017). All of the cities in the metro area could follow Denver’s lead and adopt inclusionary zoning policies that put affordable housing into new developments (Rusk, 2003). A myriad of policies that address the roots of working class poverty and high rent burdens are needed too. For just one example, raising the minimum wage to realistically meet cost of living could significantly enhance housing security. Current programming is not enough, but we do not fully fund even what little we do provide.

The above proposals require forms of democratically instituted market intervention. For pro-market ideologues, some form of supply-side economics is the best solution to housing crises. If homes are expensive, then we ought to be able to build our way to affordability. However a strategy of building blitzes is unrealistic due as much to the layers of government regulation that make construction slow and expensive, as it is due to the market incentives that make it unlikely developers would willingly build themselves into a glutted housing market. That would be economic suicide (the problem of profitable housing construction is rarely mentioned when proposed as a solution). Furthermore, where will those new (hopefully affordable) homes be built and what kind of homes will they be? If racial and economic equality are to be considered then certain kinds of affordable homes ought to be built in certain areas, so that those most starved of housing stability and the opportunity to own assets would have first chance at them. The strategy of more equitable housing construction thus brings forth more problems. Site location is just one of those problems and it is complicated by things like NIMBYism, infill versus redevelopment, price and rent controls, and eligibility requirements. Integrating an analysis of systemic inequality through the lens of racial capitalism seemingly only complicates these problems across the board. So why complicate things further with racial capitalism?

Acknowledging the complexity and the immensity of a task should not mean that things are impossible. Achieving justice for those exploited by racial capitalism could in fact be a way towards better policies. I cannot produce a comprehensive list of policy proscriptions to solve gentrification and racial inequality.
This thesis is written in the hope that it can help inform those working to articulate their situation and imagine alternatives. It does not solve anything, but it may quietly help those solutions be born. I hope that a more critical historical understanding of Denver’s evolution can be integrated into the larger debate around gentrification here, and perhaps other cities facing similar problems.

Insofar as solutions can be found in the area of policy, then an analysis of racial capitalism’s influence on housing and gentrification ought to be viewed as a help rather than a hindrance. This is partly because the intellectual foundation of racial capitalism originates from a hopeful form of politics. There is no point in critique if there is no hope for change. Let there be no doubt that despite the consistence of white supremacy in Denver and the US, things have changed and improved. When Denverites of different races formed the local chapter of the NAACP in 1915 they challenged the whole system of white supremacy that they faced. They did not give up because solutions seemed difficult or complex. Each fight over each issue over each generation matters. There is hope in this politics, not because progress is preordained, but because with any discrete issue there is always something better to be done. The fight for equality in education is one example. Equality has not been achieved in Denver, even with the victory of Keyes in the Supreme Court and a generation of bussed students. The problems of school segregation have not entirely gone away. But the school district now spends time and energy grappling with ways they can address inequality, rather than ways to gerrymander and maintain segregated schools. Progress is a moving target that is never complete.

This means that I cannot produce a comprehensive list of policy proscriptions to solve gentrification, even if I wanted to. Instead of my preferred interventions, I believe the best path toward solutions for gentrification lies within the communities already facing those challenges. The voices of people impacted by gentrification, such as the Globeville Elyria Swansea Coalition, are vital if any action is going to have a chance at success. As they put it in A Story of Displacement (2017, p. 6-7):
“An out of control housing market, driven by these investments, and a lack of rights, is causing displacement of the GES people. Our elected officials, who have continually chosen to ignore warnings from the community, now look to us for ‘solutions’. If they are sincere in their concern and care, our displacement, driven by the impacts of their projects, would be more than an afterthought--and preventing displacement would be their biggest priority. To reverse this pattern of abuse that is at the root of poverty, incarceration and failing health--the change in current systems of development and economic gain must be completely re-strategized and invested in from the grass-roots.”

They are right to say this. The crises of gentrification do not suddenly arrive out of the blue when some young professional buys a quaint house in a working-class neighborhood. Nor is it possible to collapse the cause of displacement simply “poverty.” It is the creation and maintenance of poverty, and all the systems it takes to do so. White supremacy is one of those systems. The way it is embedded in politics and economics is the problem. The groundwork for gentrification is built up over time, with each predatory loan, with each school child whose playground is contaminated with pollution, with every house put in the shadow of an interstate viaduct.

To arrive when the crisis is unfolding, brow furrowed with concern, and then ask, “what should we do?” is only possible when you never cared to listen in the first place. None of the problems effecting Globeville, Five Points, or the Highlands are new or secret. Problems such as pollution, poverty-level incomes, the significant shortage of affordable housing, poor transportation, police violence, and more, all began long ago. They are all more or less public knowledge. They are certainly known and talked about around the kitchen tables in these neighborhoods. Only those suddenly waking up to gentrification don’t seem to know where it came from. Yet, they are often the ones demanding solutions quickest and the loudest. If they had listened before they would already have known.
It might be odd to consider it but Denver is still astonishingly young. Those born around the founding of the city lived into the early 20th century, their children birthed the Baby Boomers, whose children are only now navigating adulthood and having children of their own. The history of Denver City goes back only about five generations. Looking upon the journey to the present demonstrates that with hard work and bravery we can change our city. Current gentrification can be addressed and somewhat mitigated. Future gentrification and displacement is something we can do even more to mitigate. Marginalized communities can be supported right now to build economic security and safe housing. Our history isn’t even truly history yet. Cities and social relations are protean, there is always a chance to build the city we want, if we want it.
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