Zones of Dispossession: Explaining Black Politics During Oakland's Gentrification
By Saran Uthayakumar, University of Southern California
Faculty Reviewer: Christian Dyogi Phillips, University of Southern California

Abstract:

The theories of spatiotemporal dispossession have proposed a mechanism for how capital can flow out of areas that become 'dispossessed' and concentrate capital in areas of accumulation that are defined as gentrified or beautified (Harvey 2005, 2010, 2018). Yet, in this explanation of gentrification, urban studies and urban geography have not bridged the gap between gentrification and implications for racialized politics in the United States. In this paper, I address this gap by asking: how does a racialized group become embedded in 'devaluation' in relation to 'capital accumulation by dispossession'? To empirically understand this question, I conduct a political development analysis of Black politics situated in Oakland's gentrification and historically trace the process of gentrification as it pertains to Black politics in the city. I connect this trajectory to Harvey's theory of dispossession. Lastly, I find that the process of gentrification in Oakland has not only displaced communities that have historically been Black but has devalued Black life itself. Through historical process tracing, I find that the main processes that factored into Oakland's dispossession are white anxieties over symbolic Black politics and reactionary attitudes to urban blight. Despite current accounts of gentrification in Oakland, I find that these patterns are not more recent and related to the dot.com boom and instead, are part of a longer embedded process of racialized devaluation that has been overlooked in the urban politics and race, ethnicity, and politics literature.

Oakland has been experiencing a phenomenon of rapid gentrification with rising rent costs that have pushed out the historic residents of the city, in favor of new workers (commonly referred to as "young urban professionals or yuppies") and tenants who can afford the city's skyrocketing rents (Rowen 2019). Black residents were a majority once in Oakland, with their demographic makeup being as high as 47 percent in the 1970-80 census (US Census Bureau 1980). Today, that population remains at 22 percent which is evidence of a wider phenomenon known as 'Black flight' from the city. The fields of Political Science, Economics and Urban studies have all approached gentrification and 'Black flight' in Oakland in their own ways (Brahinsky 2013, Frey 2004, Lens 2011, Watts-Smith 2019, Zuk 2018, Zukin 1987). As someone who lived not far from Oakland in Berkeley, the puzzle I was perplexed by was how did capital flow out of Oakland's Black neighborhoods into gentrified hubs made for tech

workers, reduce the substantial Black population in Oakland, and render the city itself a 'zone of dispossession' (Harvey 2018).

In this paper, I conduct a study based on the following research questions: *How did Black Oakland residents become targets of 'devaluation' in Oakland's gentrification process? How does a racialized group become embedded in 'devaluation' in relation to 'capital accumulation by dispossession'?* To answer these two questions, I begin with unpacking the effects of dispossession from a neo-Marxist theoretical framework by David Harvey to understand the mechanisms of dispossession in a localized geography. Next, I conduct a process tracing of dispossession (from gentrification) in a specific case city: Oakland, California, which I supplement with a political development study. I then revisit a theoretical understanding of 'gentrification' and expand its potential applications to urban and political geography, REP, and symbolic politics. Finally, I reconnect the process-tracing in this paper to Harvey's theoretical framework that I draw from the most: *spatiotemporal fixes* and *dispossession* of communities.

Rather than gentrification being a material process, I argue that it is inherently a *racialized* process in the context of urban centers such as Oakland in which Black life itself has become devalued. Future areas of research that this paper raises include exploring additional questions about how gentrification operates to actively dispossess marginalized groups within cities and ultimately, helps bridge the conceptual gap between class and race-based explanations for urban gentrification in the United States. Finally, I illustrate the broader implications this study has to political science including how gentrification ties into local and racial politics in the United States. Notably gentrification does not just affect Oakland, and Black flight has accompanied many urban settings as Watts-Smith (2019) points out: "the South is now the only region that has a net in-migration of Black Americans."

This paper serves as an empirical illustration of a mechanism in urban gentrification theory. Such theory is crucial to the race, ethnicity, and politics (REP) subfield as I argue that gentrification is inherently racialized in the context of Oakland. While this argument is not unique (Watts-Smith, Greer 2018, McElroy and Werth 2019), what has yet to be determined in the urban politics literature is how said dispossession of capital often displaces power in centralized, urbanized hubs like Oakland. Thus, shedding light on how power is dispossessed through the process of gentrification, enriching existing work on minority politics and gentrification in America (Patillo 2007, Newman et al. 2016). In REP, the application of gentrification studies to the relative power of racial and ethnic groups as understood through the lens of racial formation (Omi, Winant 1986, Bonilla-Silva 1999), further pronounces the effect of capitalism on socially formed, racialized minority populations. This paper will mainly focus on gentrification as it affects Black Americans in Oakland to provide an in-depth analysis of how a mechanism drives gentrification and dispossesses power.

Theory and Literature Review

The effects of gentrification have been studied previously in REP literature (Casellas and McBrayer 2018, Fallon 2020). Racial and class-based segregation in cities like New York and Detroit have also been studied with micro-level approaches in scholarship (Farley et al. 1978, Logan et al. 2017). Finally, African American studies have emphasized the role of gentrification as being a form of White majoritarian displacement rather than a move of higher-income Black residents into lower-income areas (Taylor 1992, Martin 2016, Moore 2009).

These studies have helped fill a gap on the relation of race to gentrification and descriptive representation but can be furthered by examining the intersection between capital

dispossession and race in cities. The displacement of lower income communities is not a phenomenon that is solely tied to racial gentrification or class-based gentrification either. Rather, dispossession and gentrification against specifically the Black community are occurring hand-in-hand (Harvey 2010 and Taylor 1992). To understand this joint phenomenon, I draw on the idea of a 'spatiotemporal fix' from David Harvey (2005) which can be summarized as the idea in which fixed capital moves across definite space in a constrained manner. Harvey describes this pattern as a form of "accumulation by dispossession" where adding value to one area, inherently deprives another of its market value. By bridging the urban studies literature that focuses on the process of gentrification itself with the REP scholarship that focuses on racialized elements of this process, the application of spatiotemporal fix theory enables re-conceptualization of how the beautification of property is associated with a dispossession inherent to racialized capital (Robinson 2020). Based on this Marxist framing of political geography, I investigate how capital has moved in the context of Oakland, California, and displaced the city's Black residents.

As once a historical 'Black' city with international prominence, Oakland's majority Black population is now a shrinking minority. The force of gentrification accounts for this reduction of power (Newman et al. 2016) and is critical to understand the underlying root causes for why national migration occurs and how that emigration shapes the internal political dynamics of major metropolitan areas like Oakland. Similar studies in New York (Schaeffer and Smith 1986), Baton Rouge (Yancy 2019), and Los Angeles (Romero 2022) have revealed similar patterns for explaining the flight of minority populations to non-gentrified neighborhoods.

Through a historical analysis grounded in empirical cases situated in Oakland, I connect the conceptualization of gentrification offered by Harvey to other forms of conceptualizing race-based gentrification. This connection in turn, will clarify the concept of 'gentrification' and its

usage in the literature, and ultimately, encourage a turn towards more politicized definitions of gentrification that bridge the understanding of 'dispossession' with structural racism in the US.

Black flight can be summarized through its demographics in prominent 'destination' states during the Great Migration that later became points of origin during the 1990s and 2000s return to Southern states.

As explained by Watts-Smith, Greer 2018:

"Between 1965 and 1970, states like California, Michigan, Illinois, and New Jersey were among the top ten states gaining Blacks. Between 1995 and 2000, these states were among the greatest losers of Black populations."

This puzzle has been addressed by multiple scholars from urban studies, environmental planning, and political science (Watts-Smith, Greer 2018, Ramirez 2020, Boyd 2008, Moore 2009, Schaefer, and Smith 1982). Rationale that explains Black flight in the social sciences have been the surveillance and police state (Mayorga Gallo 2014), linked fate and kinship ties (Dawson, 2001 and Frey, 1999), and increased economic opportunity in historically Black cities. While Black flight has been questioned and challenged, it has not extensively been tied to property dispossession. This study seeks to connect racial emigration to wider structural capitalism, globalization, and uneven development that exacerbates gentrification (Harvey 2018).

In the existing literature on gentrification, political scientists and economists have also tried to understand why 'Black flight' occurs. Lens et. al. 2011 found that: "Black voucher households live in census tracts with slightly lower crime rates than Black poor and Black renter households" (Lens et al. 2011). This finding claims that assistance programs and vouchers also appear to be a way that enables choices to move out. In a different vein, by focusing on neighborhood trust, Newman et al. 2016 reflect how increased presence of white population in a neighborhood coincides with decreasing neighborhood trust among Black neighbors, accounting for less political participation when trust in elites and political participation avenues are eroded.

Rather than considering the effects of subsidized or government-assisted housing or neighbor trust, I rather focus on the mechanism of gentrification: displacement. I conceptualize displacement as any acts resulting in the emigration of a minority group including those from private sectors such as housing authorities and real estate developers. I argue that a large part of the gentrification equation is the role of privatization exacerbating the housing crisis in a racialized manner in the city. I also draw on theory from Saito (2022) who writes about the onset of 'racial-spatial' formation in Los Angeles. In Saito's definition, major public improvement projects that gentrify the city operate alongside racialized practices by delineating which residents of a community are considered 'valued' or not (Saito 2022).

The Saito definition of racial-spatial formation is closely tied to the understanding of spatiotemporal-fixes that this paper considers. I argue that while Black flight in Oakland was always characterized by this idea of racial-spatial formation, it has not been actively understood as a process of spatiotemporal fixes within the city, where the flow of capital along the lines of what is *'racial-spatial'*, actively dispossesses and dictates which areas remained valued or not. This loss of value in Oakland's predominantly Black neighborhoods can be understood through its development of 'Black flight' that I now will trace and connect to the metropolis' racial and spatial politics.

Process of property dispossession and Black displacement in Oakland

The history of Oakland's Black migration patterns connects to the second World War and subsequent second Great Migration in the 1940s and '50s. The federal shipping and shipbuilding industries created numerous jobs for Black Americans and the city's Black population increased by over 10 percent in a decade following World War II (1950-1960 US Census).

The process of Black movement in Oakland, while linked to wider migration patterns, was also unique due to the institutions of Oakland that specifically enabled a distinct Black urban consciousness. Many of these migrants were escaping de jure segregation, land discrimination in farming, and white-supremacist violence, and as such, chose to live near each other in West Oakland. According to historian Jean Murch: "West Oakland represented the historical bridge to Black California" (Murch 2010). As the entry-point, this neighborhood later served as the property nexus for Black migrants to the Bay Area. During the early 20th century, Black migrants had already begun to make their mark on the Bay Area property market, and by the 1960s when the second wave of the Great Migration was underway, California attracted Black migrants as the state with the highest rate of Black property ownership (Murch 2010).

While that comparative nature may have been true for Black property in California, it did not exempt California from facing the similar patterns of housing discrimination replicated by discriminatory private housing associations and federal housing authorities. The census tracts that were most closely concentrated to the piers in West Oakland, became the default location for Black housing (85 percent of the Black population lived in West Oakland), and squatting grew common as migration waves increased but housing discrimination persisted—preventing a large demographic of Black residents from moving further East or North into neighboring Berkeley.

With the historic Black neighborhood being formed in West Oakland, the rest of the city continued to engage in politics that increasingly excluded West Oakland from decision-making in the political arena. For instance, the 1938 Housing Association for Oakland was created through lobbying pressure by Black unions and workers in the shipbuilding industry. Yet, by the 1940s the representatives of the Housing Association were all trade, insurance, and real estate representatives with a vested business interest in housing speculation, and little to no regard for

the growing segregation between West Oakland and other neighborhoods (Moore, Montojo, Mauri 2019).

This exclusive arena later made policy decisions that further dispossessed Oakland's Black community and began a gradual process of value erosion in property. The city council met in 1949 with the intent to create public housing for the city's Black residents, yet pushback from conservative homeowner's associations in Alameda along with property owners in Oakland led to the council abandoning a rare attempt to increase public housing (James 2013). If the 1940s marked the sharp change to the Oakland demographic arena, with its multiplying Black population, the 1950s were marked by policies aimed at devaluing the area occupied by Black residents and subjugating it to a form of de facto segregation.

In the 1950s, the city of Oakland continued to make decisions that were targeted at developing the city. Yet, this targeting was severely restricted in scope and did not intend to develop the areas that were homes for the city's Black residents. By the 1950s, the Black community of laborers was no longer considered to be of utility to the city of Oakland as the demand for shipping also decreased following WWII. This loss of market value for the Bay Area, also led to local cities' decision to destroy war-time housing for workers in nearby Alameda and Berkeley — furthering a process of dispossession that directly capitalized on the market 'value' of Black labor. The poverty rates coincided with this mass unemployment and dispossession, with it reaching a total of 25 percent in 1959 (Johnson 1993), the majority of whom were Black residents as well. These conditions notably were not passive in Oakland, and the city's war-time workers organized multiple wide-scale strikes leading up to the 1950s, the most well-known being the general strike in 1946.

The city of Oakland's development plans can most clearly be illustrated in their Nimitz freeway project that cut through most of the West Oakland neighborhoods that the city had already devalued post-federal shipment industry closures. In 1954, groups of bankers, real-estate developers, and affluent residents gathered to form Oakland Citizen's Committee for Urban Renewal (OCCUR). This non-profit, while geared toward serving a consultatory role for the city council and major developers, ended up only focusing on the improvement of white-resident areas, and neglected the portion of West Oakland during its early years (OCCUR 2023). OCCUR along with its sister agency, the Oakland Redevelopment Agency (ORA) redeveloped the city's infrastructure beginning with the Acorn Housing Projects and the Nimitz freeway I-880 construction that displaced West Oakland Residents by 'bisecting' Oakland neighborhoods. The original plans went around the city but were replaced in the city itself to avoid disrupting port traffic (Caltrans 1998). The Acorn housing projects off 7th street was the first attempt by the two organizations to gentrify the West Oakland neighborhoods. But rather than increasing housing affordability, and improving living conditions, the projects in Acorn were but a facade for gentrification that did not meet the local Black population's needs, as over 9000 residents had to relocate to other West Oakland housing (Hausler 1987).

Redlining by the federal government which determined which parts of the city could not be eligible for federal housing subsidiaries, coincided with the city's development plans. The 1950s were demarcated by West Oakland being confined behind the 'red line.' This area was considered as devalued and a dearth of development potential (Maharawal and Elroy 2017, Moore et al. 2019). This would later change as undeveloped space in the city grew scarcer, but infrastructural projects were targeting commutability and transiting labor rather than centering

West Oakland in the development scene due to changing markets that rendered the shipbuilding industry a relic.

While the city shifted from the post-war manufacturing work culture to a commercialized city (Murch 2010), the desire for increased workforce in this newfound commercial sector brought about a new demand for public transportation as well. While public transportation was aimed at being a coalition-building exercise for multiple minorities, the development of this transit created fierce competition for newer jobs due to scarcity. While the Bay Area Rapid Transit system (BART) had the initial goal of bridging the region for minorities to access jobs that were further away, the issue of developing BART grew newfound debates over destroying housing, increasing homelessness, and diversifying the public transit sector. Black residents in West Oakland were particularly engaged in lobbying with the developers of BART in the 1960s and formed Jobs on BART (JoBART) to voice their grievances. As scholar Rodriguez notes:

"JOBART largely failed in gaining significant concessions from BART. Yet the struggle against BART helped West Oaklanders organize a strong community movement that gained control of anti-poverty programs and local public schools" (Rodriguez 1998).

The components of community exemplified by JOBART help illustrate levels of local coalition-based governance centered around Black leadership. Examples of this type of Black governance are later eroded but would be central to one paramount social movement emerging from Oakland, and most infamous in the nation during the 1960s—The Black Panther Party.

The 1960s marked a rise in Black power movements and the globally renowned Black Panther Party was founded in Oakland at Merritt College by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. At the time, many wealthier Black residents lived in North Oakland, a region that has since become dispossessed and today hosts the least number of Black residents in the city along with the

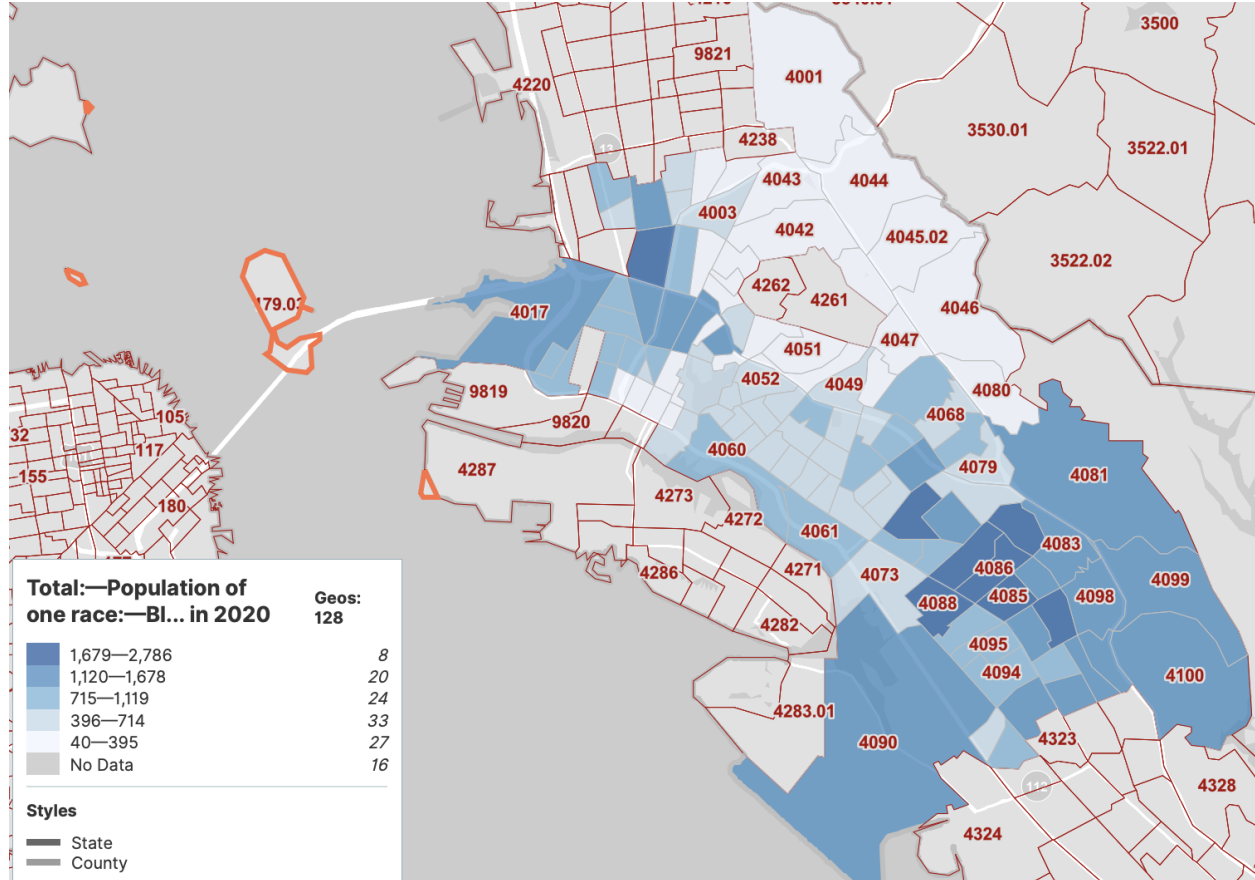declining Black population in West Oakland (2020 US Census).

Figure 1: Map of Black Oakland residents acc. to the 2020 Census. Credit: U.S. Census Bureau.

Newton and Seale met at the nexus of ongoing crises affecting the Oakland Black community. Policing had seen a sharp rise in the 1950s, and the Oakland police force encouraged Southern hires during this period to borrow harsher policing techniques as segregated Black neighborhoods increased in population. The growing Black population in West Oakland also coincided with statewide initiatives to reverse housing equality measures such as Proposition 14 which axed the first piece of Black-introduced legislature in California, the Rumford Fair Housing Act.

Focused on an anticolonial framework where "Black America " was distinct from their white imperial oppressors, the two men confronted the Oakland police force directly with action.

Seale and Newton began civilian patrols to observe their neighborhoods and keep white police officers out of the city's Black neighborhoods. The civilian patrols marked the beginning of the Panther's legacy even before the organization grew into the BPP.

While the Panthers' more controversial legacy of violence is cited in the historical literature (Jones and Austin 2006), their social programs that were directly related to the process of dispossession in Oakland were relatively less covered. In 1968, the Panthers opened the Breakfast for Children Program in Oakland, its resounding success also led to the opening of free breakfast programs across various Black Panther chapters in nearly twenty-three cities, with more than 12,000 children being served a day (Bloom and Martin 2016). By attacking hunger that was particularly affecting the Black population of West Oakland, the Panthers considered what the city and state welfare had not. Rather than allowing for the lack of economic value in the local job market and devaluation of property in West Oakland to further stifle investment into the neighborhood's schools, the Panthers also provided social services such as community schools.

Figure 2: Group of activists, including Maya Angelou (center), visit a BPP Oakland community school in 1973-4. Credit: East Bay Times.

While the legacy of the Panthers is mixed, the interactions the group had with West Oakland and the city's Black population in general is a fraction of the international influence that the anti-imperialist organization had. The foundations of their movement, being rooted in the city of Oakland, invited more Black migrants to the city, and partially explains why despite the party becoming dormant in 1980, the city still recorded its highest Black population in that same year (1980 US census).

The story of the Panthers is also an indispensable narrative to the wider politics of Black Oakland. Though city council only had one Black member leading up to the 1970s, the Panther's civilian patrols and widespread publicity brought about a new image attached to the city centered on Black politics and civil society taking back the 'streets' both in terms of protection and provision to residents. As Cohen (1999) explains:

"political issues initiating feelings of linked fate and the perception of advancing the interests of the entire black community, are more likely to be meriting group political mobilization."

In this unique way of raising the salience of collective Black rights and their intersection with linked fate and group identity, the city of Oakland as the headquarters of the Black Panther Party became an essential vocalization platform for symbolic Black politics and Black power. The decline of the Black Panther party intersected with wider conservative backlash of the 1970s and neoliberal policies that expanded financialization of housing and entrenched segregation.

The 1970s in Oakland reflected more hardlined forms of segregation between West Oakland and other neighborhoods than previously. As West Oakland continued to be encroached upon both by the waves of professional and business development projects that followed OCCUR's example from the 1960s, property values and association redlining increased which inherently deprived surrounding areas of resources and value as well (Moore et al. 2019).

The exacerbation of commercial development in West Oakland, raised rent prices to where a majority of Black of residents who were unable to live in the limited subsidized and cheaper housing, later became internally displaced as their overall neighborhoods rose in evaluation. Additionally, new homes were not being built at the same rate as demolished 'under-valued' homes (Cavin 2019). White anxieties over Black power were critical to this increased segregation (Freund 2010) since white flight to suburbia had also continued to increase in this period—thus, shifting housing markets to a periurban periphery. In addition to white fears and backlash toward a perceived 'Black inner city' (Farley et al. 1978, Galster 1990), panic from white officials and developers also stemmed from long overdue debts that began in the 1950s (Murch 2010). Wider federal integration efforts in the post-civil rights era proved to the city to be a contentious moment to encourage its white residents to return. Integration was actively resisted by conservative white residents, many of whom left the minority of integrated Oakland neighborhoods. The flight and unwillingness of white residents to integrate presented a threat to the city's investments and plans to bring white residents back into the urban area became a forefront with a goal of curing the 'blight' of West Oakland (Self 2003). Development with intentional redlining was both the council and redeveloper's highest priority to create a more 'inviting' environment for white suburban Bay Area residents to return back to the city.

On the other hand, as West Oakland grew more gentrified to accommodate white desires, the flow of capital left East Oakland to sustain these development projects of heightened, unlivable standards for the city's working class. Since the affordable projects were already overcrowded, a population of West Oakland Black residents migrated to the formerly white-majority East Oakland. New waves of Latino migrants also would come to occupy East Oakland, especially the Fruitvale area. The paradoxical nature of spatial dispossession in Oakland is

illustrated by this movement. The process of gentrification at the neighborhood level had been the impetus for Black flight into under-developed neighborhoods due to the close association between gentrified neighborhoods and white populations who were the valued population in Oakland's segregation. The Panthers and civil society organizations made it clear with their political presence which persons were not considered valued by developers and city government —the Black working class population— that in large numbers, has moved into neighborhoods in a direction opposite the flow of capital.

Despite the prominence of the Panthers in the late 1960s and early '70s, the movement was never able to successfully flip the white-run city council. The BPP even put forth their own candidate, Seale for city Mayor in 1973, but Seale lost in a runoff despite securing the second-most votes and highest Black voter turnout in the city. The lack of Black politicians to advocate for the residents in Oakland's zones of dispossession, exacerbated the crisis. Oakland downtown grew as a zone of dispossession during this period, as the white population dwindled in the city with the ongoing violence between police and the wake of Oakland gangs following the Panthers' dwindling power (Jones 1998). White flight corresponded to a rising Black population, yet the lack of symbolic political organizations that could continue to fill communal gaps, along with limited interest in viewing the West Oakland and Downtown populations as populations of concern due to de facto segregation, ultimately worsened the state-of-living in West Oakland and increased emigration to neighboring East Oakland (Self 2003).

White Anxiety Over Urban Crisis

The 1980s in Oakland also were demarcated by the confrontation of two crises of the era: the war on drugs and incarceration acceleration. According to Ruth Wilson-Gilmore, illicit drug use was on a downward trend in the 1970s, but the expansion of drug-sentencing in the 1980s as

part of the 'war-on-drugs' emancipated newfound crises that characterized 'urban blight' even further. In California alone, the prison population grew by 500 percent from 1982-2000, despite the crime rate peaking and then declining in 1980 (Wilson-Gilmore, 2007). During the period as well, while illicit drug use had been on a downward trend, state-sponsored measures increased the criminality of many drug-related offenses in line with the 'war on drugs', extending prison-sentences for drug-related activity, and conflated gang violence with drug trafficking. The Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act (STEP) in 1988 was one such measure that increased sentences for any gang-related crime.

Increased incarceration factored in the dispossession of Oakland further during this era. As Ramirez (2020) notes, "In Oakland, 'a visioning archive in which Black injury does not exist' subjected both Black and Latinx youth to be preemptively labeled as combatant." Along with spatiotemporal dispossession theory explanations (Harvey 2010), the transformation of the city's minority youth's identity contributed to the gradual desire to also leave Oakland as minorities were increasingly securitized as threats by the city officials and police. The growth of youth policing and crackdown on gang activity also corresponded with developments at the federal level that led to future flight from the city such as subsidies in the housing voucher program. "By 1980, more than 625,000 households held vouchers" (Lens et. al. 2011). When considering these two factors, it is important to make a distinction between pull factors and the process of dispossession that exacerbated the major Black flight that would take off in the 1990s into the present day.

Suburban flight from a perceived 'Black city' by white residents also contributed to the stark differences between policing and crime in the wider East Bay region. The anxieties that were attached to the Black Panther party and portrayal of a Black armed resistance in the city,

were not only actively felt by white residents, but also acted upon as white flight increased

between 1960 and 1980 with a population loss of nearly 140,000 white residents over the 20

years (US Census). The city-to-suburb pipeline also increased dramatically at 13 percent

between 1965-70 alone (Frey 1980). Rather than these city emigrants moving to drastically

different locations, the vast majority settled in wealthier suburbs surrounding Oakland, including

Berkeley and East Bay towns such as Walnut Creek and Pleasanton.

To capture the anxieties that the large 'fleeing' white population held at the time, I

borrow from sociologist Victor Rios who writes:

"In Oakland . . . racial anxieties about the city's rapidly changing demographics led to an increasing

integration of school and recreational programs with police and penal authorities" (Rios 2011).

The incarceration by police in conversation with anxieties over lawlessness notably

disproportionately affected both the Latino and Black communities, following a wider discourse

popularized during the 1970s around 'law and order' being the goal and consequences of 'tough

on crime' policies as the means to achieve that. According to sociologist Katherine Beckett, the

1970s were characterized by a growing (white) American subpopulation that was most

concerned with crime, and simultaneously opposed racial reforms the most out of any other

subgroup surveyed about crime (Beckett 1999).

In these myriad ways, the 'white anxiety' was not only existent in isolated cities, but it

also manifested in the wider rhetoric of the period that popularized criminalizing as the default

solution to a crisis that may not have existed without the rendering of crime as the social 'blight'

that policymakers and politicians relied upon to guarantee continued legitimacy by voters.

Connecting this pattern back to the white flight in Oakland, the communities who were also

moving out of the city had been proponents of the same nexus that contributed to the

securitization of Black and Latino youth and depicted the city as suffering from the 'crime

problem' that only a firm, 'law and order' type of mentality could possibly fix. Such a mentality may have also limited the reach of Oakland's first successful Black politicians at the municipal level. Mayor Lionel Wilson became the first Black mayor of the city in 1977 and served terms throughout the 1980s. However, despite Wilson making some progress for representing Black voter interests, the fallout from the Panthers allowed him to win a runoff election rather than have overwhelming support from the city's Black population (Johnson 2006), he therefore, represented more median interests than the radical changes that Black power organizations like the Panthers had enforced in the prior decades. A lack of a Black elected official in office was not the main issue with gentrification, however. Rather than hampering the patterns of uneven development, Wilson's council continued carrying out many of the city's developmental plans.

Since the city had determined which areas were no longer of interest to development, the more developed sites of Oakland continued to dictate the flow of capital, resources, and with it, the legitimacy of what the city considered to be worth socially investing in. Meanwhile, policing of Black neighborhoods in the city grew more intense in the wake of policies like STEP (Ramirez 2020). Policing operated hand-in-hand with the flow of capital in Oakland's gentrification by setting the boundary between what property is considered valuable and which communities were deemed as threats (Ramirez 2020). For the Black residents of Oakland, the undervaluation of their neighborhoods was considered a threat to the broader goals of private development, and policing enabled continual dispossession both through forcibly evicting residents and by creating an apparatus of oppression to motivate emigration from the zones that they would also attract white wealth and new investment to, once Black residents were displaced.

Devaluation of Black Life

Capital accumulation in parts of the city that were relatively less-policed, or in the suburbs, operated simultaneously in continued dispossession of quality of life and life itself. Evictions targeted largely people of color in Oakland and the majority of foreclosures in Oakland since 2007 have been homes lived in by tenants rather than owners (AEMP 2016). Since Black residents in Oakland are much more likely to be renters than homeowners, the foreclosure rate peaking in the 2008 housing crisis (3987 foreclosures) disproportionately impacts the city's Black residents. Most foreclosures also occurred in districts of Oakland that were redlined since 1937 due to white anxieties over Black migration to the city's Western neighborhoods, thus further reflecting a disproportionate effect on Black residents (Moore et al. 2019).

From 2005-15, an estimated 20,340 foreclosures took place in Oakland and 32,402 evictions due to unlawful detainers that warrant immediate evictions (AEMP 2016). Zoning has been a key that developers have maintained control over what is considered 'valuable' to gentrify surrounding areas to meet standards of said properties. By 'pricing-out' neighborhoods that previously had affordable housing—as seen by rent increases of nearly 44.5 percent in more recently turned-Black Oakland neighborhoods (UC Berkeley Urban Displacement Project)—land developers and homeowner associations contribute to displacement by building more single-family homes near gentrified homes, which are typically the least affordable (Weiss 1988). Affordable housing on the other hand, has continued to be barricaded by the 1950s legacy of Article 34, which requires simple majority voting to approve public housing projects (Rhomberg 2004) along with various provisions that have led to the decline of access affordable Section 8 housing in recent years by nearly 91 percent in majority-Black Oakland neighborhoods (AEMP 2016). In fast-gentrifying Oakland today, the rate of minorities being pushed out of the city or

being enclosed within their enclaves continues to worsen and the likelihood of a majority siding with the establishment of projects seems increasingly unattainable.

There has been continued over-policing in any areas of Oakland considered under-developed and a 'blight' by local government to be dealt with (Ramirez, 2020). In these ways, the biopolitics of Black Americans again surfaced as the fundamental joint mechanism to gentrification's displacement in Oakland. By attaching value to the fixed flow from spaces within a timeframe, those who controlled the flow of capital determined where capital would be worthwhile accumulating in and where it would not. As Foucault (1978) conceptualized however, biopower can come from individual subjects as life itself is a form of expressing power. On the other hand, politics can be understood in how biopower also can be deprived through various forms of violent dispossession (Mbembe 2019) and at its extremity, social death (Patterson, 1982). White power consolidated because the city council, real estate agencies, business developers, and the carceral state were actively distributing valued capital in spaces occupied by white people and with them, white life. The movement of capital opposite to the Black neighborhoods that were increasingly overpoliced was, therefore, not random, and is symptomatic of the devaluation of Black life in spaces they later acquired with gentrification.

With the growth of new job sectors, the movement of capital has once again accelerated back into communities I demarcated as 'zones of dispossession' due to policing legacies in the 1980s and former segregationist housing authorities in the 1950s, which have now begun encroaching on historic Black neighborhoods with the intent to beautify with the intent to invite young urban professional migration in. As Harvey puts forth:

"Continuity of flow in the circulation of capital is very important. The process cannot be interrupted without incurring losses…those who move faster through phases of capital circulation accrue higher profits than competitors" (2010).

This flow of capital now exited the more recently turned-majority Black neighborhoods of East Oakland in two ways: 1) to the richer, still-white North Oakland and newer development projects in Downtown and historic Black West Oakland that excluded Black residents and 2) to the richer suburbs around Oakland such as Vallejo, San Leandro, and Hayward. An alternative explanation to the gentrification patterns in Oakland is that capital does not follow racialized lines and that Black residents who were of high enough income brackets could move in the direction of the flow of capital, and thus leave to suburbs that are 'better-off'. Black suburban residents did notably grow as a population in the 1980s.

Yet, such explanations fail to regard policing and other segregationist policies that are still in effect, despite explicit racial redlining being outlawed. Oakland's business districts have contributed to this discrimination as it has closed off opportunities to Black industrial workers and favored labor from companies that were coming into the city from neighboring parts such as Silicon Valley, the source of the largest tech sector since the 1990s dot.com era. As gentrification also grew in Black neighborhoods, displacing lower-income residents, the flow of capital continued to be opposite of Black residents. Black populations are thus increasingly confined to areas that are pressured by forces of real estate development and are now unable to move to other parts of the Bay Area which have all dramatically increased in their evaluation in recent years.

The onset and dispossession by the technological sector are unique to Oakland in that it faces one of the most significant valuation changes facilitated by the technological sector. The Dot-com boom of the 1990s brought about newfound migration to the Bay Area: largely skilled, professional labor from Asia and other American cities. With the onset of higher-paid employment in the city, the surrounding valuation of many Oakland neighborhoods rose in line with the spatiotemporal fix of capital. Oakland Mayor Brown announced his plans for

redevelopment of the city to meet the needs of the influx of tech workers now seeking a base to work from or commute to neighboring Silicon Valley. This process of gentrification became at its fastest pace in part due to the investment opportunity in the technological sector. The flipside in limited space, however, was how the development of new higher-valued housing also tore down older subsidized and rent-controlled units, increasing displacement for communities that could not afford new rents. In 2019, 15,700 residents experienced homelessness in Alameda County where Oakland is the largest city. Nearly 47 percent of this population is Black (Oakland-Berkeley-Alameda Continuum of Care). Once again, the processes of dispossession in Oakland are directly connected to the central mechanism of gentrification: the displacement of the working-class Black population whose life has been considered 'devalued' in the market.

Conclusions: Displacement and Dispossession as Devaluation of Life and Power

The homelessness crisis disproportionately affecting Black residents in Oakland is emblematic of the history of gentrification and housing dispossession (Alkon et al. 2020) that this paper traces. City politics, reactionary development plans, and white suburban anxieties were essential components of the opposition to more egalitarian housing policies and resistance to segregationist redlining that could have maintained Black populations in the city. The Black population of Oakland declined from nearly 160,000 residents in 1980 to just under 97,000 in 2020 (-40% ~ US Census Bureau, 2020). Recent attributions for this displacement have pointed towards the return of wealthier White and Asian residents in the city who could afford skyrocketing rents (Martinez 2020). But I challenge this finding on how the process of accumulation by dispossession functioned in the long term in Oakland's history since the 1950s.

In this paper, I asked: *How did Black Oakland residents become targets of 'devaluation' in Oakland's gentrification process?* The tent cities in West Oakland, Uptown, and Downtown Oakland today are a palimpsest of the existing inequities the Black population has continued to face, but the point of this paper has been to establish how this dispossession is not simply a byproduct of the recent phenomenon of "yuppie-fication" as has been perceived (Ramirez 2020, McElroy, Werth 2020). Rather, this paper has argued that gentrification and the devaluation of Oakland's Black community has been a continuous thread through a process-tracing of how white anxieties were piqued by the symbolic Black politics of Oakland—as a historic center of breaking boundaries with social investment—and how development directly tied the value of the housing market with the 'racial-spatial' of Black life. In other words, the main finding is that gentrification **has been motivated by displacement** of the Black community for decades and is a key underlying mechanism for devaluing Black life and furthering recent 'Black flight' from Oakland. Oakland may continue to face the effects of gentrification, but the effects of capitalist dispossession are not confined to the city. As this study also demonstrates, Harvey's theory of how capital flows is directly tied to racialized minorities. The prominence of certain minority groups who have resisted and shifted the focus on gentrification (Maharawal and Elroy 2017) offers futures that diverge from its embedded devaluation of life and consequential displacement.

Ultimately, the study uses Harvey's theory of fixed capital accumulation (2005) to raise an argument of how the valuation of life has become a financialized component in today's residential and business markets in increasingly globalized metropolises like Oakland. Such a finding holds important implications for the study of politics, as power is associated with life and the struggle to preserve symbolic politics of Black organizations in Oakland reflect a loss of power amidst urban dispossession. For future avenues of study, this research on the

dispossession of Black power in Oakland also raises new questions such as whether processes of dispossession operate similarly in other cities and whether the relationship of the 'racial-spatial' is seen in other non-Black minority communities. While taking the note of Watts-Smith (2019) to avoid reductionist accounts of impoverished inner cities, the ruination of Oakland's historic Black neighborhoods by the state and private developers is an example of how addressing Black flight requires uncovering gentrification's deeper roots of uneven development and dispossession that risk undermining living circumstances, depriving spaces of rich cultures, and devaluing the lives of racial and ethnic minorities in the US.

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