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A Lighter Shade of Brown? Racial Formation and Gentrification in Latino Los Angeles

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ABSTRACT

Conventional gentrification literature has meaningfully demonstrated how economic inequality is perpetuated in urban settings, but there has been a limited understanding of how racial inequality is maintained. Drawing from participant observation, interviews, and digital ethnography in the barrio of Boyle Heights in Los Angeles that were collected over five years, this study examines how gentrification functions as a racial project and supports new forms of racialization to maintain uneven development along racial lines. Examining the ways that racial formation processes unfurl at the local scale expands conventional understanding of racial formation theory and practice while, simultaneously, illustrating the centrality of place in race-making. This study finds new race and class formations are developed by casting the barrio itself and significant portions of the Mexican American population as "honorary white." Despite colorblind and post-racial ideologies espoused in majority-minority cities like Los Angeles, this landscape fostered emerging racial formations alongside gentrification processes which have increased racial, political, and economic inequality.

KEYWORDS: racial formation; Latinos; gentrification; racialization, critical race theory.

In May 2015 *Los Angeles Times* journalist Hector Tobar authored an op-ed, "Viva Gentrification!" in which he argued that economic forces of gentrification could result in the racial integration of racially segregated, Latino-majority neighborhoods in Los Angeles (Tobar 2015). Despite Latino[1] residents' concerns over displacement, he argued that white newcomers to working-class *barrios* should be viewed as stimulators to the local economy as well as harbingers of racial diversity to these places. Tobar's views of gentrification as a vessel for socioeconomic uplift, racial integration, and racial equality crystalize how discussions about gentrification (in)directly engage dominant ideologies of race and racism. Bridging gentrification scholarship and critical theories of race, I examine how majority-

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1 I use the term "Latino" in the broad sense that includes all Hispanic-origin groups in the United States. I also use the terms "Mexican American" and "Chicano" interchangeably.

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minority places, such as Los Angeles, rationalize widening racial inequality and existing policies to advance gentrification and, simultaneously, constitute new racial schemas.

Racial formation is considered among the most prominent critical theories of race that is challenging prevailing views of the United States as a colorblind society. Racial formation theory posits race as a dynamic concept shaped by sociohistorical processes that have, in turn, uniquely defined our history and society (Omi and Winant [1996] 2014). Seeking to understand how this concept continues to shape the present racial order, racial formation theory analyzes how race is (re)defined to reproduce or oppose existing social structures. They argue that racial projects are "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (Omi and Winant [1996] 2014:56). Racial projects are helpful in revealing how gentrification processes structure racial hierarchies at the local scale. Conceptualizing gentrification as a racial project asks scholars to prioritize the historical racialization. In Los Angeles, such racialization between Mexican and white residents has long shaped how neighborhood change is understood and negotiated at the everyday scale. In examining racial projects, this study reveals the ways gentrification functions as a discursive vehicle to constitute new racial hierarchies.

Before describing my methodology and findings, I briefly review the local history of Los Angeles generally and Boyle Heights specifically to highlight the way local history informs the majority-minority dynamics in the city. Next, I turn to examine the ways whiteness is constituted in a majority-minority neighborhood and city. This section reveals how, despite being a numerical minority, whites remain in positions of power in the city; are disproportionately better off economically compared to residents of color, and are central to everyday debates involving gentrification. The social location of whites ensures they retain a dominant position in the local racial hierarchy. While gentrification is understood by local residents as driven primarily by whites, the conceptualizations of minority-led gentrification is also salient. Following this thread, I examine how "*gente*-fication," understood as the return of educated and upwardly mobile Mexican-Americans to working-class *barrios*, is viewed more favorably than white-led gentrification for the perceived economic and "racial uplift" this process bestows on the *barrio*. The final section analyzes a contrasting definition of *gente*-fication forwarded by anti-gentrification activists as a betrayal of working-class and immigrant solidarity, rather than as a pathway to socioeconomic mobility.

In contrast to definitions of gentrification as advanced primarily by economic forces, this paper posits race as a driving factor in advancing gentrification. The primacy of race is achieved, in large part, by rationalizing a racial order in Boyle Heights that maintains the dominant position of whites and, simultaneously, advances the social position of a select group of pro-gentrification Latinos. This process grants this select group of Latinos a strategic, white-like status in the local racial hierarchy. Although ephemeral, this status serves as a "buffer" between whites and anti-gentrification groups who are viewed by whites and pro-gentrification Latinos as the racial "other." Finally, I examine how anti-gentrification activists and structural critiques are racialized by whites and middle-class Latinos in ways that legitimize existing gentrification policies. Together, these findings suggest that gentrification dynamics restructure minority-majority contexts in ways that ensure white dominance, in part, by exploiting historic intra-racial dynamics in the neighborhood.

WHY LOS ANGELES? WHY BOYLE HEIGHTS?

Located about three miles from Los Angeles' civic center, Boyle Heights' proximity has brought the *barrio* into the purview of downtown revitalization. Boyle Heights is divided between foreign- and native-born residents, 95 percent of whom are Latino. The neighborhood's inexpensive housing has largely served renters over the last forty years, with homeowners making up only a quarter of its housing stock (U.S. Census 2010). In the context of an ongoing housing affordability crisis nationwide (Joint Center for Housing Studies 2016), renters in California have been identified as especially cost-

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burdened (Legislative 2015). Latino and Black populations were hit hardest by the 2009 housing crisis (Kochhar, Fry, and Taylor 2011) and immigrant status rendered Latinos doubly at risk of experiencing foreclosures (Rugh 2015; Rugh and Hall 2016), spatially marking the foreclosure landscape in Los Angeles (Tumpson Molina 2015; 2016). Such context put gentrification and its impact on the *barrio* in stark relief. Taking seriously Pulido's (2000:16) articulation that "landscapes are artifacts of past and present racisms," the dynamics explored in this paper illustrate the ways race and racism have adapted over time and continue to shape gentrification in Boyle Heights. Indeed, its proximity to the city center has historically been organized by policies and practices of exclusion, which make its present inclusion in the large Los Angeles imaginary particularly significant.

Keeping ethnic Mexicans spatially contained and placing them at the lower rungs of the racial hierarchy has represented an ongoing project for Los Angeles civic leaders since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 (Deverell 2004; Molina 2006). Los Angeles' rise as a prominent American city was largely attributed to cultural and civic labor's investment in "whitewashing" the city's Mexican past and articulating an Anglo futurity (Deverell 2004; Kropp 2006). As Los Angeles' racial landscape took shape, Anglo boosters, civic leaders, tourists, and residents participated in daily practices based on an imagined map of the city that considered particular spaces as foreign and unsettled, necessitating the fabrication of social distance between themselves and these spaces (Hise 2004). As a result, Anglo newcomers were directed to the west side of the L.A. civic center, while ethnic newcomers to the city remained confined to areas such as Boyle Heights–that is, east of the L.A. River (Sanchez 2004). The persistence of racialization of Mexicans in the Los Angeles landscape situates the unique history of Boyle Heights.

Emerging in the late nineteenth century as one of the earliest white suburbs of Los Angeles, Boyle Heights' lack of racially restrictive housing covenants opened the neighborhood to immigrants during the early decades of the twentieth century. The resulting diversity of immigrants led Boyle Heights to be redlined and subsequently regarded as "a foreign colony" by local housing surveys during the early decades; by 1939 it was a "'melting pot' area . . . literally honeycombed with diverse and racial elements" that rendered it a "hazardous residential territory" to the Home Owners Loan Corporation ("Area Description" n.d.). Home to Italian, Japanese, African American, Jewish, and Mexican populations during the prewar period, Boyle Heights became a Mexican-majority *barrio* by the middle of the twentieth century (Sanchez 2004). Building on a legacy of activism in the neighborhood (Bernstein 2011), Boyle Heights became a bastion of the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles during the early 1970s. Such movements embraced an affirmative race consciousness that continues to influence contemporary political engagement on the eastside (Garcia Bedolla 2005). Finally, as a site of immigrant replenishment from Latin America during the last quarter of the twentieth century, Boyle Heights was ensured of remaining a racialized and foreign place within the dominant Anglo imaginary.

The post-1965 influx of Mexican immigration into Los Angeles was met with anti-immigrant sentiment which steadily fueled a "Latino threat" narrative during the 1970s and through the 1990s (Chavez 2013; Massey and Pren 2012). Although Latino newcomers to Los Angeles arrived in areas of the city previously inhabited by white residents (e.g., Santa Fe Springs, Norwalk), many continued to settle in established *barrios* (e.g., Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles) (Rocco 1996). The sheer volume of immigrants transformed the Los Angeles landscape and positioned Latinos to become the city's largest ethnic group, one which remains spatially contained. The hyper-segregation of Latinos, generally (Wilkes and Iceland 2004), and the increasing "racialized underclass" status of Mexicans Americans, specifically (Massey 2009), render *barrios* as important urban areas providing insight into the local process of racial formation, particularly as these places undergo racial and class transitions. The majority-minority status of Latinos in Los Angeles has highlighted the heterogeneity of Latinos and its largest subgroup, Mexicans.

While Latino, as well as Asian, immigrants were absorbed into expanding low-wage and low-skilled industries, the simultaneous growth in high-technology industries bifurcated the local political

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economy. As these two industries competed for downtown real estate, Mayor Tom Bradley dedicated a majority of his twenty-year tenure (1973–1992) to citywide urban restructuring, catering to high-wage, high-skilled workers (Soja 2014). Allocating public resources to downtown redevelopment rather than investing in working-class communities paved the way for the 1992 L.A. Uprising (Davis [1990] 2006). Ultimately, the redevelopment process initiated by Bradley not only placed Los Angeles among top global cities but also primed the city for gentrification processes like those prevailing in London and New York (Kahne 2018).

Although redevelopment has spilled into numerous neighborhoods surrounding downtown Los Angeles, Boyle Heights is widely viewed as a stronghold of anti-gentrification resistance, and, as a result, has garnered broad national and international media coverage. Debates regarding the boundaries of gentrification and questions of belonging offer fruitful theoretical ground to re-conceptualize the relationship between racial formation and neighborhood change.

FRAMEWORK

Gentrification is understood as the processes by which "central urban neighborhoods that have undergone disinvestments and economic decline experience a reversal, reinvestment, and the in-migration of a relatively well-off middle- and upper middle-class population" (Smith 1998:198). Definitions of the term have expanded to capture variations and scales of neighborhood change in cities across the globe (Atkinson and Bridge 2005; Lees, Shin, and Morales 2016). Indeed, as global capital has consolidated over the last quarter of the twentieth century, macroeconomic forces play an ever-larger role in advancing and shaping gentrification at the local scale (Hackworth and Smith 2001). Since the global downturn, for example, U.S. urban centers have experienced exacerbated economic inequality and increased exclusion of working-class residents from the wealth generated by booming urban economies—what Florida (2017) has described as "winner-take-all urbanism." Compounding disadvantages experienced by vulnerable urban populations are nationwide affordable housing shortages that keep rental housing and homeownership out of reach. Expanding views of gentrification as solely or primarily an economic force, microscale studies have explored street-scale approaches to reveal ways in which "everyday" cultural forces, such as neighborhood identity, branding, discourse, and local history shape neighborhood change (Brown-Saracino 2009; Zukin 1998). Although macro and micro approaches to studies of gentrification and widening urban inequality have increasingly noted the role of racial diversity in processes of neighborhood change (Hwang and Sampson 2014; Maloutas 2011), examining conceptualizations of race and racial hierarchies through critical theories of race builds on existing literature to reveal mechanisms that maintain racial inequality.

Considering the processes of gentrification, how can race scholars parse these dynamics to reveal the racialization of actors in neighborhood change? Gentrifiers have been portrayed as white, middle-class individuals driven to settle "frontiers" (Smith 1996)—often working-class, immigrant communities of color. Although gentrification occupies a prominent position within the popular imagination, its adverse connotation has contributed to gentrifiers' heightened self- awareness of their positions within gentrification processes, at times leading gentrifiers to decry neighborhood change, even as they advance it (Brown-Saracino 2009). In *Gentrifier*, Schlichtman, Patch, and Hill (2017) contend that gentrifiers' pathways to working-class communities are paved by repeated searches for low-cost housing and that they arrive in racially diverse communities by way of structural constraints in the urban housing supply. Building on examinations of gentrifiers and the reciprocal racialization they maintain with their communities, critical theories of race invite an analysis interrogating the role of whiteness as a racial identity and as a set of beliefs, values, and practices based on exclusion (Mills 1997). Centering whiteness provides an evaluation of white gentrifiers in relation to local racial hierarchies to understand how their racial position is rationalized and defended, as well as how people of color similarly uphold extant power relations.

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Locating gentrification in relation to a "racialized social system" (Bonilla-Silva 1997) foregrounds how whites articulate their racial identity in relation to local communities of color that, in Los Angeles, are largely Mexican-origin and immigrant. Previous scholarship has found white newcomers inhabit immigrant communities of color in ways that expand their political and cultural power in the community (Betancur 2011; Huse 2014; Tissot 2015), creating a "white habitus" (Burke 2012). Not limited to fears of physical displacement, longtime residents experiencing white-led gentrification also express concern over transformations of community fabric on which marginalized residents heavily rely—a process considered by gentrification scholars as part of displacement processes (Hydra 2017; Marcuse 1985). Modan's (2007) work in Washington, D.C., demonstrates how political and cultural transformation of the community was achieved, in part, through white gentrifiers' efforts to "other" practices normalized by long-term residents of color— a strategy utilized by gentrifiers to gain power through moral legitimacy. In doing so, gentrifiers positioned themselves to speak for marginalized residents and, subsequently, advance policies that benefit newcomers' views in contrast to those held by long-term communities of color. Rather than isolated cases, critical theories of race bridge the ways whiteness in gentrification is utilized in relation to existing race-neutral land use policies in urban cities (Saito 2009, Saito 2018) and prevailing laissez-faire racism ideology (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997) in ways that ultimately maintain a "possessive investment in whiteness" (Lipsitz 1998). The subsequent material advantages that, in Los Angeles, render the median net worth of the average white household 100 times that of their Mexican and African American counterparts (De La Cruz-Viesca et al. 2016) underscore the inequalities defended in sustaining the local status quo.

The shift of resources away from vulnerable groups is not limited to white gentrifiers as literature has continued to understand the role of people of color in advancing, unwittingly or not, neighborhood change. Previous scholarship examining African American neighborhoods (Boyd 2008; Freeman 2006; Hydra 2008 and 2017; Pattillo 2007; Taylor 2002) and Latino communities (Betancur 2011; Dávila 2004; Perez 2004; Wherry 2011) illustrate the ongoing tensions at the intersection of upward social mobility for people of color and dominant group interests. Historically, middle-class Mexicans have organized to locate themselves on the white-side of the black/white binary in the United States (Foley 1998), a strategy that persisted in the postwar period for accessing white coded resources (Delgado 2016; González 2017), even as racialization of Mexicans and, Mexican immigrants, endures (Feagin and Cobas 2015; Ortiz and Telles 2017; Pulido and Pastor 2013). Including Latino social mobility literature in gentrification analyses provides insight into the ways middle-class Latinos advance gentrification and are racialized as proximate to whites (even if temporarily).

METHODS

This qualitative study draws from in-depth, semi-structured interviews and ethnographic fieldwork collected over a five-year period in Boyle Heights. I interviewed 20 leaders of anti-gentrification organizations, tenants' rights activists, local business owners, and residents prominent in local gentrification debates and discussions. Through the course of volunteering with organizations such as artist coalitions and tenants' rights groups, I developed relationships with anti-gentrification activists and utilized snowball sampling to recruit respondents. Respondents were asked about their perspectives and experiences regarding changes in the *barrio* and how they viewed changes impacting their lives. Interviews lasted one to two hours, and then were transcribed and coded inductively, based on emerging themes about the ways respondents understood gentrification, gentrifiers, and their relation to these dynamics. While all individuals I interviewed took an anti-gentrification stance and were against the displacement of existing *barrio* residents, practices viewed as advancing gentrification and displacement by some respondents were viewed as innocuous by others. While the question of who is and who isn't a gentrifier was a site of contestation, it nevertheless remained an important boundary which local residents and artists sought to define.

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Following numerous public local organizations on social media, such as *All Roads Lead to Boyle Heights*, allowed me to analyze social media posts related to discussions of gentrification or anti-gentrification directly related to Boyle Heights. Often, these individuals and collectives I located on posts were also those I observed or engaged with during my fieldwork. Newspaper coverage of anti-gentrification protests or art gallery launches in Boyle Heights, for example, advanced conversations in social media outlets (primarily Facebook and Instagram). Indeed, local and national media coverage of gentrification in the *barrio*, such as various news reports, resulted in protracted discussions among community members on social media platforms that were less frequent in the field. Subsequent discussions and debates online permitted a complementary approach (Small 2011) to interviews and fieldwork, providing a virtual extension to my field site. Scholars have noted that digital ethnography remains a burgeoning and essential way for social scientists to observe social interactions taking place alongside the physical world (Baker 2013; Murthy 2008). For this paper, I use comments directly related to definitions of gentrification or *gente*-fication typically referencing a gentrification-related news story. Together, these methods allowed me to develop a more rounded assessment of how gentrification is racialized and how this process is (or is not) perceived to generate racialized outcomes and reconstruct racial identities.

Gentrification as Whiteness

Bridging critical racial theories and gentrification necessitates including the role of white residents into analyses of racial processes, adding an important dimension to their role beyond the enduring trope of the white hipster as the archetypal gentrifier. The majority-minority context of Boyle Heights, and Los Angeles broadly, often minimizes the powerful social location white actors maintain in these racially diverse places. For example, while racially diverse places are seen as a portent of declining racial inequality (Frey 2015), majority-minority places such as Los Angeles remain increasingly unequal with white residents in a disproportionately advantaged position (De La Cruz-Viesca et al. 2016). Towards situating the social location of white actors, this section explores how this group rationalizes their role in gentrification in a majority-minority neighborhood. The findings in this section suggest that whites not only reproduce solidarity grounded in whiteness, but also establish group status favoring Latinos viewed as amicable towards gentrification and "othering" Latinos taking explicit anti-gentrification positions. Rather than demonstrating simply benign, mundane stories of whites' interactions with *barrio* residents, I show how gentrification-related events and discussions are dominated by ideologies of color-blind racism and reveal the ways white actors reproduce whiteness and gentrification to maintain material benefits (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2009).

In May 2014, pictures of a real estate flyer circulated by Boyle Heights organizations, business owners, and residents alike made its way to the top of many social media newsfeeds. Crystalizing fears of displacement in large, bold, red letters, the flyer asked, "Why rent in Downtown when you can own in Boyle Heights?" Offering a bike ride through the neighborhood to showcase its historic housing stock, the real estate agent sought to creatively recruit potential home buyers from downtown. With phrases such as "2 seconds from the [downtown] arts district," "Charming, historic, walkable, and bikeable neighborhood," "Put as little as $40k with decent credit," "Artisan treats and refreshments provided" spotting the flyer, local residents read this flyer as an invitation to white middle-class residents to purchase a home in the working-class *barrio* and gentrify the neighborhood.

Latino, anti-gentrification activists responded by rewriting the question of the flyer to read "Why rent in Boyle Heights when you could gentrify another working-class neighborhood?" In addition, this modified version encouraged locals to attend the advertised bike ride to protest what they viewed as an unwelcome pro-gentrification effort into the *barrio* (Sulaiman 2014). Despite the real estate agent's later explaining that she hadn't aimed to "racially profile" clients, the flyer was interpreted as catering to white residents in downtown (Romero 2014).

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The flyer, then, evoked the contentious history and racialized geography between Boyle Heights and downtown. Los Angeles' downtown redevelopment is racialized by local Mexican residents, as a white, exclusionary space. As development expands, it threatens, through gentrification, to expand this whiteness into the predominantly Mexican community. In barrios such as Boyle Heights, memories of state-led urban renewal that targeted working-class *barrios* are maintained in the local imaginary (Huante 2018). While scholars have illustrated how race-neutral redevelopment re-centers whiteness (Saito 2009), *barrios* have maintained a race-explicit view and critique of state-led development.

After generating a strong response from Boyle Heights residents, the bike tour was promptly cancelled, and an apology was issued by the realtor on a public Boyle Heights Facebook page:

> I see now that [the flyer] has unintentionally struck a very sensitive nerve in the Boyle Heights community. I sincerely apologize if I've offended anyone. People need to realize that Boyle Heights is inevitably going to change due to [its] proximity to Downtown and regardless of my little flyer. It's a true gem of a neighborhood with beautiful properties many of which are left severely unmaintained and/ or vacant. What is wrong with helping good, socially conscious folks purchase these properties, restore them, live in them, and rent them? Would you rather the neighborhood get bought out by large developers that will tear down old homes and build hideous apartment buildings in their place?
>
> Boyle Heights doesn't have to be the next Silver Lake, Echo Park, or Downtown. It's time to create a NEW MODEL FOR GENTRIFICATION. One that has positive connotations for a change! A change that benefits the long-term residents, boosts existing small local business, but also welcomes the newcomers.
>
> This all starts with community involvement. More people need to come to neighborhood council meetings and actually get involved in this conversation. We can collectively come up with creative ways to use this new influx of money and people to create a new social model. (Haffar 2014)

Couching her argument in meritocracy of "helping good, socially conscious folks purchase [unmaintained and/ or vacant] properties, restore them, live in them, and rent them" the realtor positioned herself to defend the role of realtors in maintaining the existing racial inequality produced by gentrification. Here, dismissing the historic disinvestment that produced and maintained a deteriorating housing stock as well as the impact of the housing crisis on *barrio* communities (Tumpson Molina 2016) allows the realtor to reposition herself and her clients' role in supporting existing inequality. By contrasting her role to that of corporations, she intentionally assuages any remaining doubts regarding her role in gentrification by producing an image of a smaller scale, friendlier form of neighborhood change.

The racial imaginary is most salient in the way the statement contrasts Boyle Heights to other places including Silver Lake, Echo Park, and downtown, all of which are considered gentrified predominantly by whites. The realtor encourages a "new model" of gentrification that will benefit exiting business owners and newcomers, yet, leaves local residents' concerns about displacement and rising rents unaddressed. Again, the role of ahistoricism is evident in the last paragraph, which frames local residents as politically apathetic when, in reality, the *barrio* has remained one of the more politically active places in Los Angeles.

The flyer, its response, and the subsequent apology help illustrate the way racial imaginaries are constituted and negotiated often without mentioning race or racism. Examining the apology in its entirety captures the way it is rescinded with each paragraph and simultaneously "blames the victim." Overall, the statement absolves the realtor of her role in advancing gentrification as well as the systemic racism contributing to the loss of affordable housing for the most vulnerable and powerless groups in the *barrio*. Absent the consideration of these factors, the apology conveys a sense of false

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empathy—that is, a superficial effort by whites to sense the challenges of people of color while remaining "grounded in white experience" (Delgado 1996:71). The resulting social distance is rationalized and perpetuated by maintaining power relations and material gains away from people and communities of color, particularly those *barrio* residents' views which don't align with hers on the inevitability of gentrification.

In contrast to criticism from Latino anti-gentrification activists, the flyer received support from local white homeowners. For some white residents the controversy surrounding the flyer elicited a racialized sense of solidarity with the white realtor and her white boss. One white homeowner of Boyle Heights, for example, shared the following response to the realtor:

> I wanted to email you and say I'm sorry you had such a negative run in with some people in the community of Boyle Heights. It sounds like you tangled with a small but vocal minority who are angry and scared about diversity and change coming to the neighborhood . . . I wanted to encourage you not to give up on the neighborhood. . . . My husband and I are white . . . . When we bought our place we decided on Boyle Heights partly because it was the only neighborhood in L.A. [where] we could afford a decent house at the time and also because we were familiar with and like the area . . . . Our neighbors have told us many times that they are happy that a "nice young family" moved into our place and then they proceed to tell us all the history of the area. (Correspondence on file with the author)

Offering this personal narrative to the realtor reveals how whites respond to each other in ways that rationalize their positionality and minimize the concerns of existing residents. Bonilla-Silva (2010) argues such testimonies provide rhetorical functions to support the racial status quo by eliding critical examinations of their own racial status. While the author of the letter self-identifies as white, the lack of critical examination of their racial status within the *barrio* suggests their whiteness is understood only as a benign identity. In this way, the correspondence can be viewed as mobilizing a situational sense of groupness which emerges, in this case, when whiteness becomes visible and distinctly associated with privilege in the context of gentrification. As Lewis (2004) reminds us, despite whites' heterogeneity, they constitute a social group which seeks to maintain their social position grounded in a defense of material advantages. Such a defense, as mentioned previously, is predicated on a market-based rationalization of racial inequities (Bobo et al. 1997).

Additionally, by characterizing Latino residents who critique gentrification as "a small but vocal minority who are angry and scared about diversity and change coming to the neighborhood" the author dismisses this group and renders them part of the collective black stratum. Indeed, for the author, these anti-gentrification residents are not only a "vocal minority," "angry and scared" but, as the subject line refers to them, also "horrible." In contrast, Latino neighbors who do not view their whiteness in the *barrio* as problematic are taken to be honorary whites—explicitly differentiating between "good" Mexican residents and "bad" Mexican residents. This form of distinguishing follows the prediction of Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich (2009) that whites will seek to discern between members of the collective black and honorary whites in a tri-racial order and, in addition, will consider the latter in a more favorable manner. Finally, the white homeowner's response interprets the overall anti-gentrification activism as a form of racism that renders "whites as victims" (Doane 2006), while, simultaneously, fostering a form of "white racial bonding" (Sleeter 1994) that affirms their group positionality and normalizes ongoing racial inequality.

Together, the sequence of events initiated by a real estate flyer illustrates how white actors not only remain central to debates and conversations about gentrification in majority-minority communities but also the way white actors view themselves as removed from, rather than advancing, racial inequality. Ignoring or denying racial inequality as well as differentially racializing Mexican residents in

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ways that support whites' presence in the *barrio* are insights into the ways white actors in the *barrio* maintain their dominant group status.

The Competing Conceptualizations of Gente*-fication*

While white-led gentrification is viewed as the primary threat to the *barrio*, *gente*-fication is viewed as the community's opportunity to curb potential displacement. *Gente*-fication is understood in two contradictory ways. The first describes the return of Latino residents to the *barrio* to invest in local businesses and real-estate towards providing economic and racial uplift for all residents. The second definition, in contrast, views *gente*-fication as primarily concerned with protecting the most vulnerable community residents—a position which, simultaneously, considers investment by middle-class Latinos as part of the larger threat of gentrification and displacement. In this section, I explore both interpretations of *gente*-fication to reveal the ways Latinos racialize each other to place one group of Latinos in a "honorary white" position in the racial hierarchy while placing another group in the "collective black" stratum. In Los Angeles, discussions and debates regarding gentrification become discursive vehicles in which social distance is widened between upwardly mobile Mexican Americans and working-class, immigrant co-ethnics. The resulting social distance is compounded by distance established by whites as examined in the previous section. As a form of Latino-led gentrification, *gente*-fication is part of the racialization processes of Mexican Americans in the *barrio* and their location within the ternary racial hierarchy.

Gente*-fication as Economic and Racial Uplift*

Gente-fication is primarily understood as economic and racial uplift and, simultaneously, an alternative to white-led gentrification. Here, economic investment in the *barrio* by ostensibly culturally sensitive Latinos is perceived as less threatening, as it suggests a slower, kinder gentrification process. For example, one local business owner, believed "'it would be best if the *gente* decide to invest in improvements because [*gente*] are more likely to preserve its integrity'" (Herbst 2014). Such preservation of Boyle Heights' "integrity" involved envisioning that the area remains "owned predominantly by Latinos" (Herbst 2014). In this view, choosing to return to the *barrio* involves re-imagining the *barrio* itself. Collectively, then, upward mobility, class status, and spatiality are all invoked, explicitly or implicitly, in the racialization of *gente*-fication.

Moreover, this definition of *gente*-fication is recognized as a convergence between the back-to-the-city movement and the rise of a Mexican American middle-class. Rather than follow the traditional path into middle-class suburbs farther east into neighboring San Gabriel Valley, *gente*-fication in Boyle Heights capitalizes on the proximity to downtown— in doing so, Latino spatial mobility patterns established over the last half century are re-imagined. As one Latino business owner mentioned, "making it doesn't mean moving out [to the suburbs]" (Medina 2013). Proponents of *gente*-fication as a Latino entrepreneur-driven process prioritize free market ideology, meritocracy, and individualism to consider entrepreneurship as the primary pathway to curb threats from white-led gentrification. Latinos who subscribe to this definition of *gente*-fication not only view it as an alternative to white-led gentrification, but also an economic boon to all residents.

Within this context, those who view gentrification as having negative effects on vulnerable residents are considered not favoring progress and uplift. Such views were particularly brought to light in early 2014 after a popular Boyle Heights Facebook page shared an image of a white banner which had appeared overnight in front of a vacant storefront in the neighborhood. A spray painted message in red and black on the banner read "Boyle Heights Says No! To Gentrification." The image generated an extensive discussion on social media, with Latino residents and non-residents (identified in parentheses below) expressing their views on the significance (or lack thereof) of the banner's statement. One individual argued that "a banner is not going to do anything. We NEED to start buying up property. Investing into our community" (M. C. Catalán). In another comment, one prominent

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community organizer advised anti-gentrification protesters that "complaining about [gentrification] only gets you so far" and, instead, suggested they become "involved in [the] community and help existing residents and businesses empower themselves" (J. Garcia). Finally, D. Ortiz argued "It's all just a bunch of talk unless the people who live in Boyle Heights become real stakeholders and begin to invest in their own community. By invest, I mean owning their own homes or starting up a business."

Nevertheless, with about a quarter of the neighborhood owning their homes, the overwhelming majority of renters experience barriers to homeownership—indeed, three quarters of the neighborhood has been rental housing since the 1960s ("Boyle Heights Community" 1970). Yet, abstract liberalism elides a structural analysis by pitting the threats of displacement on working-class residents themselves, at least half of whom, in Boyle Heights, are immigrants. Collectively, these responses illustrate how entrepreneurship and homeownership are viewed as the primary pathway to curb gentrification. Responses to the banner's message reflect common reactions to anti-gentrification activists in the *barrio* and reveal the values of economic and racial uplift reinforced by *gente*-fication—specifically, values such as the free market, individualism, and meritocracy. Additionally, the constellation of values, while not explicitly labeled *gente*-fication, are nonetheless embedded in this broad conceptualization. As a response to white-led gentrification and to *barrio* anti-gentrification activists, *gente*-fication fosters social distance among Latinos. This growing chasm is evident not only in comments on social media but is similarly displayed in newspaper coverage of gentrification in the *barrio*, reflecting views that affirm dominant values, while, simultaneously, admonishing anti-gentrification protesters.

Disproportionately covered by Latino journalists, newspaper coverage of gentrification and related protests in Boyle Heights has the effect of creating and exacerbating social distance among Latinos in the *barrio*. In the remainder of this section I will illustrate how newspaper coverage by the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* advance a laissez faire racism ideology. For example, after protesters targeted a white-owned coffee shop as yet another example of changes in the community provoking displacement, newspaper coverage minimized resident concerns and centralized Latino residents and businesses who disapproved of protests. One such local Latino business owner argued the coffee shop "[has] a right to run a business" and that protesters were misguided, particularly because they were free to "buy cheap coffee or expensive coffee" (Vives 2017). Another Latino business owner added "I understand forced displacement, but I definitely welcome [the coffee] shop. This is not some big corporation entering. This is really mom and pop" (Do 2017). Views of free market principles were contrasted with descriptions of anti-gentrification protesters as "ill-informed," "inappropriate," and "militant" (Vives 2017). One journalist went so far as to call activists "hypocrites," "cowards," and "silly" (Lopez 2017). Anti-gentrification protestors seeking to underscore the ways white-owned art galleries (Medina 2016) and coffee shops participated in systemic racism and white supremacy were minimized. Instead, these structural critiques of gentrification were identified, by the *Times* editorial board, for example, as participating in "reverse racism" and "[hurting] their [anti-gentrification] cause by making it about race, rather than economics" (*Los Angeles Times* 2017). Newspaper coverage of gentrification in Boyle Heights, collectively, serves to amplify values of free market competition, meritocracy, and individualism which converge to rationalize ongoing racial inequality—a process consistent with laissez faire ideology (Bobo et al. 1997). Moreover, by minimizing claims made by anti-gentrification protesters and casting them as misguided newspaper coverage implicitly mobilized racial stereotypes advanced by prominent institutions over the last fifty years to deem the *barrio* and its residents as undeserving and often dangerous. Relatedly, newspaper coverage of gentrification in Boyle Heights defined the boundaries of gentrification discourse by limiting racism to individual prejudice and rejecting structural analysis of racism and, by extension, considered illegitimate those Latinos skeptical of *gente*-fication's potential for economic and racial uplift.

Among the cumulative impacts of discussions and views on the racial and economic boost of *gente*-fication is the association to middle-class Mexican Americans' standing and status. Although

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middle-class status is neither the primary nor singular factor in the racialization of Mexican Americans as "honorary white," it nonetheless serves as a racial fault line to distinguish from Latinos included as part of the "collective black." In addition to the upward mobility implied in *gente*-fication, its endorsement by prominent, Latino journalists reinforces its link to middle-class status and, ultimately, "honorary whiteness." As a result, middle-class status meaningfully informs how *gente*-fication is legitimated or contested by various community stakeholders.

As indicated earlier, the social mechanisms discussed build up to a ternary racial hierarchy. These mechanisms are evident in the social distancing between "honorary white" Latinos who, in this case, rationalize racial inequality in the context of a free market and ostensible racial uplift, and Latinos who view gentrification as structural racism, placing them in the collective black stratum. Latino journalists here, then, are understood as institutional actors, part of "*gente*-fication as racial and economic progress" at the expense of immigrant and working-class individuals protesting structural racism represented by gentrification. Doing so underscores processes of a ternary racial hierarchy where the fluidity of whiteness permits a select group of Latinos to retain extant power relations in a majority-minority context. The result is a distancing along gentrification and anti-gentrification lines, where the former is aligned with white hegemony.

Gente-*fication as Working-class Solidarity*

In contrast to *gente*-fication as racial and economic uplift, the second definition of *gente*-fication relates primarily to working-class solidarity. Anti-gentrification activism grounded in this notion of *gente*-fication targets conventional white gentrifiers as well as middle-class Latinos. This solidarity is motivated by distrust towards responses to gentrification that support hegemonic whiteness. As a result, this definition is oppositional to economic and racial uplift *gente*-fication. In this way, ethnic entrepreneurship is not viewed as the purveyor of *barrio*-wide protection against cultural and political displacement and therefore unsupported. Instead, racial and economic advancement is accomplished through social activism and, particularly, by securing inexpensive housing for economically vulnerable immigrants to prevent displacement. *Gente*-fication as working-class solidarity reveals the ways anti-gentrification activists, conventionally considered social pariahs, participate in racialization processes by identifying themselves as part of the "collective black" and in opposition to Latinos they view as white-like or "honorary white."

Proponents of *gente*-fication as working-class solidarity utilize social activism to advocate for renters' rights as well as a means to curb the rise of businesses perceived as advancing gentrification and displacement. Bringing structural interpretations to the forefront of gentrification discussions centralizes immigrant and working-class Mexicans otherwise overlooked in conventional assessments of benefits and losses resulting from neighborhood change. In contrast to the perception of gentrification as largely an economic force, proponents of *gente*-fication as working-class solidarity regard economic-based rationalizations as extensions of displacement historically experienced in the *barrio*. For instance, one local anti-gentrification activist told a reporter that activists "think of gentrification as displacement and white supremacy" (Medina 2016). These structural critiques are also evident in the boycott against the white-owned coffee shop in Boyle Heights. Here, activists fashioned signs which read "No I.C.E. Coffee," "White AmeriKKKanos To Go," and "No COPpuccinos." In doing so, activists connected the neighborhood rise in policing and immigration enforcement to the rise in white-owned coffee shops—a relationship predicated on the removal or displacement of longtime working-class residents. That is, for protesters, white business owners represent symptoms of larger structural processes that repeatedly result in the displacement of vulnerable residents.

Challenging conventional interpretations of gentrification and *gente*-fication reveals how anti-gentrification activists and social movements respond to contexts seeking to minimize, at best, erase at worst, their perspectives. Most noteworthy are the ways anti-gentrification activists engage in the racialization of Latinos as "white" for their middle-class aspirations, their support for gentrification, or

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perceived actions against the interests of working-class immigrants. In many ways, such racialization parallels the racialization of whites who distinguish between Mexican origin groups supportive of gentrification from those opposed. As such, this top to bottom approach is complemented by anti-gentrification activists' bottom up racialization that highlights the social distance practiced by "honorary white" Latinos, using it to legitimize their own position.

Carolina, a Boyle Heights resident and Mexican immigrant, questioned what she saw as uncritical support for *gente*-fication in discussions of gentrification of the *barrio*. She explains:

> Now that we call [gentrification] *gente*-fication and some people decided [*gente*-fication] was a good thing, they're comfortable with that. We don't think about the ways that we ourselves are implicated in the process of displacement. *Gente*-fication, to me, seems like it is a little more about assimilating into these ideas of 'we need progress'. . . *Gente*-fication, progress, and social mobility in the name of what? Sacrificing what? I feel Latinos are implicated in the process of displacement because Latinos have money too.[2]

A recent college graduate, Carolina's college education would place her in middle-class standing; however, her critique of *gente*-fication and concern over Latinos' participation in displacement suggests a more nuanced interpretation. Rather than implicitly accepting displacement facilitated by middle-class Latinos, Carolina questions the underlying notions of "progress and social mobility." For her, *gente*-fication, despite claims of community-oriented entrepreneurship, indicates a breakaway from working-class and immigrant solidarity. As an immigrant herself, Carolina expresses her concern for the displacement of immigrants not necessarily seen as socially mobile or middle-class. Her skepticism towards middle-class co-ethnics and potential threats to working-class solidarity is not limited to *gente*-fication and questions implicating Mexican American and Chicano identity at a broader scale.

Gente-fication as an indicator of Latino and especially Mexican Americans' arrival in the middle-class is particularly contentious in Boyle Heights. The *barrio's* progressive political consciousness coupled with its local geography (Acuña 2007; Garcia Bedolla 2005) cast the influx of middle-class co-ethnics as a kind of betrayal. After the postwar economic growth and civil rights legislation bestowed entry to the middle-class on some Mexican Americans, Roman's (2013) argues, class ascension generated significant tension in working-class communities who did not benefit from similar social mobility. Speaking to the class status panic in Chicano cultural production, Roman's (2013) analysis is relevant to understanding the tensions in response to *gente*-fication. According to Roman, class ascension in the Chicano imaginary is considered cultural and class betrayal. This "double betrayal" is rooted in three related parts: the negative association between middle-class status and whiteness, an idealization of Chicano community as a working-class family, and the homogenization of Mexicans in the marketplace (Roman 2013:17). These factors are helpful in comprehending how community members view and respond to *gente*-fication, often raising similar concerns.

Longtime organizations are not exempt from similar criticism by community members seeking to stop gentrification. During one recent protest directed at a historic and Chicano art organization, Self Help Graphics, one local anti-gentrification coalition named "Defend Boyle Heights" held banners that read "El *Barrio* No Se Vende" ("the *barrio* is not for sale"), this consideration of cultural betrayal helps reveal the sign's double meaning—"the *barrio* will not be sold out." Similar to Roman's assertion that "someone who expresses cultural differences in pursuit of financial or social capital is often perceived as someone who is leaving the ethnic group" (2013:18), the actions by local organizations are scrutinized to differentiate those who are authentic Chicanos or residents of Boyle Heights. Even those who operate businesses in the *barrio* are considered suspicious. For Carolina, the business owner who coined *gente*-fication "talks about brown people coming back to the community but he doesn't live in the community. His greatest contribution has been a bar that has a dress code!"

2 Interview with author. August 2016, Los Angeles, CA.

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Pointing to what she considers as hypocrisy in conventional notions of *gente*-fication, Carolina notes that the local bar owner's residence in the nearby suburbs, the limited local benefits of a bar, and the business' dress code work together to cast the bar and the owner as inauthentic and socially distant from the relevant needs of the working-class community; in the view of anti-gentrification activists this places the bar and its owner as part of the "honorary white" stratum—however, contingent the status.

Interrogating the role and status of the middle-class in *gente*-fication reveals how Mexican *barrio* residents are prompted to gauge the social distance between themselves and co-ethnics located in more privileged positions within the racial hierarchy. Supporters of the *barrio* community and culture through *gente*-fication simultaneously disavow immigrant and working-class struggles by, often, blaming the latter for their own oppression. Exercising agency, these Latino residents' perspectives are aligned with whiteness and are placed in the "honorary white" level of the tri-racial hierarchy. In addition, whites and the collective black, such as working-class Latinos, also work together in placing Latinos in the "honorary white" stratum. For example, a couple of Mexican immigrant day laborers, commenting on the patrons of a local bar, considered the quintessential symbol of *gente*-fication for its dress code and cover charge, declare, "They're not Mexican," while another added that they resemble "*güeros*" or whites (Mejia 2015). Other Boyle Heights residents emphasize a working-class solidarity and question uncritical support of *gente*-fication as racial and economic progress. As Leonardo, anti-gentrification activist and longtime resident, stated "*Gente*-fication, has a negative effect on the older, immigrant generation that came from Mexico and have Mexican-ized Boyle Heights. . . . So when we talk about *gente*-fication, who is the *gente*? How is that *gente* coming together? How are they addressing the negative impact of gentrification?"[3] His questions highlight the class tensions in *gente*-fication, while also seeking to expand *gente*-fication to include working-class immigrants vulnerable to displacement. Interestingly, these questions about *gente*-fication occur alongside discussions regarding white residents and their role in gentrification, illustrating nuanced discussions seeking to meaningfully curb gentrification.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although gentrification scholars have identified economic forces as the primary driver of the process and others have posited the intersection of race and class, this study makes the case for the primacy of race. I argue that, understood as a racial project, gentrification is involved in race-making as well as place-making. Discussions and debates surrounding gentrification in the Boyle Heights *barrio* reveal the ways racial categories are constituted in relation to neighborhood change. The racialization of white gentrifiers, Latino residents who view *gente*-fication as economic and racial uplift, and Latinos positing a *gente*-fication grounded in working-class solidarity, has constructed a racial hierarchy reminiscent of a tri-racial hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2009). This new racial hierarchy in the *barrio* is rationalized through competing ideologies (including colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2010), laissez-faire racism (Bobo et al. 1997), and diversity Ideology (Mayorga-Gallo 2019), which cumulatively protect whites' dominant position and, simultaneously, advance gentrification.

This paper has illustrated the dominant role of white actors and the centrality of whiteness in gentrification even in places where racial diversity is prevalent and minority-led gentrification processes are viewed as prominent. Findings here expand gentrification scholarship on white newcomers' self-awareness as gentrifiers (Brown-Saracino 2009; Schlichtman et al. 2017) by revealing how white actors form group solidarity when confronted with their role in gentrification of the *barrio* and do so, in part, by racializing residents of color in differential ways to support white gentrifiers' position in the neighborhood. As Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich (2009) argue, maintaining white dominance amidst rising racial diversity will encourage whites to distinguish between people of color and to favor those who do not challenge their dominant position and status. Moreover, these findings supplement

3 Interview with author. August 2016. Los Angeles, CA.

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scholarship documenting the disproportionate power wielded by white newcomers in immigrant communities generally (Betancur 2011; Huse 2014; Tissot 2015) and in ascending Latino neighborhoods, specifically (Owens and Candipan 2018).

While *barrio* residents view *gente*-fication as an alternative to white-led gentrification, two contrasting definitions of the term prevail. Examining the competing interpretations of *gente*-fication constitutes the two additional findings of the paper. In its conventional formulation, *gente*-fication is understood as the return of Latinos to the *barrio* to invest in the neighborhood—resulting in the economic and racial uplift of all community residents. This interpretation of *gente*-fication is advanced by local business owners and newspaper media coverage, increasing social distance between middle-class and working-class Latinos while elevating economic investment over solidarity in the neighborhood. Previous research has documented the ways macro-narratives across various institutions represent the upward mobility or middle-class standing of Latinos as more whitewashed, and therefore a more consumable, minority culture (Dávila 2008). *Gente*-fication in this context, then, complements similar macro-scale narratives which depict Latino middle-class as assimilating into whiteness. This framing of Latino class-based ascent legitimizes the desirability of the *barrio* in the urban imaginary, even as racialization persists for Mexican Americans— often hindering full incorporation to mainstream middle-class America. This definition of *gente*-fication legitimizes extant land uses as well as business and real estate practices that disproportionately cater to middle-class sensibilities of Latino and white residents and consumers while, simultaneously, racializing anti-gentrification working-class residents in the *barrio* as Other.

As narratives of *gente*-fication are increasingly utilized to describe Latino neighborhoods experiencing gentrification, the social distance between middle-class and working-class Mexican Americans will become increasingly relevant. Research has demonstrated that middle-class Latinos in the United States continue to face racism despite attempts to assimilate, while others have identified an internalization of dominant racial ideologies that enables them to enforce practices to secure whites' dominant position in the racial social structure. Delgado (2016) contends that more than simply internalizing U.S. racial norms, middle-class Mexican Americans' social distance from other Latinos reflects a strategy employed by this group to navigate the fluid racial hierarchy they experience in daily life, to gain access to white-coded resources and to deflect racialization—an aggregate result that continues to place middle-class status as distinct and part of "honorary whiteness" (p. 687).

Finally, anti-gentrification movements which have garnered national media attention view *gente*-fication as a process of working-class, immigrant solidarity among residents. Drawing from social movement history entrenched in the *barrio*, anti-gentrification activists view working-class, immigrant solidarity as the primary goal of their activism. Pointing to rising rents and evictions as well as to the heightened presence of immigration enforcement, residents and activists subscribing to this view of *gente*-fication view the amelioration of these conditions for Latino residents as impetus for resisting gentrification. In this view, then, middle-class Latinos viewed as advancing gentrification in the *barrio* are considered by anti-gentrification activists as being white. Such processes highlight the historic and contemporary tension between whiteness and Latino identity, generally, and Mexican identity (Gomez 2007; Haney Lopez 2003). The critique of Latino whiteness and structural racism formed a central part of Latino anti-gentrification activists' response to pro-gentrification narratives. Moreover, the ways that local Latino activists and residents mobilized support through competing, racialized definitions of gentrification provide insight into resistance to gentrification in minority communities—an underdeveloped dimension of gentrification research (Brown-Saracino 2016).

Rising racial diversity and expansive inequality in cities will require more nuanced conceptualizations of race and racism to better assess the ways gentrification reproduces racial inequality. Targeted universalism (powell 2010) is one approach to policymaking which acknowledges the legacy of racism and its contemporary iterations. From this premise, targeted universalism appeals to broadest social justice goals while being particularly responsive to marginalized groups. By attending to the unique location of oppressed groups within a racialized social system, targeted universalism offers

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public, private, and non-profit actors the opportunity to set policy goals and modify those goals to attain best outcomes. Here, policy goals seeking to achieve affordable housing, for example, might target the high rent burdens disproportionately experienced by immigrant and Latino populations. Absent similar race-explicit strategies, gentrification is likely to outpace policies and practices seeking to ameliorate its negative effects.

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