

GENTRIFICATION: MORE THAN AN INNOCENT MOVEMENT OF URBAN RENEWAL

*UNDERSTANDING THE PHENOMENON OF BLACK GENTRIFICATION*

*AS A MECHANISM FOR BLACK RESURGENCE*

by

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## ABSTRACT

This project is an original research paper centered on examining the process of gentrification in the urban centers of the United States, and moreover, exploring the role of people of color in this process. *Can people of color gentrify? How is Black gentrification different from the overall process of gentrification?* While traditional gentrification as perpetuated by white people is both a classist and racist process that involves the displacement of racial and ethnic minorities, a revival of the historic and exclusive dynamics of racial segregation, and the commodification of diverse cultures, Black gentrification follows a completely different set of trends. As a means of urban transformation, Black gentrification is motivated by the Black middle-class's desire to escape racism in the larger white world, build a stronger connection and sense of solidarity with the Black community, and reinvest into Black spaces. Furthermore, Black gentrification follows a model centered on a social justice agenda that limits displacement of lower-income Black people while maintaining the economic diversity of the community. Because of the glaring differences between these processes, I argue that Black gentrification is actually a distinct and unique process that does not mirror the same exclusionary and racist mechanisms as traditional gentrification. And as a result, this process should not be labeled Black gentrification at all, but rather a new theory called *Black Resurgence*. The conflation of Black Resurgence to traditional gentrification is a dangerous and irresponsible comparison that undermines the truly oppressive nature of gentrification carried out by white gentrifiers. Resurgence represents a coming to life, a sort of revival; this is exactly what is happening in these newly gentrified epicenters of Black life.

## I. Introduction

A critical investigation into the patterns of economic growth and revitalization of urban communities within the contemporary United States reveals a startling trend that is largely overlooked in the name of social advancement: *gentrification*. In the modern era, the process of gentrification has undergone extensive research relative to its effects on class relations in the most developed metropolitan centers of the nation. With that being said, the issue of gentrification has transformed into a hot topic of debate in the local, national, and even global arena, due to its profound effects on many communities. The primary reason for the controversy surrounding this subject is the difference in perspective of those who understand gentrification as a driving force to revive dying communities, and those who recognize it as a dividing force that fractures low-income neighborhoods of color. It comes as no surprise, then, that there is very little consensus on the actual meaning of the term. However, despite the contention behind gentrification, there are several prevailing definitions that circulate within the scholarly community—some far more innocuous than others. Hence, it is worth noting that much of early scholarship surrounding gentrification includes a fairly elementary understanding of the process that fails to acknowledge the detrimental impacts and social realities that have been disguised as a mere process of revitalization. As a result, it is imperative to briefly define gentrification in a more holistic light by combining popular understandings that will help to advance this assessment.

To put it rather simply, Donald Bryant and Henry McGee (1983) define gentrification as a process that encompasses involuntary residential displacement caused by the return of affluent gentry from suburbia to well-located but deteriorated inner city areas (Bryant et al., 1983, p. 46). Furthermore, Elizabeth Kirkland (2008) characterizes gentrification as a process of renovating

and improving deteriorated and depreciated urban neighborhoods, in terms of economic stability and development, to allow for the influx of more affluent residents (Kirkland, 2008, p. 4). In these contexts, it is clear that phrases such as “inner city areas” and “urban neighborhoods” are truly just euphemistic ways of referring to people of color. Consequently, utilizing these interpretations of gentrification, I have come to understand that the phenomenon traditionally requires a race-based exclusionary displacement and replacement mechanism, supplemented with major class transformation marked as economic progression. So while advocates of gentrification argue that it remains a racially neutral policy focused purely on economics and urban renewal, the assertion largely relies on a colorblind ideology that refuses to acknowledge *who* the process may negatively affect: primarily, poor people of color. In my opinion, it is not about economic reclamation nor is it racially neutral. But rather, gentrification embodies the process of pushing people of color out of their historic homes and neighborhoods to make room for upper class white residents who bring economic resources into these communities—specifically, at the expense of its original inhabitants. Moreover, gentrification operates by altering the culture of these neighborhoods through the deliberate erasure of their histories and commodification of their diversity.

I will employ the term *traditional gentrification* in reference to these previously recorded forms and patterns of urban gentrification that are specifically driven by white people. This process of gentrification is rooted in both racist and classist beliefs; it relies on such marginalizing social structures to push it forward. However, the significance and impact of race has been vastly undertheorized in mainstream gentrification literature. Most scholarship associated with gentrification solely revolves around issues of class antagonism and tension and largely fails to unpack the racialized components that also accompany this process. This hole in

the research is especially obvious when attempting to better comprehend the role of people of color, specifically Black people, in the process of gentrification. And that is why it is so vital to center race in this discussion. The question at hand in this research surrounds the differences between how white people and people of color participate in moments of gentrification. *Can people of color even gentrify?* How might the phenomenon of *Black gentrification*<sup>1</sup> (where the Black gentry returns to urban Black communities bringing with them a wealth of economic resources thereby “gentrifying” the space) differ from previous, more typical, models of gentrification? These are the complexities and nuances that are important to articulate in order to more effectively grasp how gentrification is maintained and propagated, and more importantly, how communities of color can more effectively enhance their neighborhoods without being displaced and erased.

Through this research, I argue that what has become known as *Black gentrification* is actually a distinct process that follows completely different trends from traditional gentrification, and therefore, requires a new name. I propose a new theory that represents the process of the Black middle class returning to urban Black communities and developing them: *Black Resurgence*. This is not an advocacy for gentrification processes but rather an understanding of the racialized components of gentrification and how they manifest uniquely across different social locales. Furthermore, this is not simply an argument surrounding an issue of semantics; this is about an entire reframing of how we analyze gentrification processes. This theory requires recognizing that the conflation of what is happening in gentrifying Black communities to traditional gentrification is a dangerous and irresponsible connection that largely undermines the racist and exclusionary tactics used in the latter.

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<sup>1</sup> In Black gentrifying neighborhoods, both the poor and working class residents who resided in the neighborhood prior to its “gentrification” and the new residents of greater economic means, are Black (Combs, 2010, p. 2)

## II. The Social Realities of Traditional Gentrification

Before delving into the intricacies of the distinctions between *traditional gentrification* and the new theory of *Black Resurgence*, it is imperative to elaborate on what these terms mean.

While I have already defined traditional gentrification earlier in this assessment, it is necessary to explore its exact societal and cultural implications. The larger body of research and scholarship centered on the topic of traditional gentrification has concluded that there are various racially-related consequences of this seemingly harmless wave of “urban revitalization.” Most notably among these numerous effects: displacement of racial and ethnic minorities, exclusion and revival of historic racial segregation, and ethnic commodification. To demonstrate how gentrification in this nation has racist roots, I will analyze the consequences above, with a theoretical lens based in Critical Race Theory<sup>2</sup>, and their significance and grounding in reality.

### A. Geographic Displacement of Racial and Ethnic Minorities

It is no secret that traditional gentrification typically represents neighborhood change that is particularly accompanied by the *displacement* of low-income residents and increased conflict between social classes. According to Bryant and McGee (1983)

Displacement occurs when a household is forced to move its residence because of conditions that affect dwelling or its immediate surroundings. These conditions typically: (1) are beyond the household’s reasonable ability to control or prevent; (2) occur despite the household’s compliance with all previously imposed conditions of occupancy; and (3)

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<sup>2</sup> Critical Race Theory (CRT) looks at the relationship between societal power structures and the social construction of race. CRT recognizes that racism is engrained in the fabric and system of the American society....CRT identifies that these power structures are based on white privilege and white supremacy, which perpetuates the marginalization of people of color (UCLA School of Public Affairs, p. 1).

make continued occupancy of the residence by that household impossible, hazardous, or unaffordable. (Bryant et al., 1983, p. 46)

Fundamentally, displacement represents a tragic reality where, directly or indirectly, external pressures placed on their households force the original inhabitants of gentrifying neighborhoods out of their homes. Soon, gentrifying neighborhoods experience a transformation that creates an environment that is no longer hospitable or welcoming to the needs and interests of the initial low-income residents. Without a doubt, displacement is one the most controversial and universally upsetting consequences of this larger gentrification process. However, fewer researchers recognize the “racial component wherein that gentrifying residents are white and lower income residents are racial and ethnic minorities” (Moore, 2009, p. 118). This is an extremely significant piece to center in this analysis because it brings attention to the fact that gentrification is an intersectional<sup>3</sup> issue that affects not just the working class, but specifically, the working class of color.

The phenomenon of gentrification-inspired displacement of racial minorities is not a new feature of contemporary society, but rather a process that has early roots in American history. One of the most prominent historic examples of this is New York City’s Central Park. What is now an expansive and remarkably beautiful city park teeming with life and enjoyed daily by millions of people was once a thriving African American community that served as an oasis of acceptance from the overwhelming racism that dominated Manhattan. When New York City was just a sprouting metropolis, barely anything more than farmland, the settlement of Seneca Village was a predominantly African American and immigrant community.<sup>4</sup> Just as various

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<sup>3</sup> Intersectionality, a term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, represents the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

<sup>4</sup> Seneca Village composition was approximately ¾ African American and ¼ Irish Immigrant.

ethnic groups form enclaves in the modern day, Seneca Village was created by Black people who were severely limited by discrimination and tried to counteract this oppression by fostering a sense of safety in their own communities (Central Park Conservancy, 2019, p. 6). When starting to operationalize plans to create Central Park, the city targeted Seneca Village as prime location. This idea was justified through the media's portrayal of Seneca Village as a wasteland, and those living on the land as impoverished squatters, painting the narrative that this project would be transforming blight to beauty (Central Park Conservancy, 2019, p. 14). Due to the power of eminent domain<sup>5</sup>, the government took this private property and allocated it for public use which led to the traumatizing experience for many African Americans living there of being forced to leave their own homes despite their vocal protests. This instance mirrors gentrification processes that are still occurring hundreds of years later where communities of color are targeted for their real estate, pushed off, and replaced by something (or someone) new. Understanding how this historic moment of gentrification and displacement occurred helps us to recognize that gentrification as a tool of racist and classist expansion and exclusion has not ended at all; it has simply transformed into a more covert process now camouflaged as urban revitalization.

In this contemporary moment, there are several contributing factors of gentrification that lead to the residential displacement of poor people of color. One of the first signs of a sparking gentrification movement surrounds efforts of *historic preservation*. Historic preservation occurs when private and public efforts collaborate to restore and [/or] preserve the artistic, cultural, and historic past of certain neighborhoods. In most instances, Indigenous low-

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<sup>5</sup> The law of eminent domain grants the government the right to expropriate private property for public use, with payment of compensation. The Fifth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution provides that the government may only exercise this power if it provides "just compensation" to the property owners. However, "just compensation" is relative and may not always represent the true value of the property (Central Park Conservancy, 2019, p. 15).

income residents are removed when specific landmarks are saved, or entire areas are restored. (Bryant et al., 1983, p. 50)

All across the nation, the historic preservation movement facilitates gentrification as it aims to reclaim older, inner city neighborhoods to rehabilitate their appearances and restore their “former glory”—often without concern for those who currently live there. “Cleaning up” the neighborhood for preservation or restoration usually includes allocating space for parks and trails, requiring residents to conform to aesthetic expectations for their properties, and city-driven enhancements of certain structures and architecture that serve as a reminder of a city’s history. Wide-scale renovations typically sprout up throughout the quaint sections of town in an attempt to beautify the neighborhoods and attract more affluent residents to the area—these residents would then begin to replace the original inhabitants as the price of property in the neighborhood is driven up as a result of this historic preservation. And more often than not, these original inhabitants are poor people of color.

In the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Chicago, “hundreds of Black, Latino, and old-time Irish, German, and Italian families were gradually displaced by the influx of small scale investors and owner-occupiers who renovated the old townhouses and small apartment buildings” (Bryant et al., 1983, p. 52). In this example, not only were the “indigenous” residents coerced into selling their properties with promises of payouts far greater than what they believed to be the value of their homes, but also private markets continued to selectively clear out the poorest pockets of the city to make the land available for middle-income townhomes (Bryant et al., 1983, p. 52). This demonstrates how poorer communities of color are quite literally victims of intentional displacement and gentrification via the historic preservation movement that uses the “cloak of

restoration” to seize historic districts of urban centers and renovate them for use by the upper class. Unfortunately, Chicago is just one of the many examples of this phenomenon.

Additionally, *conversions*<sup>6</sup> of urban apartments into condominiums, luxury housing, and cooperatives is another way in which gentrification drives the displacement of working class racial and ethnic minorities. One of the most common ways in which gentrification manifests is through the presence of newly developed middle- to upper-income style city living options. The conversions of apartments and other buildings into condos and penthouses displaces residents primarily in two ways—either directly or indirectly. According to Bryant and McGee (1983)

Many formerly undesirable neighborhoods have become very attractive due to downtown access or for other locational attributes. Developers purchase buildings in the new areas, displace lower income tenants, and then renovate the units for sale as condominiums to more affluent buyers. In addition to this direct displacement of lower income persons, indirect displacement can occur because of conversion in buildings located in better areas. Middle income renters may be unable or unwilling to buy their converted units. They then seek housing in less expensive parts of town, bidding up rental levels in dwindling rental stock. This in turn forces out lower income tenants who cannot afford the higher rent prices. (Bryant et al., 1983, p. 64)

In essence, conversions can displace low income residents when developers directly buy out their homes to make room for more luxury accommodations, or deplete the stock of rental units consequently driving rental prices up far too high. And while this issue may seem mostly dependent on social class, research shows that these developers, looking to gentrify, often target

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<sup>6</sup> Factors that create a climate conducive to conversion activity include scarcity of land for new construction, high priced single family homes, high priced vacant residential land, declining supply of rental units, lack of legislation to regulate conversions, and employment or population trends that increase the demand for housing near the urban area. (Bryant et al., 1983, p. 63)

communities of color. For instance, in New York City's famous Chinatown, gentrification has resulted in the displacement of Asian American residents. In his study published in the *Asian American Policy Review*, Kartik Naram (2017), a law clerk from NYU School of Law, speaks to the rise of gentrification when stating, "Across America, upscale property developments threaten to encroach on venerable ethnic enclaves that happen to sit on very valuable real estate" (Naram, 2017, p. 1). This demonstrates both the class and racial issues of gentrification as real estate developers target communities of color to expand their luxury developments—most often not thinking of the ramifications of their actions on those communities. This idea is further supported by Naram's claim that, "It [gentrification] is a physical, economic, and cultural process in which private developers, aided by city policies, invest in low-income and underserved neighborhoods, causing high-income people to displace low-income people, often people of color, from their homes and businesses" (Naram, 2017, p. 3). Essentially, displacement of minorities is a result of increasing the property value of these neighborhoods, so much so, that people of color who have lived there for ages can no longer afford to stay in their own neighborhoods. This attracts affluent residents, usually white, to the area and slowly removes people of color.

In New York City, for example, the Asian and Latino populations dropped by 11 percent each from 2000 to 2010, while the White population rose by 19 percent (Naram, 2017, p. 5). So, while there is anecdotal evidence that white residents have gentrified and taken over historical communities of color, there is also statistical and empirical data to support that conclusion.

Although historic preservation movements and high-rise condominium conversions are the more standard methods by which gentrification pushes the displacement of poor minorities, *anti-redlining legislation* has also strangely contributed to this phenomenon of displacement. Redlining is a historic discriminatory practice that represents the systematic denial of mortgage

loan applications from specific neighborhoods along with uneven conditions such as higher transaction costs and higher interest rates for these locations (Aalbers, 2007, p. 178). Often, the redlined neighborhoods are poor communities of color that are deemed financial risks and are full of households that financial institutions believe have low property values. This resulting depletion of investment and financial assets in specific urban neighborhoods drives the widespread economic and social decline of those communities. Despite the fact that this practice continues in more subtle and furtive ways in the contemporary era, a series of anti-redlining legislation has made open and active redlining illegal. These regulations have limited the discretionary power of lenders allowing for better investment in inner city neighborhoods—however, this does not protect these vulnerable communities from the threat of gentrification and displacement, rather the opposite. By opening up a market of older, well-located, and aesthetically attractive urban housing to private investment, anti-redlining efforts stimulate gentrification making it easier for “pioneers” and speculators<sup>7</sup> to obtain home mortgage and rehabilitation loans for building in inner city areas (Bryant et al., 1983, pg. 68). The flow of capital into these communities allows developers to come in and convert rental units causing property values, rent prices, and taxes to increase displacing the poor people of color who live there. The very communities that had been redlined are now being gentrified as anti-redlining legislation encourages white people to invade these communities and push out the old inhabitants.

Furthermore, not only are residents of color being displaced, but also small businesses and industries owned and operated by people of color are as well. This is known as *commercial*

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<sup>7</sup> Speculation is short term investment in property in order to gain from quick resale at higher price. Speculation is considered a major factor in rapidly rising housing costs and property tax bills. Speculation is the driving force behind most private market displacement. (Bryant et al., 1983, p. 65)

or *industrial displacement*. Essentially, the economic shift characterized by the influx of upper class white people creates an environment where businesses that cannot afford increasing rent prices are replaced with more aristocratic establishments that better suit the needs of the changing population. Soon, high-end boutiques, trendy coffeeshops, and spin studios replace the mom-and-pop shops that were popular in urban minority neighborhoods pre-gentrification. In many gentrifying neighborhoods, businesses and factories that primarily employ working class people of color and immigrant populations sit on valuable real estate. These businesses play an integral role in the economy of these neighborhoods; however, gentrifiers are typically uninterested in these types of businesses. As urban neighborhoods gentrify, these manufacturers face displacement because their space has become attractive to developers who convert lofts into residences; in addition, the displacement of small businesses and those they employ remakes economies in a variety of settings, endangering the diversity of the economy and the employment outcomes of unskilled minority and immigrant workers (Curran, 2007, p. 1428). Themis Chronopoulos (2016), Director of American Studies at Swansea University, perfectly highlights this industrial displacement when noting that

in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, approximately 75% of Black stores in Fort Greene, Brooklyn closed. There are many reasons why these businesses shut down, though in most cases, gentrification pressures undermined their existence while new Black entrepreneurs did not have the connections with investors willing to support their ventures. Many stores closed because landlords offered unaffordable rents to renew commercial leases and preferred new commercial establishments with multiple investors willing to pay large sums of money for many years. (Chronopoulos, 2016, p. 315)

Another more recent example of this displacement is included in a 2008 survey that concluded almost half (48 percent) of small-business proprietors in Chinatown considered relocating out of Chinatown or shutting down altogether (Naram, 2017, p. 5). The revitalization that has caused sharp increases in rent prices and property values does not allow these communities' poorer residents and businesses to remain in the neighborhood—resulting in overwhelming displacement of low-income people of color and the institutions where they work.

Given the racial makeup of those affected by the process of gentrification, it is evident that this is more than economic resurgence. Gentrification quickly becomes an issue relating to class, to an issue that also relates to race. If the argument that gentrification is race-neutral held true, then white residents should not be populating gentrified communities at the expense of the disproportionate displacement of people of color. This very phenomenon highlights the inherent racism of gentrification because communities of color are targeted for their real estate, and consequently displaced so that white people can move in—this process is white supremacist in nature and essentially mirrors practices of *colonialism*.<sup>8</sup> In all respects, it seems like this is happening and at rather alarming rates. Displacement is occurring as a result of gentrification processes facilitated through the historic preservation of urban districts, the conversion of inner city housing into luxury apartments and condominiums, counterproductive anti-redlining legislation, and the removal of minority owned and operated businesses and industry. These factors have proven track records of whitewashing historic neighborhoods of color by pressuring older residents out and allowing for new, wealthier ones to move in.

## B. Exclusion and Revival of Historic Racial Segregation

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<sup>8</sup> Colonialism is the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically. The connection between *traditional gentrification* and colonialism will be explored further on in this assessment.

Another racial implication of gentrification is the exclusion of people of color from certain areas and the perpetuation of historic racial housing segregation. According to Themis Chronopoulos (2016), “gentrification actually goes beyond displacement and includes the replacement and exclusion of certain populations from a neighborhood...the movement of people acquires its own exclusionary dynamics” (Chronopoulos, 2016, p. 1). Chronopoulos asserts that gentrification, in its very essence, is exclusionary. The replacement of low-income minority neighborhoods by more affluent and white families is not a neutral consequence of the process but, rather, one that is intentional and deliberate. Chronopoulos also adds that “low-income people can no longer move to a gentrifying neighborhood, because they are priced out and because landlords and real estate entities are seeking a different type of tenancy...Peter Marcuse calls this process *exclusionary displacement*”<sup>9</sup> (Chronopoulos, 2016, p. 1).

Exclusionary displacement is a racialized consequence of gentrification.

The entire process operates so that once it has effectively displaced minority communities, those populations can no longer gain access back into their neighborhoods. Increased police presence and violence that keeps people of color out of gentrifying neighborhoods through intimidation and blatant brutality reifies the exclusion. It is no secret that gentrification often goes hand in hand with heightened efforts to make neighborhoods “safer”—but what this truly implies is ridding the space of people of color, and specifically Black people. Manissa Maharawal (2017), from the Department of Anthropology at American University, understands that racialized police violence as a means of creating ‘safe’ spaces for capital investment enables the police to be shock troops of gentrification (Maharawal, 2017, p. 340).

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<sup>9</sup> Exclusionary displacement is largely an indirect process as units being vacated by low income residents are no longer affordable to other low-income households. This is exclusionary because future low-income residents are excluded from moving into the neighborhood.

Urban transformation encourages a unique form of violence against communities of color that extends beyond displacement and includes the criminalization of non-white identities, the threat of incarceration, and fatal police violence. In this contemporary moment, social movements such as Black Lives Matter<sup>10</sup> have recognized that this police violence goes hand in hand with white dominance of previously Black spaces. Maharawal calls attention to this violence when recognizing that

The snug relationship between police regimes and urban development have been described in other cities throughout the country where similar processes of “military urbanism” and securing space for capital reinvestment seem to perennially proceed through evictions, homeless removal, the privatizing of public spaces and the growth of security and policing practices that criminalize the poor [people of color]. (Maharawal, 2017, p. 343)

Essentially, the police uphold safety procedures in gentrifying neighborhoods by eradicating the homeless, serving out evictions of the low-income people of color, and discriminatorily restricting the use of public spaces. This manifests in increased police attention and commitment to anti-homeless architecture like underpass spikes or segmented park benches. This means kicking homeless people off the streets and out of parks. Furthermore, this leads to increased surveillance of people of color who enter the gentrifying neighborhood, often with lethal consequences.

The tragic case of Alex Nieto, a Latino man, is a prime example of gentrification connected to police violence. Alex Nieto was in his home neighborhood in San Francisco’s Bay

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<sup>10</sup> #BlackLivesMatter is a prominent social movement and global network whose mission is to build local power and to intervene in violence inflicted upon Black communities. The movement has a larger social justice framework dedicated to antiracism, but also a specific agenda of eradicating police brutality against Black bodies.

Area sitting in a park before heading to work as a security guard. Two interactions led to his untimely death: (1) a white man, who had moved to the neighborhood just months before as a tech professional, called Nieto a racial slur leading to a verbal altercation and (2) a white couple, living in the area for about a year, believed Nieto was holding a gun in the park and called the police. When the police went to investigate, Nieto was shot on sight with no questions asked. He did not have a gun. Nieto, an original resident of the neighborhood, was perceived as a threat by the new white gentrifiers who had just entered the community. This is just one of so many cases of unjust racialized police violence against innocent minorities in gentrified neighborhoods. This type of policing is not only demonstrated through a plethora of anecdotal and qualitative evidence; empirical data supports the conclusions made here. In the Bay area, while Blacks only account for 28% of the population, they represented 59% of police stops and searches (Maharawal, 2017, p. 347). The police have been used as facilitators of gentrification by over-policing racial minorities and keeping them out of increasingly white gentrifying neighborhoods. Fundamentally, gentrification signifies not just the reinvestment of capital into urban spaces, but also the concomitant security forces which exert violence and exclusionary spatial control upon poor racialized urban populations (Maharawal, 2017, p. 349). Since gentrification is racially exclusionary, racism is clearly tied to this concept.

Additionally, the evidence concludes that the process of gentrification renews racial segregation in the housing industry. A study conducted by Wyly and Hammel in 2004, but highlighted in Elizabeth Kirkland's review, demonstrates the exclusionary aspect of gentrification put into practice. The study called attention to homebuyers and their success in applying for and receiving loans for gentrified neighborhoods in New York City. According to the study, minority applicants in gentrified neighborhoods were much more likely than white

applicants in those areas to have their loans rejected—in fact, African Americans were 2.33 times more likely to be rejected, and Hispanics followed close behind at 1.44 times more likely, than their white counterparts (Kirkland, 2008, p. 7). This type of housing discrimination is an extension of the historic discrimination that resulted in highly segregated communities. As seen here, gentrification perpetuates this type of racial housing segregation by enabling realtors and landlords to exclude minorities from purchasing in newly gentrified communities while simultaneously displacing those already there.

Government zoning is another piece of evidence that suggests the deliberate exclusion of racial minorities from these neighborhoods by the process of gentrification. According to Tom Angotti, Chinese and Latino groups in New York City fought for a rezoning plan that would protect their neighborhoods—but, the city ignored their request and up-zoned several blocks of Chinatown to promote new high rise development (Angotti 5). Zoning is an effective strategy to empower gentrification to thrive and dominate minority communities. In this example, the government has actually taken efforts to enact gentrification by rezoning minority neighborhoods to encourage developers to legally enter communities and quite literally gentrify. This demonstrates how the process of gentrification may not only exclude minorities from living in these communities, but also excludes them from participating in the politics of the situation by silencing their voices.

Gentrification is not only racially exclusionary, but also it perpetuates systemic forms of racism through housing discrimination and coded segregation. Since gentrification affects minorities communities negatively via discrimination and exclusion, one can conclude that gentrification is rooted in racism, not simply economics.

### **C. Racial Commodification and Cultural Sterilization**

The racist roots of gentrification are also articulated through the process of racial commodification that often drives efforts to gentrify. According to a theory proposed by Nancy Leong, racial commodification stems from racial capitalism where social and economic value are assigned to racial identity (Naram, 2017, p. 2). Essentially, racial commodification makes race a commodity—dominant groups exploit minority groups by viewing their identity as an economic commodity, or means of obtaining a profit, rather than as a central aspect of their personhood.

Leong argues that racial commodification can be seen in the history of Chinatown:

Gentrification and racial capitalism coincide when economic development depends, at least in part, on exploiting "the commodity of nonwhiteness" for value. Marketing the diversity of Chinatown has in fact been part of developers' gentrification strategy.

(Naram, 2017, p. 4)

Chinatown is a prime example of race becoming a commodity—the “exoticness” of this community was used as a marketing tool to enact gentrification by attracting affluent white residents to this ethnic enclave. This is a calculated strategy utilized to drive gentrification efforts, specifically in communities of color. In fact, white yuppies are some of the key stakeholders in this process as diversity is often something younger white professionals seek out when looking for neighborhoods to settle down in—a process commonly referred to as *yuppification*. This process occurs when yuppies<sup>11</sup> move into urban neighborhoods attracted by the cultural amenities and with large amounts of discretionary income to spend renovating their homes to be “urban chic” (Moore, 2009, p. 120). These young business professionals are often drawn to lifestyles teeming with diversity and multiculturalism. On the surface, it appears to be a

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<sup>11</sup> Yuppies are typically white, business professionals, often without children. These yuppies are young, recent university graduates who often feel a strong desire to live a multicultural lifestyle in the city. Yuppies are not inherently problematic, only when their interests take precedence over the interests of long-time residents living in the neighborhoods they desire. (Moore, 2009, p. 120).

good thing that white college graduates are interested in connecting with people from different ethnic backgrounds. However, in most cases where this occurs, the interest of yuppies takes precedence over the interests of those they seek to gain cultural competence from. This results in pushing out those people of color while capitalizing on the positive aspects of their culture such as their food, music, and cultural celebrations. When it comes to yuppies, the cultures of the inner city become commodities they can buy into without investing in the actual people those cultures belong to. This unintended consequence of this racial commodification is *cultural sterilization*, or the diminishing of ethnic minority culture. Displacement of minorities from their traditional neighborhoods, and their replacement with white individuals, effectively changes all aspects of the minority culture that are “undesirable,” while appropriating and maintaining the aspects of the culture deemed appropriate. More simply, gentrification results in the whitewashing of ethnic enclaves, both literally and abstractly.

This type of *racial capitalism* is a contributor to the process of gentrification—therefore, gentrification is rooted in racist ideology that commodifies and exploits ethnic identity for the benefit of white people. Furthermore, gentrification may diminish the culture endemic to an area through the strategic replacement of people of color. Since minority communities are being disproportionately exploited, displaced, excluded, and commodified, to the benefit of affluent white residents, the whole process of gentrification is intrinsically racist—and white supremacist at that.

### **III. Black Gentrification and the Effects on Communities of Color**

According to Barbara Harris Combs (2010), an associate professor of sociology and criminal justice at Clark Atlanta University, Black gentrification encompasses a gentrification process where “in Black gentrifying neighborhoods, both the poor and working class residents

who resided in the neighborhood prior to its “gentrification,” and the new residents of greater economic means, are Black” (Combs, 2010, p. 1). For years, Black gentrification has simply been understood as an exact replica of traditional gentrification processes with the caveat that the gentrifiers are themselves Black. The insinuation was that Black gentrification mirrors the key aspects of traditional gentrification specifically in regard to the influx of residents from a higher socioeconomic class and the resulting improvement of deteriorated neighborhoods. However, many scholars have asserted that Black gentrification is a distinct process that contains an entirely different set of patterns driving urban transformation. Combs speaks to these distinctions when recognizing that an additional hallmark of Black gentrification that distinguishes it from traditional gentrification is that Black gentrifiers in Black gentrifying neighborhoods often feel a responsibility or obligation to their lower income Black neighbors (Combs, 2010, p. 1). Other scholars such as Kesha Moore, also touch on this point by suggesting that Black gentrification is a product of the continued racial exclusion of African Americans and reflects a specific social justice agenda that challenges the system of racial and class stratification (Moore, 2009, p. 119). With these understandings of the nuances of Black gentrification, it is worth further investigating if Black gentrification produces the same outcomes and processes as traditional gentrification perpetuated by white people. If not, the question at hand then becomes, is it responsible and appropriate to label this distinct process “gentrification” at all? In the following section, I will explore the causes of Black gentrification, the social costs, and the communal benefits in an attempt to highlight that Black gentrification is a unique system that does not depend on the same racist and exclusionary dynamics.

#### **A. Causes of Black Gentrification – What are the Motivating Factors?**

In recent decades, an increasingly visible Black middle class has begun returning in droves to many epicenters of Black urban life, including famous neighborhoods such as New York City's Harlem and Philadelphia's Brickton. As symbols of a strong and thriving Black culture, these sites have such meaningful historic ties to the larger Black community in the United States. The past literature pertaining to Black gentrification has largely attempted to make sense of this massive migration and the accompanying rebound in these inner city Black neighborhoods by studying the motivating factors behind Black gentrifiers decisions to return to these communities—and, of course, the effects they have on the original inhabitants. Of the many elements that contribute to the process of Black gentrification, the most notable causes pertain to the Black gentry's<sup>12</sup> desire to escape racism, build a stronger sense of racial solidarity, and reinvest in the Black community.

For much of the Black middle class, returning to urban Black communities is largely a result of this craving to evade the overwhelming racism and discrimination endemic to white suburbia. Despite the lack of quantitative evidence that exists in regard to Black gentrification, there is a wealth of qualitative data in the form of interviews and anecdotes that support this general claim. For instance, consider television journalist, Reggie Smith's experience when he states how

In Chicago, we bought a house in a white area that was fire-bombed before we moved into it. Because I travel so much, I was worried about leaving my wife and kids alone. I made a decision to [move] to a Black community. (Taylor, 1992, p. 110)

Kimberly Anderson-Biggs' work life also highlights this underlying racial tension

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<sup>12</sup> Gentry is another word representative of middle to upper-class socioeconomic identity and sensibilities. The Black gentry is simply another way of expressing the Black middle class.

I really wanted to live around Black people. I really get tired of going downtown and having white folks act like I don't belong down there. I get that all day long. (Taylor, 1992, p. 111)

And Malcolm Balderidge's interview reaffirms this similar sentiment shared by the Black middle class

I wanted to live here [Harlem] because I got tired of living in a very middle class white community, not because I'm against white folks or anything like that, because I'm not.

But I got tired of having to always prove myself. (Taylor, 1992, p. 111)

No matter how it manifests, it is abundantly clear that many individuals in the Black middle class have grown fatigued with the racist encounters they experience on a daily basis—whether it be at their jobs or in their white neighborhoods. In an increasingly diverse society, multiculturalism is often cited as a value and asset to many companies and communities. Despite the progress we have made as a more integrated society committed to cherishing diversity, society has much work to do in terms of actual *inclusion*.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, the social reality shows that many Black people still feel the effects of racism in many aspects of life from housing to employment to education. Middle class Blacks who feel marginalized in the white world often look to pockets full of Black people for an acceptance of their Blackness. According to Monique M. Taylor (1992),

Interviews with Harlem's Black gentry suggest that racism is, if not the most important, certainly a central reason for being pushed into the Harlem community. As a group they appear to be responding to a tension that arises as they increasingly cross once-restrictive

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<sup>13</sup> In Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) framework, diversity refers to the representation of all traits and characteristics that make different groups of people unique while inclusion refers to the behaviors and social norms that ensure people feel welcomed. While there may be a diversity of people in a space, not everyone feels celebrated, welcomed, and "included."

boundaries that kept them out of certain neighborhoods and workplaces. Their increased contact with whites has given rise to encounters with racism and heightened their racial self-awareness. (Taylor, 1992, p. 107)

The Black middle class, who typically have careers that have infiltrated the white world, has grown resentful of the mistreatment and discrimination they face at work and in their home neighborhoods. This exhaustion has pushed them to seek refuge among their own—finding places like Harlem to be perfect homes that reconcile their racial differences by providing a community of similar people. In this way, it is evident that the move to Harlem is not simply a meaningless relocation to buy into the aesthetics of urban life, but rather, it is a strategic method of cultural survival stemming from a desire to find support in the Black community.

Additionally, another important point that encourages the return of the Black middle class to these urban centers of Black life is the mere desire to be a part of a larger community that generally shares the same values, culture, and experiences. As articulated earlier, this is nothing new as Black people (and many other people of color and immigrant communities) have built their own ethnic enclaves in this nation as somewhat secluded places free from the constraints and oppression of white America. In New York City alone, there are countless neighborhoods that represent specific populations such as Little Italy, Chinatown, or Spanish Harlem that prioritize the preservation of these cultural and ethnic identities. The Black community is no different, and the Black gentry has specifically focused on places like Harlem and Brickton as sites to celebrate Blackness and foster racial solidarity. Monique M. Taylor (1992) flawlessly captures these motivations when stating that the

new gentry in Harlem is strongly motivated by a desire to participate in the rituals that define daily life in this famous and historically Black community...middle-class Blacks

seem to be drawn to Harlem in an effort to connect to these and other symbols of Blackness that define the existing community. (Taylor, 1992, p. 4)

For many of these Black people who are “gentrifying” these communities, their motivation lies in the desire to find a sense of belonging in a community that shares similar cultural roots and backgrounds. In an effort to rebuild strong communities and escape the overwhelming racism and discrimination localized in white-dominated suburbs and city centers, many African Americans have been observed returning to predominantly Black, and perhaps lower-income, communities. The attachment many Black middle class people have to these neighborhoods is not conflicting with the cultural elements of the *Black spatial imaginary*.<sup>14</sup> This spatial imaginary focuses on the interests of the community and public good for Black people to help maintain the unique culture of the neighborhoods—and the Black gentry have been vital in maintaining this spatial imaginary through their enthusiastic devotion to engross themselves in Black culture. Stripped down to the basics, as Mary Pattillo (2005) noted in her research, the Black middle class wants to come home to a community where they would be surrounded by folks who understand their culture (Pattillo, 2005, p. 4). This very sentiment is captured by June Wilson’s declaration:

It was important for me to set up house in an area where I would be the most comfortable. That meant being around Black people and being around Black people who were race-minded. (Taylor, 1992, p. 110)

Likeminded individuals within the Black middle class are driven to Black city centers to be a part of something bigger. These Black gentry are stakeholders in the cultural outcomes of the community; they are not moving there simply because it is trendy or to remove the current residents, as that would defeat the whole purpose. Black professionals are moving back to places

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<sup>14</sup> The Black Spatial Imaginary is a term coined by George Lipsitz that encompasses the idea of community control by low-income Blacks as the best way to advance neighborhood interests. (Lipsitz 2011).

like Harlem and West Chicago to pursue some type of social solidarity and participate in the cultural life *of* Black people *with* Black people across all economic backgrounds.

The last major impetus driving the Black professional return to low-income Black communities is a strong inclination and obligation to reinvest in Black people. This social justice mindset that encourages Black people who have found economic success to invest in their own communities is one of the hallmarks of Black gentrification that distinguishes it from the larger process of traditional gentrification. In the low-income Black Philadelphia neighborhood of Brickton, Black gentrifiers view their investments in the community as a way to reverse and combat the historic and contemporary forms of racism and discrimination that have disadvantaged Black communities for generations in this country (Moore, 2009, p. 297). In her conversations with Black residents in Brickton, Kesha Moore found that 90% of the Black middle class shared this desire to give back and help their people out as the prime motivating factor in their decisions to move there (Moore, 2009, p. 128). There is a sense of racial uplift that attracts middle-class Black people to these communities; and while this ideology can be problematic when occurring in a top-down<sup>15</sup> manner, this doesn't seem to be the case with Black gentrification. The racial uplift that is happening in these communities is largely a bottom-up<sup>16</sup> process where middle-class residents empower their low-income neighbors, support their interests, and build a more equitable space for all to enjoy. Furthermore, this commitment to the larger Black community expresses itself in a multitude of ways; it comes not only as a contribution of economic power and resources, but also manifests itself as political action and

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<sup>15</sup> A top-down paradigm to justice seeks to address issues on a macro-scale. Strategies are determined based on their maximum impact at a societal level. The needs and concerns of “the people” are often overlooked as activism starts at the top and filters down.

<sup>16</sup> A bottom-up approach to social justice shows an investment in the interests and needs of those located the farthest away in the margins. This paradigm represents activism that is more *for the people, by the people*.

involvement within the community. In addition to housing development, the Black middle class has also demonstrated efforts to improve local business districts, support community entrepreneurs, beautify the neighborhoods, and develop community youth and cultural programs (Moore, 2009, p. 125). The efforts of Black middle class to improve these Black communities demonstrate that their commitment to investing in the neighborhood is genuine and truly representative of a larger social justice agenda.

### **B. Social Costs of Black Gentrification – Issues of Class Tension? Debunking the Myths**

Despite the rather innocent intentions behind this new Black gentry's migration back to these communities, there is one principal cost that may arise inadvertently, and it is definitely worth noting: *class tension*. First and foremost, class differences between the incoming gentry and the long-term poorer residents provide a stark contrast and disconnect within the community (Taylor, 1992, p. 110). This aspect of Black gentrification is strikingly similar to the realities created by traditional gentrification. Class tensions in the community are often a result of the difference in cultural expectations and norms between the various socioeconomic classes—in essence, middle-class sensibilities are not so universal for low-income neighbors who are accustomed to a vastly different pace of life. For instance, the norms surrounding the communal use of urban space may provide a disconnect between the middle class (who are used to having their own private space) and the lower class (who have a much more communal sense of neighborhood space). The stoop culture of Harlem is indicative of this difference in understanding. For young Black urban professionals, Kimberly Anderson Biggs and her husband, Jeff, stoop culture was initially a shock,

At first, there was a fair amount of resentment about it [their arrival]. Jeff wouldn't let people sit on the stoop anymore, you know. They used to hang out on the stoop and eat

dinner and throw chicken bones in the stairwell and stuff, and we'd make them leave, you know. It's a pain to live in Harlem when you lead a life different from the life of your neighbors. When the people don't have to be at work in the morning, they can stay up all night. When you have to get up in the morning, you don't want to hear that shit. (Taylor, 1992, p. 117)

For this couple, adjusting to new life in Harlem provided its own set of unexpected challenges. Their desire for private space on their property was at first offensive to the old time residents. The difference in work culture and noise posed another set of challenges. For the Black gentry, there is a question of how to transition from an outsider to an insider in a community where they are set apart by their class position and middle class lifestyle. These tensions, even though not grave, are typically obviated by the newcomer's efforts to become more integrated into the community.

Unlike traditional gentrification, it is not characteristic for Black gentrifiers to merely move into a new space and ignore or neglect their neighbors. Their overwhelming drive to seek community, solidarity, and support motivates them to solve these class tensions through forming real relationships with the community and giving back. Black gentrifiers often adopt a mentality of being *house proud*—meaning caring enough to develop the space you live in (particularly through contributions to local economy and showing others that things can be better). For this couple, being house proud meant becoming politically engaged with the community. In an attempt to achieve a better balance between their race and class, the Biggs recognized their level of active political involvement helps erase the line between insider and outsider. If people really understand that you're committed, then you don't feel like an outsider. That's why I got involved in community [politics]. I'm on a task force on AIDS

and homelessness... We have great police service, we have great sanitation service, in part because of our activism. I'm a part of the traditional block association. We're in every 20<sup>th</sup> Precinct community council meeting. (Taylor, 2009, p. 120)

For Kimberly Biggs, showing commitment to the innerworkings of her own neighborhood was a way to ease the awkwardness and tension that comes with being middle class in a predominantly low-income neighborhood. And it is evident that she demonstrated this type of commitment in a multitude of ways by joining task forces, advocating for better services, and volunteering in council meetings. This dedication is just one way that the Black gentry is able to not only combat the inevitable strain resulting from class differences, but also a way to connect with the community, build that support they moved to the space to find, and improve the community for *everyone*. This general community participation reflects the values and consciousness about race work and social responsibility that make Harlem's Black gentry aware of and concerned about the community of their "brothers" around them (Taylor, 1992, p. 120). And the Biggs are not the only example of middle class Blacks who have been able to alleviate the social tension their entrance has caused. Many other successful Black people get to know their community by attending block parties, going to Harlem churches, shopping in the area, and supporting local cuisine. Even though class tensions seems so natural to gentrification processes, it is clear that it does not have to be that way; and Black gentrifiers are the perfect example of this.

Another social cost that is typically connected to traditional gentrification is displacement. In many scholarly circles, gentrification has almost become synonymous with displacement. So how is it possible for Black "gentrification" to occur without displacement? Surely, the Black middle class newcomers flocking to the city must be taking someone else's space, and therefore pushing out their lower-income neighbors. However, research suggests that

displacement is rarely involved in Black gentrification processes—which is why it such a distinct and unique process compared to traditional gentrification. Black gentrifiers avoid or severely limit the displacement side effects of their arrival by utilizing that social justice mindset that brought them to the neighborhood in the first place. As stated earlier, much of the motivation of the Black middle class to move to these urban communities is because of their desire to be among other Black people and reinvest in the deteriorated communities—therefore, ensuring the survival of their low-income neighbors is of utmost importance. Reverend Simmons of Brickton elaborates on how his gentrifying Black community is able to enhance their living conditions while also protecting the poor from displacement:

The goal of community development is not to replace lower-income Black residents with higher income Black people, but to create a community that all could share and enjoy. The solution is to have a staged development and to encourage asset accumulation (e.g., homeownership, entrepreneurship) among the low-income population. This asset development of low-income and working class residents is a critical goal of community development and a necessary prerequisite to having more expensive luxury housing. Thus far, Brickton has only experienced low- and moderate-income affordable housing construction. (Moore, 2009, p. 130)

Essentially, a staged development process helps the community prevent displacement from happening in the first place. In simpler terms, this type of community development restricts the typical factors of gentrification such as condominium conversion and luxury high rise development from happening *until* there has been considerable asset accumulation among lower income residents. In traditional gentrification, wealthy developers are able to buy out urban housing and construct their own penthouses and apartments for upper class living. However, in

Brickton, by first focusing on low and middle income construction, the community effectively limits the influence of the private market and upper class Blacks from driving up rental prices and housing values. By keeping these prices at bay, low-income residents are able to continue living in the community alongside the Black middle class newcomers. This does not mean that luxury housing is not available at all in the community, it just means that there will be no active efforts to produce more until the community is stabilized. This type of system supports the creation of a racially homogenous, yet class-diverse integrated community. This is primarily how Black gentrification advances in communities all around the nation, making it far less threatening than traditional gentrification processes that target minorities and kick them out of their own homes. This social justice mindset that Black gentrifiers have is vital to not only easing class tensions that arise from their presence, but also to maintaining a healthy and vibrant economically diverse neighborhood.

### C. Communal Benefits of Black Gentrification

While there is no doubt that the phenomenon of *Black gentrification* results in initial class tension, many scholars and community members believe that these Black gentrifiers are integral parts of their communities and play a key role in the development of the public. Providing an economic stimulus to the community is a huge return on their investment in the Black public sphere of life. Like in Harlem, Black gentry newcomers (who already participate in communal life in a number of ways as demonstrated earlier) broaden the economic base by not only renovating their own properties and increasing their home values, but also by doing business in Harlem and keeping money in the community and supplying jobs to other locals (Taylor, 2009, p. 122). For example, one new Harlemit noted:

I try to do as much business in Harlem as possible. I patronize as many things as possible. In doing my house, most of the work that has been done has been by Black contractors, plasterers, and electricians. I make it a point to really try and keep the money in the community in that way. (Taylor, 2009, p. 119)

Furthermore, educated Black professionals moving into spaces that are primarily low-income contribute knowledge about city politics and public services that may not have been a priority before their arrival. Black gentrifiers are known to participate in city politics and to advocate on behalf of their community for basic services they have grown accustomed to in their previous middle class environments. For instance, when Yolanda Jackson moved into Harlem she recalled that

The block association had been kind of laying dormant, so I reorganized it and got a group of people organized to go to the police precinct to demand they clean the mess up off our block. (Taylor, 2009, p. 120)

For Yolanda Jackson, sanitation and cleanliness of her neighborhood was a serious issue that needed more attention in Harlem. Her advocacy in the community helped to bring about real sustainable social change in the form of better sanitation services. Another Harlemite's activism helped address certain needs such as supermarkets and more affordable housing in the community to encourage more Black gentry to move into the neighborhood (Taylor, 2009, p. 120). This type of work not only attracts more Black gentrification that can stimulate the economy, but it also addresses larger issues such as food insecurity in food deserts that do not have access to supermarkets with fresh food and accessible and affordable groceries. These efforts help bring valuable resources into the community that not only provide jobs, but also improve the health and wellness of all community members.

In addition to change brought on by Black gentrifiers' activism in their new communities, these individuals also serve as great role models for their low-income neighbors as a very visible group of economically successful Black people. They also help to enrich the culture by participating in hallmarks of Black tradition such as block parties, festivals, and the vibrant outdoor communal life. In the end, these Black gentrified communities have largely discovered ways in which to overcome their class tensions in order to truly strengthen and develop their own neighborhoods. Given that the Black gentry has proved helpful in their political and social commitment to their communities, perhaps, it is not only possible, but preferable, that Black gentrification occur in the manner that it is currently: where communities are not fragmented or displaced, but rather built up by people who are returning "home."

#### **IV. Distinctions Between Traditional Gentrification and Black Gentrification**

Although both *traditional gentrification* and *Black gentrification* have somewhat similar outcomes, strictly in terms of enhanced & beautified physical spaces and the influx of middle to upper-income residents, there is a definite distinction between the two processes. While capitalist greed for more developed metropolitan areas by white people often motivates traditional gentrification, Black gentrification does not share this same overarching sentiment. Instead, Black gentrification is motivated by the Black middle and upper class's desire to return to their historic communities in order to seek social solidarity and a sense of belonging that is largely absent in white-dominated spaces. Furthermore, an overwhelming obligation to reinvest in Black communities that have experienced depreciation and deterioration as a result of generations of racism and discrimination motivates Black gentrifiers. While white gentrifiers often want to turn a profit or invade a space they find desirable (for any number of reasons—location, cultural

diversity, luxury housing options), Black gentrifiers simply wish to escape the racism and discrimination laced in many other communities.

Not only are the causes of these respective phenomena vastly different, but also the consequences are distinct. Traditional gentrification results in the exploitation, displacement, exclusion, and commodification of low-income people of color who reside in gentrifying areas. This process is deeply rooted in racism and classism. Communities of color gentrified by white people are often torn apart and fragmented; the long term residents are pushed out of their homes due to rising prices of property and business; white people replace and further exclude people of color from living in these spaces through increased rent prices and police intervention; and finally, ethnic culture becomes a hot commodity that draws in even more gentrifiers due to the fetishization of “exoticness.” Black gentrification does not share any of these results. While traditional gentrification is usually a top-down process in which the wealthy few change the entire composition of an urban space, Black gentrification employs a bottom-up paradigm that centers low-income residents before anyone else. Black gentrification, albeit not a perfect process as it does lead to class antagonism and an underlying level of tension, largely strengthens communities of color. Black gentrifiers do not displace their low-income neighbors, rather, they share a new space and community that undergoes a social transformation. Black gentrifiers’ commitment to developing the community results in better schools, more businesses, safer neighborhoods, and an overall improved community life for everyone. These new residents broaden the economic base of the community and serve as a positive force that bonds community members and genuinely revitalizes Black culture and solidarity.

Additionally, traditional gentrification mirrors practices of colonialism. Similar to colonial processes, traditional gentrification not only usurps local and economic power to new

and often wealthier residents, but there are also implied class and racial components attached to it as well (Wharton, 2008, p. 0). Colonialism in the United States involved the displacement of Indigenous people, the confiscation of their land, the exploitation of their resources, and their replacement with a new white gentry. Gentrification is startlingly similar. The parallels between the two show that both processes support an economically empowered few to oversee an operation to economically and politically displace one group for another, while achieving financial gain and political power allowing for an elite group to flourish while the others are left to fend for themselves (Wharton, 2008, p. 1). Gentrification is a modern replication of this oppressive and horrendous system. These practices of acquiring new land without regard for who lives there have not disappeared, they have merely evolved into a more covert form. And while I am surely not attempting to conflate the devastating horrors of colonialism to that of gentrification, there is no denying that these processes have operated in strikingly comparable ways. They are even perpetuated in a similar manner. Just as colonialist agendas such as Manifest Destiny<sup>17</sup> were justified as a seemingly natural evolution to an ever-growing and improving early American nation, gentrification is justified by painting the narrative that it is natural process of urban progress. However, in reality, neither of these processes are natural or necessary; they are deliberate policies that intentionally remove and disempower poor, ethnic minorities to the benefit of rich white people. Black gentrification does not replicate this same colonialist mindset in the contemporary era. It is not expansionist in nature; Black gentrification is not happening in Chinatown or the white-dominated areas of Lower Manhattan—Black gentrifiers are specifically returning to Black communities. This kind of revitalization fights

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<sup>17</sup> Manifest destiny was a widely-held cultural belief in the 19th-century United States that its settlers were destined to expand across North America.

against that type of colonialist mentality by empowering “indigenous” low-income residents and creating an economically-diverse community that celebrates culture instead of eradicating it.

Since Black gentrification differs from our mainstream understanding of traditional gentrification processes, I argue that not only are these processes very separate, but also Black gentrification should not be labelled “gentrification” at all. In my opinion, and as noted through the literature, gentrification centers on exclusionary politics that degrades and displaces people of color for the benefit of affluent white people. Gentrification is a racist and classist process. Black gentrification does not follow these discriminatory patterns; therefore, I do not believe we can fairly label this phenomenon “Black gentrification.” Instead, I propose that the process of Black middle and upper class people returning to their communities and developing them should be known as *Black Resurgence*. Resurgence is defined as an increase or revival after a period of inactivity; it is rising into life again; it is a renewal. Based on those definitions, Black Resurgence more effectively represents what is happening here. Predominantly Black and often impoverished communities are going through a process of resurgence in which the Black gentry reinvest in them, resulting in a stronger, more connected, safer, epicenters of Black culture and life. The term “Black gentrification” misses the mark by conflating this experience to that of the racist and exclusionary tactics surrounding traditional gentrification; however, Black Resurgence more effectively and responsibly encapsulates the nuances and complexities that arise when the Black gentry decides to come “home.”

## V. Conclusion

It has become increasingly evident—through a close study of gentrification throughout the neighborhoods around the nation—that this process is not purely economic in nature. Gentrification is largely an issue that stems from institutional racism and racist ideology. Since

there is sound evidence that illustrates how gentrification is racially targeted, racially motivated, and racially executed—through examples such as minority displacement, exclusion and housing segregation, and racial capitalism—one can effectively conclude that gentrification *is* rooted in racism. This process thrives by further oppressing communities of color and low-income populations to literally provide more room, in terms of real estate, for the wealthy whites to make our urban communities their playground. Therefore, the process of traditional gentrification is very distinct from what has been deemed “Black gentrification.” In fact, since the term Black gentrification unfairly paints the narrative that Black people can gentrify in the same exclusionary and racist manner as white people, I argue that this term should be replaced with *Black Resurgence*. Black Resurgence more precisely captures the social cohesion and community building that occurs when the Black gentry return to their low-income communities. It is a movement made *for Black people, by Black people*. It is more a process of reclamation, than gentrification.

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