Reproducing race in the gentrifying city: A critical analysis of race in gentrification scholarship

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ABSTRACT
While the term gentrification in an American context often incorporates racial turnover, the role of race in gentrification remains undertheorized. Employing a critical race lens, this study explores the historical relationship between race and gentrification in academic studies. I conduct a systematic review and a discourse analysis of 331 empirical studies of gentrification from 1970–2019. Findings show that although studies frequently employ racial categories, they do so in imprecise ways, subsuming race under class. Race-based theory is rare; race is primarily used as a variable to examine conflict-oriented outcomes, such as displacement. This creates oppositional and homogenizing racialized typologies of “poor minority incumbents” and “wealthy White newcomers,” which remain steady despite an increasingly complex urban landscape. I argue that this limits our ability to understand how race, class, and power operate in space and underscores the need for a more clearly defined role of race within gentrification that focuses on positionality and power in lieu of a groupist emphasis on antagonistic racial categorization.

Gentrification as a concept emerged in the 1960s to describe the combination of reinvestment and repopulation that occurred in similar fashion across many cities. Since its emergence, gentrification has come to occupy an increasingly large position in both media and academic scholarship (Helms, 2003; Tolfo & Doucet, 2020), with substantial numbers of academic studies focused on gentrification over time (Figure 1).

With the growing prominence of the concept, there is substantial debate about how gentrification should be defined and measured. Meta-analyses have found that while definitions vary broadly, gentrification most consistently refers to a change in the socioeconomic status of neighborhood residents. At times studies may also emphasize changes in infrastructural quality, cultural identity, market values, ownership rates, and/or displacement (see Atkinson, 2000; Redfern, 2003). While economic change is paramount, racial turnover is also often included in descriptions of gentrification (Boyd, 2008; Kirkland, 2008). This is particularly true within an American context, where the housing landscape has been shaped by racialized processes of segregation and discrimination that link race, class, and housing in complex ways (Massey, 2016; Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987). Despite this frequent connection between race and gentrification, the role of race as a component of gentrification remains undertheorized (Boyd, 2008; Kirkland, 2008).

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This complicated and undefined relationship between class, race, and gentrification has become more transparent as the focus and scope of gentrification studies have expanded. For example, the emergence of studies analyzing “Black gentrification” (Gibbons & Barton, 2016; Taylor, 1992), Hispanic-led gentrification (Ahrens, 2015; Delgado & Swanson, 2019), and “non-white gentrification” (Anderson & Sternberg, 2013) infer that “regular” gentrification is a White phenomenon or, at the very least, that race necessarily interacts with class change in the process of gentrification. If this is true, then gentrification is an inherently racialized concept, which should be reflected in its definition, measurement, and analysis. Yet although race appears to play a prominent role in studies such as those focused on “Black gentrification,” others evict race entirely from their analysis of gentrification, arguing that it is exclusively a class-based change (Hammel & Wyly, 1996).

To understand and negotiate this tension between the role of class and race in the process of gentrification, I argue that it is imperative to analyze how race has historically been used in studies of gentrification, especially in relation to class. How have scholars themselves incorporated race into gentrification? Have scholars changed the way race is analyzed as the racial landscape of American cities has changed? If so, how is this reflected in measurement and analysis?

To answer these questions, this study turns a critical race lens on academic studies, focusing on how studies of gentrification have incorporated race over time. I conducted a qualitative discourse analysis of 331 empirical studies of gentrification spanning 40 years and a systematic review of a subset of 60 articles, exploring how and when racial concepts were used. Findings indicated that studies consistently employed race in description and measurement, specifically as a discrete and stable individual variable. Simultaneously,
As malleable \textit{A}.

Our tenure remained a relational practice when studies focused on Black-White interaction. A set of homogenizing typologies emerged and remained consistent over time that tied Blackness or Whiteness to class and tenure (e.g., “wealthy White gentrifier”).

I conclude by arguing that this limits gentrification as an analytic concept by reducing our ability to theorize gentrification in complex, multiracial space as well as non-American contexts. Moving forward, studies must break open the black box of “race” by employing an intersectional, relational, and contextual approach to studying race as a component of gentrification (Brubaker et al., 2004).

\textbf{Implementing a critical race frame in urban sociology}

A critical race (CRT) perspective starts from the position that race is a fluid, contested, and malleable social category of practice rather than an innate individual trait (Banton, 1979). As a social identity, race is defined and enforced through a process of racialization or boundary drawing\footnote{This refers to the social construction of boundaries that divide people into racial categories.} through which individuals are divided into racial categories according to historically and culturally specific criteria, such as physical appearance (e.g., skin pigmentation, hair texture) and social characteristics (e.g., speech patterns; Bonilla-Silva, 1999; Brubaker et al., 2004; Omi & Winant, 1994). Although race is a social construction, racial divisions have real structural impacts (Bonilla-Silva, 1999); one’s position in the racial order structures access to resources and power, which has tangible impacts on inequality (Brubaker et al., 2004; Fields, 1982; Omi & Winant, 1994; Wacquant, 1997). Racial categories themselves and people’s placement into them vary across time and place such that the definitions and measurement of “race” as an individual trait are too unstable\footnote{This refers to the historical and social variability of the definition of race.} to pass basic tests of validity or reliability (Wacquant, 1997; Zuberi, 2008). CRT aims to destabilize definitions of race essentialism by engaging racial categories as historically contingent power relations and critiquing the ways in which race is defined and utilized.

Turning a CRT lens onto academic studies is important, as it helps us unearth how past scientific inquiry has constructed racial inequality and racial ideologies that scholars may continue to implicitly or unintentionally reproduce. Despite assertions of neutral positivism, scientific inquiry has historically been one way that racial inequality and biases were justified and sustained (Bourdieu, 1991; Wade, 2010). Racial hierarchies in the global West gained credibility, in part, through scientific theories such as Darwinism and eugenics, which employed a range of variables—crania, intelligence, insanity, etc.—to define racial difference and legitimize race as a basis for inherent superiority (Wade, 2010).

Although scientific inquiry has moved away from the explicitly racist underpinnings of the early 19th century (see American Sociological Association, 2003), CRT has found that the role of race within academic disciplines still bears the indelible mark of a racialized history. Scholars including Frazier (1949) and Yosso and Solorzano (2005) interrogated the history of sociological studies, arguing that the disciplinary history has been shaped by the idea of race—or specifically Blackness—as a social problem. This could be seen in deficit-based research focused on culture of poverty (Lewis, 1966) or intellectual gaps (Loehlin et al., 1975; Lynn, 1991; Pasamanick & Knobloch, 1955; Peoples et al., 1995; Witty &
Jenkins, 1936) that attempted to explain the problem of Blackness. The mark of these histories can still be seen in modern studies, for example, that focus on the “race gap” in educational outcomes (Bali & Alvarez, 2004; Brown-Jeffy, 2009; Mangino, 2013). Mangino (2013) and Stewart (2008) have argued that research questions that focus on an oppositional racial gap continue the history of assumed racial difference, reify race as fact, and fail to engage social structure in favor of trying to identify the cause of racial difference in outcomes.

Levi Martin and Yeung (2003) and Niemonen (1997a) have made similar arguments around methodological decisions within sociology. Levi Martin and Yeung (2003) found there had been an increase in the sociological use of racial categories within analyses over time. However, the use of race was broad but shallow; race was primarily used in quantitative analyses as a control variable, which both reified the idea of race as an innate trait and failed to account for the structuring role of race in society. Likewise, Niemonen (1997a) found that the use of race in studies was highly quantitative, tended to subsume race under other social structures, and failed to critically engage with the concept of race and instead relied on common U.S. Census definitions. Supporting these findings, other studies have found that race is often measured as a discrete, quantitative variable (Brubaker et al., 2004; Emirbayer & Desmond, 2012; Frazier, 1949; Levi Martin & Yeung, 2003; Niemonen, 1997b; Reisigl & Wodak, 2005) and analyzed in standard regression models (Stewart, 2008). This use of race as variable fails to engage race as a social construction by obscuring the social processes that produce racial categories and racial inequality and reproducing the notion of race as an innate, flat variable (Zuberi, 2008). For example, the continued use of the “race effect” to examine performance differences between racial groups asserts an almost causal role to race in outcomes (Holland, 2008; Horton & Sykes, 2008; Stewart, 2008). However, CRT asserts that race is not just a variable to control but a structuring agent of society.

Critical race scholars have focused on many topics within the social sciences, such as ethnographic research (Duncan, 2002), education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997; Taylor et al., 2009), and social psychology (Bobo & Fox, 2003; Stevens, 2003). However, little attention has focused on urban studies and urban sociology. This is problematic as housing and land use patterns—major topics of study within urban studies—have explicitly been shaped by racialized processes of segregation and exclusion (Charles, 2003; Logan, 2013; Massey & Denton, 1993). The failure to turn a CRT lens on urban studies likely impedes our ability to unearth racialized disciplinary assumptions and histories that may reify racial inequality. This article aims to expand the reach of CRT into urban sociology to better understand how the study of place relates to the construction of race and racial inequality through the process of gentrification.

The importance of understanding race and gentrification

This article brings a critical eye to gentrification, a uniquely appropriate subfield to analyze racialization in scholarship. Gentrification occupies a prominent place in academic studies of urban change (Hwang & Sampson, 2014; Owens, 2012; Solari, 2012; Timberlake & Johnswolfe, 2017). Initially the term emerged to describe changes associated with the movement of the middle-class into low-income areas and the concomitant infrastructural, economic, and social changes (Glass, 1964/2010). The multifaceted nature of gentrification has prompted debate on the definition, causes, and consequences of this process (Schwirian,
1983; Wyly & Hammel, 2004). Scholarship on causes and consequences, in particular, heavily emphasize the role of class and economic change as the undercurrent of gentrification studies (Slater, 2004; Slater et al., 2004; Smith, 1996; Wyly & Hammel, 1999).

However, in an American context, gentrification emerged in both a classed and racialized landscape. In the post–World War II period, racially discriminatory policies and practices combined with suburbanization to create a hyper-segregated residential landscape. Segregation was compounded by political and economic shifts that reduced employment opportunities and investment in inner cities, effectively concentrating poverty in these regions (Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987, 1999). The result was a racially and economically segregated landscape throughout the country, particularly in cities such as New York and Detroit (Farley et al., 1978; Frey & Farley, 1996; Logan et al., 2004). The myriad racialized processes of segregation over decades created an American housing landscape where race and class are intrinsically intertwined (Massey, 2016; Massey & Denton, 1993; Trounstine, 2020; Wilson, 1987).

Given this racialized residential foreground, changes on the class composition within space necessarily involved racial change and/or turnover (Kirkland, 2008). Though studies have historically emphasized class and socioeconomic change, the tight link between class and race in America suggests that race is necessarily related to the process of gentrification yet is substantially undertheorized (Boyd, 2008; Kirkland, 2008). Despite frequent associations between gentrification and racial change that have been made over time, the explicit relationship between race and gentrification remains substantially undertheorized, particularly when compared to the role of economic change.

This lack of clarity has become increasingly problematic as patterns of racial segregation and urban renewal have changed. Since the 1970s, many U.S. cities have shifted from stark Black-White macrosegregation toward a more diverse landscape marked by patterns of multiracial integration and declining racial isolation (Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Flores & Lobo, 2013; Lichter et al., 2015a; Logan, 2014; Logan & Zhang, 2012; Logan et al., 2012; Wright et al., 2014; Zubrinsky & Bobo, 1996). Similarly, the focus of gentrification research has seemingly expanded geographically, temporally, and contextually to cover a broader range of regions, times, and topics.

Studies attempting to engage with this changing landscape highlight the complicated and undefined nature of race in gentrification. Studying “non-white” gentrification in Chicago’s predominantly Black Bronzeville and largely Latino Pilsen, Anderson and Sternberg (2013) find that race shapes governance practices and trajectories of gentrification. Studying “Black gentrification,” Taylor (1992) and Moore (2009) argue that there are distinct processes, constraints, and opportunities involved with the movement of upper-class Black residents into lower-class Black communities that make this distinct from other forms of gentrification. Similarly, studies of Hispanic-led gentrification, or gente-ification, explore how class and race interact to produce a form of regional change in regions with large Hispanic populations (Ahrens, 2015; Delgado & Swanson, 2019). These studies find that race non-trivially shapes the causes, consequences, and constraints of gentrification.

Similarly, by coining non-White gentrification, studies imply that gentrification is inherently a racialized phenomenon, predicated by White individuals moving into non-White spaces. Whiteness or racial domination is implied in the process. Yet the role of race remains unclear and underexplored (Kirkland, 2008). This presents a problematic tension for the field: Is gentrification a race-neutral concept based in class, or is it inherently
racialized? The answer has implications for how scholars define and measure gentrification in an increasingly diverse urban landscape (Lees, 2016).

I argue that to effectively theorize the role of race in gentrification, it is imperative to first unearth the historical relationship between race and gentrification in academic scholarship. Examining research studies with a critical race lens provides an opportunity to gauge how scholars have navigated and reconciled various aspects of race within gentrification. This provides a foundation for understanding the implicit and explicit racial associations contained within gentrification studies over time and builds a pathway forward to a stronger theoretical frame that engages more fully with race.

Data

I analyzed empirical studies of gentrification published between 1970 and 2019. To ensure a comprehensive set of both published and unpublished documents, I searched the Publish or Perish Database, Google Scholar, and library databases for reports, manuscripts, theses, and dissertations related to “gentrification.” I refined this list using the following criteria:

(1) Written, presented, or disseminated between 1970 and 2019;
(2) Gentrification was a primary subject of inquiry identified in the title or abstract;
(3) Original empirical was analysis included (theoretical, meta-analysis, popular, and narrative reports were excluded from the analysis set);
(4) Geographic focus was United States (this allows a focus on the unique patterns of racial division and segregation within an American system).

This resulted in a universe of empirical studies of gentrification written between 1970 and 2019 (n = 331). To assess changes over time, I classified the 331 studies into four periods based on publication date (Table 1): P1 1970–1990, P2 1991–2000, P3 2001–2009, P4 2010–2019. I divided periods corresponding to both shifts in gentrification (Hackworth & Smith, 2001; Lees, 2003) and urban racial changes (Brown & Sharma, 2010; Ellen et al., 2012; Florida & Mellander, 2015; Reibel & Regelson, 2007). This allowed me to explore how studies have changed their treatment of race as the economic and racial composition of U.S. cities has changed.

Analysis I

The first analysis explored how race is used in definitions and measurement of gentrification over time. I conducted a systematic literature review of a subset of gentrification articles (n = 50) selected through both random and purposive sampling. To capture articles arguably most influential, I purposively sampled the 25 studies with the most citations.

| Period     | # Studies |
|------------|-----------|
| 1970–1990  | 57        |
| 1991–2000  | 54        |
| 2001–2009  | 122       |
| 2010–2019  | 98        |
| **Total**  | **331**   |
To represent the remaining body of scholarship, I randomly sampled 25 studies from the nonreplacement set of 306.

I systematically reviewed these studies, capturing the definitions, descriptions, and measurements of gentrification provided by authors. I focused on these three components within each study as a means of unearthing both explicit and implicit meanings of race vis-a-vis gentrification. I describe these components in the following.

**Definitions**

I used authors’ explicitly stated definitions of gentrification (unique or quoted). Definitions identify the author’s core understanding of gentrification, including input, outcomes, and process—for example, Tissot’s (2011) definition: “the transformation of working class inner city areas into renovated residential and/or commercial neighborhoods attracting a growing number of middle-class residents” (p. 266) and “primarily a process of exclusion” (p. 266). Definitions indicate how an author is approaching and evaluating concepts, specifically why certain social structures matter and how they are expected to operate in the world. Definitions explicitly indicated if and how race interacts with gentrification as well as how the author is theoretically oriented toward these concepts.

**Descriptions**

The descriptions used were author-provided contextual examples and/or descriptions of regions that are gentrified, ungentrified, gentrifying, and/or gentrifiable. For example, Yee (2010), described the ungentrified Mission District: “Historically, the Mission District’s educational and occupational status as well as family income has remained well below the city’s average” (p. 26). Descriptions provide insight into the reflexive and implicit associations or stereotypes that authors hold of the process of gentrification, deepening our focus on the author’s implicit understanding of race and its role in gentrification.

**Measurements**

Author-defined metrics and types of analysis used in studies to conduct their empirical exploration included: (a) research question; (b) data source (e.g., Census or AHS); (c) location of analysis; (d) period of analysis (number and range of years studied); (e) method of analysis (e.g., logistic regression); (f) analysis variables (dependent, independent, and controls). Using type of data and method, I divided studies into quantitative or qualitative, based on the findings of scholars such as Niemonen (1997a) and Levi Martin and Yeung (2003), who found an increase in race as components of quantitative analysis. Statistical models and regression analysis employing surveys and panel data were coded “quantitative,” and interviews, case studies, and ethnographies were coded “qualitative.” This provided the ability to compare how authors measured gentrification across types of studies and how this may or may not incorporate race as part of the analysis.
Racial coding

Race was operationalized as the set of racial terms, concepts, and categories employed by the authors themselves. Thus, race referred to ways that authors employed and made use of racialized identities (e.g., White), racial and ethnoracial categories (e.g., non-Hispanic Black), and racial processes (e.g., “race relations,” “racism,” “racial prejudice”). Rather than predefining a set of terms, I relied on the authors’ use of race to iteratively develop a coding guide. Each racial term was coded as mutually exclusive; for example, if “Black,” “racism,” and “Hispanic-Black” appeared, each was coded as a distinct category. I then closed-coded the captured definitions, descriptions, and measurements using this coding scheme.

Analysis

First, to identify when authors use race, I compared the presence (or absence) of race in definitions, descriptions, and measurements over time. Second, to determine how race was employed in definitions, descriptions, and measures over time, I evaluated the substantive focus of each instance of racial coding employing Niemonen’s (1997a) distinction between primary and secondary context. The use of race was coded as “secondary” if race was a passing mention or a subtopic of another focus; secondary mentions have no related theory, definition, or justification. Race was coded as “primary” if the discussion of race is a core focus of analysis or a primary subject, with a definition or justification. For example, race as a control variable is secondary, and use as a dependent variable is primary.

Analysis II: Methods

To explore implicit associations of race in studies of gentrification, I conducted a discourse analysis using collocation and qualitative coding of the corpus of gentrification studies (n = 331). Collocation analysis uncovers relationships of habitual co-occurrence between words (Stubbs, 1995). Repeated associations can be reliable indicators of macrolevel meaning, uncovering connections that are left implicit or unstated (Hunston, 2002).

I coded articles using Nvivo software in three stages. First, I conducted an inductive investigation of dominant terms by running a word frequency analysis of all words in all articles. I cleaned results by combining stemmed words, removing prepositions and common stop terms. I then qualitatively grouped related terms to make a series of prominent “conceptual core themes.” These conceptual cores were largely self-explanatory concepts of race/ethnicity, economic status, social status, urban structure, power, etc. I operationalized “race” as well as other categories using terms employed by the authors.

I conducted a collocation analysis of terms. Using Nvivo’s search function, I captured words in close proximity (~5 words) to coded themes. For example, analyzing upscale in the sentence, “Since the 1970s, certain types of upscale restaurants, cafes, and stores have emerged as visible signs of gentrification in cities all over the world” (Zukin et al., 2009, p. 49), the words directly before and after upscale—“the 1970s certain types of” and “restaurants cafes and stores have”—would be captured. This occurred for every use of upscale in all articles, with the total surrounding terms merged into a single node.

I then ran a cluster analysis and frequency analysis on each node. Collocated terms were assigned a frequency percentage indicating strength of association with stem words. To
determine if the association was reciprocal or unidirectional, I ran a separate collocation analysis on each of the 25 most highly associated terms as the search stem. For example, if *upscale* was strongly associated with *restaurant*, a frequency analysis was conducted on *restaurant*: Each analysis was done on all studies overall as well as by period.

To visualize the association between nodes, I used arrows extending from stem terms to related words. An arrow pointing both from the stem term and toward the stem term indicates a reciprocal relationship. The thickness of the arrow relates to strength of association (frequency) between related words. For example, if *upscale* was more strongly related to *restaurant* than *yoga*, and if that relationship was reciprocal, the figure would appear as seen in Figure 2.

**Findings Analysis 1**

**Racialized definitions and descriptions of gentrification**

In this section, I analyze how race is employed in the definition, description, and measurement across all studies of gentrification. Findings referenced are in Figure 3 below. To start, race was included in 30% of all study definitions (Figure 3). The most frequent use of race in

![Figure 2](image_url)  
*Figure 2.* Reciprocal item association example.

![Figure 3](image_url)  
*Figure 3.* Definitions and measurement incorporating race by period.
definitions was in the earliest period, P1: 1970–1990 (62%) but remained low in subsequent periods.

In the 30% of the definitions that did employ race, race was used primarily to modify economic position and/or tenure. Spain (1981), for example, defined gentrification as “young white professionals moving into deteriorated neighborhoods and renovating houses previously occupied by blacks or white ethnics” (p. 14). In these definitions, the relationship between race, class, and tenure was consistent, such that the upper-class, incoming population was identified as White and the incumbent population was identified as Black, minority, or non-White in P1 and P2. In P3 and P4 that relationship was deracialized or racially unidentified.

While race was included infrequently in definitions, class or market-based terms (e.g., upgrading lower-class areas) were used in all definitions across the board. For example, Hammel and Wyly (1996) defined gentrification as “the replacement of low-income inner-city working class residents by middle or upper class households, either through the market for existing housing or demolition to make way for new upscale housing construction” (p. 250). The centrality of class in definitions, and the lack of race in definitions, reinforces the idea that class is a dominant focus of gentrification, and race is a secondary component of the process.

In study descriptions, 61% of studies used race when describing gentrified, gentrifying, and ungentrified areas (Figure 1). Although race in descriptions was most frequent in P1 (68%), it remained relatively stable over time, in contrast to the decline in race-mentioning definitions over time. Race was used in two ways in descriptions. First, descriptions in P1 and P2 overwhelmingly (92% and 88% respectively) described gentrification as an outcome of specific, historical processes in the post-WWII period (1940–1960): This declined in P3 and P4 (37% and 42%), whereby gentrification became an abstract concept not rooted in a specific historical period (Table 2).

Of the historically specific descriptions, a majority referenced race explicitly (69% in P1 and 63% in P2) by discussing racial segregation, White flight, and racially discriminatory policies. For example, “As the white middle-class moved out to the suburbs and the Black migration accelerated ... Harlem’s population became increasingly Black” (Schaffer & Smith, 1986, p. 351). Descriptions that engaged this specific postwar period made race a central component of analysis by contextualizing the process within specific sites and times. This engaged race and discrimination as residential sorting mechanisms, providing a rationale for why race was incorporated into descriptions.

However, in P3 and P4, descriptions shifted to comparing racialized populations across time or geography. Regions were described as gentrified or gentrifying if there was a comparatively smaller percentage of Black, Hispanic, or minority populations and/or an increased White population. For example, Schill and Nathan (1983) described gentrified regions as places that experienced significant change in class composition (percent low income and percent blue collar workers), as well as racial populations (percent Black and percent Hispanic). Yee (2010)

| Table 2. Descriptions of pre- and postgentrified areas. |
|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Postwar period (1940–1960)                              | Other historical periods |
|                                                        | No race | Race | Total | No race | Race | Total |
| P1                                                      | 23%     | 69%  | 92%   | 8%      | –     | 8%    |
| P2                                                      | 25%     | 63%  | 88%   | 13%     | –     | 13%   |
| P3                                                      | 27%     | 10%  | 37%   | 17%     | 27%   | 44%   |
| P4                                                      | 30%     | 12%  | 42%   | 27%     | 21%   | 48%   |
described changes in the Mission of San Francisco: “There has been an influx of Anglo, middle income business owners moving into a predominantly Latino-working class neighborhood” (p. 3). Similar to the way race was used in definitions, race in P3 and P4 was listed as just one change among many. Descriptions were unclear about whether race, economic position, tenure, or an interaction of variables was essential to this process gentrification. Thus, unlike descriptions in P1 and P2, in later years, race became secondary, appearing in descriptions without a motivating theory.

**Racial absence in research questions**

Coded research questions were divided into three broad categories: (a) exploring regional context of gentrification, (b) identifying impacts of gentrification, and (c) predicting the likelihood of gentrification. Question types were mixed in P1 and P2, but in P3 and P4 the emphasis on impacts was dominant, primarily due to an increased emphasis on displacement, as seen in Figure 4.10

Race was more consistently included in studies that predicted gentrification. Studies predicting gentrification employed longitudinal data to demonstrate how specific population compositions produced gentrification and in doing so highlighted race as a key mechanism of change.

In context-based and impact-based studies, race was largely excluded from research questions. For example, Sims (2014) asked where concentrations of displacement existed and what factors were associated with displacement. The few impact-based studies that did include race as part of the research question tended to be qualitative, focusing specifically on perceptions and conflicts that emerged. Boyd (2005), for example, explored how a Black community perceived gentrification.

The shift toward impact-focused research questions indicated a view of gentrification that is increasingly divisive and power laden. Impact studies tended to emphasize conflict-oriented

Figure 4. Questions by focus period.
outcomes, such as displacement and community resistance. Although conflict became more dominant in research questions in P3 and P4, race was largely absent in motivating questions.

**Frequent use of race in measurement and analysis of variables**

Even though race was largely excluded from definitions and research questions, it was included as a variable in 84% of the studies. This was particularly true for quantitative studies. Quantitative analyses made up about 63% of studies evaluated (Table 3). The rise of quantitative analysis is heavily related to the increased focus on displacement.

Both quantitative and qualitative studies operationalized race as a flat, constant, and obvious individual-level attribute. Studies did not define *race* nor provide a justification for how they identified or sampled racialized individuals or communities (such as percent of individuals in the community identifying as a race). In quantitative studies race was consistently operationalized as a mutually exclusive and discrete individual-level attribute. In P1 racial designation was based on a single question from data sources such as the American Community Survey (ACS), which measured self-reported race at a single point in time. After P1, race was variably combined with a self-reported measure of Hispanic ethnicity, resulting in categorizations such as “non-Hispanic Black.” This ethno-racial operationalization was variable; some studies employed Hispanic or Latino in tandem with race (e.g., non-Hispanic White), and others incorporated Hispanic as its own race. Despite this variation, studies largely failed to evaluate or justify their use of race or ethnicity. Simultaneously, they uncritically defined race as a set of fixed, mutually exclusive, and discrete individual-level attributes, taken from single sources.

Over time, the range of racial categories incorporated into studies remained limited, despite changing demographics in the United States. Between 1970 and 2010, various permutations of ethno-racial designation in the U.S. Census allowed for more than 20 distinct categories, and post-2000 the Census allowed for the selection of multiple categories (Hirschman et al., 2000; Nagel, 1995). However, few of these categories were represented in the analyzed measurements. Categories were consistently limited to “White,” “Black,” “Hispanic,” “non-Hispanic White,” “non-Hispanic Black,” and “minority.” Only one study in the sample set included “Asian,” none engaged “Native,” “Pacific Islander,” “Two or more races,” or “Other.” In this way, racial representation remained limited, failing to account for changing demographics in U.S. cities.

For contrast, *class* was consistently defined using a combination of response variables from data sources such as the ACS, including educational, professional, wealth, housing ownership status, and/or income measures. Given the range and variation in indicators used to define *class*, authors explicitly justified their specific measurement of class, rooting decisions in both past literature and current events. *Class* was consistently defined as

| Table 3. Methods of analysis. |
|--------------------------------|
| **Quantitative studies total** | 63% |
| Regression                     | 52% |
| Spatial analysis                | 7%  |
| Computer simulation             | 2%  |
| Descriptive statistics          | 2%  |
| **Qualitative studies total**   | 37% |
| Ethnography or case study       | 32% |
| Interviews                      | 5%  |
a complex and multifaceted concept that varied across contexts and time. The divergence between the treatment of class and race positions class as more complex and multifaceted than race, reinforcing notions that race is a stable, inherent trait (Banton, 1979).

In analyzing these variables, more than half of quantitative studies used race as a secondary focus, incorporating it as a control or independent variable in quantitative regression-style analysis. Despite the implicit interaction between race and other variables in the study definitions and descriptions, only two studies explicitly incorporated an interaction effect with race. For example, Sullivan (2007) used an interaction between Black and tenure. In many of the quantitative studies, a series of regression models were set up in which Whiteness was a predictor of gentrification and displacement, and the presence of Black and Hispanic residents was indicative of ungentrified areas. This use of race in quantitative models reinforces the a priori assumption that gentrified spaces are White spaces. Like ecological contamination models, whereby all persons in “bad” neighborhoods are viewed as possessing the moral liability of the neighborhood (Anguelovski, 2016; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004), Whiteness became a sign of neighborhood resurgence, and non-White categories remained associated with disinvestment (Gilbert, 2010; Wacquant, 1997).

Using race as a control inherently suggests that all racial categories—across multiple times and locations—experience the same mechanisms and pathways of inequality. By contrast, parallel analyses and interaction effects would allow the coefficient of interest to vary by race, indicating that processes or mechanisms may vary by racial category. Levi Martin and Yeung (2003)’s analysis of race in the American Sociological Review demonstrated a similar usage of race in analyses, whereby variables were analyzed in ways that evidenced a broad but shallow usage: Meaning that authors were assuming that although race had a broad impact on the outcome variable of interest, race did not affect the relationship between other variables. In other words, although race was a visible component of the social world, it was not powerful enough to impact other social processes. This use of race is seen in gentrification studies as well, creating a flattening and homogenizing view of race in the process of gentrification, whereby race is not a key component of analysis nor operationalized as a complex and historically contingent social construct.

Findings Analysis II: Racialized associations

This section details results from Analysis II on associated clusters of concepts emerging from gentrification literature. Using the most prominent term, gentrification, the immediate relationships that emerged are not related to race but instead relate to power, domination, and economic structural processes: specifically, core concepts of renewal, capitalism, economics, vulnerability, and power (Figure 5). This reinforces the idea that gentrification is primarily discussed as a process of economic dominance.

Three sets of significantly associated terms emerged and remained consistent across time periods. The first set centered on upper-class and was strongly associated with educated, white-collar professional, and Whiteness. Slightly weaker, but still significant, associations included youth, change, proximity, and influx (Figure 6). This cluster, which is focused around economic status, includes racial associations or Whiteness and other demographic features of youth and classed status of educated and professional. This showed that Whiteness, in studies of gentrification, was highly correlated with positions of social class.
A second cluster emerged from lower-class, which was strongly associated with minority, Black, and displacement. These are less strongly associated with harm, decline, political, and renter (Figure 7). Like the upper-class cluster, this focused on class position but included two racial categories of minority and Black, as well as power-laden associations of harm and displacement. This effectively tied racial statuses of Blackness and minority position to weaker social positions and lower-class status.

A final cluster consisted of a broader set of associated terms: newcomer and incumbent (Figure 8). Although overall the nodes produced few overlapping associations, three nodes—
Figure 7. Low-income cluster, 1970–2019.

Figure 8. Newcomer and incumbent cluster.
gentrification, culture, business—were shared between newcomer and incumbent. Aside from these, the strongest associations for newcomer included entertainment, enterprise, and middle-class; the strongest associations for incumbent were change, low income, Black, and gentrification.

These clusters represented relationships over the period of analysis, 1970–2019. In analyzing the clusters across all periods, the strength of relationships varied slightly due to sample size of analyzed words, but the pattern of relationships remained consistent over time across all clusters.

Focusing on associations of concepts, although gentrification studies emphasized power and change, race was complicit in how class and power were represented. The emerging racialized types tied class, race, and tenure together in ways that stayed stable over time. Despite changes in the demographic and economic composition of cities, on the whole, studies tended to associate economic and social power to White newcomers and economic poverty and vulnerability to a set of minority incumbents. This suggests that gentrification is a highly racialized body of work, which reproduces racial associations and biases.

Although there are some associations that emerge out of the analyses of “Asian” and “Hispanic” concepts, due to the relatively low frequency of these categories throughout gentrification studies, the strength of these relationships does not appear to be significant. In P4 there are more terms that allow for analysis. Specifically, Hispanic is associated with Blackness (8.44), Whiteness (4.81), immigration (4.43), and worker (3.32). Asian has substantially fewer mentions than Hispanic, making the associations quite weak, but there is a light association with Hispanic (1.14).

**Discussion: Gentrification as a racialized body of work**

Findings from Analysis I and II on studies of gentrification highlight the confused and chaotic role of race within the field of gentrification, particularly when compared to the role of class. Overall, class is defined as the structuring agent of power in gentrification. In explicit definitions and research questions, studies position gentrification primarily and explicitly as a process of economic change. In the systematic analysis of a subset of articles, class is explicitly included in all definitions of gentrification. Similarly, class is measured as a multifaceted variable of measurement that varies across time and place.

By comparison, race is subsumed or made epiphenomenal to class. Race was included in only a third of definitions and less than 30% of research questions. Despite this absence of race in the theory and motivation for studies of gentrification, race is consistently included in both description and measurement. Unlike definitions, race is included at levels similar to class in analyses. Racial categories are present in more than 80% of study measurements and in more than half of the descriptions of gentrification. In contrast to class, race is operationalized from a single data source, staying stable over time. Studies consistently use the presence or absence of racial groups to measure degree of gentrification and insert race as a control variable. This treatment of race in models and measurement reinforces the a priori assumption that a gentrified space is a White space, and an ungentrified space is Brown.

The stark contrast between the treatment of race and class creates a body of scholarship that subsumes race under class in the process of gentrification but uses race in measurements. In doing so, scholars reinforce racial assumptions about how gentrification works without engaging seriously with how race and racial dominance are reconstructed and reconstituted in space during this process. Focusing on racial differences as outcomes and
employing race as a variable of analysis without a motivating logic for how race operates within their specific quantitative model perpetuates a series of problematic and self-confirming statistical associations between race, class, and power (Levi Martin & Yeung, 2003; Stewart, 2008). While the very frequent presence of race in scholarship implies that there is indeed a relationship between race and gentrification, how and when they relate is left unexplored and undefined. This is especially noteworthy when compared to class; class is operationalized in multifaceted ways, which are debated across studies and theorized within studies. As a result, there is little epistemological or ontological justification for how or why race operates in urban spaces. The consistent use of race as a metric without a theoretical framework to give race meaning or value results in abstracted empiricism (Mills, 2000). Abstracted empiricism layered onto a framework about power and change acts to reify essentializing views of race as a flat, stable, individual qualities.

This depiction of flattened and reified racialized traits is further supported through findings from the collocation analysis. Although the overarching relationships in studies of gentrification relate to power, dominance, and capital, consistent typologies emerge that tie race, class, and tenure together, creating sets of “poor minority incumbent” and “wealthy White newcomer.” These typologies reinforce ideas of White dominance and power in the making of space, and Blackness is placed in a vulnerable position. These groupings remain consistent over time and place, which is surprising given both the changing demographics of American cities (Lee et al., 2014; Zubrinksy & Bobo, 1996) and the idea that racial meaning varies substantially across time and geography in ways that should shape both space and racial logics (Farley & Frey, 1994; Fox & Guglielmo, 2013; Omi & Winant, 1994; Wade, 2010). For example, we should expect, given studies on the construction of race in America, that the geographic location of cities—whether in the South, Midwest, or Northeast—should shape the patterns of segregation and racial power structures that may either predate gentrification or shape the way gentrification occurs (Fox & Guglielmo, 2013).

It is important to note that the findings from analyses I and II are done on aggregated studies, representing the sum of a body of research rather than all individual studies. There are many authors, such as Hwang (2016), Schachter and Besbris (2017), Ahrens (2015), and Delgado and Swanson (2019), among others, who engage race and ethnicity with power and positionality in their studies. However, findings do suggest that a substantial amount of scholarship is designed in a way that implicitly creates an understanding of gentrification as a process imposed by White in-movers on Black incumbents. This framing is clear in studies of “non-white gentrification” whereby the Whiteness of gentrification is implicit.

There has been a call to leave gentrification as a “flexible” or “chaotic” concept to best capture a similar process over time and location. However, I argue that leaving gentrification as a poorly defined analytical concept allows race to remain epiphenomenal to class in ways that do not require a clear racial logic. By failing to explicate how we expect race and class to operate within spaces, gentrification will continue to reproduce problematic notions of racial dominance and abstracted empiricism. This will simultaneously limit our ability to analyze emerging forms of urban change in diverse settings and inhibit theory that can elucidate how the process of urban renewal interacts with existing social structures and social identities to reshape the experience of power and dominance. Failing to address race as a structuring agent in urban space and urban renewal produces two problems for scholarship, both of which are highlighted in this study: first, the assumption that race, racial dominance, and racial power structures operate the same way for all individuals and all races, and second, that race is
a discrete individual property (Atkinson, 2002). Encouraging a well-defined analytical concept of gentrification will help authors to more clearly identify the power dynamics and processes of oppression underlying urban change (Maloutas, 2012; Slater, 2006).

Moving past race as a stable trait

As a pathway forward, I argue for a relational-analysis definition of gentrification, in which the role of race is defined by authors and incorporated more fully into definitions of the process being explored. Engaging race more explicitly helps avoid both abstracted empiricism and a broad but shallow treatment of race.

This is not to argue that race does not shape gentrification nor that it should be evicted from analysis. On the contrary, scholarship on segregation and spatial dynamics suggests that race continues to shape land values, housing patterns, and reinvestment in ongoing ways that should be examined within studies of gentrification (Charles, 2003; Hall et al., 2015; Riddick, 1996). Indeed, studies finding that race shapes even the appraisal process would suggest that a rise in property values is indeed linked inextricably with race (Howell & Korver-Glenn, 2018). Stemming from this, I argue that urban studies must take seriously the social constructivist perspective of race and not throw race into analyses simply because it is standard practice. Studies without a motivating theory for why race plays a role should evict race as a variable of analysis. Those that include race should engage seriously with how race operates in the process of gentrification.

Scholars should engage more explicitly with race as a complex concept. To do so, race must be understood as a complex, fluid, and malleable concept of practice rather than a stable trait. If race is defined as a complex category, like class, then race should be operationalized as a complex and varied social identity, similar to the ways class is variously operationalized using income, wealth, educational attainment, and/or profession. Using race as a flattened variable obscures the heterogeneity within and between racial categories and fails to engage with why we should expect race to matter in different contexts. Racial-category variations such as pigment, nationality, time in the United States, and gender intersect with race in ways that meaningfully influence access to power and social outcomes (Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Parisi et al., 2011; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Quillian & Zhou, 1997). For example, there are meaningful differences between Black Americans and African immigrants in identity, attitudes, and social mobility, though both are considered Black when using only a Census variable of race (Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Waters & Jiménez, 2005). Chandra (2009) has proposed new ways of collecting ethnicity-related data that allow for variation and complexity, suggesting that this type of data analysis is possible.

Similarly, methods of analysis should align with theoretical motivation. Incorporating race as a variable within single regression models suggests that all racial categories operate in the same way across space (Levi Martin & Yeung, 2003), which conflicts with studies demonstrating that racial dynamics and mechanisms vary substantially across categories and space (Charles, 2003; Fox & Guglielmo, 2013; Kim & White, 2010; Quillian & Zhou, 1997; Wright et al., 2014). For example, if studies assume that racial categories will shape residential patterns distinctly, different models should be run for different racial categories to demonstrate how different racial categories work within society. For example, studies of the color line in relation to housing segregation suggest that one’s racial
categorization presents unique patterns of historical housing and challenges for attaining nonsegregated equitable housing (Lichter et al., 2015b; Logan, 2013). Likewise, if the factors limiting housing access are due to discriminatory practices, studies should focus on racism rather than using race as a proxy. Horton and Sykes (2008) provide an example of how scholars can tie a theory of race to methods by measuring racism rather than just race in isolation.

Finally, I encourage a relational approach that moves away from a stable group-based analysis toward an emphasis on contextualized, situated relationships. Brubaker (2004) has argued against a groupist approach, in which “the group” is taken as an unproblematic concept as basis for analysis. As an alternative, Desmond (2014), Collins (2000), Crenshaw (1991), and Crenshaw et al. (1991) have called for analyses that can account for how power operates across time and place (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Rouhani, 2014). A relational approach moves the focus of analysis from groups themselves to changing patterns of relationships. This allows scholars to incorporate multiple social categories and social positions to determine how power and dominance is reshaped and restructured in relation to categories. This keeps analysis tied to the dynamic and fluid nature of social relationships and avoids assuming a specific set of power relations, identities, and local alignments and antagonisms in which relationships between places and categories are fixed and flattened.

Contextualized analysis is attentive to historical and social processes that have shaped specific sites, including the processes, policies, and structures that led to a racialized landscape. For example, Anderson and Sternberg (2013) root their analysis in two neighborhoods in Chicago and highlight how race can differentially shape the process of gentrification itself. A relational perspective encourages scholars to look past stable concepts, such as race, and better understand how and why certain spatial shifts may marginalize or empower some as opposed to others.

**Conclusion**

This study analyzed a corpus of 331 empirical studies of gentrification to determine how scholars have defined and measured race as it relates to gentrification. Findings suggest that gentrification studies have historically highlighted gentrification as a class-based change, while including race as an epiphenomenal component of analysis and description. The result is that race is used consistently and implicitly in studies without a motivating theory or logic to define how race is expected to operate within each context. A series of racialized typologies that link class, tenure, race, and power are used consistently over time, despite changes in the urban landscape.

Although this approach may stem, in part, from legacies of segregation in the 1970s and 1980s, the increasingly complex racial landscapes require a shift from stable racialized assumptions toward a more complex and inductive analysis of how a range of relationships between tenure, class, and race may impact the process of gentrification.

In 1984, Rose argued that to better theorize and study the chaotic concept of gentrification, scholars should relate gentrification and its processes to broader political-economic changes and the concrete conditions, processes, and contexts through which gentrification may occur (Rose, 1984). This article agrees with Rose’s position, advocating for a move from fixed component parts toward a relational analysis that can begin to account for the broader sociopolitical and historical forces. I propose a shift from a group-based approach that analyzes race and place as stable, ahistorical identities, toward a contextualized and intersectional analysis, which provides
equal theoretical and empirical weight to the situated structures that produce power and domination. This is imperative to producing detailed and rigorous studies of gentrification in future years.

Notes

1. Racialization occurs at multiple social levels. At the macro level it occurs through structurally enforced, sanctioned, or monitored division. Census categories, for example, define the spectrum of racial categories and which individuals belong in these categories (Bailey et al., 2013; Burawoy, 2003; Hirschman et al., 2000). Racial designations have then been used to (re)produce inequality explicitly (such as voting rights [Klarman, 2004], housing access [Glaeser & Vigdor, 2012; Massey & Denton, 1993], labor [Bonacich, 1972; Lieberson, 1980; Wilson, 2007], and education [Myrdal, 1944]) and implicitly (examples include welfare and criminal justice policies target racialized groups). At the micro level, individuals perceive and categorize individuals based on socially significant cues and indicators gleaned through interaction (Glenn, 1999; Green, 2011) and tie treatment and perception to those cues.

2. The definition of race has been used inconsistently over time and across geographic and cultural contexts. Within the United States, for example, federally recorded Census categories have shifted almost every decade for the last 100 years, responding to political pressures and popular perceptions. Assignment into these categories has changed from enumerator assignment to self-selection in the 1960s and likewise shifted from single response to multiple response in the early 2000s (Hirschman et al., 2000; Nagel, 1995). Similarly, individual self-identification can change over an individual life span (Saperstein & Penner, 2012). As such, these concepts are not strictly defined but are malleable and unstable—as both the macro-categories change and assignment into them shifts.

3. Many review articles and meta-analyses have compared definitions, finding they vary in inclusion and emphasis on infrastructural upgrading, the influx of a culturally or economically distinct population, a shift in neighborhood identity, increases in market values, changes in ownership, and local population turnover, among other definitional components (see Atkinson, 2000; Redfern, 2003).

4. Focusing on causes, supply-side arguments posited that change was driven by uneven development, capital accumulation, and rent gaps that benefited capital expansion in disinvested regions (Smith, 1979). Demand-side arguments focused on changes in the workforce, family, and economic power that shifted preferences to urban spaces, leading to a repopulation of disinvested regions (Butler & Hamnett, 1994; Zukin, 1987). Similarly, studies of gentrification’s consequences—revanchist and emancipatory positions—debated the implications and outcomes of the process using class and culture. Revanchist arguments characterized cities as contested sites of material and symbolic power in which market forces enabled upper-class newcomers to exert economic and cultural dominance (Slater, 2004; Smith, 1996). The emancipatory approach argued that gentrification allowed multiple classes to co-exist, reversing disinvestment and segregation (Lees, 2008; Slater, 2004).

5. I contacted a set of content-specific e-mail lists and planning forums, requesting unpublished studies of gentrification, neighborhood effects, and the ghetto. The combination yielded more than 3,000 unique documents, reasonably representing a comprehensive sample of studies on these topics developed between 1970 and 2013.

6. Given the constructivist nature of this exploration, I suggest that it is theoretically appropriate to exclude cross-national studies in this examination. The construction of race varies by nation such that comparing race in U.S. studies and other nations would not provide insight into the same historical contexts, e.g., the difference between American and French designations (Blum & Guérin-Pace, 2008).

7. Citation numbers for this study were provided by Web of Knowledge. While citation numbers are not a perfect indication of influence, they provide a degree of insight into articles most frequently referred to by other scholars focusing on gentrification.
8. To ensure a consistent measure of race across analyses within this study, I compared the “race” concepts from Analysis I with the coding scheme from Analysis II to ensure consistency between both race-based coding schemes.

9. During analysis, multiple word-length tests were conducted including ~3, ~4, ~5, ~8, and ~10. Analyzing each return, ~3 provided very few associations once scrubbed for stop words, while ~10 provided few strong associations. Word-length tests ~5 and ~8 provided similar results, and I chose ~5 for ease of analysis.

10. Scholars define displacement in various ways; Valli (2016), for example, discusses emotional, psychological, and affective displacement that affects the phenomenological experience of place. Others focus on spatial displacement; Marcuse (1985), for example, defines four different types of displacement, including direct last-resident, direct chain, exclusionary, and pressure. The role of displacement in gentrification and the appropriate definition of displacement are both topics of debate within the field (Redfern, 2003; Vigdor et al., 2002). For this study, I quantify displacement by relying on the author’s use of the term or variable. I do not distinguish between types of displacement but argue that these all entail some form of removal or exclusionary behavior that is enacted upon a specific population.

11. Brubaker (2004) argues that groups and categories are not the same; groups are a specific set of mutually interacting, mutually recognizing, mutually orienting, and bounded collective with a sense of solidarity, identity, and capacity for action. Categories, by contrast, are imposed by outsiders and do not necessarily lead to groupness.

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