

‘Gentrifications’

*Settler Colonial Innocence and Segregation in the
East Bay*

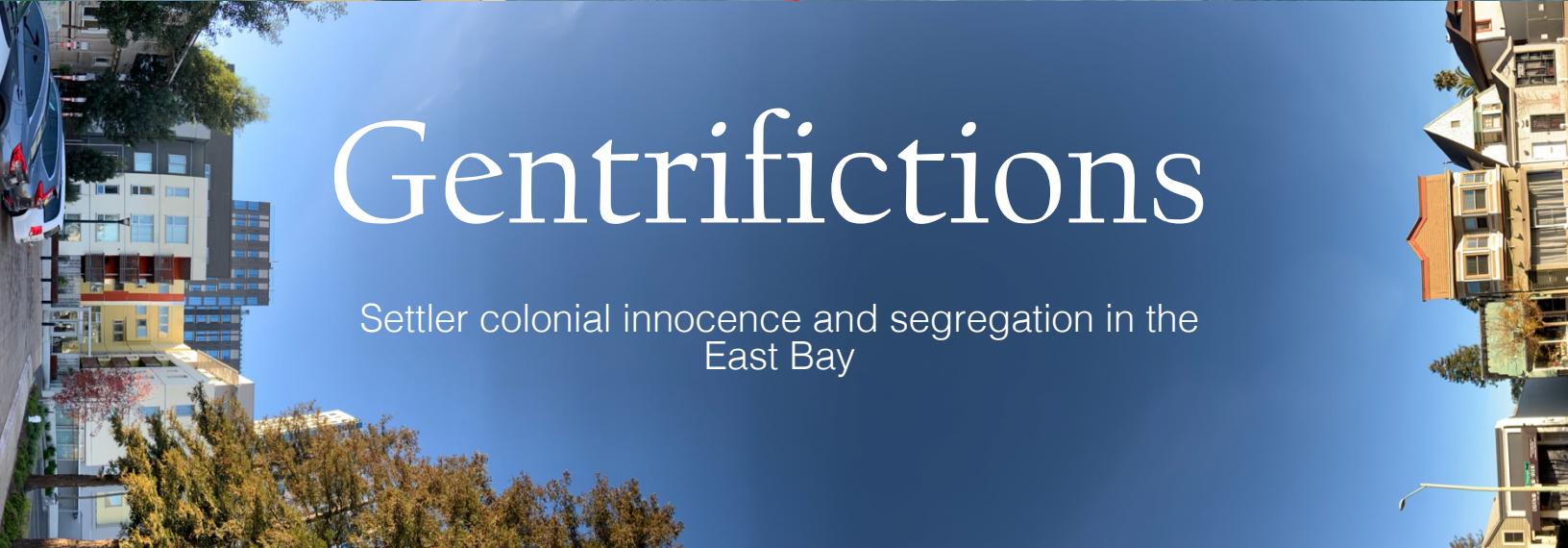
by

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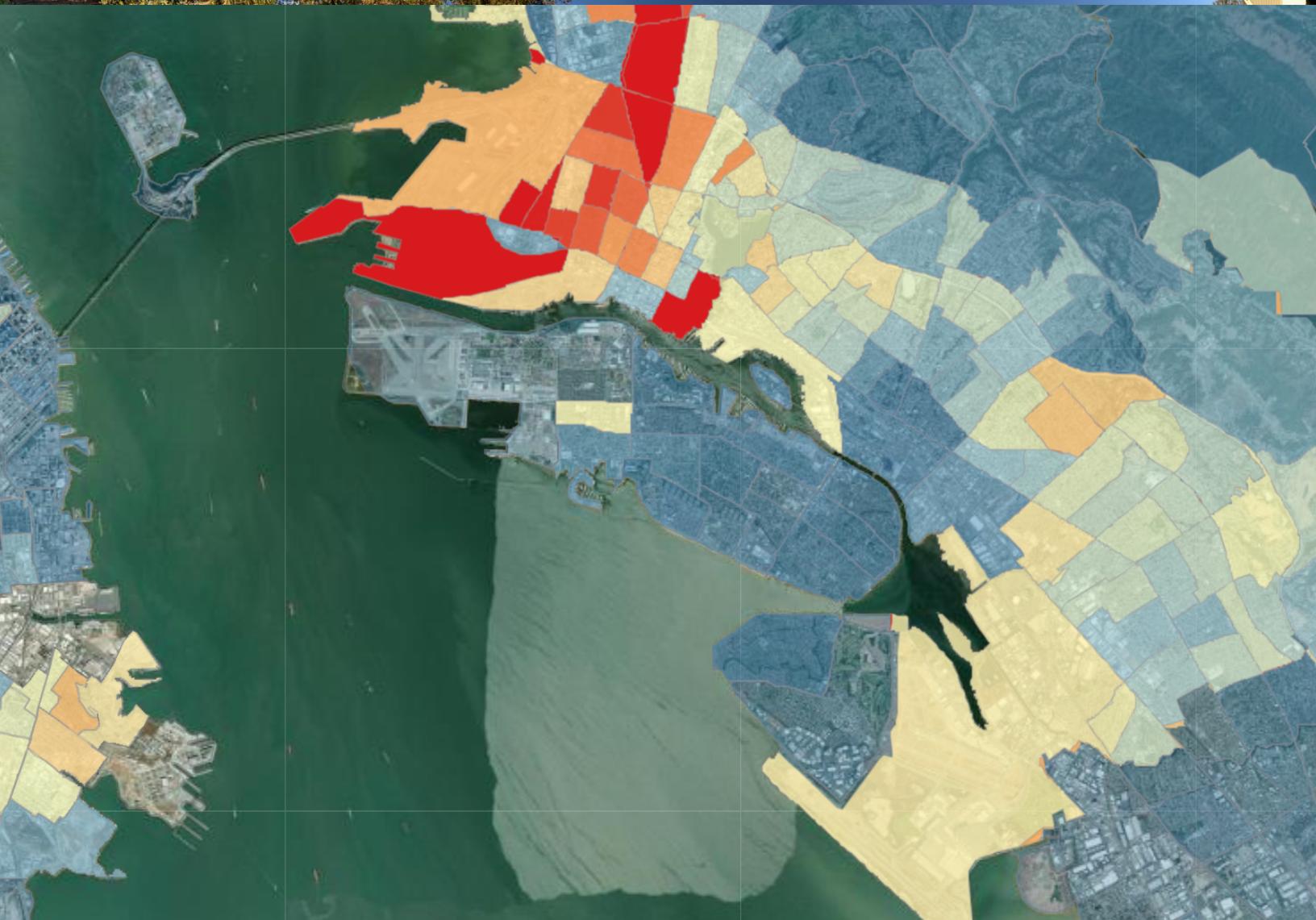


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Introduction



“GOLD RUSHERS SETTLED HERE. AND NOW YOU’RE HERE.” The banner that greeted me as I stepped out of the Embarcadero BART station was one of several, each leading to another down a bread-crumb trail that ended at the foot of the new elevated Salesforce park. I remember seeing these signs for the first time and being amused, not totally sure what exactly they were advertising, and following them along their path until I reached the final one. It reads: “WOOLY MAMMOTHS LIVED HERE. AND NOW YOU’RE HERE.” And on the back: “THE EAST CUT. OUR STORIED NEW NEIGHBORHOOD.”

Neil Smith, in his seminal book on gentrification writes that the “Frontier is a style as much as a place,” an idea that serves to separate the city from its history and produce

neighborhoods as frontiers to be explored.¹ The signs in downtown San Francisco that I ran into in 2019, late for my first day of work, are exactly this: the marketing of a new neighborhood by invoking the settler-colonial past.

Almost half of the 1580 census tracts in the nine counties that make up the greater Bay Area are estimated to be at risk of or are currently undergoing ‘gentrification.’² Living and growing up in the East Bay, gentrification in the form of rising rents, new development, vast cultural and racial changes, and constant advertising for real estate has always been in my periphery. My family is fortunate enough that we have never been displaced, or needed to worry about it, but for most people in the East Bay this is not the case. The Bay Area trades places with New York City yearly for the most expensive housing market in the country; in 2021, the median home cost throughout the nine Bay counties was \$1.3 million dollars, requiring a minimum estimated income of at least \$235,000 yearly to afford a home in the Bay Area.³ This is reflected by the fact that the Bay Area has the highest income inequality in California, already a state with one of the largest wealth gaps in the country.⁴

Our extreme inequality, however, has not made California’s land market any less profitable. In 2021, the real estate market *alone* in California was worth an estimated \$9.24 trillion dollars.⁵ Neighborhoods that have been continually divested from through redlining,

¹ Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier* (London: Routledge, 1996), 14.

² Mujahid, Mahasin S., Elizabeth K. Sohn, Jacob Izenberg, Xing Gao, Melody E. Tulier, Matthew M. Lee, and Irene H. Yen., "Gentrification and Displacement in the San Francisco Bay Area: A Comparison of Measurement Approaches" *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 12: 2246

³ KTVU Staff, “So, how much does it take to buy a house in the Bay Area?” *KTVU*, November 11, 2021, 1.

⁴ Erica Hellerstein, “It’s Official: Bay Area Has Highest Income Inequality in California,” *KQED*, January 31, 2020, 1.

⁵ Treh Manhertz, “U.S. Housing Market has Doubled in Value since the Great Recession, Gaining \$6.9 Trillion in 2021,” *Zillow*, January 27, 2022.

tenant abuse, mob violence, and over policing are now becoming some of the most profitable additions to one of the most rapacious land markets in the world.⁶

Gentrification has many definitions, each contesting the visibility of the positive-and-negative effects it brings, but few which name gentrification for what it almost always is in the East Bay. As I will argue, gentrification is an inherently racialized process, relying on the legacy of California's residential segregation to reap enormous profits from strategically devalued neighborhoods. This process relies on carefully constructed advertising and messaging around gentrification, designed to invent new geographic identities that are desirable to the liberal whites that make up the largest portion of the Bay Area's wealth.

For developers looking to appeal to liberal white people, gentrification has become a "dirty word."⁷ Developers and realtors employ tactics to avoid the connotations of gentrification by substituting it for other words—"rejuvenation," "revitalization"—which deflect from the reality and of dispossession and eviction. Simply put, there is money to be made in easing the conscience of white homeowners buying property. The extreme avoidance of 'gentrification' in marketing and proposals by the real estate industry hints at the economic capital at stake when gentrification is remade into a more 'innocent' process.

This work is an exploration of contemporary gentrification in the East Bay, how it is portrayed and sold to white people, and how this is connected to the history of racialized housing in the Bay Area. Influenced by Neil Smith's work on gentrification strategies, as well as Carol Anderson's work analyzing the active decisions made by white Americans to maintain economic control in the United States, my research has focused on linking the active choices made by

⁶ Dawn Phillips, Louis Flores Jr., and Jamila Henderson, *Development Without Displacement: Resisting Gentrification in the Bay Area*, (Causa Justa::Just Cause, 2014), 9.

⁷ Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 47.

white residents and realtors that have created the conditions for gentrification and perpetuated racial segregation in the housing market. I am especially inspired by Jodi Melamed's assertion that theoretical analyses can be tools for activism when we use them "to name and analyze the production of social separateness—the disjoining or deactivating of relationships and human beings,"⁸ and using Smith's production-side approach as well as some consumption-side theorizing, my aim is that this work can highlight how gentrification has come to perpetuate and profit from residential segregation in the Bay.

Gentrification thrives by remaking neighborhoods into new frontiers to be explored and exploited. The signs advertising "The East Cut" that I encountered on my way to work, a title that up until a few years ago wasn't used to describe the Rincon Hill neighborhood, were installed by the East Cut's Community Benefit District as part of a 2015 rebranding project undertaken by property owners to distinguish the "East Cut," to give it a new identity and raise its property value. This is the same process that drove the reinvention of Brooklyn's DUMBO, Williamsburg, and increasingly Bushwick in New York city, and is also behind the invention of Longfellow, in Oakland, and NOBE—a neighborhood term created in the last five years by a sole real estate company, Red Oak Realty, that has been met with significant community resistance.⁹ These rebranding projects, the banners in downtown San Francisco invoking "great ships" and the US's settler-colonial conquest of the Bay Area, are the effect of capital invested in inventing a new cultural and class identity in an old neighborhood.

The contradiction between the Bay Area's liberal identity and the monopoly held by whites on land and capital is one of the 'conflicts of modernization' that gentrification marketing seeks to assuage. Richard Slotkin, in *Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of*

⁸ Jodi Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1. (2015): 78.

⁹ Rob Arias, "Realtor Responds to NOBE Controversy," *The E'Ville Eye*, January 11, 2013, 1.

Industrialization, describes these conflicts as reflections of the “desire to avoid recognition of the perilous consequences of capitalist development in the New World.”¹⁰ This ‘desire’ becomes commodified by gentrification marketing; by remaking the past into new urban frontiers, poverty, dispossession, and the violence of eviction are erased from the legacy of a neighborhood, becoming what Smith describes as the “new urban frontier.”¹¹



Figure 1: A BID banner in the East Cut, calling back to the “tall ships” of San Francisco’s Gold Rush

Segregation and displacement have intrinsically linked urban land capital in the United States to the racial identities of those who own it, becoming a system for separating white people from nonwhite people spatially, but also in terms of access to capital and resources. When the past is invoked in housing advertisements, redevelopment projects, and new developments, the version of the past constructed and consumed is selectively curated. The frontier ideology of the

¹⁰ Richard Slotkin, *Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800-1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 47.

¹¹ Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier* (London: Routledge, 1996), 19.

Bay Area is woven from the imagery of stoic pioneers who never ethnically cleansed the West, gold rushers who never attacked Chinese immigrants, and Chinatowns that were never ghettoized and marauded by White mobs.

Methodology

To explore the process of gentrification, I use existing sociological theory and frameworks for understanding gentrification and urban development, as well as historical research into the racialized government policies and housing market practices of the past. As a part of this project, I also began mapping where racial and economic changes were occurring in the Bay Area using data from the US Census. Although US Census data has many limitations, it has been incredibly useful for me to be able to visualize the magnitude of racial change in the Bay, as well as geographically ‘see’ where gentrification is taking place. I employ statistics and maps throughout this work, all of which come from my research using Census Data unless otherwise stated.

To photograph ongoing development and the “visuals of gentrification” that I thought I would find, I visited six Bay Area neighborhoods throughout the East Bay. I walked a path first around the perimeter of each neighborhood and then through each neighborhood, spending on average about five hours photographing developments, taking notes, and googling the housing and property ads that I was able to find. I visited Prescott and the Lower Bottoms in West Oakland, Emeryville, the Northern end of Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, and Temescal, in North Oakland. I chose these neighborhoods to provide a sense of the range and variation in how gentrification occurs in the Bay, as how it is marketed differently in different places.

Chapter 1 – Competing Theories of Gentrification

1.1 –

*A renewed neighborhood, a rejuvenated neighborhood, and a revitalized neighborhood walk into
a bar, Or:*

Redevelopment in the sheets, gentrification in the streets

The term “Gentrification” was first used by sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964 to describe how London neighborhoods had been evicting low class residents and replacing them with middle class tenants and is used explicitly to criticize both the effects eviction had on previous residents and the cultural change that took place in the neighborhood, describing gentrification as a process that brought cultural destruction and displacement as the working class quarters of London were “invaded by the middle classes.”¹² Glass’s original usage of gentrification is still close to what gentrification has come to mean in twenty-first century cities; the cultural and class change of a neighborhood, the process of evicting existing residents, and the decisions made by landholders to ignore, demolish, renovate, or construct buildings all constitute what is widely known to be part of the gentrification cycle.

Even though Glass’s original use of the word was explicitly critical, the growth and increasing intensity of urban real estate markets has seen time and energy put into giving gentrification both positive and negative meanings. Prior to the 1980’s, gentrification was an academic concept almost exclusively used by sociologists and economists—in 1976, for example,

¹² Ruth Glass, *London: Aspects of Change* (London: Centre for Urban Studies and MacGibbon and Kee, 1964), xviii.

gentrification researcher and cartographer Neil Smith recalls trying to explain what the new ‘gentrification’ term was to colleagues at cocktail parties to little interest. However, by the early 1980’s gentrification began to catch the attention of the larger public and came to be recognized as the process behind the increasing rents and neighborhood displacement of an increasing number of cities in the last two decades of the 1900s. Public awareness and moral opposition to gentrification was not typically strong enough to change the course of urban policy within cities, but growing awareness of the negative effects of gentrification put redevelopment projects in a tight spot: either address the harms of dispossession, or rebrand to avoid the new “dirty word” of urban development.¹³

The real estate and development industries have employed two tactics to avoid the negative public perceptions of gentrification: either changing the name of redevelopment or arguing for the altruistic benefits of gentrification. In 1985, for example, the Real Estate Board of New York—which was a private corporation of developers, although the name sounds like a government institution—took out several weekly advertisements in the *New York Times* to defend connotations around “gentrification,” arguing that the term described a process of privatization wherein capital is brought into an area to *rehabilitate* it, a positive process. The RENBY ad conceded that gentrification may cause some displacement but argued that its impact is small and overall allows “neighborhoods and lives to blossom.”¹⁴ The RENBY ad is emblematic of how positive portrayals of gentrification are designed to abstract the lives of those living in neighborhoods targeted for redevelopment.

Public policy and redevelopment projects have invented myriad, more positive terms to describe gentrification. The Bay Area real estate ads I encountered avoided the term

¹³ Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 30-35.

¹⁴ Ibid, 31.

“gentrification” entirely, instead opting for a bouquet of other terms such as “rejuvenation,” “redevelopment,” and “revitalization” to describe gentrifying neighborhoods. The advertisements for ‘The East Cut’ that first got me interested in the real estate marketing process, lead you to a website that describes the neighborhood as “redeveloped” and “neighborhood currently undergoing significant revitalization” or “an up-and-coming neighborhood” is how Bay Area ads describe properties in West Oakland.

The rise of gentrification in the 1970’s presented a challenge to traditional urban economic theories that had to be met with new “explanations” for gentrification. Neil Smith has written about the emergence of academic gentrification debates and their ideological significance, arguing that traditional postwar urban economic theories of the Chicago school fell short of predicting, or explaining at all, the ‘return to the city’ that followed gentrification. In grappling with the birth of this new urban phenomenon, a fierce—but confined to academia—ideological debate gave rise to the two dominant schools of theory that have continued to inform public policy and activism around gentrification. Smith explains the ideological divide between different theorists as being between those arguing that the source of gentrification lies in “culture and individual choice”—the culture and choice of the gentrifiers—and those arguing that causes lie within the shifts of capital in the real estate market.¹⁵ The former is the more traditional “consumption-side” approach to gentrification, which focuses on the causes of gentrification that stem from consumer choice. According to consumption-side analyses of gentrification shifts in middle-class ‘preferences’ drive migration into neighborhoods; cultural changes within the middle and upper middle class have attracted prospective residents who locally increase demand, driving up rent and changing the class identity of a neighborhood.

¹⁵ Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 38.

The “Production-side” approach to understanding gentrification uses a Structural Marxist lens to analyze class oppression and look for the causes of gentrification in the ‘production’ of housing and land. Landowners and developers make decisions that impact local policy and the flow of capital, and production-side analyses look to these processes to understand gentrification.¹⁶ Although production-side approaches tend to critique gentrification as a form of violence against the working class, they also conceptualize race and culture as secondary aspects of class identity and only consider race as a form, or manifesting, of class oppression. The traditional production-side approach, which sidelines race as both an economic reality and cultural force, avoids the systemic racialization of gentrification in American cities. When used to understand gentrification that has specifically targeted communities of color, class-only analyses are forced to substitute ‘middle class’ for white and ‘working class’ for nonwhite, overlooking and oversimplifying the racism and racial hierarchy that drives gentrification.

Production-side theorizing offers a helpful analytical tool, but it is important to understand its limitations when describing American gentrification. Cedric Robinson critiques uses of Marxism that give race secondary status to class, arguing that racialism is itself a part of the American social order with roots that predate modern capitalism.¹⁷ In her article “Racial Capitalism,” Jodi Melamed expands on this idea further:

[Capital] can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups—capitalists with the means of production/workers without the means of subsistence...conquerors of land made property/the dispossessed and removed. These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires.¹⁸

¹⁶ Tom Slater, “The Eviction of Critical Perspectives from Gentrification Research,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 30, no. 4 (December 2006): 737.

¹⁷ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983), 68.

¹⁸ Melamed, “Racial Capitalism,” 77.

Existing sociological work done on gentrification is a perfect example of the limitations of a social theory that conceptualizes of ‘class’ as the primary division of power, connected only by a quirk of history to a racial hierarchy. Disaggregating class and race in traditional production-side explanations for gentrification leads to what McElroy and Werth term the “deracinated dispossessions” of contemporary sociological work on gentrification, work that abstractly describes gentrification regardless of the local context of racial violence and dispossession.¹⁹ I think this is a necessary extension of any social theorizing about the dynamics of gentrification in the East Bay, and I argue that gentrification in the Bay Area insists upon analyses that examine the connections between race, capital, and cultural identity, not just theoretical class dynamics.

Even though consumption-side approaches theoretically focus on the cultural change involved in gentrification, they *also* tend to treat culture as a race-neutral aspect of the middle class and erase any discussion of the impacts of gentrification on existing residents. Jon Caulfield’s 1989 essay “Gentrification and Desire” argued that gentrification in Toronto neighborhoods during the ‘70s and ‘80s was the effect of a cultural shift in middle-class away from the “oppressive conformity of suburbia, modernist planning and market principle,” but did not extend this understanding of cultural shift to the racialized history of the suburb itself.²⁰ This perspective, what Smith termed the “gentrification of theory,” paints middle-class movement into the city like social activism, in the words of Smith as a “personal triumph of culture over economics” and is emblematic of consumption-side approaches that privilege the autonomy of middle-class gentrifier culture.²¹

¹⁹ Erin McElroy, Alex Werth, “Deracinated Dispossessions: On the Foreclosures of “Gentrification” in Oakland, CA,” *Antipode* 51, no. 3 (March 2019): 880.

²⁰ Jon Caulfield, “‘Gentrification’ and Desire,” *Canadian Review of Sociology* 26, no. 4 (August 1989): 617-632.

²¹ Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 41.

Consumption-side analyses avoid discussing race altogether and justify gentrification as a positive, sometimes even subversive, cultural migration of the middle-class. Neil Smith describes the genesis and general use of consumption-side theoretical approaches: “More often, the consumption-side position was adopted by political liberals who broadly celebrated the advent of a postindustrial city and the rehabilitation of slum neighborhoods while lamenting the social costs. Insofar as they focused on class it was the middle class, often a new middle class, who were vaunted as the subjects of history.”²² Architect Andres Duany embodies this triumphant perspective perfectly with his challenge to gentrification critics: “Middle-class Americans are choosing to live in many inner-city neighborhoods because these places possess urbane attributes not found in newer residential areas... people should not be prevented from profiting on the natural appreciation of their neighborhoods. Not in America.”²³

Labeling the return of middle-class whites as a triumph is truly a celebration of whites’ ability to use the housing market as a tool for subjugating one culture to their own. Even when gentrification is conceptualized as a rebellion against suburbia, it is *always* the land industry that benefits from the violence enacted by whites and the property they purchase. The cultural ‘rebellion’ against the suburb that recruits the same tools of racial segregation and dispossession used to *build* the suburb is no rebellion at all; it is fundamentally an extension of the existing racial order against the working class and nonwhite residents of the city.

In practice, both consumption and production-side approaches are necessary for understanding gentrification. Both are techniques that I employ here to understand how gentrification in the East Bay has developed in the shadow of racial segregation and how it is aimed at appealing to a white, liberal/neoliberal audience.

²² Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 39.

²³ Andres Duany, “Three Cheers for Gentrification,” *American Enterprise Magazine*, April 2001, 39.

1.2 – What about development?

Developers involved with gentrification work hard to portray gentrification as an overall beneficial process, hyping up the resources that gentrification brings to a geographic area while at the same time downplaying how older residents are prevented from accessing them. The logic that developers present which extolls the wealth that gentrification supposedly brings is persuasive, especially for people who have never been displaced or had their community fragmented, but in practice gentrification is designed to keep resources only in the hands of the ‘new’ community. Rather than ‘uplifting’ communities, as Duany and others argue, gentrification consumes the geographic space of neighborhoods, expanding the borders of an already-existing, already-wealthy community. Rather than a process of addressing the systemic inequalities that produce poverty—something that would require confronting why neighborhoods become targeted for divestment in the first place—gentrification swiftly overwrites poorer communities with wealthier ones. Bay Area neighborhood spaces that are gentrified have white wealth *transplanted* onto them, displacing existing, poorer residents, and conflicting with existing resources.

In my experience being a liberal white person and being around other liberal white people, gentrification primarily means the clichés of Brooklyn; overpriced lattes, vintage stores, Soul Cycle, Whole Foods, Zumba, eco-friendly deconstructed bluegrass beanies—you know the type—as well as the perception of lower crime rates, better schools, and more wealth. Tom Slater has described how the perception of gentrification in recent years has shifted from “rent increases, landlord harassment and working-class displacement” to “street level spectacles,

trendy bars and cafes, i-Pods, social diversity and funky clothing outlets,” highlighting how white culture’s clichés have replaced the actual violence behind gentrification.²⁴ Smith notes that the awareness of mass evictions and dispossession that arose from the social activism during the ‘60’s and ‘70s has faded overtime.²⁵ Although gentrification is still a “dirty word”—something that can be seen by realtors’ unflinching avoidance of it—for people unaffected by it, gentrification has come to signify a set of cliché’s. When gentrification becomes something to just ‘roll your eyes’ at, it becomes naturalized as an inevitable aesthetic process that is meant to be sat back and watched from a distance, instead of the active process of systemic dispossession that it is. I discuss this in more detail in the next chapter, but economic divestment in Black and Latinx neighborhoods is *the* precondition for gentrification in the Bay. In truth ‘poking fun’ at a new coffee shop and moving on may feel transgressive, but also buys into the way developers and realtors minimize displacement and the intrinsic racism of the housing market through ‘quirk.’ The problems caused by gentrification are not aesthetic, even if they make us cringe—gentrification is the source of much more real forms of harm that get lost when we fixate on it as a cliché.

Even amidst active displacement gentrification messaging is used to encourage prospective buyers that the new and the old are in harmony. The East Cut’s Business Improvement District’s (BID) website captures the subtle ways advocates warp portrayals of gentrification to minimize or even entirely erase ongoing displacement: “Where coffee once roasted in the Hills Brothers factory and seamen lugged goods from docked ships, we now have modern office towers that are home to some of the most innovative companies in the world.

²⁴ Slater, *The Eviction of Critical Perspectives from Gentrification*, 738.

²⁵ Vanessa Matthews, “Aestheticizing Space: Art, Gentrification and the City,” *Geography Compass* 4, no. 6 (June 2010): 660

Longtime local residents and businesses are welcoming their new neighbors as the East Cut promises to be one of the most forward-thinking and hospitable neighborhoods in San Francisco.” Similarly, Red Oak Realty’s website claims that in West Oakland the “old and the new peacefully coexist side by side, as do artists, young professionals and working families,” carefully reinforcing the idea that there are no victims of gentrification. ‘Hospitality,’ and ‘coexistence’ are recurring characters in real estate strategies aimed at appealing to San Francisco’s white, liberal professionals.

So, is gentrification really a bad thing? Simply put, if you can’t already afford to gentrify a neighborhood, yes. Despite assurances from neighborhood websites, the benefits connected to gentrification are by design inaccessible to long term residents and actually exacerbate the economic conditions that attract developers. Ideas like the “social mix” theory—what my friend called “micro-Reaganomics” when I described it to him—argue that class ‘diversity’ uniformly uplifts neighborhoods. This is not reflected in the reality of gentrifying Bay Area communities; the neighborhoods in Oakland that most gentrified also have the largest disparities between the mortality rate for white and Black residents.²⁶ In North Oakland, an area that has undergone significant gentrification in the past two decades, Black homeowners have dropped from making up 50% of homeowners in 1990 to only 25% of homeowners by 2011.²⁷

Another way to visualize the interconnectedness of displacement and gentrification is to look at maps of racial changes in the Bay Area. Neighborhoods that have been significantly ‘whitened’ (fig. 3) by an influx of white residents without exception are also areas where the proportion of Black people has significantly decreased in the last 20 years (fig. 2).

²⁶ Dawn Phillips, Louis Flores Jr., and Jamila Henderson, *Development Without Displacement: Resisting Gentrification in the Bay Area*, (Causa Justa::Just Cause, 2014), 9.

²⁷ Ibid, 9.

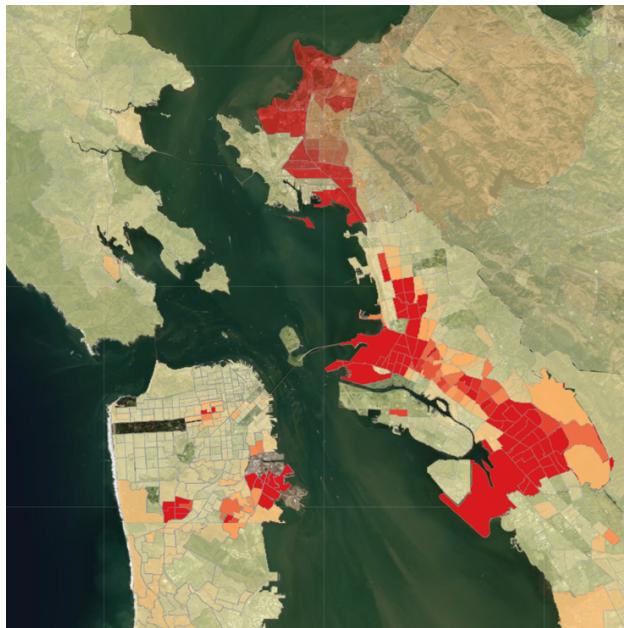


Figure 2: Bay Area tracts colored by the change in proportion of Black residents since 2000. Areas where Black residency has fallen are in red, and areas where Black residency has increased are shown in green.

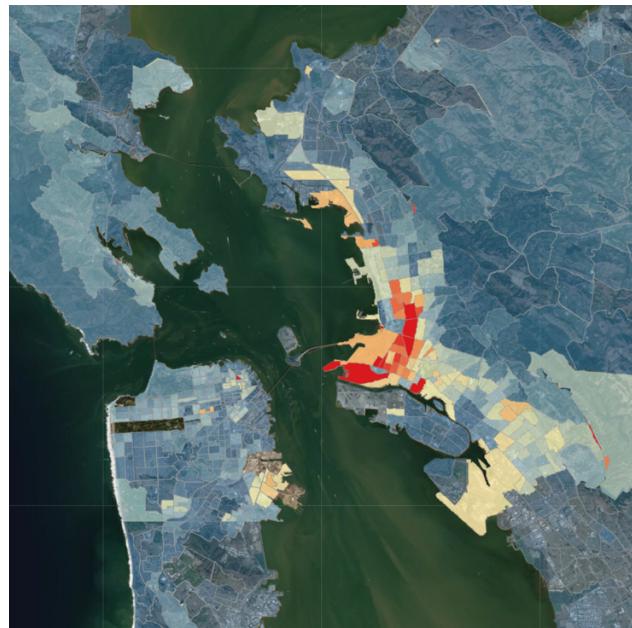


Figure 3: Bay Area tracts colored by the change in proportion of white residents since 2000. Areas where white residency has fallen are in blue, and areas where white residency has increased are shown in red.

There is a complete disconnect between messaging to white people around gentrification and the realities of gentrification that make it appear much more ‘innocent’ than it really is. Challenging the portrayal of gentrification as fostering “peaceful coexistence” requires asking 1) who gets to reap the benefits of neighborhood investment, and 2) how the value of gentrifying communities was removed in the first place.

Neoliberal urban policies that promote gentrification as a strategy for urban ‘rejuvenation’ and ‘rehabilitation’ argue that displacement is an unfortunate side effect of gentrification.²⁸ Another second quote from Andres Duany embodies this perspective eerily well: “Gentrification rebalances a concentration of poverty by providing the tax base, rub-off work ethic, and political effectiveness of a middle-class, and in the process improves the quality of life

²⁸ Slater, *The Eviction of Critical Perspectives from Gentrification*, 737.

for all a community's residents. It is the rising tide that lifts all boats."²⁹ The "rising tide lifts all boats" line is a familiar neoliberal claim, arguing that the wealth brought by the new middle class community will spread to poorer residents in the neighborhood. The idea that wealthier residents bring an influx of capital that is accessible by all members of the neighborhood is the basis of 'social mix' or 'mixed-income' defenses of gentrification. 'Social mix' or 'mixed-income' proponents of gentrification share Duany's idea that resources brought by the white middle class will benefit *everyone*, the old and the new. This is exactly what advertising material for new gentrification projects argues makes gentrification a process of 'uplift.' Holliday Development's proposal for the "Central Station" redevelopment project in West Oakland celebrates the planned changes as "a dynamic revisioning of the area surrounding the historic 16th Street railroad station...a new kind of urban community: diverse, stimulating, and welcoming...Parks, community services, and shops will once again enliven the neighborhood. And thanks to tax-increment funding generated by the redevelopment, the landmark 16th Street train station will at last be restored, revitalized, and put to good use."

Mixed-income proposals that claim wealth will improve the lives of all residents contradict the fact that in practice, influxes of capital are specifically tailored to benefit new residents. Even just by exploring this idea theoretically, it is clear that only a very small minority of existing residents benefit at all from gentrification. Gentrification projects are designed to attract buyers that are much wealthier than the neighborhoods they move into. The resulting income gap between new and old residents in a neighborhood increases the cost of living, driving up the price of commodities like food and rent as businesses and landowners begin charging old residents 'new resident' prices. Unless a resident already owned a business—and only then if

²⁹ Duany, *Three Cheers for Gentrification*, 38.

new residents patronize it—they need to deal with a higher cost of living without an increase in their income. New businesses that follow gentrification into a neighborhood could potentially provide a source of higher-paying jobs, allowing existing residents to keep pace with rent and food, but, as Smith puts it, the urban labor market is a “single *geographical* labor market.”³⁰ New businesses can just as easily hire employees from other neighborhoods and have no economic incentive to pay out wages that are any higher than what residents were already making. Additionally, racial discrimination in the job market, limited access to college, and fewer employment connections are not ameliorated by bringing in whiter, wealthier residents; if an older resident was unable to find high-paying employment before, gentrification will not magically give them access to it. As rent goes up in an area, landlords are exponentially incentivized to evict existing residents and rent to higher-paying newcomers—or to raze the building entirely and redevelop. Residents face harassment, such as landlords continuously calling the police on tenants, neglected homes as landlords refuse to repair buildings and utilities, and outright eviction as property owners are incentivized to rent to middle-class residents or redevelop their land altogether.³¹

Even in this simplified image of gentrification solely as class change, only a *very* small proportion of existing residents can benefit from the influx of capital. Add to this that in the Bay Area the economic transitions that occur from gentrification are almost always the result of white people migrating into Black and Latinx neighborhoods, creating restrictive racial/cultural borders that demarcate the flow of capital within neighborhoods.³²

³⁰ Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 79.

³¹ Ibid, 62.

³² Dawn Phillips, Louis Flores Jr., and Jamila Henderson, *Development Without Displacement: Resisting Gentrification in the Bay Area*, (Causa Justa::Just Cause, 2014), 9.

If social mix is the goal, why don't we build low-income housing in wealthy, white neighborhoods? The answer to this is that ‘Social mix’ and ‘mixed income’ theories believe that ‘white culture,’ alongside white wealth, needs to dominate neighborhoods before they can economically improve. Geographer Nicholas Blomley describes the way a redevelopment project in downtown Vancouver persuasively argued to prospective buyers that gentrification was “to be encouraged, because it will mean the replacement of a marginal anticomunity (nonproperty owning, transitory, and problematized) by an active, responsible, and improving population of homeowners.”³³ Blomley’s analysis captures the way social mix thinking is premised on the idea that nonwhite communities are inherently destined for poverty. This will be discussed more in the next section, but this is the exact same thinking that white people have historically used to justify redlining and segregation, two systems that have kept wealth out of Black and Latinx communities and *produced* the inequality that gentrification requires.

The neoliberal addition to these tropes is that white people, through gentrification, can now ‘save’ urban neighborhoods. John Russo, the former City Attorney of Oakland, described the North Oakland Longfellow neighborhood—previously known as Santa Fe—as a “swing neighborhoods,” claiming that gentrification in Longfellow was necessary to save the city. According to Russo, the new residents moving into Longfellow were “going to make or break Oakland. These are the people who will move in, fix public schools and build a community for years to come,” adding, almost a little desperately, “If you lose those people now, the consequences are felt 20 or 30 years down the road.”³⁴ Although Russo’s dramatic plea does not mention race, the “people” he refers to are invariably white. White people now make up 40% of

³³ Nicholas Blomley, *Unsettling the City: Urban Land and the Politics of Property* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), 89.

³⁴ Justin Berton, “Longfellow a Neighborhood Key to Oakland’s Future,” *SFGATE*, June 23, 2012.

Longfellow's population, which is more than double the 15% that they made up in 2000. As, in Russo's words, incoming white residents "build a community for years to come," Black Longfellow residents are displaced. In contrast to the 'whitesplosion' taking place in Longfellow, Black people have gone from 73% of Longfellow's population in 2000 to only 30% in 2020—the "community" that Russo says will save the city is clearly a white one saving it for white people.

This is reflected in the way newer Longfellow residents have clashed with existing community resources; back in 2002, the 40-year-old Northside Supermarket helped provide food for Longfellow block parties and turkey giveaways for residents who were unable to afford holiday meals. Beginning in 2012, however, the Northside began receiving complaints from new residents, including complaints to the Oakland Police Department, arguing that the Northside stocked the wrong products, was the source of neighborhood loitering due to it selling liquor, and connecting it to gang violence. Yahya Korin, the owner of the store, explained that the complaints he received were coming entirely from new residents, people who he had never seen shopping at or supporting his store. "Please don't ask me to sell organic milk if you are not actually coming in here to buy it."³⁵ In contrast to what deracialized social mix theories claim, the "rising tide" of white wealth brought opposition, not support or investment, in Yahya Korin's business.

Gentrification development can also be literally *designed* to keep and concentrate capital in the pockets of the new community. When I took BART to Temescal, a heavily gentrified North Oakland neighborhood, I made a beeline for "The Logan," a recent development that I had seen from the MacArthur BART station. The Logan is hard to miss; it's huge and imposing, one

³⁵ Ibid.

of those buildings made from glass and iron and a material so uniform and smooth that it doesn't seem like it could be from Earth.



Figure 3: The Logan, with its built-in Whole Foods

The Logan occupies a whole block of Temescal, housing 200 residents and offering 660 ft² single-bedroom apartments that start at \$2,668 a month. As a development, The Logan is aimed at appealing to wealthier workers from the city and makes a point of advertising itself both as an authentic part of Temescal, but also as a space that provides separateness from Oakland. “Get away from it all, in the middle of it all” is printed on the side of the building, and the headline on The Logan’s website reads: “The Logan is Oakland Local—just like you. With a 25,000 sq ft rooftop farm and onsite Whole Foods, community and sustainability are built into your everyday life.” Whole Foods is the foundation, literally, of The Logan’s design; it is aggressively advertised outside of MacArthur BART as you approach the neighborhood and is

the first thing you are shown online. As a resident, you are reminded that you will not need to leave the building to shop, park, or integrate into the community. Your ‘community’—which, in The Logan means ‘Whole Foods’ and a rooftop garden—is already “built into your everyday life.” The microcosm of The Logan is designed to keep culture and capital flowing into Temescal within new development. Although it is an extreme example, the architecture of The Logan highlights how the “rising tide that lifts all boats” mentality that gentrification proponents use to advocate for new development distracts from the actual practices employed when developing a neighborhood. The Logan erects *more* borders, cultural and economic, to bring people into Oakland, while sequestering money in the new—all to ‘get away from it all, in the middle of it all.’ Rather than ‘spreading the wealth,’ from the ground up The Logan is designed to maintain a lucrative separation of capital and culture from the rest of Temescal and provide a separate, self-contained community.

Mixed-income ideology, in practice, is a myth that functions to deflect criticism and resistance to gentrification.³⁶ The portrayal of gentrification as a process that has “good intentions,” even as it causes harm, is a ‘gentrifiction.’ In reality, for neighborhoods undergoing gentrification the promised “rising tide” of mixed-income projects promise arrives as a flash flood.

1.3 – Rent Gaps

Gentrification displaces, but does not ‘solve,’ poverty. Economic frameworks like Neil Smith’s ‘rent gap theory’ reveal how the extreme inequality of capital in neighborhoods is the

³⁶ Tom Slater, *Eviction of Critical Perspectives from Gentrification*, 751.

driving force behind gentrification, the fuel that makes it such a profitable process. Within marketing rhetoric in support of redevelopment projects, like the one described above by Richard Blomley, gentrification is portrayed as though it ‘rescues’ neighborhoods from their own self-destruction. In truth, the lowering of property values is the result of active decisions made by landowners and realtors, not residents. It is critical to understand that the devaluation of land in Black and Latinx neighborhoods is the result of strategic and deliberate divestment, not a lack of ‘middle class culture’ as proponents of gentrification insist. In this section, I give an overview of Smith’s “rent gap theory” and its use in understanding how the profitability of gentrification is intrinsically linked to the degree of a neighborhood’s devaluation.

This seems contradictory; how does divestment *from* a neighborhood become investment *in* a neighborhood? Rent gap theory unpacks how divestment is a series of rational decisions on behalf of developers and landowners, interested in maximizing the capital produced by their land. A piece of land’s “rent gap” represents the difference between a property’s current value, the rent it earns now, and its potential future value, the rent it could potentially earn if it were redeveloped.³⁷ Smith applies rent gap theory to understand why older industrial buildings are often the first to become demolished and to have their land redeveloped, something that is the hallmark of gentrification in places like New York City, and is also useful for understanding the kind of development that has been going on in West Oakland.

Industrial buildings are designed to maximize their usage as industrial spaces, and because of this occupy a plot alongside land for storage, shipping docks, or other industrial space needs. Industrialized plots of land are overall not optimized to make use of every square inch of the property; the value represented by an industrial building is the value of what it produces.

³⁷ Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 65.

Residential spaces are different—their value *is* their square footage. In general, as manufacturing slows down in an industrial area, landowners lose tenants renting industrial plots of land. The rental value of industrial buildings begins to decrease, but the *potential* value of the land remains the same, or even increases. This is the ‘widening’ of the rent gap—as buildings lose manufacturing value, landowners are increasingly incentivized to capitalize on their value as residential spaces. The same is true of housing in poor neighborhoods: as a community loses wealth, the relative profit that can be made by evicting and then reselling residential land to a wealthier community proportionally increases.³⁸ Once a property’s rent gap is sufficiently large, a rational landowner will demolish whatever structure is on their land and build a new one, maximizing its rental value by building as many units as possible on their plot.

Landlords are incentivized to divest as much capital as possible from existing buildings if they think they can make a profit from redevelopment in the future, leading to undermaintenance and building abandonment. Since the taxes paid on land are based on its value as-is, not potential value from redevelopment, landowners are actually incentivized to repair the structures on their properties as little as possible, keeping the assessed value of their land low. Refusing to repair and maintain buildings, even while residents are living in them, frees up capital that can be invested elsewhere. Especially when tenants have no ability to pressure the landlord to repair their properties or move as is the case for the majority of low-income families in the Bay Area,³⁹ allows landlords to continue collecting rent. collect as much rent but invest much less in maintaining their buildings.

According to Smith’s theory, landlords continue divesting from their land until the ‘rent gap,’ the potential profit from their property’s use as residential land, is wide enough. Capital

³⁸ Ibid, 64.

³⁹ KTVU Staff, “So, how much does it take to buy a house in the Bay Area?” 1.

gets reinvested in properties in the form of demolition, new development, advertising, parks, and bike lanes to attract wealthier renters that will pay higher rents. Examples of this kind of industrial development in the East Bay are the ‘Zephyr Gate’, ‘Station House’, ‘Pacific Cannery’ and ‘Iron Horse’ developments in the Prescott neighborhood of West Oakland. Starting in 2006, block by block, industrial areas of Prescott have been cleared of equipment and redeveloped into high density housing.

The ‘rent gap’ is a useful heuristic for understanding industrial redevelopment, but it also offers an insight into the land market’s intrinsic reliance on divestment to produce profit. Rent gap theory reveals that the profit associated with a property widens just as much from divestment in that property as it does from investment. “Lowering” the value of land now, relative to its speculated value in the future, allows landowners to maximize the money that can be made from redevelopment. In other words, Smith’s straightforward idea demonstrates that the profits made from redeveloping land depend *as much on its devaluation* as they do on the capital invested in the process of redevelopment.

The more devalued a neighborhood is relative to the median home price of a city, the more profitable gentrification becomes. In markets like the Bay Area, it is in the financial interests of redevelopment agencies to concentrate divestment into a single neighborhood, undermaintaining and undervaluing land until it is ready to be profitability redeveloped and gentrified. ‘Mixed-income’ defenses of gentrification argue that gentrification saves, uplifts, renews, and rescues neighborhoods, implying that it is the *residents* that have devalued the land. In reality, the decisions made by realtors, redevelopment agencies, the federal government, and white homeowners to keep money out of Black and Latinx neighborhoods have created the extreme economic inequality that has made gentrification such a profitable industry.

Chapter 2 – Dividing Race, Space, and Capital

2.1 – White Innocence

It is critical to understand that gentrification is not a solution to, but an extension of racialized divestment. Gentrification in the Bay Area is recurrently portrayed as though it is an inherently good process, that may unintentionally harm a few people, but that it is *necessary* and beneficial to everyone. This is actually one of the oldest tricks in the book used to dispossess communities of color and historically has played an integral part in justifying the way in which white landowners have manipulated the value of land in the Bay Area. In the Bay, divestment has targeted Black, Asian, and Latinx communities through redlining, blockbusting, landlord abandonment, federal loan discrimination, lowball housing appraisals based on race, racial covenants, zoning law, and de-jure and de-facto segregation, resulting in an extreme concentration of wealth in white communities.

Proponents of gentrification as a ‘restorative force’ stop short of asking who or what has drained communities of their real estate value in the first place. Advertising for gentrifying neighborhoods implies that neighborhoods are devalued because they have been ‘forgotten,’ such as the East Cut’s website, claiming that the neighborhood arose when “city planners began to see the potential of creating a new mixed-use neighborhood in this neglected corner of San Francisco.”⁴⁰ The Bay Area’s history of active and calculated divestment has actually targeted—not ‘neglected’—Black and Latinx neighborhoods, despite the way developers portray

⁴⁰ The East Cut, “About Us.”

neighborhood history. Racial segregation has been used to divide the housing market racially, spatially, and economically, bequeathing developers with the uneven economic geographies that have made gentrification so incredibly profitable. In this chapter, I focus on the ways that white people have unequally divided the wealth of the Bay Area's land, but also the moral gymnastics that realtors and white homeowners have undertaken to justify dispossession as the inevitable result of advancement.

The dispossession of land from communities of color began as soon as Europeans got to California. Historian Benjamin Madley estimates that as many as 310,000 people, speaking around 300 different languages, lived in California by the time Europeans arrived in the late 1700s. The colonization of California was initially undertaken by the mission system constructed by the Spanish, beginning in the Bay Area in 1776 with the construction of Mission San Francisco de Asís. Although the Franciscan missionaries' purported goal was evangelization, the arrival of the Spanish to California began two centuries of genocide and resulted in destruction of countless Native California lives. Spanish missionaries forcibly extracted manual labor from Native people, routinely sexually assaulting Native Californians who were held captive in the missions. Spanish violence established a social and legal racial hierarchy allowing extremely cruel punishment against Native Californians and the Spanish claim to any Native land.⁴¹

The racial hierarchy enforced by the Spanish missionaries was expanded upon by white Americans to forcibly dispossess Native Californians from the entirety of California, restricting them from voting,⁴² and establishing a legal and social order that gave whites exclusive access to

⁴¹ Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 23.

⁴² Kimberly Johnston-Dodds, *Early California Laws and Policies Related to California Indians* (California Research Bureau, September 2002), 5.

the resources in California's land.⁴³ Along with legal disenfranchisement, in the words of Madley, "Indians became, for many Anglo-Americans, nonhumans," and Native Californians were mass-murdered by white settlers with the support of the federal government.⁴⁴ between 1846 and 1880, the Ohlone population—the nonspecific anthropological term for the many Ohlone/Costanoan groups living in the Bay Area at the time—declined to just ten percent of what it was before white Americans arrived.⁴⁵

Despite the genocide that formed the basis of California's statehood, white Americans have always dreamt of California as a frontier free from its history of social inequality and brimming with expansive future opportunity for white pioneers. The *first* state address given in 1849 by Peter Burnett, the once-slaveholding first governor of California, praised California for its progressive stance against slavery while simultaneously calling upon the legislature to ban Black immigration into the state:

Our Constitution has wisely prohibited Slavery within the State; so that the people of California are once and for ever free from this great social and political evil. But the Constitution has made no provision in reference to the settlement of free people of color within our limits... There is, in my opinion, but one of two consistent courses to take in reference to this class of population – either to admit them to the full and free enjoyment of all the privileges guaranteed by the Constitution to others, or exclude them from the State. If we permit them to settle in our State, under existing circumstances, we consign them, by our own institutions, and the usages of our society, to a subordinate and degraded position, which is in itself but a species of slavery....

That weak and sickly sympathy – that misplaced mercy – that would hesitate to adopt a salutary measure to-day, but would suffer all the inevitable consequences of to-morrow, may consider the policy I propose as harsh in its character; but if it is calculated to produce the greatest good to the greatest number, it is the best for humanity.

It could be no favor, and no kindness, to permit that class of population to settle in the State under such humiliating conditions, although they might think otherwise; while it would be a most serious injury to us.⁴⁶

⁴³ Eli Moore, Nicole Montojo, and Nicole Mauri, *Roots, Race, and Place: A History of Racially Exclusionary Housing in the San Francisco Bay Area* (Berkeley: Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, 2019), 17.

⁴⁴ Madley, *An American Genocide*, 171.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 3.

⁴⁶ Peter Burnett, "State of the State Address," December 21, 1849.

Burnett's first address captures the contradiction of California's settler-colonial foundation. White Californians wanted a complete monopoly on land and jobs, but also wanted to believe that their discrimination was done in the interests of *everyone*, including the Black Americans that they discriminated against. Burnett's celebration of California's freedom from the "social and political evil" of slavery completely contradicted Burnett's own life; he himself had owned slaves and had passed a law in Oregon that created a legal loophole allowing whites to continue enslaving Black people in the "free" state.⁴⁷ Additionally, California was not really 'free' from slavery: the passing of California's 1850 so-called *Act for the Government and Protection of Indians* allowed white settlers to evict Native Californians from land and bind Native American children, and any adult convicted of a crime, in indentured servitude contracts.⁴⁸ Despite this, white settlers bought into the idea that excluding free Black settlers entirely from California's booming economy was necessary to protect Black people from whites' own systemic racism.

Two years after his first address, Burnett gave a second expressing his attitude toward the genocide of Native Americans: "That a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the races until the Indian race becomes extinct must be expected" Burnett wrote, "While we cannot anticipate this result but with painful regret, the inevitable destiny of the race is beyond the power or wisdom of man to avert."⁴⁹ Burnett fabricated a 'settler colonial innocence' to assuage the consciences of his white constituency, justifying their genocide and discrimination by removing the agency of the white people *doing* the genocide itself. The message sent to white settlers, that they had no agency over or moral culpability for the violence they perpetrated,

⁴⁷ Alisa Chang, Gregory Nokes, "Peter Hardeman Burnett: California's 1st Governor and a Noted Racist," *NPR*, July 15, 2020.

⁴⁸ Johnston-Dodds, *Early California Laws and Policies Related to California Indians*, 8.

⁴⁹ Peter Burnett, "State of the State Address," January 6, 1851.

morally supported and emboldened white settlers' dehumanization and mass murder of Native Californians.

Burnett's speeches are now nearly two centuries old, but their 'settler colonial innocence' persists in the way gentrification is justified and sold to white people. Signs for The East Cut remind residents that they embody the legacy of "GOLD RUSHERS," but a particular legacy wherein the genocide that was foundational to the dispossession and exploitation of California's land never occurred. Neighborhoods like The East Cut become cleansed frontiers, devoid of violent history, that invite residents to come "discover" their communities.⁵⁰ Jon Russo's declaration that Longfellow's new white middle class residents "are the people who will move in, fix public schools and build a community for years to come"⁵¹ relies on the *same* settler colonial innocence Burnett invoked by assuring Californians that the "inevitable destiny of the [white] race" was to conquer, dispossess, and monetize the land.

2.2 – Redlining and Divestment

Red Oak Realty's website describes West Oakland as a "once gritty, overlooked neighborhood,"⁵² implying that it was the 'overlooking' of the neighborhood that devalued it. In reality, as Smith's work on gentrification and rent gap theory reveals, devaluation has been *actively* maintained to keep West Oakland's property values as low as possible.⁵³ Divestment is what enables redevelopment, despite the way it is invisibilized in portrayals of the past.

⁵⁰ The East Cut, "About Us."

⁵¹ Justin Berton, "Longfellow a Neighborhood Key to Oakland's Future," *SFGATE*, June 23, 2012.

⁵² Red Oak Realty, "West Oakland Real Estate."

⁵³ Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 64.

In the Bay, divestment has invariably occurred along racial lines, inseparably linking gentrification to white supremacy. In 1936, the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) put redlining, literally, on the map. The HOLC was a federal program—although it sounds like a private company—created in response to the enormous number of foreclosures that occurred following the great depression with the goal of overhauling how properties were evaluated by lenders and banks. The HOLC created maps for over 200 cities, including the East Bay, which separated neighborhoods into a hierarchy describing their relative ‘riskiness’—how likely it was that a bank or lender would get a return on their loan.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Robert K. Nelson, LaDale Winling, Richard Marciano, Nathan Connolly, et al., “Mapping Inequality,” *American Panorama*, ed. Robert K. Nelson and Edward L. Ayers, accessed April 13, 2022, <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining>

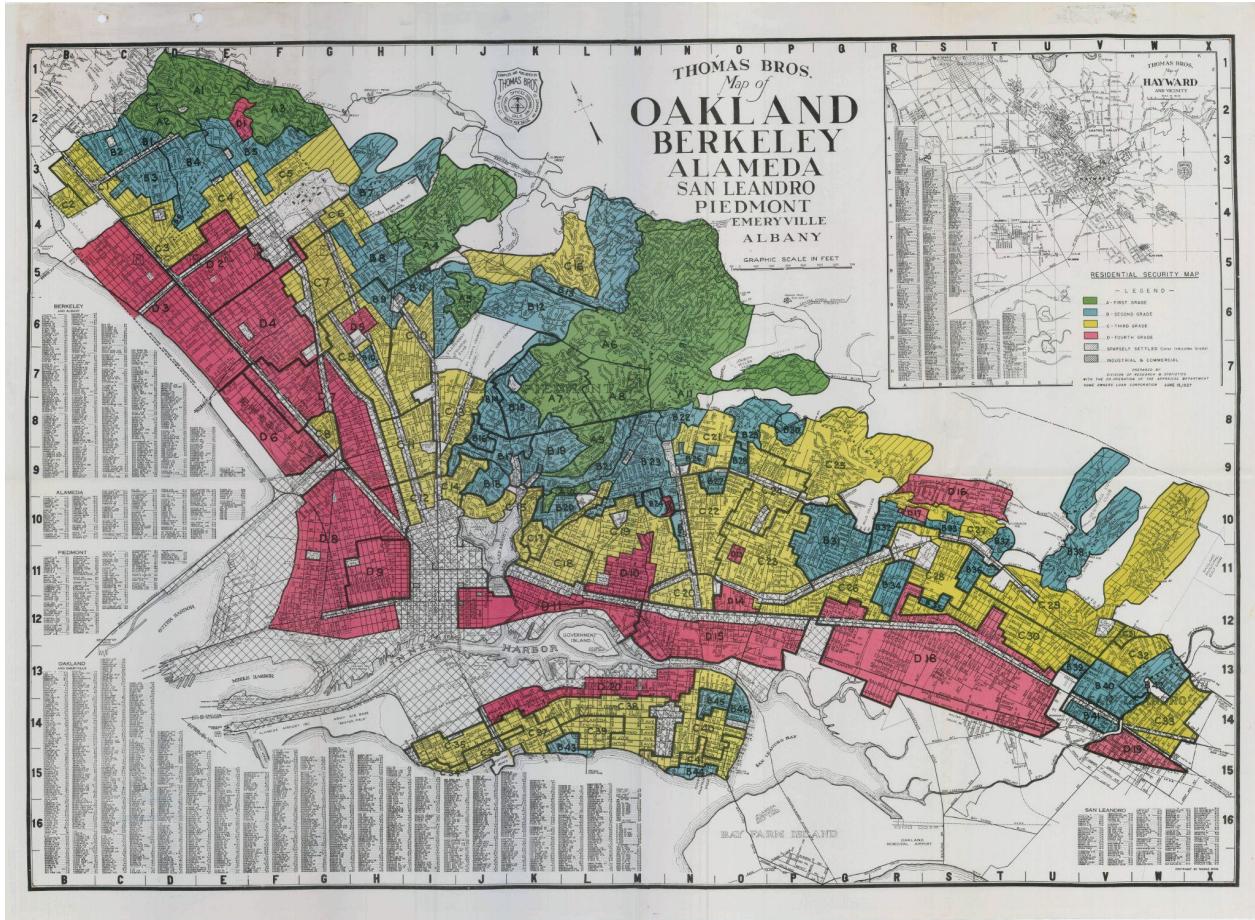


Figure 4: 'Residential Securities Map' of the East Bay created by the HOLC in 1936. 'D' or 'hazardous' tracts are in pink, 'A' tracts are in green. Note the concentration of redlined tracts in West Oakland and South Berkeley, and the concentration of 'A' and 'B' tracts in the Oakland and Berkeley Hills.

Although they purportedly described the economic character of neighborhoods, reading the descriptions of each HOLC tract makes it clear that the main criteria for evaluating neighborhoods was how white they were. As an example, the HOLC classified the tract where I grew up in North Berkeley as yellow, explaining that this tract would likely be blue, one grade higher, except for the “slight infiltration of Orientals, such as Jap tailor and cleaning shop, Jap student rooming house, etc.” based on the presence of 6 Asian families that were living in the neighborhood at the time.⁵⁵ For the tract containing what is now the Acorn neighborhood in

⁵⁵ Ibid.

West Oakland, the HOLC blatantly cited the “infiltration of Negroes, Orientals, etc.” as “detrimental influences”, classifying the tract as red—“hazardous” to investors.⁵⁶

The HOLC surveyors universally decided to actively discourage investment in Black and Asian neighborhoods, redlining them across the East Bay. Researchers working on the *Mapping Inequality* project, which published the HOLC’s maps and data as explorable webmaps, found that the HOLC surveyors “assumed and insisted that the residency of African Americans and immigrants, as well as working-class whites, compromised the values of homes and the security of mortgages”⁵⁷ almost without exception across the United States. By classifying *any* nonwhite residency as “infiltration” that threatened the economic stability of white segregated neighborhoods, the HOLC’s redlining prevented Black and Asian residents, business, and neighborhoods from receiving the influxes of wealth and investments that continued to flow into white neighborhoods.

The logic used by the HOLC to assume that non-whiteness resulted in depreciation came from Frederick Babcock, the “central figure in early twentieth-century appraisal standards,” and the underwriting manual he wrote directly for the Federal Housing Administration to use when evaluating property for federal loans.⁵⁸ The FHA’s manual claimed that “The infiltration of inharmonious racial groups will produce the same effects as those which follow the introduction of nonconforming land uses which tend to lower the levels of land values and to lessen the desirability of residential areas.”⁵⁹ The “nonconforming land uses” that the manual references are in fact industrial developments, ‘nonconforming’ because they are nonresidential.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid, “Introduction.”

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Frederick Babcock, *Underwriting Manual: Underwriting and Valuation Procedure Under Title II of the National Housing Act* (Federal Housing Administration, April 1936), 323.

By treating “inharmonious racial groups,” which the HOLC took to mean *any* nonwhite racial group, to “nonconforming land uses” the HOLC instructed lenders to treat nonwhite communities as though they were not actually residential communities at all.

The federal government’s advocacy for financial discrimination exemplifies the self-fulfilling prophecy used to justify and advocate for racial discrimination in the housing market. By placing nonwhite neighborhoods at the bottom of the mortgage-security hierarchy according to the HOLC maps, redlining effectively restricted the flow of capital into only the most segregated white neighborhoods.⁶⁰ This severely limited the economic mobility of communities of color; no families living in redlined areas could get loans, mortgages, or attract investment that was not in the form of demolition. The redlining practices themselves depreciated the value of land, reaffirming the racist assumptions that the HOLC used to redline Black, Asian, and Latinx neighborhoods.

The HOLC’s logic also parallels the way redevelopers portray the past of gentrified neighborhoods. In the Bay, the HOLC treated Black and Asian residential communities as though they were industrial developments, slowly losing value. This is identical to the way the real estate market describes gentrifying neighborhoods in the East Bay. From Red Oak Realty’s website: “[West Oakland] was once San Francisco and the wider Bay Area’s industrial center, and converting the old factories and warehouses from that era into contemporary live/work lofts is all the rage.”⁶¹ The decision to describe West Oakland’s history, an area once referred to as the “Harlem of the West,”⁶² where Aretha Franklin, B.B. King, Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington, and Sarah Vaughn regularly performed in the jazz clubs that still remain on 7th street⁶³ as an

⁶⁰ Robert K. Nelson, LaDale Winling, Richard Marciano, Nathan Connolly, et al., “Mapping Inequality.”

⁶¹ Red Oak Realty, “West Oakland Real Estate.”

⁶² Lee Romney, “The Blues Return to Oakland’s 7th Street,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 2011, 1.

⁶³ UC Berkeley Journalism School, “Remembering 7th Street: Virtual Oakland Blues and Jazz.”

industrial center consisting of “old factories and warehouses” is pure ‘gentrification.’ The erasure of historical communities, as well as the people that continue to live in West Oakland today, helps the real estate industry ‘flatten’ out the neighborhoods it sells to white people, ameliorating guilt and awareness of the active displacement caused by gentrification. In doing so, gentrification echoes the HOLC’s underwriting practices of the 1930s, which treated Black, Asian, and Latinx communities in the East Bay as nonresidential ‘industrial areas,’ unfit to receive investment.

In addition to blocking the flow of capital into nonwhite neighborhoods, the HOLC’s racialized dogma was commodified and sold to white homebuyers by the real estate market. Real estate agencies, adopting the HOLC’s decision to evaluate nonwhite residency as a threat to the value of residential property, began pushing the idea that integration would lower property values when selling homes to white buyers.⁶⁴ Article 34 of the 1924 National Association of Realtors’ code of ethics explicitly called for realtors to avoid integrating neighborhoods, stating that “A Realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood a character of property of occupancy, members of any race or nationality, or any individuals whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood.”⁶⁵ In their report on housing inequality in the Bay Area, urban development researchers Eli Moore, Nicole Montojo, and Nicole Mauri note how this process became a “mutually reinforcing dynamic... between homeowners applying racial prejudice in selling or renting homes and narratives from real estate agents that integration drives property values down.”⁶⁶ Realtors were able to push the idea that integration was ‘risky,’ reinforcing white racism, and in return could enhance the appeal of

⁶⁴ Moore, Montojo, and Mauri, *Roots, Race, and Place*, 49.

⁶⁵ National Association of Real Estate Boards, “Code of Ethics,” June 6, 1924, 7.

⁶⁶ Moore, Montojo, and Mauri, *Roots, Race, and Place*, 49.

segregated developments. Here too, ‘innocence’ was employed to smooth over the reality of discrimination. Through the HOLC’s evaluation philosophy, racism became justified as a ‘rational’ economic result, and white homeowners were encouraged and emboldened to act on their racist beliefs by the Federal government’s affirmation that it was the financially responsible thing to do.

It is also critical to point out that the HOLC’s decision to discriminate was not as ‘rational’ as the Federal Government and real estate market argued it was. The theory the HOLC relied on to justify segregation—that nonwhite residency lowered property values due to white racism—was not necessarily true in practice. Although there are not many cases of integrated housing, the Sunnyhills subdivision in Milpitas, described by the SF Chronicle as “the first subdivision in the Bay Area where Negro families will be sold homes without racial discrimination,”⁶⁷ was at least somewhat successfully integrated. Contrary to the belief at the time that white people would be unwilling to live in integrated neighborhoods, 90% of Sunnyhills’ initial homebuyers were white and by 1957 Black families lived in 15% of Sunnyhills’ homes.⁶⁸ Though the racist logic pushed by realtors claiming that Black and Asian people would lower property values was rationalized as the inevitable result of white racism, developments like Sunnyhills reveal that this was in part a fiction.

The HOLC’s circular reasoning is similar to the way that mixed-income descriptions of gentrification, like Jon Russo’s description of gentrification in Longfellow, treat middle-class white ‘culture’ as a force that can rescue the city. The HOLC’s redlining was premised on the belief that property occupied by communities of color would ‘naturally’ decrease in value , and

⁶⁷ Andrew Hope, *Tract Housing in California, 1945-1973: A Context for National Register Evaluation* (Sacramento: California Department of Transportation, 2011), 43.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 43.

by acting on this to bar Black, Asian, and Latinx people from receiving loans, the HOLC furthered divestment in communities of color and realized its own racist assumptions. In the same way, gentrification theories which presume influxes of middle-class white culture can ‘save’ the city end up, in practice, concentrating *more* wealth in white communities and further displacement and economic hardship for nonwhite communities. In both cases, white racism becomes a rhetorical ouroboros, the end to its own means, because of white people’s raw, unrestrained control over resources and our willingness to abuse it.

2.3 – Blockbusting and Covenants

Blockbusting and racially restrictive covenants were two common practices that exemplify the way the racism of the white middle class was leveraged by the real estate industry. Blockbusting was a process wherein landlords and real estate agents would begin showing homes in a white neighborhood to Black, Asian, and/or Latinx families, only to then rush door-to-door “warning” white homeowners that incoming tenants were about to drive property values down.⁶⁹ Blockbusting could be enormously profitable for realtors; one white Oakland resident described how realtors “hounded us to sell the house at that time so they could give it to the colored at about twice the price,”⁷⁰ showing how white panic could be utilized to vastly increase the profit from selling homes.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 50.

⁷⁰ Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 165.

The doubling of prices associated with blockbusting was possible, and so profitable, only because of how spatially restricted Black and Asian homebuyers were in the East Bay. Geographic segregation was accomplished by racial covenants, which legally prevented Black, Asian, and Latinx families from purchasing homes, as well as white mob violence, which was used to terrorize people of color who moved into white neighborhoods.⁷¹ The effect racial covenants had on restricting the residency of Black people in the Bay was huge; 75,000 residential units were built in the East Bay between 1949 and 1951, but only 600 of those homes—less than 1%—could be bought by Black people.⁷² Racial covenants were marketed to white people as a ‘bonus’ commodity, advertising separateness and claiming that property values in segregated neighborhoods would not decrease; a 1914 price list for the “Berkeley Park” subdivision in North Berkeley advertised that “No Asiatics or Africans” would be able to purchase tracts there; another vaunts the “Presidio Terrace” development in San Francisco as the “one spot in San Francisco where only Caucasians are permitted to buy or lease real estate.”⁷³ These ads are clear examples of how segregation was specially commodified by the real estate market, leveraging white racism for profit.

The marketing of racial covenants and racial segregation is still mirrored in the way Bay Area real estate listings advertise property in gentrifying neighborhoods. For white buyers in the past, realtors advertised guarantees that a neighborhood was entirely white as an assurance that the value of property would increase over time. Now, ‘gentrification’ has come to stand in for ‘segregated;’ real estate listings for properties in gentrifying East Bay neighborhoods assure prospective buyers that gentrification will increase their investment. One listing for a retail space

⁷¹ Moore, Montojo, and Mauri, *Roots, Race, and Place*, 14

⁷² Ibid, 40.

⁷³ Ibid, 37.

on 7th Street advertised “Neighborhood currently undergoing significant revitalization,”⁷⁴ more blatantly referencing gentrification than most of the properties I saw. Typically, rather than referencing the change outright, advertisements imply gentrification by describing neighborhoods as “on the rise” or “soon-to-be” hot new markets.

Mob violence was an integral component for enforcing the racial segregation of the housing market. Despite the depiction of the North as a haven from the constant threat of lynching, as researcher and author Carol Anderson explains in *White Rage*, Black people who traveled Northwest to find employment during WWII “simply stepped into a new articulation of the seething corrosive hatred underlying so much of the nation’s social compact.”⁷⁵ Increasingly, following the 1948 Supreme Court ruling on *Shelley v. Kraemer* that made racial covenants unenforceable, white residents formed lynch mobs and organized harassment of Black and Asian families with the support of local police in order to enforce segregation.⁷⁶

Violence from organizations of white homeowners and the police were routine for Black people looking to move.⁷⁷ Elbert Allen Daly, a multi-hyphenate businessman, WWI veteran, and journalist who headed the *California Voice* newspaper, described the constant threat of white terrorism that faced Black homeowners moving to Oakland in the early 1920s:

Daly: In 1923 Mr. Burt Powell was a carrier and bought a house on Manila Avenue. We had to protect him for three or four weeks because the white people wanted to kill him because he moved in a white district... And again, I think it was in 1923...we had to sell Mr. Dawson’s house on Market Street. He bought something else on Apgar and we had to watch for him for two or three weeks—day and night—until the thing quieted down. There was another one on Genoa Street in the 5700 block. They put up a new house there and a Negro moved in. The white people tried to run this colored man out and we had to watch over him for about a month, day and night, to keep the white people from molesting him...

Interviewer: Well, what made the white people respect the ones who were watching?

⁷⁴ Blatteis Realty Company, “Advertisement for 1410 7th Avenue.”

⁷⁵ Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 54.

⁷⁶ Moore, Montojo, and Mauri, *Roots, Race, and Place*, 27.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 22.

Daly: They had guns. They had the difference. A loaded gun.

Interviewer: What was the police department's role in this situation?

Daly: Well, they didn't do anything. They didn't ever put anybody there to watch for them. If anything happened, then they'd come. But they didn't just put a watchman there all the time.⁷⁸

Daly's experiences are not unique, there are dozens of accounts of real or threatened violence against Black and Asian homeowners.⁷⁹ Even Willie Mays, the fifth greatest baseball player of all time,⁸⁰ faced extreme harassment after he and Marguerite Mays moved to San Francisco from Alabama in 1957 to play for the SF Giants. "Up here it's all a lot of camouflage," Marguerite Mays commented, "They grin in your face and then deceive you."⁸¹

2.4 – White Migration

The violence the Mays' faced in San Francisco is a part of the systemic policing of racial borders, and although it may seem disconnected to developments like 'The Logan,' gentrification is just the latest manifestation of this same violence. By vehemently policing racial borders, white homeowners were able to constrict and intensify material divestment in communities of color, making racial segregation into a system of dividing capital and resources as well as dividing space.

This system was so effective and intense that, even almost a century later the HOLC tracts are alive and well, echoing—screaming—their history through the racial geography of the East Bay. Shown below are two maps, one (left) of the Black population with an overlay of tracts

⁷⁸ Elbert Allen Daly, "Perspectives on the Alameda County District Attorney's Office," interview by Joyce Henderson, *UC Berkeley Regional Oral History Office*, October 13, 1972, text transcription, 661.

⁷⁹ Moore, Montojo, and Mauri, *Roots, Race, and Place*, 23-28.

⁸⁰ Bill Ladson, "How Great Was Mays? Ask His Peers," *MLB.com*, May 6, 2021.

⁸¹ Moore, Montojo, and Mauri, *Roots, Race, and Place*, 28.

the HOLC marked as “D” or redlined, and the other (right) of the white population shown with an overlay of tracts marked “A” and “B”—the two most valuable grades.

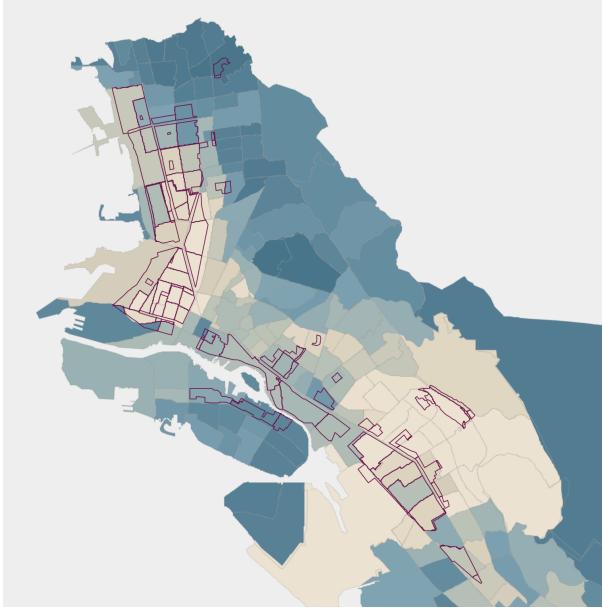


Figure 5: Map of census tracts by the proportion of Black residents. Bluer tracts have lower proportions of Black residents. HOLC tracts classified as “D” are outlined in red.

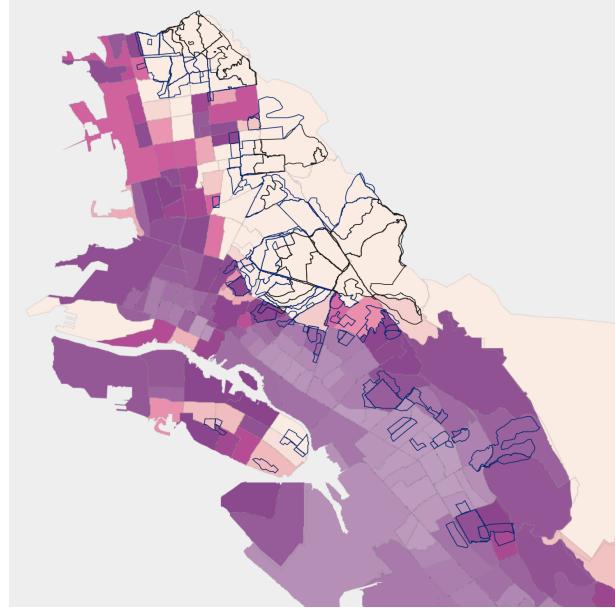


Figure 6: Map of census tracts by the proportion of white residents. Pinker tracts have lower proportions of white residents. HOLC tracts classified as “A” and “B” are marked in black and blue, respectively.

These maps shocked me when I first made them, but in the context of how intensely white people have historically worked to maintain racial segregation, they make sense. These maps offer a visual, a thumbprint of apartheid, that reveals a part of the story of gentrification that does not often get told. Much of the sociological work on gentrification considers it first and foremost a class conflict, a process that exploits the uneven terrain of the land market. What I hope these maps can illustrate is that Bay Area’s ‘uneven terrain’ in terms of its land value is matched by its ‘uneven terrain’ in terms of its racial segregation. Returning for a moment to Jodi Melamed’s description of capitalism’s reliance on race, “race enshrines the inequalities that capitalism

produces,”⁸² I think this is crystallized by the relationship between the HOLC’s redlining maps of the 1930s and the racial stratification of the East Bay today.

Using Smith’s rent gap theory, I argue that white violence and white racism were tools that the real estate market used to widen the rent gap as much as possible in nonwhite neighborhoods. The policing of racial segregation, combined with the racist logic of the HOLC, allowed active divestment to target and intensify inequality between white and nonwhite neighborhoods, producing borders that demarcated race *and* the value of land. Gentrification in 2020 has become the capitalization on these borders:

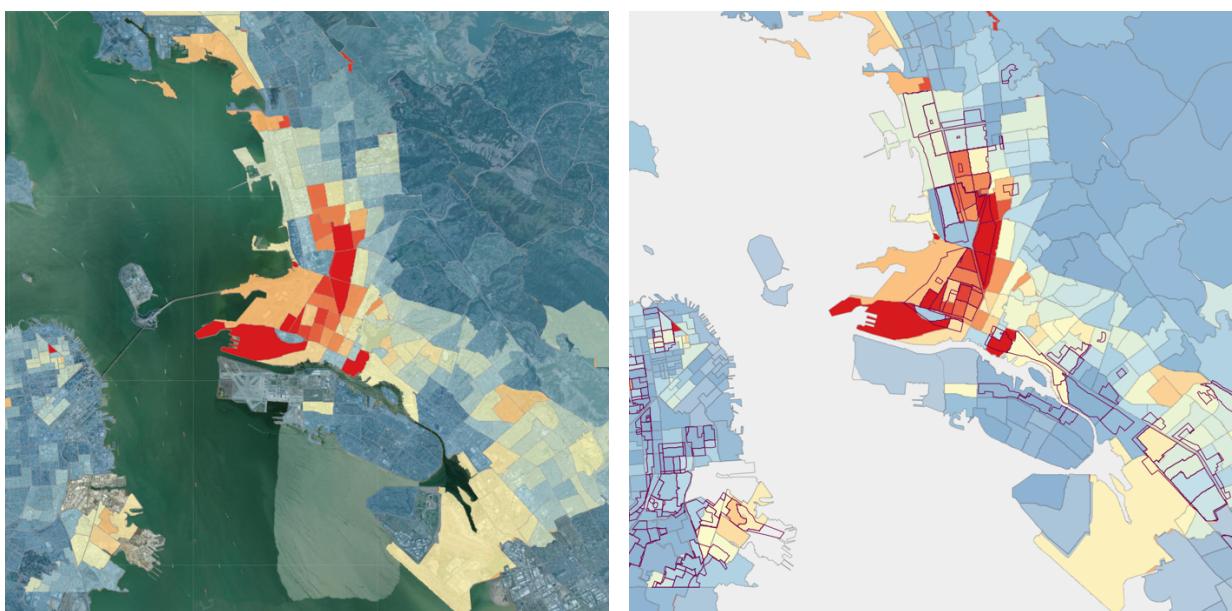


Figure 7: A Map of tracts by change in white population. Red tracts are ‘whiter.’ HOLC tracts classified as “D” are shown overlaid on the right.

These two maps are illustrations of where white people are moving to in the East Bay, one (right) with an overlay of tracts the HOLC classified as “D.” “D” neighborhoods are—with a few exceptions—undergoing or have undergone the most extreme gentrification in the Bay Area. A ‘consumption side’ approach to explaining this would argue that the white middle class has

⁸² Melamed, “Racial Capitalism,” 77.

simply come to prefer these neighborhoods, that white people are just ‘less racist now’ and want to take advantage of what West and North Oakland, as well as South Berkeley, have to offer. In the next section, I argue that this is not the case. The appearance of white people valuing “culturally rich” neighborhoods—as one West Oakland ad described the area, does not change the fact that gentrification still results in more deeply segregated cities and harm to Black and Latinx residents.

Instead, Smith’s rent gap theory reveals that these neighborhoods have become the targets of gentrification *because* of their divestment. In the light of how white racism has driven divestment, gentrification is inarguably the opportunistic consumption of the enduring legacy of racism in the East Bay. The reality of racism as the basis for gentrification is pretty clearly in opposition to the “chic” portrayals that gentrification uses to appeal to San Francisco and the East Bay’s wealthier white liberals. This explains why the revisioning of the history of a neighborhood is such a common feature of gentrification marketing; by wiping clean the slate of divestment and white racism, gentrification produces spaces where white people are not confronted by the effects of our racism. In fact, for proponents of gentrification, the effects of white racism—disproportionate wealth—become the very ‘virtues’ white people bring to a neighborhood. Although there are differences in scale between the genocidal system white settlers used in the past and the displacement of Black and Latinx neighborhoods in the Bay Area today, they are both underpinned and enabled by the same ‘settler colonial innocence’ that emboldens white people to act on, benefit from, and perpetuate racialized dispossessions.

Chapter 3: Where the White People Are

“If you are an urban pioneer who is looking to buy somewhere before it really booms, look into West Oakland” – Red Oak Realty

Zooming out from our maps of the Bay, we can see the same pattern in the movement of white people that Neil Smith describes as the “return to the city” that characterizes gentrification.⁸³ The suburbs are becoming overall less white, but the ‘inner city’ of the East Bay—especially West Oakland—is receiving a dramatic increase in white people.⁸⁴

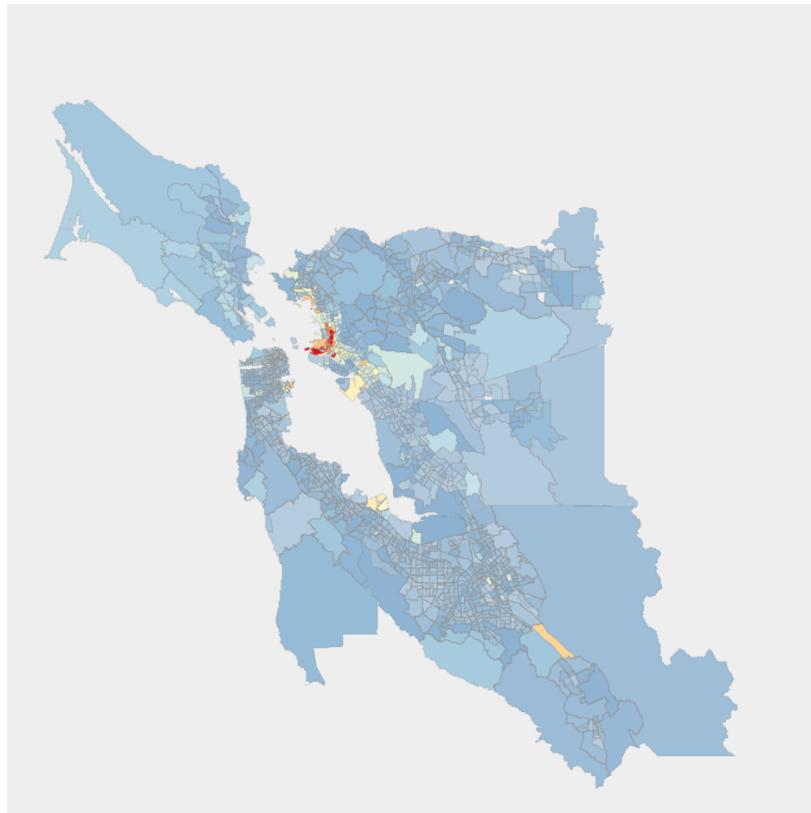


Figure 8: Map of white population by Census tract, showing the suburbs of the greater Bay Area.

⁸³ Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 51.

⁸⁴ In fact, the entire Bay Area is becoming less white. Despite how concentrated white people are in gentrifying neighborhoods, the overall white population has gone from being 66% of residents in the 9 Bay Area counties in 2000 to 48% of residents in 2020.

Consumption-side theorists laud this general demographic change as a cultural shift away from the suburb, what Slater described as a “collective middle-class rejection of suburbia.”⁸⁵ As suburban development arose in the 1950s and 1960s and suburban life became the dominant lifestyle for white middle-class Americans, critiques of suburbia’s aesthetic and cultural ‘blandness’ started to dominate the public imagination. Historian Lewis Mumford, for example, describes the suburb as:

A multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold.⁸⁶

Mumford’s bone to pick with the suburb is its uniformity, the loss of individual white identity that accompanies it. However, Mumford does not connect this uniformity to the violence and the system of segregation that produced it, nor does he acknowledge that the white ‘uniformity’ was part of the cultural capital that drew many white immigrants to the suburb in the first place.⁸⁷ Critiques of suburbia bemoan the loss of individuality that accompanied suburban expansion, but do not reflect on this as a consequence of white supremacy or racial capitalism. Using Mumford’s metaphor, the problem is not that there is “mold” in the white walls of tract housing, but that suburbia has become a place where white people can *see* the “mold.”

Critiques of suburbia remind me of what Renato Rosaldo termed “imperialist nostalgia,” where “people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed.”⁸⁸ As discussed,

⁸⁵ Slater, “Eviction of Critical Perspectives from Gentrification,” 741.

⁸⁶ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), 486.

⁸⁷ Vilna Bashi Treitler, *The Ethnic Project: Transforming Racial Fiction into Ethnic Facts* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2013), 98.

⁸⁸ Renato Rosaldo, “Imperialist Nostalgia,” *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 108.

white violence, self-affirming myths that Black people would lower the value of land, and legal segregation worked to produce the suburb has a place intentionally devoid of everyone but the white middle-class. The uniformity of the suburb was created actively, through investment in racial segregation and the policing of racial borders that destroying the lives of nonwhite people in the process. By mourning the loss of individuality, but not acknowledging it as the result of oppressive white supremacy, the underlying “mold” remains unchallenged and the ‘solution’ to suburbia becomes returning to the city to find culture again.

Consumption-side approaches that analyze the desires of the white middle class extoll this process. Jon Caulfield writes that the city offers “difference and freedom, privacy and fantasy, possibilities for carnival...‘A big city is an encyclopaedia of sexual possibility’... the city is ‘the place of our meeting with the other.’”⁸⁹ I agree with Caulfield that the white middle-class’s desire to ‘meet with the other’ is one of the forces that drives gentrification, but in no way is this a positive or substantive change from the systems of white supremacy that produced the conformity of the suburb. bell hooks describes this process as the “commodification of Otherness,” wherein the Other is “offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling...ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.”⁹⁰

For Gentrification that occurs in the East Bay, this commodification is a strategy used to attract white people to neighborhoods. Downtown Berkeley, for example, now has streetlight banners of its own, installed and paid for by a local BID, which advertise the diverse ‘cultural opportunities’ that Berkeley offers:

⁸⁹ Caulfield, “‘Gentrification’ and Desire,” 617.

⁹⁰ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1992), 21.



The ‘Other’ is hinted at, in catchy, alliterative, triplets. Each banner offers something that is both easily consumable—food, an hour-long yoga lesson—but also something that is outside white American or European culture, acting as both the literal and figurative “spice” that bell hooks describes. As a neighborhood gentrifies, white people arrive searching for the mythical “spice” or “grittiness” that they believe—and have been told—the neighborhood contains. Returning to Andres Duany’s defense of gentrification he is adamant that this process should go on, unfettered: “people should not be prevented from profiting on the natural appreciation of their neighborhoods. Not in America.”⁹¹ This, as discussed before, ignores the reality that “neighborhoods” as communities do not reap the benefits of gentrification. Although the physical space of the neighborhood sees an influx in wealth, the people who have created the culture that white people come in search of are faced with displacement.

The marketing for gentrification developments presents gentrification to white people as a strategy to avoid the conformity of whiteness. The Logan’s website—get ready to cringe—transparently presents this opportunity for escape in its descriptions of Temescal: “It’s been hailed as the West Coast’s Williamsburg... We have quirk in abundance.” Quirk, now a cliché,

⁹¹ Andres Duany, “Three Cheers for Gentrification,” *American Enterprise Magazine*, April 2001, 39.

works to stand in for literally *anything* deemed idiosyncratic or deviant from the norm, sending a clear message: there is “difference” here. In gentrification marketing, cultural ‘difference’ becomes a commodifiable cultural capital, with some differences even being treated as more valuable than others. Another advertisement for property in Oakland describes Oakland’s Chinatown:

If you haven't spent a ton of time in Oakland yet, making a quick trip over to Chinatown is also highly recommended as well. Despite often being overshadowed by the more prominent Chinatown in San Francisco, Oakland's Chinatown is... considered by many to be one of the more authentic Chinatowns in the entire U.S.

Even though San Francisco’s Chinatown is “more prominent”—meaning more ‘famous’—Oakland’s Chinatown is still valuable to white people because it’s “authentic.” I think this quote embodies the degree to which ‘commodification’ of culture occurs under gentrification; cultures are even evaluated by white people, placed along a hierarchy of authenticity and appraised in terms of their prominence.

Consumption-side celebration of the white middle-class’s commodification of culture makes it appear as though this is a revolution, or a fundamental shift in whiteness *away from racism*, when in reality the pursuit of authenticity is still based on evaluations of culture along a racial hierarchy. I see ‘innocence’ at work here, too; the commodification of ‘Otherness’ insulates white people from accusations of racism, of racial ‘dislike,’ even when gentrification results in more deeply segregated neighborhoods and perpetuates racialized inequality. There is something oxymoronic, but very revealing, about The Logan’s claim that Temescal has “quirk in abundance.” As ‘quirk’ dominates—think: gentrification clichés—it becomes another normative regime, and therefore ‘quirk’ must be sought elsewhere. The commodification of ‘Otherness’, through a system that destroys ‘Otherness,’ justifies the ever-expanding gentrification of neighborhoods.

The commodification of ‘Otherness’ as a way of defending gentrification is not limited to the East Bay. The mural of the Notorious B.I.G.--“Comandante Biggie!”--on the ‘Brooklyn Love Building’ recontextualizes Biggie Smalls’ image as emblematic of the new, creative and socially conscious Brooklyn vibe, but also says nothing about the radical change that has erased the neighborhood that was there. The mural itself was commissioned by white philanthropist Sean Meenan, who owns the ‘Brooklyn Love Building.’ The Biggie mural itself represents an investment of capital into Brooklyn, and while it celebrates a Brooklyn legend, it has no message about how Meenan’s investments are a part of the rapid dispersal of Black and Brown residents from Brooklyn *or* of how divestment in Black neighborhoods--such as BedStuy—is precisely what made it possible for Meenan to remake this building in Biggie’s image.

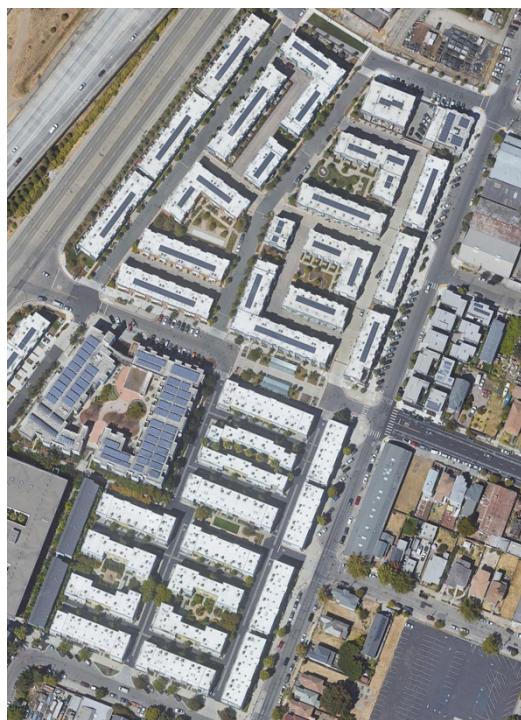


Figure 9: The Brooklyn Love Building, feat. the Notorious B.I.G.

The website for the Brooklyn Love Building describes it as the “first residential space to promote a message of local love and pride,” despite the fact that the Brooklyn Love Building’s message is also publicity for Sean Meenan. Meenan’s own nonprofit, named after his restaurant Café Habana, is prominently advertised on the Brooklyn Love Building’s opposite side above its unattributed Biggie lyric, making this mural more of an advertisement for Sean Meenan than anything else.

The commodification of Biggie’s image helps gentrification appear as though it is a process of integration, of coming-togetherness, when in reality it works to produce more separate and homogenized spaces. An example of this kind expansion is West Oakland’s Zephyr Gate/Station House development, a massive project housing tech workers that spans 8 blocks of the Prescott and Lower Bottoms neighborhoods. Satellite imagery of the development shows how the spatial layout of these developments is designed to create a space that becomes an ‘internal neighborhood,’ complete with roads, parks, and lawns.

Figure 10: Satellite Imagery of Zephyr Gate/Central Station



Visiting these developments in person is eerie, the first thing you see is over a thousand feet of repeating lime-green buildings, each identical to the last. Entering in through one of the ‘roads’ takes you past several security cameras, neighborhood watch signs, but eventually you step out into a space that feels like a secret world. There are sidewalks, crosswalks, gardens, fountains, and benches to sit on *within* the development, complete with two-car garages and multi-story homes:



Figure 11: Photos of the outside (left) and inside (right) of Zephyr Gate

This group of developments is unmistakably a suburb, transplanted into West Oakland. Where ‘The Logan’ sold itself as a self-contained community, Zephyr Gate and Central Station feel like terrariums, microcosms of the sprawling tract developments of the ‘50s and ‘60s. The physical division and layout of tech developments like these results in the production of a totally separate

neighborhood, a fragment of white suburbia, despite offering West Oakland's 'culture' up as a reason to live there.

The commodification of 'Otherness' in gentrification helps deflect from the precarity of whiteness, its need to constantly expand and seek out new frontiers. Critiques of suburbia who believed, earnestly or not, that a "return to the city"⁹² would end the homogeneity of the white suburb missed the fact that it is the profitable symbiosis of white racism and real estate that homogenized the suburb. The cultural contact that is offered through gentrification is always temporary, or, as with Meenan's Cuban restauraunt, financially beneficial to white people.

⁹² Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 38.

5. – Conclusion

“But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.”⁹³

Gentrification is a slippery process, one that I think offers a powerful glimpse into racial capitalism, but also one that resists being looked at and seen in its historical context. Everything from the neoliberal linguistic contortions describing gentrification as ‘uplift,’ ‘renewal,’ ‘rejuvenation,’ ‘revitalization,’ to the more destructive myths describing neighborhoods as ‘industrial’ when they were and remain residential communities are employed as ‘gentrifications’—lies designed to reinscribe the innocence of a process that devastates communities. Theories from the past do not fully account for the ways that these gentrifications are aimed at liberal white people and leverage white identity, instead seeing whiteness as an aspect of ‘class.’ It is my hope that by emphasizing the connection to historical forms of racism gentrification can be seen as a process that, at least in the East Bay, cannot be theoretically understood without analyzing its reliance on white people and white identities.

Understanding the history of segregation in the East Bay is crucial to understanding gentrification. Even a broad overview of the codependence of land, wealth, and race that has been pushed and affirmed by the HOLC, realtors, and white homeowners reveals that gentrification is not a break with the past, or a new force come to ‘save’ the city. Instead, gentrification is just the latest form of profit from divestment. By draining neighborhoods of

⁹³ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: The Dial Press, 1963), 2.

resources, keeping them devalued until potential home prices are high enough, and ultimately redeveloping them, realtors and redevelopment agencies make enormous profits and inflate the value of land across the Bay Area. Gentrification in the East Bay has been so profitable, in fact, that some gentrifying neighborhoods in Oakland have higher rents and property values than neighborhoods like Rockridge and the Oakland hills, historically some of the wealthiest places in the East Bay.⁹⁴

The common defense of gentrification, that it is a process that “lifts all boats” even if it does a little harm, is again a ‘gentrifiction.’ Mixed-income and mixed-residency ideologies subtly (or not so subtly) promote whitening as the *only* and *most natural* step towards progress. This is, in a way, the same logic that has been used to justify the ongoing torrent of dispossessions in California since its founding. Challenging the idea that racial inequality is ‘natural’ or that it is the result of ‘rational’ market forces—as in the case of the HOLC’s ideology—can open up what we see as possible paths towards fighting poverty in neighborhoods that need support. Untangled the ‘rationalization’ of gentrification requires studying white people, and the way gentrification is sold to white people. Sociologist Martin Nicolaus, on sociocultural research, asks:

What if that machinery were reversed? What if the habits, problems, actions, and decisions of the wealthy and powerful were daily scrutinized by a thousand systematic researchers, were hourly pried into, analyzed, and cross-referenced, tabulated and published in a hundred inexpensive mass-circulation journals and written so that even the fifteen-year-old high school drop-outs could understand it and predict the actions of their parents’ landlord, manipulate and control him?⁹⁵

This is particularly inspiring to me. Understanding the ‘rhetorical ouroboros’ of white supremacy, that it *is* because it *can assert itself*, is a crucial step to challenging its legitimacy and control over the Bay Area’s housing market. As a white person, recognizing how the things that

⁹⁴ Dawn Phillips, Louis Flores Jr., and Jamila Henderson, *Development Without Displacement*, 9.

⁹⁵ Martin Nicolaus, from Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 42.

are culturally, or materially, valuable to you—that new Soul Cycle, for example—have arrived in your life by means of a system of devastation is uncomfortable, but necessary. Confronting the ‘settler colonial innocence’ that is foundational to California’s history means looking where gentrification asks you not to and figuring out what it means to walk away from ‘Omelas.’

I feel mixed about writing an academic paper on a process that has such ongoing and harmful effects on the place that I love. I was continually inspired to write this, though, by returning to Jodi Melamed’s quote on racial capitalism, that academic tools can help us “name and analyze the production of social separateness—the disjoining or deactivating of relationships and human beings.”⁹⁶ Understanding how a complex process works—even if it is not direct action—is an important step towards understanding how a complex process might be stopped.

The Logan’s assurances that you are ‘Oakland local,’ while building a *very* local Whole Foods on its bottom floor, and Berkeley’s signs encouraging you to associate it with easy access to diverse food are designed to sell white folks in the Bay Area the feeling of contact, of togetherness, while profiting from a growing economic divide that deepens the separation of communities along racial and spatial lines. Recognizing where ‘innocence’ is being produced and sold is important; from Baldwin’s words, it is the innocence that perpetuates the cycle of harm, white racism, dispossession, and devastation. Going forward, I think we need to develop more tools for understanding and challenging ‘settler colonial innocence’ where it is used. White people in particular have a knowledge, although I think it is hard to access, of the importance of innocence to white identity. I hope that this work, by naming and illuminating gentrification as an extension of racial segregation, can be a tool—however scarcely used or small—for understanding the subtle ways devastation is sold to white liberals in the Bay Area.

⁹⁶ Melamed, “Racial Capitalism,” 78.

Limitations of census data

Because the data I use to map out the borders of gentrification in the East Bay is gathered from the US census, my mapping analyses have some important limitations. The US Census data groups all East Asian, Southeast Asian, and Indian ethnicities into the “Asian” supergroup, making it an extremely poor description of race and/or culture.⁹⁷ In California in particular, where different waves of immigration, laws, colorism, and contemporary racism have affected and continue to affect different Asian ethnicities very differently, the census category of “Asian” cannot meaningfully describe identity or the way “Asian” race has been treated by white Californians, and so I do not discuss in detail here discrimination against people classified on the Census as ‘Asian.’ Similarly, Bay Area residents with Latinx, Arab and MENA ancestry are classified as “white” by the US census and are not accounted for in the Census data I use. The census also does not collect data on Black or white ethnicities; on the census, all Black people are classified as “Black or African American” and all white people are classified as “white” regardless of ethnic ancestry or immigration history. Residents classified as Black and Hispanic/Latino were also statistically undercounted by both the 2000 and 2020 censuses, while white and Asian residents were statistically overcounted, so I consider the maps used here for analysis as tools to help explore, but not perfectly describe, racial change in the Bay Area.⁹⁸

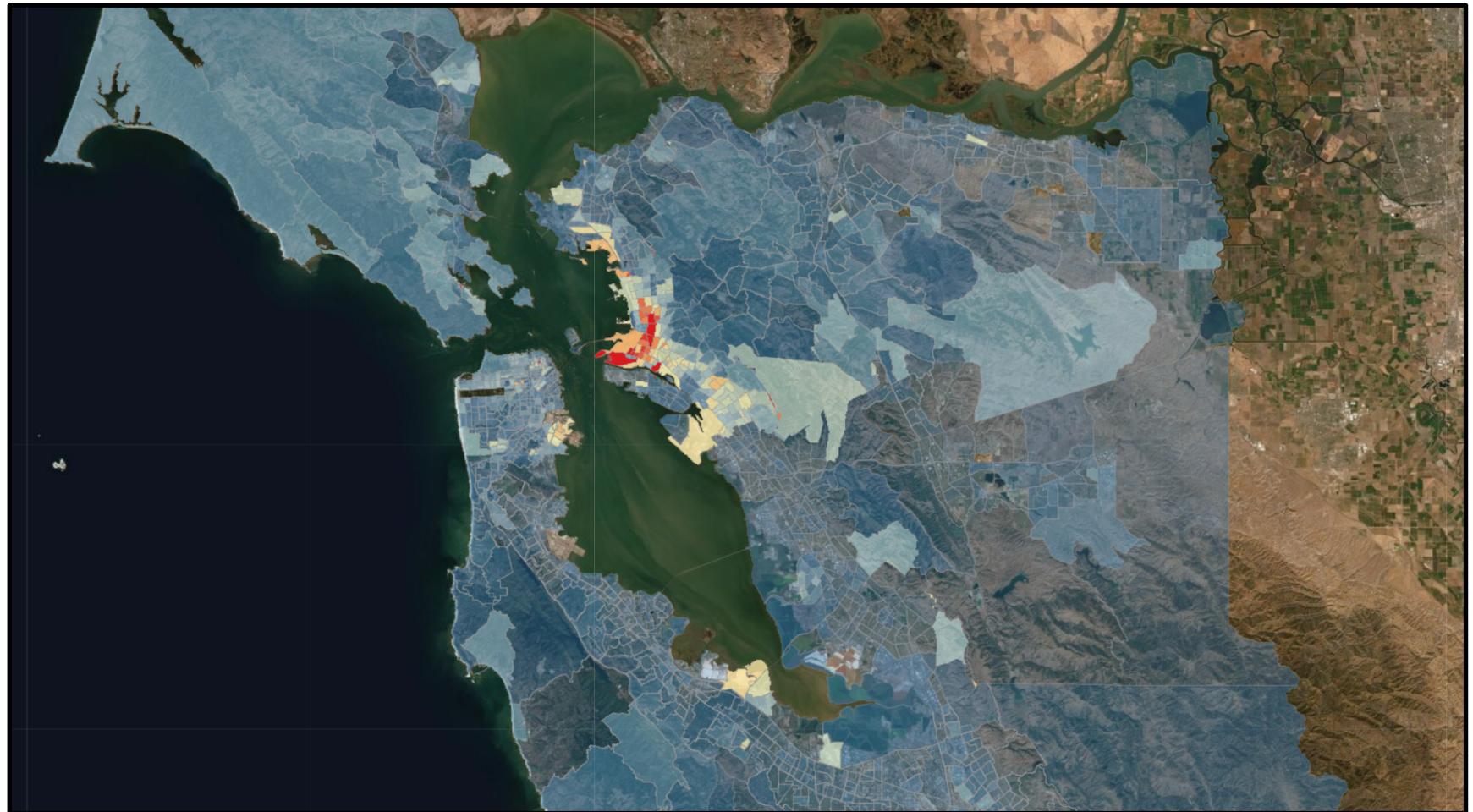
⁹⁷ Asian Pacific Islander Institute on Gender-Based Violence, “Census Data and API Identities,” <https://www.apibgv.org/resources/census-data-api-identities/>.

⁹⁸ US Census Bureau, “Census Bureau Releases Estimates of Undercount and Overcount in the 2020 Census,” <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/2020-census-estimates-of-undercount-and-overcount.html>.

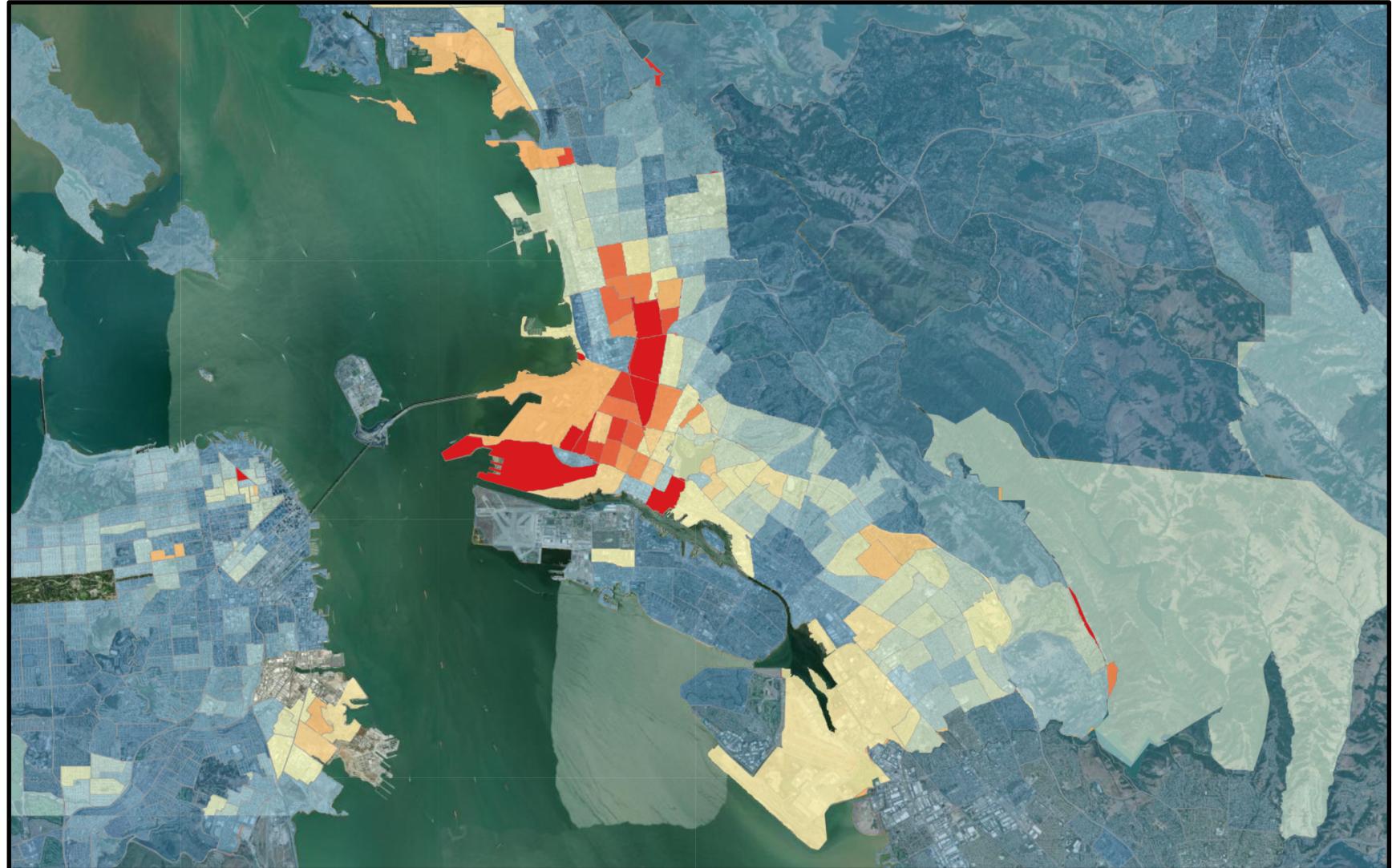
Supplemental Figures



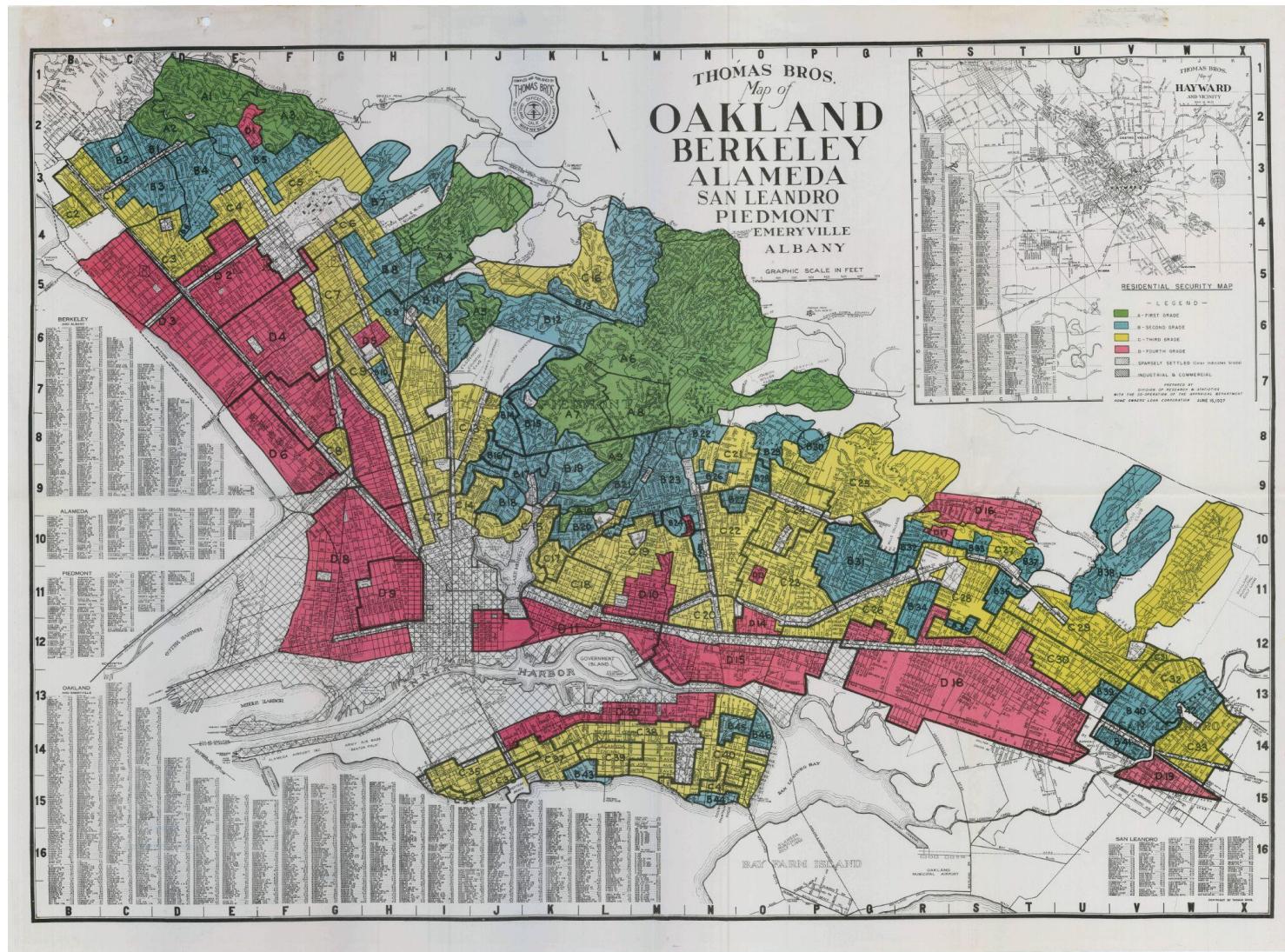
Supplemental Figure 1: Walking paths I took through each neighborhood. Berkeley in Orange, Emeryville in Green, Longfellow in Yellow, Temescal in Purple, and West Oakland, both Prescott and the Lower Bottoms, in Blue. Paths were created using Google Earth and the geotag data from the photographs I was taking as I walked.



Supplemental Figure 2: Full map of changes in the proportional population of white people. Shown is data from Alameda, San Francisco, Contra Costa, Marin, San Mateo, and Santa Clara counties. Note the extreme increase in white populations in tracts in the East Bay, especially around West Oakland, relative to the rest of the Bay Area.



Supplemental Figure 3: Zoom-in on Supplemental Fig.2, focusing on Alameda and San Francisco counties.



Supplemental Figure 4: Scan of the map contracted by the HOLC in 1936 that established the redlining that continues to affect residential tracts

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