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The omnivore's neighborhood? Online restaurant reviews, race, and gentrification

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Abstract
Social media users who post restaurant reviews on the website Yelp.com act as both prosumers or produsers and "discursive investors" in gentrification. Their unpaid online reviews create cultural and financial value for individual restaurants and also construct a positive or negative image of their locations that may lead to economic investment. Moreover, Yelp reviewers show marked preferences in terms of race. Examining 7046 Yelp reviews of restaurants in a predominantly White-gentrifying and a predominantly Black-gentrifying neighborhood of Brooklyn, NY, shows far more reviewers draw attention to the urban locale when the majority of residents are Black. A framing analysis of 1056 reviews that mention the neighborhood indicates that most Yelp reviewers feel positive about the White neighborhood, where they consider the traditional Polish restaurants "authentic" and "cozy," while they feel negative about the Black neighborhood, which they criticize for a dearth of dining options and an atmosphere of dirt and danger. This language represents "discursive redlining" in the digital public realm, with Yelp reviewers contributing to taste-driven processes of gentrification and racial change.

Keywords
Social media, prosumption, produsage, Yelp, gentrification, race and racism

Introduction

During the past decade, for millions of diners around the world, the simple act of choosing a restaurant for an evening out has been reshaped by digital technology. Websites and blogs that publish online restaurant reviews are both creators and

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beneficiaries of this transformation. With growing numbers of users and writers, they have become significant media platforms in their own right, as well as important mediators between global publics of consumers and local providers of cultural goods and services. In the United States, the most influential of these websites is Yelp.com, an online database of consumer reviews that evaluate and offer comments on local businesses. Beginning in 2004 as a "simple idea to bring word-of-mouth recommendations online," Yelp quickly exploded into public consciousness. By the time the website celebrated its 10th anniversary, it boasted an archive of 61 million reviews that were read by more than 138 million unique visitors per month in more than 20 countries (Yelp, 2014).

While Yelp is useful to find reviews of individual boutiques and bars, the site's restaurant reviews offer a treasury of Big Data related to other issues. Public health agencies use Yelp restaurant reviews to track food-borne illnesses (Harrison et al., 2014), and academics study them to discover linguistic patterns with emotional resonance (Jurafsky et al., 2014). But using Yelp reviews as data poses problems. Reviewers publish under pseudonyms, and there are constant complaints, leading to lawsuits, that reviews are neither unbiased nor independent (Loten, 2014). Despite the appearance of open participation and transparency, questions of selection and self-selection remain unresolved. Yelp contains filtering software that identifies, flags, and removes what the website's administrators define as questionable reviews, but the algorithm the site uses is not public. According to Yelp,

> the filter establishes an objective standard against which every review can be measured. Even though it inevitably affects legitimate reviews from time to time and can miss some of the fake ones, too, it helps protect the integrity of the site for consumers and business owners. (Yelp FAQs, 2013; Yelp Q2, 2014; Yelp Support Center, 2014)

Yet, researchers claim that approximately 20% of reviews are fakes (Luca and Zervas, 2013).

For most Yelp contributors, posting a review is an exercise in prosumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010) or, in digital terms, produsage (Bruns, 2008), in which reviewers actively co-produce the content they consume. Yelp reviewers not only eat in a restaurant, but they also compose an informal mini-essay about the meal (the review), following a format and rhetoric that have been familiar in print media since the mid-20th century, including comments about the food, service, and atmosphere. They conclude this exercise by rating the restaurant according to a number of standard criteria and signify their conclusion by selecting a number of stars. Going through this procedure involves mental work connected with consumption, but Yelp reviewers also produce a real impact on a restaurant's business model. They do this work with no expectation of financial reward, contributing a form of immaterial labor to both the Yelp website and the restaurants they describe (Lazzarato, 1996). To the degree that they do derive benefits, these are social rather than financial, in terms of "elite reviewer" status and potential

meet-ups with other contributors (Piskorski, 2014). Websites like Yelp represent the unpaid labor of producing reviews as an opportunity to join a community and contribute to a public forum, with the assumed bonus that other users are paying attention to reviewers' opinions.

Yet by publicly voicing their opinions, reviewers are exerting influence on restaurants' commercial success. Research shows a direct causal relation between positive reviews and a restaurant filling seats (Anderson and Magruder, 2012). Likewise, a one-star increase in Yelp leads to a 5%–9% increase in a restaurant's revenue (Luca, 2011). Although readers of reviews do not necessarily follow reviewers' recommendations, the majority of visits to Yelp do result in purchases from local businesses – even more so when consumers read the reviews on mobile devices (Nielsen: Newswire, 2013). So, Yelp acts as a reflexive feedback loop, both reflecting popular sentiments about specific restaurants and helping to form those sentiments.

It has not gone unnoticed that corporate owners gladly absorb social media users as unpaid content creators and marketers. As Morreale (2014) says about YouTube, "Prosumers actively produce and share content independent of capital, while capital seeks to benefit from the social and material value being produced" (p. 114). New digital technologies continue to make this process ever easier and more widespread, not only incorporating social media users into the business models of corporate consumption (Kuehn, 2013; Ritzer, 2015) but also making their cultural capital an integral part of capitalist innovation (Terranova, 2000). Nonetheless, the social position of online reviewers may be more complex than this analytic framework suggests (Zajc, 2015). On one hand, they are exploited as unpaid writers and marketing advisers and mobilized primarily as consumers. But on the other hand, they benefit from shaping the kinds of consumption spaces, both virtual and "real," that they prefer. This duality places Yelp at the center of ongoing debates about whether Web 2.0 has made social life more participatory and democratic or strengthened the hold of established power centers (Bird, 2011; Bruns, 2008). We focus on the latter point, by situating Yelp reviewers in both an economic and a spatial context.

Produsage as discursive investment

The complicated role of online restaurant reviewers in the contemporary capitalist economy can be captured by thinking of them as discursive investors. The first step, as we have said, is that they produce texts that influence individual restaurants to provide more of the cuisines they crave. In this sense, the reviewers are investing their labor in improving these restaurants' business model. Yet because Yelp organizes and lists reviews geographically, reviewers on that website extend their investment beyond a restaurant's walls: Yelp reviews conceptualize and represent the urban locality in which individual restaurants are located (cf. Lefebvre, 1991). The website creates a discursive space where locality and identity intersect in terms of consumer tastes.

Specifically, if gentrification is socially constructed by capital, state policy, media images, and consumers' tastes, Yelp restaurant reviewers make discursive investments in two of its formative areas: media images and tastes. Like media coverage of new art galleries and dive bars, favorable reviews not only boost the image of a specific restaurant but may also change the image of its neighborhood. This attracts more visitors, especially affluent, adventurous consumers, and, eventually, brings chain stores, higher rents, and real estate developers (Zukin, 2010). What is special about Yelp reviewers is that they participate publicly and discursively, with no financial reward, in the process of making "place."

Although not much is known about Yelp reviewers, the few details that have appeared suggest they represent prototypical demographic segments of urban gentrifiers. A marketing study finds that they are disproportionately White, childless women earning over US$60,000 a year, who browse the Web from school and work (Alexa, n.d.). An academic researcher with access to Yelp's own data states that they are young college graduates (Piskorski, 2014). Anecdotally, an observer in Boston who attended a meeting with Yelp reviewers notes that most are in their 20 s and have more time than money (Simester, 2011). In short, Yelp reviewers have more cultural than economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984).

The gentrification literature suggests that people with more cultural than economic capital, such as artists, musicians, and students, often live in socially diverse, low-rent urban neighborhoods (Ley, 2003; Lloyd, 2006; Zukin, 2010). These localities are likely incubators of both the "authentic" cuisines favored by foodies, who bring an "aesthetic disposition" to even the humblest practices of everyday food consumption (Bourdieu, 1984; Johnston and Baumann, 2010), and the edgy new restaurants that generate media buzz (Bridge and Dowling, 2001; Hyde, 2014). Therefore, intentionally or not, Yelp restaurant reviewers may encourage, confirm, or even accelerate processes of gentrification by signaling that a locality is good for people who share their tastes. Reviewers' discursive investment in gentrification does not replace all other reasons for moving to a neighborhood or opening a restaurant in a specific location. But by appealing to people who share their tastes, Yelp reviewers encourage changes to the cultural landscape in neighborhoods that are potential sites of capital reinvestment. Their selections, evaluations, and language place a neighborhood on the cognitive map of homologous consumer choice, in an effort to make social and geographical space coincide.

To explore the relationship between Yelp restaurant reviews and gentrification, we briefly look at how social media have spread and popularized foodies' concerns and then suggest how Yelp reviews represent intertwined issues of urban locale and race. That discussion will introduce a close analysis of the language in Yelp reviews, comparing reviews of restaurants in one gentrifying neighborhood in Brooklyn, NY, where most residents are African American, Caribbean American, and Black and in another where most residents are Polish and White.

Foodies in social media

Researchers address the rapid rise in social media like Yelp as a loose assemblage of technological innovations and financial investment (''Web 2.0''), organized around virtual networks (Rainie and Wellman, 2012; Wellman, 1979) and tastes (Bourdieu, 1984), which help participants to satisfy social needs (Piskorski, 2014). Although users' motivations, from sharing information, opinions, and resources to self-promotion, appear to be the primary driver, social media have proven to be powerful platforms for promoting all kinds of consumer goods and services, not least of which is the ''connectivity'' among spatially disparate, consumption communities offered by media sites themselves (Van Dijck, 2013).

Food emerged early on as a major focus of online communities. Chowhound, an online discussion forum for serious foodies, was founded in 1997. Since then, the number and variety of social media platforms about food have grown exponentially, from personal blogs to YouTube videos and from recipes posted by celebrity chefs to nonprofessionals' reviews, confessions, and exposés (Rousseau, 2012). Today, whether people use them for education or entertainment, food ''channels'' have a large and growing public. According to a recent survey commissioned by Google, YouTube's corporate owner, nearly half of all adults in the United States watch food videos on YouTube, with young adults, aged 18–34 years, watching most of all (Delgado, Johnsmeyer and Balanovskiy, 2014).

Digital food platforms offer many opportunities for produsers. Besides replicating dishes shown in a video, improving their preparation, and posting the results online, digital prosumers document and critique restaurant meals, broadening a form of discourse that originated in early-19th century France and expanded worldwide through professionally written newspapers and magazines from the mid-20th century (Ferguson, 2004: 95–99; Zukin, 2004: 181–195). By the 1980s, collections of survey-based restaurant reviews were being published in book form. Since then, Web 2.0 has vastly broadened the public for restaurant reviews and ''democratized'' the reviewer's role. At the same time, as we have already suggested, a discourse of ''democratization'' obscures the varied economic interests underlying reviewers' engagement.

Today, anyone can post restaurant reviews online, in principle opining as credibly as anyone else about the quality of a chef's food, an establishment's customer service, and the ratio of a meal's financial cost to its aesthetic value. These mobile critics have real influence on both producers and consumers. On one hand, faced with bloggers' or Yelpers' negative reviews, restaurant chefs and owners have been known to change their offerings (Rousseau, 2012). On the other hand, positive reviews may lure readers to try unfamiliar cuisines and visit unfamiliar urban locales.

Restaurant reviews and locality

Because most restaurant reviews focus on "internal" factors of food, service, and atmosphere or décor, they seldom mention the "external" locale in which an eating establishment is found. For example, a quick reading of thousands of Yelp reviews of restaurants in several different areas of New York City turns up practically no mention of neighborhood. But if a review does mention, or even imply, something about the neighborhood, it often indicates a perceived anomaly. Perhaps the reviewer sees a problematic fit between cuisine and locale ("hidden gem") or notes a process of demographic and reputational change ("an area in transition"). Reviewers may even explicitly state that an area is being gentrified.

In research on restaurant reviews and gentrification in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, Hyde (2014) finds that single-critic newspaper reviews of restaurants call attention to "culinary framing" of the supposedly gritty locale. But Hyde focuses on food narratives and restaurants' strategies in dealing with the area's socially marginalized population, rather than with reviewers' discursive investment in the locality. Moreover, Hyde finds that most reviewers see only a weak connection between their own preference for "casual gourmet" dining and gentrification. By contrast, Yelp restaurant reviewers in Brooklyn do wax reflexive about the polyvalence of their aesthetic tastes. They are aware that they, as omnivorous consumers, form a market for the exotic or authentic experiences, places, and products that spur gentrification (Brown-Saracino, 2009). As one Yelp reviewer says with perhaps a touch of irony, "[The restaurant] holds on to the feeling of Brooklyn pre-gentrification but gives you all the things you want in a brunch place post-gentrification."

Competition for low-rent housing in many localities brings potential gentrifiers into contact with racial and ethnic minorities who are longtime residents. But how might race appear in *restaurant* reviews? Unless a reviewer specifically identifies their racial or ethnic background as a qualification for judging the authenticity of a cuisine, racial identity should be irrelevant to evaluating a restaurant's quality. Furthermore, if mainstream websites like Yelp filter out racial signifiers and racial bias because they do not want to alienate potential users and advertisers, they effectively ban most language indicating racial identity. Moreover, the aliases and photos posted by Yelp reviewers are not reliable indicators of racial identity. Yet, if foodies' discourse typically embodies cosmopolitan "First World" biases (Johnston and Baumann, 2010), perhaps Yelp reviews do deal with race in some way. Then, we would expect the racial dimensions of a neighborhood's restaurant reviews to be intensified by existing patterns of residential racial segregation.

Racialized rhetoric in social media

Race is, in fact, connected to locality in various social media platforms. In forums on the website City-data.com, users post questions about the racial composition of specific urban neighborhoods or suburbs to which they are thinking of moving.

The replies sometimes lead to highly emotional, online disagreements and debates. A more inflammatory social media platform was the ''community-driven'' navigation app SketchFactor, introduced in 2014, which combined publicly available data and users' comments about their experiences in specific urban locales, including their subjective comments about race in those encounters. The site then derived numerical ratings of the areas' ''sketchiness,'' with the intention of allowing users to avoid being crime victims or, at least, to avoid being made anxious by the risk of danger. The app immediately drew widespread criticism for giving a public forum to racism and disappeared by 2015 (Marantz, 2015; Murphy, 2014).

Less overtly, racism may affect the material outcome of advertisements on Airbnb. Although it is not clear whether racialized rhetoric or perception of risk in racialized locales is the dominant causal factor, researchers have found that Black hosts earn 12% less than non-Black hosts for the same kinds of housing (Edelman and Luca, 2014).

If ''cyber racism'' (Daniels, 2009) of some kind does appear in online restaurant reviews, it would likely be expressed as a subtext about the internal or external locale. Reviewers may make suggestive, negative comments about dirt and disorder in Black-identified restaurants or about perceived dirt, disorder, and danger in majority-Black neighborhoods (cf. Hwang and Sampson, 2014). This ''discursive redlining'' would alert readers not to venture into the area (Jones and Jackson, 2012).

Two contrasting neighborhoods

To explore these questions, we examined Yelp reviews of restaurants in Greenpoint and Bedford–Stuyvesant (Bed-Stuy), two neighborhoods in Brooklyn, NY, which are now at a comparable stage of gentrification in terms of housing prices and media buzz. However, they have different racial and ethnic profiles (Figure 1).

Greenpoint, a formerly industrial and working-class neighborhood on the East River in North Brooklyn, has had a Polish, and therefore White, majority since the 1980s. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of Poles decreased, but Whites have remained the majority racial group (57%), while the number of Hispanics, the second largest demographic group, has shrunk by 10%–20% (New York City, Department of City Planning, 2010). The Black population hovers around 3%. In contrast, Bedford–Stuyvesant, a mainly residential neighborhood in Central Brooklyn, has long had a Black majority. Since the 1950s, residents have been predominantly African-American and Caribbean American. Since the 1980s, however, the neighborhood has attracted new Muslim immigrants, mainly from West Africa and South and Central Asia. These migrations have created an ethnically and culturally more complex ''majority-Black'' identity, expressed, in part, by more differentiated restaurant cuisines (Zukin, 2014). Declining crime rates and relatively low housing prices have also stimulated gentrification. This in turn has brought racial changes. Between 2000 and 2010, Bed-Stuy's small White population increased by 700%, while the Black population shrank by 11% (New York City,

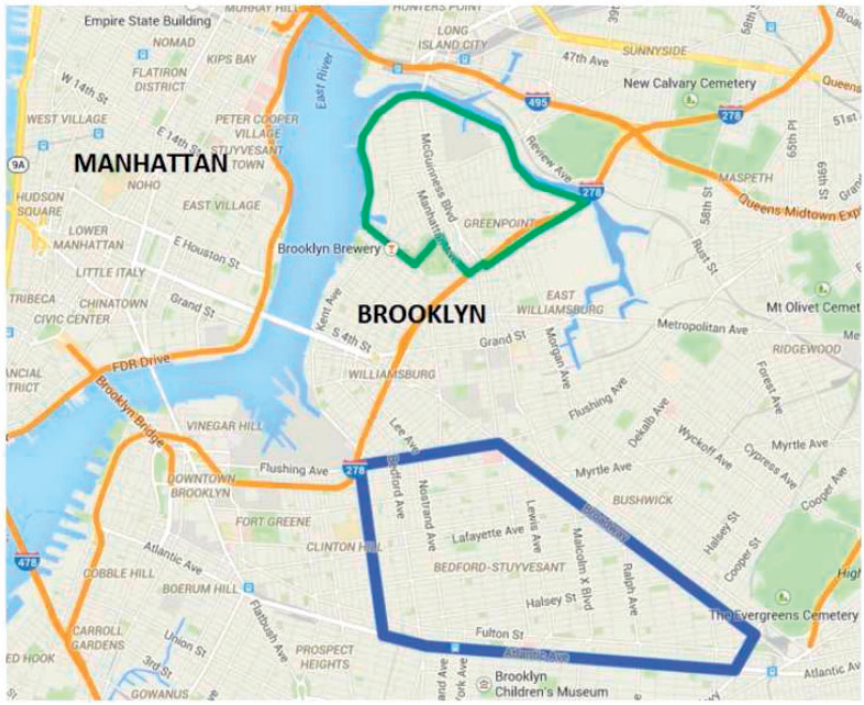

Figure 1. Map of Bedford–Stuyvesant and Greenpoint, Brooklyn.
Source: Google Maps.

Department of City Planning, n.d.). Today, Whites make up 13% of the total population; Blacks, at 59%, represent a diminishing majority.

Gentrifiers have moved steadily into both neighborhoods since the early 2000s, as housing prices rise in adjacent, already-gentrified areas. Greenpoint has experienced spillover from the ''hipster'' district of Williamsburg, while Bed-Stuy gets an overflow from Fort Greene, Clinton Hill, and the ''hipster'' area of Bushwick. Apartment renters are primarily White, and many of them are students, although Bed-Stuy has long had, and continues to attract, home owners of African descent and mixed racial backgrounds (Zukin, 2012). In contrast to Greenpoint's modest houses and apartments, Bed-Stuy contains many beautiful brownstone townhouses with original architectural details and two officially designated historic landmark districts. Yet, new high-rise apartment houses, especially along the East River waterfront in Greenpoint, also attract large numbers of more affluent residents. Moreover, Greenpoint, where the main character in the TV series *Girls* lives, is experiencing a boom in both new boutiques of the ''curated'' kind and offices and production studios for creative industries.

But at least from the 1950s, both neighborhoods suffered from disinvestment by private investors and local government. The closing of New York's commercial

shipping port in 1960, and concomitant deindustrialization, left empty docks and warehouses along the waterfront in Greenpoint, inhibited the development of retail businesses, and kept housing prices low. At the same time, the growth of a large Black majority in Bedford–Stuyvesant, experiencing high unemployment, served by inferior schools, and plagued by crime, contributed to the area's decline. Residents' self-proclaimed motto, ''Bed-Stuy, do or die,'' was an ambiguous paean to survival.

Yet, crime rates have dropped dramatically all over New York City, including in these two areas, since the 1990s. Today, Greenpoint is considered to have ''a safe reputation,'' according to the Real Estate Buying Guide of the *New York Times* (Powell, 2014), while in Bedford–Stuyvesant, some areas are still considered risky. Although robberies have declined in both areas, only one-fifth to one-third as many are reported in Greenpoint as in Bed-Stuy. Moreover, no murders were reported in Greenpoint through the first half of 2014, and only one in 2013. In contrast, five murders were reported in Bed-Stuy in the first 6 months of 2014 and six in 2013 (New York Police Department, 2014).

For both Bed-Stuy and Greenpoint, typical gentrification narratives in the media show an appreciation of longtime residents' friendliness and the neighborhood's small-town feel, mixed with regret about gentrifiers' effect on housing prices and local character. Some Polish business owners say there are no longer enough Poles in Greenpoint to support Polish-oriented food stores (Fishbein, 2012). But many Bed-Stuy narratives, whether they feature the voices of old timers or newcomers, pose anxious questions about whether the area's Black racial identity can be sustained in the changing landscape of consumption (Howell, 2014; Nixon, 2014).

Data and method

To explore possible connections between restaurants, race, and gentrification, we carried out a framing analysis of the language used to refer to ''neighborhood'' in Yelp reviews of restaurants in Bed-Stuy and Greenpoint. We used the same general method as Johnston and Baumann's (2010) study of foodies' language, which sorts discursive themes according to three levels of generality. From most general to most specific, these levels refer to discourses, ideologies, and frames.

Our first task was to isolate those reviews that mention or describe the neighborhood context. These are, by far, a minority of the total number of reviews. Nonetheless, just by reading through the thousands of reviews posted on Yelp for each of our two areas on 1 May 2014, we found that many more restaurant reviews mention the neighborhood in predominantly Black Bed-Stuy than in predominantly White Greenpoint.

To make a smaller, representative sample, we began by taking all reviews of the 10 ''most reviewed'' restaurants in both neighborhoods directly from the Yelp website. But we immediately saw that this category mainly featured ''trendy'' restaurants that had opened in each neighborhood since 2005. The top 10 ''most reviewed'' restaurants tended to exclude establishments that represented each

Table 1. Neighborhood mentions in Yelp restaurant reviews, Bedford–Stuyvesant and Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

Category	No. of reviews	No. of neighborhood mentions	Neighborhood mentions (%)
Bed-Stuy total	3022	720	24
Top 10 "most reviewed"	2380	630	26
Top 10 "traditional"	642	90	14
Greenpoint total	4024	336	8
Top 10 "most reviewed"	3406	263	8
Top 10 "traditional"	618	73	12

neighborhood's historical and cultural roots: African-American soul food and Caribbean cuisines in Bed-Stuy and Polish cuisine in Greenpoint. Therefore, we created an additional category comprising all reviews posted for the 10 most reviewed ''traditional'' restaurants in each neighborhood. We defined ''traditional'' as the ethnic cuisines identified with the majority population in each neighborhood. We then had reviews of 40 restaurants, 20 in each neighborhood: 10 ''most reviewed'' restaurants, which we would generally describe as ''trendy,'' and 10 ''traditional'' restaurants, all of which we would describe as ''ethnic.'' This gave us a representative sample of 7046 reviews.

As in the entire ''universe'' of reviews, most reviews in the representative sample do not mention neighborhood at all (Table 1). However, reviews of restaurants in Bed-Stuy are twice as likely to mention the neighborhood as reviews of restaurants in Greenpoint. Moreover, reviews of trendy restaurants in Bed-Stuy are *three times* more likely to mention the neighborhood as reviews of trendy restaurants in Greenpoint.

For the framing analysis, we focused on the subsample of 1056 reviews that mention the neighborhood: 720 reviews in Bed-Stuy and 336 in Greenpoint. To capture subtleties and subtexts in the way people speak about the urban environment, we decided to use manual coding rather than software. It is easy for a computer program to find direct mentions of ''neighborhood,'' ''place,'' and neighborhood names. But reading the entirety of reviews ourselves allowed us to discover references and tropes that use more allusive and culturally resonant terms.

Framing the neighborhood

The framing analysis showed an overarching discourse, shared by reviewers in both Greenpoint and Bed-Stuy, about an *up-and-coming neighborhood* (Figure 2). But from that point, as themes became more specific, reviews in each neighborhood sharply diverged. On the second, more specific level, the ideology expressed by most restaurant reviews in Greenpoint is *cultural preservation*. In general, reviewers of restaurants there see a mix of various cultures, old and new, and they describe

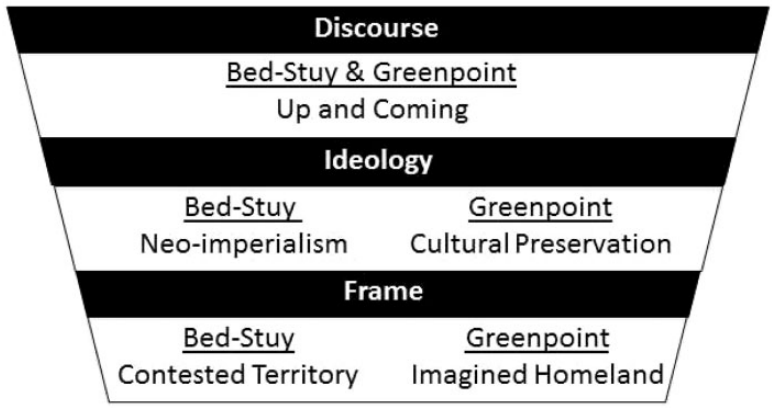

Figure 2. Frame analysis of two Brooklyn neighborhoods based on Yelp restaurant reviews.

them all positively. However, restaurant reviews in Bed-Stuy overwhelmingly express an ideology that could be labeled *neo-imperialism*. Reviewers see a neighborhood in transition from bad to good, where they can impose their tastes. On the third, most specific level, reviews of restaurants in Greenpoint construct a frame of an *imagined homeland*. Reviewers positively identify with a "cozy," "European" neighborhood and an "authentic" Polish cuisine. By contrast, comments about restaurants in Bed-Stuy construct a frame of *contested territory*. Reviewers negatively identify with "dark," "dangerous," "ghetto" conditions in the neighborhood and praise the trendy restaurants for bringing a welcome change to an area with "no options."

Framing comments about the two neighborhoods fall into four thematic categories: description of (1) the physical landscape, (2) local residents, and (3) variety and quality of restaurant options and (4) discussion of restaurants as agents of neighborhood change.

Common discourse: "Up-and-coming" neighborhood

In both Bed-Stuy and Greenpoint, reviewers generally acknowledge that the neighborhood is "rising." One calls Bed-Stuy an "area in transition"; according to another, "this is a great time to see Bushwick/Bed-Stuy." A third reviewer says, "This is not the Bed-Stuy, Do-or-Die of my childhood." Moreover, the prognosis is for more change to come: "It won't be rough out there much longer." Likewise, reviewers say that Greenpoint is "transforming before our very eyes." It is "rapidly gentrifying"; "the neighborhood may have changed a lot in the last decade." A reviewer admits,

> being someone who has grown up in Greenpoint and watched it evolve from a very blue collar neighborhood of simplicity with a mix of various cultures to [a] continuously evolving neighborhood of literary minds . . . , I can honestly say I LOVE IT!

In both neighborhoods, the gentrifiers whom reviewers target with derision are ''hipsters.'' A reviewer in Greenpoint critically notes, ''[this] place is going to be another douche-bag hipster lounge.'' A reviewer in Bed-Stuy points to ''dirty little hipsters,'' while another describes a restaurant as ''a bastion of hipsters in a sea of poverty.'' Nonetheless, reviewers in both areas express overwhelming approval of the direction of neighborhood change. From this point, however, the tone of their comments begins to differ.

Greenpoint: Ideology of cultural preservation

In Greenpoint, reviewers find ''a mix of various cultures,'' embodied by ''all manor [sic] of Brooklyn's colorful denizens.'' What they mean by multiculturalism, however, is that ''about half the crowd seemed to be gentrifier-transplants, with the remainder Poles.'' Indeed, as other reviewers note, Greenpoint is ''a section of bklyn known as little Poland,'' a neighborhood ''bustling with multi-generational Polish families,'' and ''an excellent example of the polish community's enduring presence in Brooklyn.'' The general tone of approval leads some reviewers to advocate a form of cultural preservation, if only for the restaurants: ''I hope the traditional polish influence in the neighborhood sticks around.'' But the positive vibe of the urban locale carries a suggestive subtext about race, as when a reviewer describes a Greenpoint restaurant as located ''in the heart of a pleasant and ethnically sound (predominately of polish decent) neighborhood.''

Bedford–Stuyvesant: Ideology of neo-imperialism

Restaurant reviews give new Bed-Stuy residents a discursive space to mobilize support for their own effect on the district. ''We have been living in Bed Stuy for the past 3 years,'' a reviewer writes, ''we are happy to witness a changing neighborhood. Please support Bed Stuy and the movement.'' Presumably, ''the movement'' refers to restaurant patronage rather than to racial identity, but this comment suggests an unbridgeable gap between different kinds of consumers. Another reviewer obliquely refers to either, or both, social class and race, when they note, ''The divide between who was in the café and the dominant population of the neighborhood speaks volumes.'' Reviewers readily acknowledge economic reasons for this gap: ''This place is especially popular among the moneyed newcomers.'' But there are also allusions to a neo-imperialist regime where populations are sorted into different spheres of consumption. ''Plenty of times I have sat outside [this restaurant],'' a reviewer says, ''and a 'local/native' Bed-Stuy passerby would ask about the place... I can see it in their faces that hesitation.''

Unlike in Greenpoint, Bed-Stuy reviewers express little desire to preserve the existing culture of the neighborhood. ''There are no options in Bed-Stuy,'' a reviewer typically states about the absence of desirable restaurants. Another says about a new restaurant, ''This is the kind of place Bed-Stuy needs.'' But who needs this kind of restaurant, and why?

Framing Greenpoint: Imagined homeland

Reviewers of Greenpoint restaurants feel the neighborhood is both exotic and authentic. They frame the neighborhood as "European" and relate to it bodily, in an intimate way. "I felt like I was in Europe," one says. "It's like walking into a legitimate European bakery in the middle of Greenpoint," writes another. "It's in Greenpoint. It feels sweet and old fashioned in the best way," says a third. But another reviewer's perception of a "European" ambiance is, to say the least, confused: "I felt like we were in another country – probably Amsterdam, with all the tulips, thick framed glasses and ubiquitous smell of weed."

Reviewers who correctly identify the neighborhood's cultural origins say that going to a traditional restaurant in Greenpoint is "like stepping into a Polish household or neighborhood café in Poland." Another reviewer says that a restaurant is "the kind of spot you would be delighted to find while walking the streets of Krakow." Or in another Polish city: "I imagined myself at a neighborhood café in Warsaw, at least the Warsaw of my imagination." For this reason, reviewers warmly recommend visiting the neighborhood: "If you don't have the time or money to travel to Poland, make it to Greenpoint." Most reviewers, although probably not of Polish descent, seem to feel at home in this exotic territory. They praise traditional restaurants in Greenpoint for presenting an "authentic," "grandmothers'" cuisine. This discursive bridging of "authentic" and "exotic" may relate to the perception of Greenpoint's "European" character and reflect reviewers' positive orientation toward a White cultural identity.

Framing Bed-Stuy: Contested territory

Like the frame of "imagined homeland" that Yelp reviewers construct for Greenpoint, the frame of "contested territory" produces the largest number of comments – and richest level of allusion – for Bedford–Stuyvesant. Restaurant reviewers typically describe a "gritty," "sketchy" "'hood." They emphasize danger, alerting readers that to eat in a certain good restaurant, they must be prepared to "brave the dark alleys of Bed-Stuy." Some even go out of their way to focus on fear: "Once I stepped out the door, I wanted to go right back inside! The neighborhood is a little scary – and that's putting it nicely." But other reviewers challenge this alarmist view. "You can cue the Oscar awards for those who are describing the location of this place. It is NOT BAD," says one reviewer. "Also, the area is fine," another adds, "you're not 'risking your life' to get this food." A third asserts that the neighborhood is "NOT shady, people must be racist" [to say so]."

As these comments show, racialized language creeps into online restaurant reviews in Bed-Stuy, both those that condemn the as-yet-not-thoroughly gentrified neighborhood and those that condemn "racist" reviewers for their fears. Negative reviewers regularly borrow tropes from pop culture, evoking rappers and movies that exploit images of the ghetto. "Shadows of the world of Biggies [sic] Smalls and

New Jack City still exist,'' says a reviewer who visits a restaurant in Bed-Stuy. But another says, ''If you're scared of poor or minority neighborhoods keep your prejudiced butt away.'' Reviewers' racist comments, then, are both confirmed and challenged. When a third reviewer says, ''the ghetto is still the ghetto,'' another asks, ''Why do people keep saying the neighborhood is shady? They must not be from the neighborhood or are struggling with a little bit of racism.'' With reviewers on both sides ''claiming'' the neighborhood, the overall frame is left open. Moreover, some reviewers point to restaurants themselves as playing a material role in neighborhood change, for both good and bad.

Restaurants as agents of gentrification: Greenpoint

Changes in the quality, variety, and price of restaurant food clearly influence reviewers' perceptions of neighborhood change. The reviewer whom we quoted earlier, who grew up in Greenpoint and admits to ''loving'' recent changes there, praises ''(the so-called 'hipsters') [for] bringing their organic, sustainable and healthy everything.'' Another reviewer positively notes, ''a lot of new restaurants are popping up.'' But a third reviewer is sad that new restaurants are pushing out old favorites: ''Extremely disappointed to see that Basia is gone after 15 years in Greenpoint. This place was so homey... An angry Polish man on the street told me the place is going to be another douche-bag hipster lounge.'' Bars are a specific irritant. ''Franklin Street is transforming before our very eyes,'' a reviewer states. ''It's like Reading [England!] in the early nineties. Every building on Friar Street reopened as a mega-pub. People came out of their offices at 5:30 and plunged into these places til eleven o-clock rolled round.''

Several reviewers point to gentrification's effect on prices. ''Gentrification is definitely taking its toll on the prices,'' says a review of a ''traditional'' Polish restaurant, ''as most entries [sic] are now around $9 instead of $7 in the same time frame. [From] when I first visited, beer price had been nearly doubled.'' Another says, ''Prices are on the higher end but at this point lets all just agree that Williamsburg/Greenpoint have become an extension of 'trendy' Manhattan.'' However, another reviewer considers that higher prices likely reflect general economic conditions. ''I admit to being one of the early gentrifiers of Greenpoint in the days of yore (moved there 9 years ago),'' this reviewer says. ''The prices have changed, but that's to be expected b/c a lot of other factors around us have changed too, not just gentrification... (economy, food prices, gas prices to transport food, inflation, taxes, etc.).''

Some reviewers note that ongoing gentrification threatens their favorite restaurants. ''This is definitely one of 'my spots' that I've been loving forever,'' one says. ''I just hope that they don't get pushed out of the neighborhood by the Williamsburg yuppies.'' Another says, ''I hope the traditional polish influence in the neighborhood sticks around, if not we will lose gems like this.'' A third adds an even sadder comment about changes wrought by gentrification: ''As an old school NY'r, it's a shame to see what happened to the area.''

By and large, Yelp reviewers in Greenpoint describe a neighborhood whose traditional restaurants are already desirable – and complain because that traditional culture is threatened by gentrification.

Restaurants as agents of gentrification: Bed-Stuy

In contrast, Yelp reviewers in Bed-Stuy are sharply divided between support for, and criticism of, new restaurants precisely because they encourage gentrification. Those who support trendy, new restaurants generally favor gentrification. However, even reviewers who explicitly support Black-owned restaurants, and therefore support, at least by implication, the neighborhood's "traditional" character, offer negative comments about some of these restaurants' food and service.

Reviews of trendy restaurants depict them as contradicting Bed-Stuy's landscape and social and racial character. "An unexpected gem, can this really be Bed-Stuy?" a reviewer asks. "The atmosphere [of the restaurant] transported me away from the housing project across the street," another says. One restaurant is called a "white oasis"; another is described as "one of the key selling points for me when I decided to move to Bed-Stuy, might [have] been because every hipster around the area headed there." Furthermore, reviewers lavishly praise these restaurants for changing the neighborhood. "I love the courage the owners have in bringing a farm to table concept to Bed-Stuy," a reviewer says, "to connect residents with REAL food." Another says, "What a corner it's becoming! Congratulations to the chefs who decided to get their businesses running here in the first place. It is with them that a community can gather momentum. But without them it remains stagnant."

Unlike reviewers who lament the demise of traditional restaurants in Greenpoint due to gentrification, reviewers explicitly connect the opening of good restaurants in Bed-Stuy with gentrification and neighborhood improvement. "Never would have known about it had my real estate agent not pointed it out!," a reviewer says. "Ahhhh gentrification. . .," another says. "Thank you for bringing the neighborhood yet another good place to go." Yet, other reviewers criticize trendy restaurants for destroying the community. "I like the diversity and flavor as Bed-Stuy as is," one reviewer says. "I hope no more like it open around within the vicinity. . .," adds another, "Ya know what I mean?" A third condemns a restaurant for being "the epitome of everything wrong w gentrification, [a] blatant appropriation of everything Brooklyn."

These reviewers blame restaurants and their gentrifier patrons for a loss of local identity. "I finally found a place that has not been taken over by people from out of town you [sic] now call Brooklyn home," a reviewer states. "This is a local restaurant where actual local (born and raised in Bed-Stuy) people eat." Another reviewer criticizes newcomers who enter the neighborhood in what we have called a neo-imperialist way. "This is hardly supporting the community," a reviewer writes:

> It's [sic] seems like someone coming in as a guest in the neighborhood, paying little to no attention bout what locals might be looking for in a bar. I can't assume they are

> white yuppie-hipsters gentrifying the neighborhood but that's definitely the message it send, ga-ross.

Yet Black-owned restaurants, which are nearly all in the "traditional" category, earn scathing criticism for incompetence and attitude:

> I try my best to patronize black owned businesses but today is definitely my last time of freaking dealing with this place . . . There's way too much competition out here in the restaurant business so you should govern yourselves accordingly.

Another says, "Unfortunately, this seems to be another African American owned establishment with little or not [sic] business sense . . . always out of their star dishes."

A restaurant's bad service places at least one reviewer in an ethical quandary: "I support my black businesses – especially since there are so many non-Black owned business flooding the area," they say. "But who would want to come out and support a place like this when you don't even feel welcomed by your own people who work there." As this comment shows, some negative reviewers identify themselves as advocates for both Black-owned businesses and the majority-Black community. "I really hate that this is a black-owned establishment because I rather take my business elsewhere," a reviewer says. "I can't support the people that don't support themselves!" Another complains, "This restaurant is exactly what is wrong with so many other businesses in this neighborhood. Furthermore, it is restaurants like this one that give this beautiful neighborhood a bad name . . ."

These reviewers try to balance their role as conscientious prosumers with the obligations of racial solidarity. The effort leads them to condemn a restaurant for offering inferior food and service and argue that poor restaurants hurt the Black community. "These fools did not even have chicken ready, yet chicken is 90% of their offerings," a reviewer says. "No thank you, this is why white folks are owning Bedstuy economics."

Conclusion

A close reading of online restaurant reviews highlights and expands an understanding of produsers' social role in promoting processes of urban change. Not only do Yelp reviewers create economic value for individual businesses and business owners, they also make a discursive investment in gentrification.

Because reviews posted on Yelp.com are organized geographically, the cumulative effect of reading them either intensifies or contradicts preexisting perceptions of "good" and "bad" neighborhoods. Online reviews, and depictions of neighborhoods that are sometimes embedded in those reviews, continually redraw cognitive maps of consumer choice, which sets the stage for economic investment. Yet, as we

have shown for two neighborhoods in Brooklyn, this process is racially selective. Yelp reviews mobilize racialized biases to effect a discursive redlining of majority-Black districts. This is a strikingly different view of online discourse from its mainstream depiction as democratic, participatory, and even, to some degree, mundane, in the case of supposedly apolitical restaurant reviews. Instead, our work confirms the critical view of Ritzer, Terranova, and others that prosumers and produsers, and social media at large, are deeply implicated in embedding the norms of the capitalist economy in everyday culture.

Our work expands earlier critiques by looking at the spatial context of Yelp reviews. A close reading of these reviews suggests the integral role produsers play in channeling capital flows. Not only does Yelp reviewers' cultural *labor* enhance the flow of like-minded consumers to individual restaurants, their cultural *capital* enhances the flow of visitors and developers to the neighborhoods where the ''best'' restaurants are located. Along with the material investments of new restaurant owners and residents, the reviewers' discursive investments remake a neighborhood's sense of place and contribute to gentrification.

Our analysis breaks new ground by calling attention to the racial logics underlying seemingly race-neutral restaurant reviews. To the degree that reviewers' cultural capital reflects specific racial and ethnic ''dispositions,'' their reviews reproduce and, given the reach of social media, expand harmful racist biases. They do this by framing both restaurants and neighborhoods in racialized ways. First, the framing of ''traditional'' ethnic restaurants in majority-Black neighborhoods as less valuable and less interesting than ''traditional'' ethnic restaurants in majority-White neighborhoods perpetuates a culinary hierarchy based on European, White, First World tastes. As other researchers have shown, race and ethnicity limit supposedly omnivore tastes. Second, the framing of White neighborhoods as authentic, cozy, and comfortable, and the contrasting framing of Black neighborhoods as dark and dangerous, perpetuates White-inflected ''distaste'' of racial minorities. These frames, moreover, achieve an unprecedented momentum through social media, which publicize and promote the ''movement,'' as a few reviewers imply, toward a global gentrification.

Nonetheless, it is worth pointing out again that some reviewers who self-identify as Black, or as supporters of Black-owned businesses and local Black cultures, post severe critiques of Black-owned restaurants that do not operate well. Moreover, although it is outside the bounds of this research project, we should also point out that the owners of many upscale restaurants, cafés, boutiques, and bars in Brooklyn's gentrifying neighborhoods are, themselves, Black. And so are some of their suppliers, employees, and customers.

We close by emphasizing Yelp's centrality in the contested framing of gentrifying neighborhoods. If Yelp reviewers are discursive investors in a taste-driven process of neighborhood change, their participation in social media has a material effect on capital investment in the urban environment. In the digital public realm, Yelp is a language of power.

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