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To cite this article: Dena Aufseeser & Dillon Mahmoudi (26 Jul 2024): Interrogating narratives of urban change: disinvestment and development in two neighborhoods in Baltimore, MD, Urban Geography, DOI: [10.1080/02723638.2024.2376907](https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2024.2376907)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2024.2376907>



Published online: 26 Jul 2024.



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Interrogating narratives of urban change: disinvestment and development in two neighborhoods in Baltimore, MD

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ABSTRACT

Popular press and academic narratives of neighborhood change frequently conflate the experiences of different non-white populations in working-class and poor areas, presenting them as detrimental to urban development and at risk of displacement and eviction. Such narratives provide justification for uneven disinvestment and overlook the variegated ways in which urban development strategies can be exploitative. Mislabeling urban change as gentrification and grouping multiple racial/ethnic groups can lead to inappropriate policy and misaligned forms of intervention. Building on arguments within Black geographies and critical urban studies, we seek to disentangle how Black and Latine/x populations are differently positioned in urban narratives of dis/investment. Combining archival analysis with data from the US Census, we analyze two formerly redlined neighborhoods in Baltimore whose development trajectories significantly diverged. We demonstrate that inequality is not simply due to the continued effects of historical redlining, but instead part of ongoing rounds of uneven dis/investment. We expose how racial capitalism exploits racial difference between non-white groups to extract profits. By focusing on specific neighborhoods, we enrich research interrogating how racial and ethnic hierarchies relationally shape urban change, making visible the necessity of spatially-specific contingent analyses.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 July 2022
Accepted 20 June 2024

KEYWORDS

Uneven development; racial capitalism; neighborhood change; (dis)investment; gentrification

Introduction

From the legacy of Pennsylvania Avenue jazz clubs to the places where civil rights leaders grew up, West Baltimore's Upton neighborhood is rich with Black spiritual, cultural and political history *Baltimore Sun's* Neighborhood Profile Series (Rao, 2021).

On the corner of Bank Street and Highland Avenue, a vibrant mural of gold and bluish green depicts European immigrants who originally settled in Highlandtown alongside today's growing Latino community *Baltimore Sun's* Neighborhood Profile Series (García, 2021).

Popular discourse and academic research on neighborhood change often group non-white populations together, depicting Black and Latine/x populations as both devaluing urban spaces and at risk for displacement and eviction. But, as is evident from the leading

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quotes, narratives about different ethnic and Black areas vary substantially. In this article, we find that Latine/x and Black populations in Baltimore are framed differently in stories of urban prosperity and decline in ways that produce, reinforce, and compound uneven development. Analyzing populations relationally reveals how the production of difference itself becomes a tool to facilitate profit-generating activities.

City of Baltimore officials actively court Latine/x populations to spur urban growth, romantically conceptualizing them as part of the city's long immigrant history. Regardless of whether new Latine/x residents are immigrants, they are framed through narratives that emphasize the economic benefits of immigrants (Wenger, 2016). In contrast, narratives link Black residents – many of whom also migrated, but from the US South – with blight and urban decline. By analyzing the different trajectories of Highlandtown, a historically immigrant neighborhood, and Upton, a historically Black neighborhood, we complicate dominant arguments about gentrification and neighborhood change, and reaffirm the necessity of spatially specific and contingent analyses. Further, we argue that vibrant neighborhoods do not just evaporate or decay, but rather are actively devalued. Given capitalism's dependence on the exploitation of difference for profit, it is imperative to more closely interrogate the ways in which racism and ideas of ethnic hierarchies shape processes of urban change (see Mumm & Sternberg, 2022; Rucks-Ahidiana, 2021).

Baltimore, Maryland, like many older American cities, is often referred to as a “city of neighborhoods,” each with its own historical narrative of change. Upton, in West

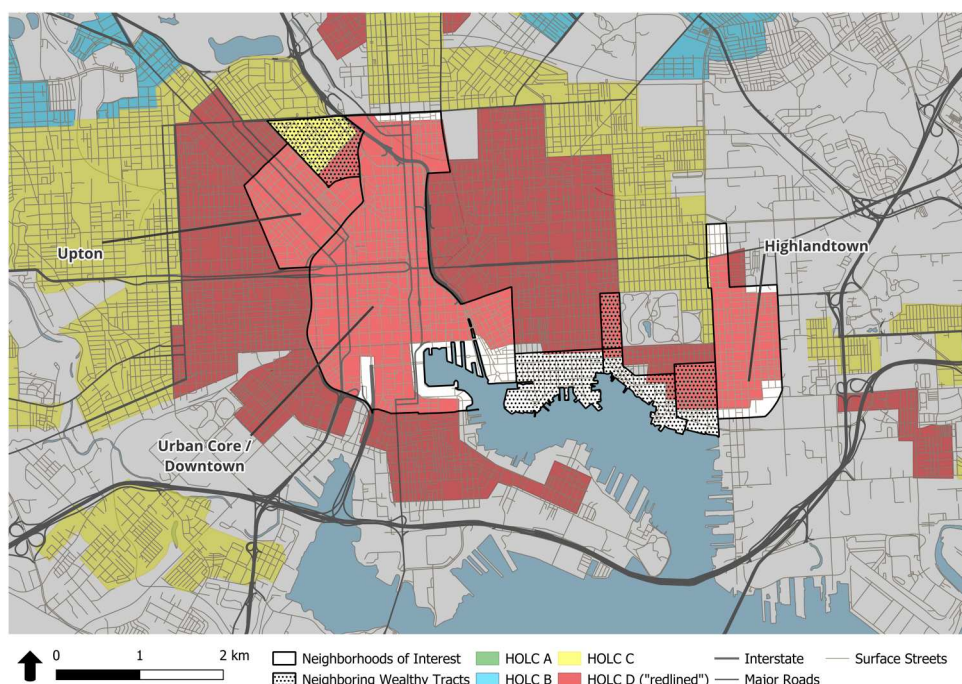


Figure 1. Highlandtown and Upton in Baltimore city using Census Tract 2010 boundaries. Highlandtown and Upton were both considered “redlined” areas according to historical HOLC grades (Nelson et al., 2020). Neighborhood boundaries determined by authors in conjunction with city of Baltimore neighborhood boundaries which loosely adhere to census geographies.

Baltimore, and Highlandtown, in East Baltimore, are both between two and three miles from Baltimore's downtown and Inner Harbor (Figure 1). According to the Upton Planning Committee:

Upton has all of the ingredients to be a thriving, successful neighborhood: great housing, livable streets, proximity to employment and cultural centers, five train stations within a short walk or drive, a neighborhood commercial district and an extraordinary story to tell about its past.

A description of Highlandtown focuses on its long history as a neighborhood of immigrants. Live Baltimore (2021), a non-profit organization promoting Baltimore's neighborhoods, writes:

Highlandtown has been a neighborhood of immigrants since 1866 and remains that way today. Irish, Germans, Poles, Italians and Latinos have made their homes here, and the many restaurants and shops reflect this international heritage. Today, Highlandtown boasts an eclectic mix of artists, ethnicities, long-time residents and newcomers, and blue-collar, green-collar and white-collar workers who share a common belief, like the residents before them, that Highlandtown is the heart of Baltimore.

As elaborated below, Highlandtown and Upton were both redlined in the 1930s. Both neighborhood descriptions emphasize their history and their cultural vibrancy. But the reality of certain economic aspects of each neighborhood is starkly different. While Upton's property rates remain stagnant, rates in Highlandtown have skyrocketed. The median home price of occupied housing units in Upton is \$82,700, compared with Highlandtown's \$281,600 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).¹ According to a report by the National Community Reinvestment Coalition (NCRC), Highlandtown is today part of a cluster of neighborhoods that are considered to be rapidly changing (Richardson et al., 2019). In contrast, Upton, like other predominantly Black neighborhoods, faces high vacancy rates and what we refer to as active disinvestment. In this paper, we build from scholars that emphasize the role of racial differentiation in explaining gentrification and related processes of neighborhood change (Mumm & Sternberg, 2022; Rucks-Ahidiana, 2021) by examining the divergent trajectories of Highlandtown and Upton to make two related arguments. First, we problematize a tendency to categorize most forms of urban change as gentrification. Second, we argue that shifts in property values and population demographics can only be understood by a close examination of specific neighborhoods *in relation* to each other. A failure to consider the different ways in which race and ethnicity are valued perpetuates racial capitalist processes of extracting value from difference. Baltimore is a particularly useful site for examining this because of its long documented history of extreme segregation and difference between its Black and white populations (Brown, 2021), combined with a small, but recently growing, Spanish-speaking immigrant population (Filomeno, 2017).

We argue for the need to consider critical urban changes through the lens of racial capitalism. Racial capitalism is "a technology that correctly identifies capital's nature; capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups" (Melamed, 2015, p. 78). Capitalists accumulate capital through the production of hierarchies of difference such that Black and Brown people are reduced to non-human private property and Black and Brown neighborhoods are dismissed as empty spaces (Melamed,

2015; Robinson, 2021). McElroy and Werth (2019, p. 878) warn against “deracinated dispossessions, or accounts of displacement uprooted from grounded histories of racial violence and resistance.” In fact, this form of dispossession can be a primary method of citymaking at margins of the city (Seymour & Akers, 2019).

Employing the lens of racial capitalism, we highlight key shifts in socioeconomics and the framing of urban processes in Upton and Highlandtown, from the Federal Home Owners’ Loan Corporation’s (HOLC) mortgage security maps to present day. Our research shows that inequality is not simply due to the continued effects of historical redlining, but instead is part of continuous rounds of uneven disinvestment and investment. Addressing nefarious dispossession requires contextualized and historical understandings of how development plays out and of the ways racial difference is mobilized in processes of accumulation.

Literature

While most gentrification literature mentions race, there is a need to more directly theorize gentrification (and urban change more broadly) as racialized processes (Mumm & Sternberg, 2022; Rucks-Ahidiana, 2021; Wright & Herman, 2018). Scholars challenge narrow accounts of gentrification as an economic process that results in white upper- and middle-class populations displacing non-white populations (see Boyd, 2005; Lees, 2016; Pattillo, 2010). They argue that gentrification occurs in different forms, such as Black gentrification in the United States (Moore, 2009). However, only a handful of articles (see Mumm & Sternberg, 2022) examine how different non-white populations may be pitted against one another and valued differently in processes of urban change. Further, multiple forms of urban change and redevelopment may be mislabeled as gentrification (Slater, 2006).

As it pertains to Baltimore, Mallach (2020) cautions that gentrification-driven displacement, forced displacement through dispossession, and neighborhood population loss are different but related phenomena. The decline in social welfare policies and spread of neoliberalism led to displacement in many forms. Brown (2021, p. 16) argues for an expansion of what counts as displacement to include “withdrawing critical resources in communities, such as mass school closures, school takeovers, recreation center closures, and the demolition and privatization of public housing”. Yet, there is little research that considers variations in how different populations have been dispossessed and displaced.

We draw insights from scholars of racial capitalism such as Robinson (2021), focusing especially on racial capitalism’s intersections within geography. In this vein, Bledsoe and Wright (2019) argue that capitalism does not exploit all populations in the same ways; anti-Blackness works to specifically render Black populations aspatial. Erasing a Black sense of place is profitable; it allows Black spaces to be framed as dangerous sites of urban crisis, in need of redevelopment (McKittrick, 2013). City planning and development discourses often naturalize unevenness among neighborhoods, obscuring the role of anti-Black racism and the ways in which property markets and municipal investment are imbricated with processes of racial differentiation (Robinson, 2021). Ramirez (2020) invokes Anzaldúa’s “borderlands” as an urban analytic to show how city spaces are violently (re)produced and reworked to determine who belongs and the value

different populations bring to space. Recognizing such processes as ongoing and inherently relational challenges ways in which the devaluing of nonwhite spaces is presented as inevitable. Uneven capitalist development is simultaneously a process of racialized devalorization and (dis)accumulation (Bonds, 2019, p. 577).

One tool in a long history of racial capitalism came in the form of residential security maps, commonly referred to as redlining maps. In the wake of the Great Depression, the HOLC mapped and color-coded neighborhoods in over 150 US cities to depict potential risk factors for mortgage lenders. Color-coding was based on factors such as quality of housing stock, proximity to employment opportunities, and the race, ethnicity and wealth of their residents (Jackson, 1987). D areas, depicted in red, were “characterized by detrimental influences in a pronounced degree, undesirable population or an infiltration of it.” Marked as “declining,” redlined neighborhoods were considered risky investments, which made it challenging to obtain loans to maintain or develop houses.

The consequences of redlining have been long-lasting. “Declining” neighborhoods were increasingly described as “blighted” in terms of both physical and economic characteristics. Blight served as a supposedly “race-neutral” method to dispossess Black communities; policy makers linked it with “depreciation, speculation, usefulness, taxation and investment” to describe neighborhoods at-risk of becoming slums (Chronopoulos, 2014, p. 210). By 1947, references to racial hierarchies and their potential influences on land values and loan worthiness were removed and replaced with secondary attributes of those communities. Unsurprisingly, housing structures such as the alley tenements common among Black Baltimoreans were likely to be described as “blight.” Large public works projects were advertised as containing the spread and intensification of blight (Herscher, 2020). Like subsequent urban renewal and redevelopment, housing reform discourse and policy played on the fear of blight’s spread to relationally capture public investment for the growing commuter class rather than to assist low-income, marginally housed communities (Herscher, 2020).

Predatory urban strategies with anti-Black underpinnings have persisted for decades, contributing to the systematic devaluation of spaces predominantly inhabited by Black communities. These strategies are closely linked with processes of gentrification. Uneven investment and disinvestment create spaces available for capital accumulation. Zaimi (2022) argues that narratives of disinvestment are misleading in that they overlook how neighborhoods experience influxes of predatory capital, as opposed to the implied disinvestment as an absence of capital. Similarly, Taylor (2019) proposes the idea of predatory inclusion to describe how Black women in the 1960s and 1970s were targeted to receive subpar loans for dilapidated properties, with the intention that they would then default on their loans, allowing the properties to be resold again. Safransky (2022) shows how linking Black populations to decline and an innate need for improvement becomes a tool to extract more profits. Under such racial regimes of property, whiteness and land improvement become synonymous.

Given the ways in which the mobilization of difference is central to the functioning of capitalism, the lack of differentiation between non-white populations in gentrification literature is somewhat surprising (see Mumm & Sternberg, 2022). There have been limited studies that look at the role of immigrant populations in facilitating gentrification. Hwang (2016) found that immigration may facilitate gentrification in part because it meets gentrifiers’ desire for some level of diversity. Hwang also found a link between

the presence of Latine/x and Asian populations and gentrification 10 years later. Neighborhoods with high immigrant populations may be appealing to potential residents and investors in part because of what these neighborhoods are not: predominantly Black low-income neighborhoods (Charles, 2003). Language used to describe immigrant neighborhoods links Latine/x populations with other immigrants, portraying them as closer to white, in contrast to Black populations (Anderson & Sternberg, 2013). According to Hwang (2016), “gentrifiers” prefer neighborhoods that are already white, and consider Latine/x and Asian populations to be a middle ground, preferable to predominantly Black neighborhoods. Immigrant groups may also differentiate themselves from Black Americans as part of a strategy to claim “whiteness” (Shabazz, 2015).

The perceived value of neighborhoods needs to be considered relationally. The link between Black people and Black spaces and presumed lack of value relationally renders value in immigrant and Latine/x neighborhoods. Although not usually discussed in the context of gentrification, policy research on “welcoming cities” links the presence of immigrant populations and economic growth. Welcoming cities are separate from “sanctuary cities” that choose not to enforce federal laws on immigration status. Instead, welcoming cities employ a range of immigrant-friendly policies to demonstrate inclusivity and better integrate immigrants into receiving societies (McDaniel, 2018). Immigration has long played a role in urban development, with some city governments actively courting immigrants to “jump-start” economic development in particular neighborhoods (City of Baltimore, 2014; Harwood & Lee, 2018). In the case of the City of Baltimore, the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs “seeks to facilitate the development and progress of immigrants and refugees in the workforce and increase their access to entrepreneurial opportunities, thereby meeting the needs of employers and promoting the growth of the city” (City of Baltimore, 2013). Placing value in potential residents as economic change agents devalues existing residents as unworthy of investment.

We complicate typical narratives regarding gentrification and urban change. In the case of Baltimore, scholarly claims that Black and Latine/x populations detract from urban value overlook the *different* ways in which Black communities are viewed compared with other non-white populations.² While national reports on gentrification usually include Baltimore as one of the most rapidly gentrifying cities, such reports are misleading (Comen, 2019; Favre, 2019). The city is experiencing overall population loss, displacement akin to “decline-induced displacement” (Seymour & Akers, 2023), and uneven federal and corporate-sponsored investment. By focusing on specific neighborhoods within Baltimore through the lens of racial capitalism (Mumm & Sternberg, 2022), we dismantle static narratives of gentrification and better understand the effects such processes have on non-white populations.

Context

In the past half century, Baltimore has seen significant overall population declines, with headlines decrying population loss (down from over 950,000 in 1950 to just under 520,000 in 2020), vacant homes, and urban decline (see coverage in MacGillis, 2019; Miles, 2016; Simpson, 2024). Baltimore itself has even been described as having “too little gentrification,” with arguments that “gentrification must be embraced in our challenged neighborhoods” (Miles, 2016). In these narratives, revival and growth are

exceptions. In Baltimore, however, population decline has slowed in the past two decades, offset by an increased number of college-educated young adults (25- to 34-year-olds) moving into a select number of neighborhoods (Mallach, 2020). While white and Black populations overall declined since 2010 (Table 1), Baltimore's Latine/x population grew from just over 26,000 to almost 34,000. Studies that offer explanations for uneven gentrification indicate that being near "already-strong" neighborhoods leads to increased likelihood of neighborhood revival (Guerrieri et al., 2013). However, while Upton and Highlandtown are both near wealthier neighborhoods on at least one side (Figure 1), Upton has not seen as much investment.

Within the United States, white-Black relationships take primacy in narratives regarding race (Nieva & Pulido, 2014). In the first decades of the nineteenth century, Baltimore's population was more than a fifth Black (Gibson & Jung, 2002), and was home to both slaves and free Blacks (Rockman, 2009). At the same time, Baltimore was second only to New York City as a port of entry for migrants, with especially large German, Irish, and English populations. Black and ethnic migrants competed for limited housing, shaped by proximity to employment opportunities, affordability, and availability (Henderson, 1994).³ While ethnic immigrants also struggled to find high-quality affordable housing, by the 1930s, areas described as slums were largely confined to the Black population (Henderson, 1994). This can be attributed to active efforts to restrict residential racial expansion, combined with population increases. Between 1930 and 1950, Baltimore's Black population increased from 142,106 to 225,099 with little change in the size of the residential area in which Black residents lived (Henderson, 1994: 49). The Black population continued to increase over the course of the Great Migration, reaching around 420,000 by 1970, or 46.4 percent of the population (Gibson & Jung, 2002). In contrast, the number of immigrant arrivals slowed due to federal-government quotas. At the same time, ethnic loan and aid societies saved resources to finance the purchase of new homes, an option that was not available to Black communities who had less opportunity for the accumulation of wealth. This relieved some of the stress on working-class immigrant neighborhoods like Highlandtown.

By the mid-twentieth century, immigration rates declined significantly, and descendants of immigrants were slowly incorporated into white society (Fox & Guglielmo, 2012). As of 2018, just over 8 percent of Baltimore's population was foreign-born (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Further, 5.3 percent of the population identified as Hispanic or Latino, according to data from the American Community Survey, which includes both foreign- and US-born (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Mexican, Salvadoran and Dominican migrants account for more than half of this population, with notable numbers of Honduran, Puerto Rican, and South Americans.⁴ Within neighborhoods such as Highlandtown, Latine/x populations constitute a much greater percentage of the overall population than is the case for Baltimore as a whole. Baltimore's Latine/x population grew by nearly 5,000 between 1990 and 2000, a period in which the city's white and Black populations were declining (Table 1). Such growth has continued, with the Latine/x population nearly quadrupling since 1990. This coincided with increasing formal efforts to attract and retain immigrants as part of the City of Baltimore's growth strategy (Filomeno, 2017).

In parts of East Baltimore, the size of Latine/x populations has started to decline. Immigrants are particularly prone to displacement because of additional difficulties they may face in becoming homeowners (Filomeno, 2017). As renters, they are easily removable. While the presence of Black populations is linked with a lack of gentrification, the presence of Latine/x populations has not been framed as detrimental to development. In Baltimore, as is often the case in “welcoming cities” discourses, there is a focus on the economic benefits that immigrant communities can bring to the city (McDaniel, 2018; Wenger, 2016). This contrasts with other cities, such as Buffalo, which despite increasing Hispanic populations, continue to be framed through narratives of population and economic decline (Cope & Latham, 2009).

Baltimore has long been marked by unevenness; “some neighborhoods boom and others go bust, often at the same time” (King et al., 2019: 2). As mentioned, Baltimore frequently appears on lists of US cities gentrifying the most quickly (Richardson et al., 2019). However, gentrification is concentrated in only a few locations within the city. The contradiction between statements about Baltimore rapidly gentrifying, not having enough gentrification, and not gentrifying because of decline can only be understood by examining the role of racism and ethnic hierarchies in shaping urban change. The neighborhoods experiencing growth are predominantly white or mixed white and Latine/x. In contrast, neighborhoods that have concentrated Black populations are not gentrifying or experiencing displacement on a notable scale.⁵ Slater (2006) argues against academic scholarship that reframes gentrification as a positive form of urban change, using it as a stand-in for urban investment or revitalization.⁶ Claims that Baltimore needs to embrace gentrification (Kirby, 2021; Miles, 2016) give credence to Slater’s concerns about how the concept of gentrification is invoked. We also suggest that arguments for more gentrification are fundamentally racial; they are not just about how to address “blight” but also about ongoing concern about the persistent concentration of Black populations associated with that blight.

Methods

Our methodology was designed with the recognition that narratives of urban change are mutually constitutive with material experiences of that change (Cope & Latham, 2009; Wilson & Grammenos, 2005). We sought to understand how racial differences undergird narratives of disinvestment, predatory extraction, and the other forms of neighborhood change. Building from other socioeconomic studies of neighborhood change (Cortright & Mahmoudi, 2014; Richardson et al., 2019; Preis et al., 2021), we analyzed summary statistics from Decennial Census data for 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010 and the American Community Survey’s (ACS) 5-year data for 2018. The 2018 data is considered more reliable than data collected in the 2020 Decennial Census, which had large undercounts of Hispanic and African American populations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). The 5-year American Community Survey (ACS) data are obtained from a statistical sample, meaning they are subject to sampling error. However, the 5-year ACS data – used in this analysis – are generally considered to be robust due to the low level of sampling error compared to the estimates at the tract level (Jurjevich et al., 2018). As a result, the specific statistical error associated with the data is not reported in this context. Data for 1970–2010 come from the Longitudinal Tract Database (LTDB) which

precompiles Decennial Census data in 2010 tract geographies and harmonizes tract geographies (Logan et al., 2014). This step makes the LTDB data comparable to the 2018 ACS 5-year. For 1970, the count of Hispanic and Latino residents was imputed by using Nativity by Country of Origin and Spanish indicator subcategories. For all other years, these counts are reported in the LTDB or ACS.

Between each period, we used the R Statistical Computing Language (R Core Team, 2021) to calculate the change in median rent (2018 USD), overall change in population, change in the Non-Hispanic or Latino (NHL) White population, change in the NHL Black population, and the change in the Hispanic or Latino population. In this paper, we select Census Tracts based on whether most of the tract overlaps the geography of official Highlandtown and Upton neighborhood boundaries. Neighborhood data are thus not precise, but still characterize the area. Further, it is important to note that change in racial and ethnic groups does not necessarily constitute displacement.

Demographic and economic changes alone cannot adequately describe the varied and contextual forms of neighborhood change, and, as we have argued, in this case miss Baltimore's continued population loss, decline-induced displacement, and brownfield redevelopment. Sensitive to this concern, we engage in a spatially specific contingent analysis which not only provides a lens on the quantitative neighborhood change, but also seeks qualitative descriptions of neighborhood change. We supplemented demographic and economic metrics of neighborhood change with content analysis. We examined *Baltimore Sun* online newspapers between 1933 and 2020⁷, as well as statements from the City of Baltimore, to assess the dominant ways in which neighborhoods of interest were framed. This allowed us to analyze neighborhood change starting just before the HOLC's residential security maps through present-day. We searched for key terms including renewal, revitalization, blight, gentrification, slum, slum clearance, and displacement. Keywords were selected to encompass shifting terms and policies over time. In particular, gentrification was not used as a term in Baltimore until the 1990s. In total, we analyzed 391 articles. We looked for overlap and difference in the ways in which Highlandtown and Upton were framed. We also used the articles to reconstruct policy shifts and priorities. In assessing neighborhood change, Wilson and Grammenos write that "rhetoric is crucial" (2005: 295). Perceptions of change shape decision making of both (potential) residents and investors.

Results

Racial capitalism has long-functioned through exploitative housing practices. Throughout Baltimore's history, intentional government efforts reflected in the placement of public housing and urban renewal projects exacerbated inequalities (City of Baltimore, 2010; DeLuca & Rosenblatt, 2017). In the context of Baltimore, grouping non-white populations together obscures the distinct ways in which Black and immigrant populations are (de)valued. Highlandtown and Upton, both redlined in 1937, diverged over the course of the past eight decades. Upton's urban change can best be characterized by disinvestment and dispossession. In contrast, Highlandtown's median household income is increasing and property values have gone up. Importantly, the presence of Latine/x populations has not deterred investment; in fact, it may even pave the way for gentrification. As municipal government, developers and investors struggled with

population decline, they framed Latine/x immigrants as desirable residents, connected to Baltimore's longer narrative of white immigration. They actively courted Latine/x immigrants, rather than grouping them with Black residents, as is often emphasized in the literature.

Coded as “Undesirable”

When HOLC made their residential security maps Upton was a predominantly Black neighborhood. Highlandtown was a predominantly white immigrant neighborhood that included a large Polish population. HOLC assessors noted that housing values and conditions had declined in both Upton and Highlandtown, although they still reported higher values for houses in Upton. Beyond housing, however, the HOLC assessors found aspects of both neighborhoods' populations to be concerning. In Upton, the assessors listed “Negro concentration” under detrimental influences, reporting that 80 percent of the families living in the neighborhood were “Negro.” Highlandtown was only 2 percent Black but listed “Mixture of foreign born” under detrimental influences, likely referring to the 30 percent of the population that was Polish.

At the time of the HOLC assessment, neither Upton nor Highlandtown were considered stable investments. Yet, their trajectories have diverged significantly since the HOLC made its residential security maps. In 1970, the first year of our quantitative analysis, median rents in East Baltimore and West Baltimore were similar, with no significant difference in rent between Highlandtown and Upton. Although rents were similar, shifts that would ultimately contribute to large disparities were well underway. At the time, Highlandtown was over 96 percent non-Hispanic/Latino White. In contrast, Upton was over 95 percent non-Hispanic/Latino Black. Latine/x populations were minimal in both neighborhoods. By 2018, inflation-adjusted median rents in Highlandtown had significantly increased, with growth especially rapid since 2000. In contrast, when controlling for inflation, we saw little change in Upton, which in 2018, had some of the lowest rental prices in the city. We argue that these differences are linked to the continued effects of anti-Blackness.

Upton and highlandtown through the 1970s

During the mid-twentieth century, from the Federal HOLC's residential security maps to multiple rounds of capital disinvestment and urban renewal, Upton's largely Black population was consistently rendered a-spatial by developers and planners (see Bledsoe & Wright, 2019; Wright & Herman, 2018), allowing Black neighborhoods to be imagined as empty, in need of investment and government intervention. In the first half of the century, Upton was arguably a thriving neighborhood. Its middle-class Black population was increasing, and the neighborhood was, or had been, home to some of Baltimore's most affluent (and most well-known) African Americans, including Frederick Douglass, Thurgood Marshall, and Cab Calloway. Upton's thriving entertainment district attracted visitors from between Harlem and Washington, DC. Yet, the neighborhood's growing Black population was viewed as threatening to nearby white neighborhoods.

By the mid-twentieth century, Upton's population had grown significantly – in part due to an influx of Black migrants looking for jobs during the war. Baltimore's capitalists

perfected several strategies to contain and restrict Black populations' access to different neighborhoods. Some of these tactics included racially restrictive covenants, as well as unwritten practices by real estate actors to spatially restrict loans by race and other efforts to stem the "contagion" of blight (Henderson, 1994).⁸ In 1940, for example, roughly 2,800 out of 3,000 houses in one of the white neighborhoods bordering Upton, for example, had restrictive covenants (Henderson, 1994). This meant that Black migrants needed to crowd into existing housing in a limited number of neighborhoods with Black residents who were already living in Baltimore. In 1940, in the face of white fears over Black population growth and geographical expansion, the city constructed its first Black public housing unit to serve as "... a splendid barrier against the encroachment of colored" into "an adjacent good white residential neighborhood" (Public Housing Authority, as cited in Geldenhuys, 1995). Because of the racially exclusive policies and practices of the past, the image of public housing today is intertwined with Black poverty. Anderson and Sternberg (2013) suggest that Latine/x populations are less affected by this form of spatial stigmatization, a factor attributed to the different "socioracial" historical legacies of different neighborhoods. Baltimore continued to construct public housing units in historically Black areas, such as Upton, rather than in neighboring white areas. While ethnically white immigrants also faced challenging housing conditions, they were able to access more spaces of the city than were Black residents (Williams, 2004). The increase of less affluent Black populations in neighborhoods such as Upton furthered the trend of middle-class Black families migrating to the suburbs. According to the *Baltimore Sun*, these population shifts negatively affected the area. "Once the hub of a strong Black cultural and financial community, the [Pennsylvania] avenue by 1968 had deteriorated into a sprawling wasteland" (Rhoden, 1981: C1).

Urban renewal further exacerbated Upton's decline. One of Baltimore's largest renewal plans focused on Upton. Between 1951 and 1964, the government displaced 3,100 families from the Southern part of Upton and nearby districts (McDougall, 1993). As part of the renewal, small shops, theaters, and music clubs were demolished, which systematically destroyed Black communities and sense of place (see McKittrick, 2013). Further, some houses deemed worth saving were included in demolition plans (Keidel, 1968). Row homes were replaced with "superblocks of low-income housing" (Upton Power, 2017, p. 25). This change in the type of housing available, combined with the destruction of community institutions, foreshadowed ongoing rounds of capital accumulation and re/development projects in Upton.

While rents in Upton and Highlandtown were not significantly different in 1970, the narratives surrounding the neighborhoods had already diverged. Upton was largely seen through a lens of slum clearance and urban renewal policies. According to an article in the *Baltimore Sun*, "Upton now has the look, smell, feel of inner-city negro ghetto ... the Upton plans seem to be based on a realization that the neighborhood is likely to remain poor" (Baltimore Sun, 1969). Most aspects of the "renewal" focused on federally subsidized housing for low-income to moderate-income people. During this time, property values in the Upton area declined. In 1971, in anticipation of an \$18 million urban renewal grant from the federal government, the city leveled whole blocks. However, a moratorium on disbursing federal funds left the housing agency with deteriorated homes and no funding. Despite the

passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968, banks still frequently refused to invest in the area (McDougall, 1993).

In contrast, city and philanthropic groups actively worked to prevent population loss and a decline in property values in predominantly white Highlandtown. The neighborhood was struggling with the loss of Bethlehem Steel and other industrial jobs, and some more affluent residents moved away. As Highlandtown's population and wealth declined overall, it became harder to access loans to maintain properties – and some people began to refer to southeast Baltimore, including Highlandtown, as the “white ghetto.” Yet residents were able to leverage their whiteness to organize and prevent portions of southeastern Baltimore from being rezoned for industrial land use. They also successfully lobbied to get federal money for sanitation and other services (McBride, 1977). The city and the Ford Foundation provided resources for community organizing groups to purchase and improve houses before speculators could move in (Kuttner, 1976). Further, residents formed a local branch of Neighborhood Housing Services whose main aim was to promote home ownership and counter the effects of federal redlining from earlier decades. Labeled as ethnic renewal, their efforts were credited with improving the neighborhood without displacement (Kuttner, 1976). Newspaper articles supported Highlandtown's portrayal as a close-knit immigrant and ethnic neighborhood. An article from the *Baltimore Sun* in 1972 emphasized Highlandtown's stability as a working-class (white) neighborhood, interviewing residents to emphasize how little had changed over the decades. While residents in Upton also organized to maintain their neighborhoods, government officials, investors and philanthropists overlooked, dismissed, or perceived the efforts as ineffective in the face of dominating narratives linking Blackness with declining property values.

Racism and population decline

Between 1970 and 1980, Upton's population remained nearly all Black, although the total population declined from 13,286 to 11,670. The spatial concentration of Black people was seen as a proxy for low land value (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019; Pulido, 2016). Upton's population loss was accompanied by economic decline and disinvestment through the 1980s. There were periodic efforts to “revitalize” Upton, but multiple redevelopment plans, including a \$152 million dollar superblock, never came to fruition, and in other situations, “investment” took the form of predatory extraction (see Zaimi, 2022). Population continued to decline throughout the 1990s, with a net loss of nearly 4,000 people between 1990 and 2000. Despite residents' efforts to establish Upton as a Historical District and to promote intra-community renovations, a community activist living in Upton described the neighborhood as “a dumping ground for people renting slum housing” (Jacobson, 1994, 2B). The City of Baltimore also continued to borrow federal money for the construction of low-income subsidized housing in Upton.

During the 1990s, Highlandtown also lost a significant number of its white population. Over the same period, however, it gained both Black and Latine/x populations (although it remained over 90 percent white). This is especially important given the dominant narrative of population loss for Baltimore as a whole. Further, while Highlandtown lost about 13 percent of its population over the decade, Upton's population declined by about 1/3 (Table 1). In 1990, rent in Highlandtown was nearly double the rent in

Table 1. Population change in Upton and Highlandtown between 1970 and 2014-2018 (Logan et al., 2014; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). White and Black populations are non-Hispanic.

		Upton	Highlandtown	Baltimore City
1970 Census	Population	13,286	13,247	879,354
	White	3.9%	99.3%	53.0%
	Black	95.4%	0.2%	46.2%
	Hispanic/Latino	0.0%	0.2%	0.2%
1980 Census	Population	11,670	11,404	785,512
	White	3.6%	98.2%	43.4%
	Black	95.0%	0.3%	54.5%
	Hispanic/Latino	0.8%	0.9%	1.0%
1990 Census	Population	11,813	11,088	735,941
	White	2.8%	94.9%	38.6%
	Black	96.3%	2.0%	58.9%
	Hispanic/Latino	0.4%	1.5%	1.0%
2000 Census	Population	7,973	9,740	651,154
	White	4.6%	70.9%	31.0%
	Black	93.0%	18.3%	64.0%
	Hispanic/Latino	0.7%	6.4%	1.7%
2010 Census	Population	8,009	10,503	620,961
	White	3.8%	54.3%	28.0%
	Black	92.6%	18.2%	63.3%
	Hispanic/Latino	1.4%	22.3%	4.2%
2018 ACS	Population	7,137	10,261	614,700
	White	4.6%	60.7%	27.5%
	Black	91.2%	14.9%	61.9%
	Hispanic/Latino	0.9%	18.6%	5.1%
Difference, 1970 Census to 2018 ACS	Population	−6,149	−2,986	−264,654
	White, Share	+0.7%	−38.6%	−25.5%
	Black, Share	−4.2%	+14.7%	+15.7%
	Hispanic/Latino Share	+0.9%	+18.4%	+4.9%

Upton (\$705 versus \$373, Table 2), but was still viewed as a working-class neighborhood at risk of further decline.

Community groups in both Upton and Highlandtown actively worked to “renew” their neighborhoods, focusing on both commercial main streets and residential areas. During multiple phases, the City of Baltimore and private philanthropies implemented policies aimed at encouraging people to move to, or stay in, in the city. However, such efforts were not evenly spread throughout the city. For example, in 1998, the Abell Foundation partnered with a neighborhood association serving parts of East Baltimore including Highlandtown to create the Home Value Guarantee program, in which homeowners who enrolled in the program received a guarantee that their home value would not decrease; if their home sold for less than its value at the time of program enrollment, the Foundation would make up the difference. Newspaper articles promoted

Table 2. Inflation adjusted Median Rents between 1970 and 2014-2018 in 2018 USD (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001; 2019).

	Upton	Highlandtown
1970 Census	\$452	\$499
1980 Census	\$349	\$529
1990 Census	\$373	\$705
2000 Census	\$393	\$707
2010 Census	\$517	\$1,302
2018 ACS	\$425	\$1,450

homeownership in Highlandtown, emphasizing its location and affordable prices – just over \$41,000 at the time (Jones-Bonbrest, 1999). The city invested millions to open a new library branch in Highlandtown, which they envisioned as an anchor for the main commercial thoroughfare, and provided matching grants to businesses to update their facades. These efforts were part of an active strategy to counter outmigration and fears of declining property values. No such programs existed in Upton. Community self-reliance alone cannot substitute for municipal investment (Reese, 2018). The disparity between investor and governmental support for Highlandtown and Upton reflected beliefs about the long-term value of the respective neighborhoods, compounding the commitment of capital to white neighborhoods and the belief that Black neighborhoods should be cut-off from the access to capital.

Development in highlandtown, disinvestment in upton

In the late 1990s, Highlandtown was still described as a neighborhood experiencing physical decline, with 25 percent storefront vacancies on its main commercial street. However, it is around this time when the narratives of Upton and Highlandtown diverge even more, with increased interest and rising rental pricing in Highlandtown and continued stagnation in Upton (Table 2). Successive mayors tried to portray Baltimore as a welcoming place for immigrants and refugees, suggesting they could “help offset decades of dwindling population” (Brewington, 2004), revive commercial streets, and contribute to Baltimore’s urban renaissance. By renting houses that might otherwise become vacant, Latine/x communities potentially stemmed further urban decline (Bowie, 2004). In 2004, the mayor’s liaison to the Hispanic community was quoted in the *Baltimore Sun*, saying, “They’re [the Latine/x community] going to revitalize our city. They’re hard workers. They pay taxes and never complain. Let’s reach out to them” (Vozzella, 2004). Yet, migrant communities themselves are diverse. To entice “desirable” migrants – those who were framed by city officials as adding economic and cultural capital – to Baltimore, the city offered \$3,000 grants to Latine/x populations who bought houses. Once again, similar promotions were not offered to Black residents (Kane, 2004). While such promotions did not focus on specific areas, because of the concentration of Latine/x residents in East Baltimore, neighborhoods such as Highlandtown disproportionately benefited.

Some directly credit Latine/x families with reviving Highlandtown and bringing new life to a neighborhood that had lost population and businesses (Kelly, 2012). Since 2000, Highlandtown’s population slowly increased while Upton continued to experience population decline. In the context of Baltimore, Latine/x residents stem abandonment by investing capital and signaling that a neighborhood is comparatively safe for investment.

Some studies present Baltimore as one of the most rapidly gentrifying cities (see Richardson et al., 2019). According to the NCRC, between 2000 and 2013, 16 Census Tracts of Baltimore’s 200 total tracts experienced significant neighborhood change that the authors labeled as gentrification (Richardson et al., 2019). These tracts included Highlandtown and surrounding areas but did not include Upton. When data is analyzed separate from broader population growth or decline, development and disinvestment shifts may be inaccurately labeled as gentrification. A label of “gentrification” may be

especially misleading when there is minimal population growth and an increase in mixed-use development but little evidence of displacement.

Our analysis demonstrates the serious quantitative demographic and economic change that complemented the qualitative change since 1970. [Table 1](#) indicates that Highlandtown is experiencing continued housing development and changing demographics due to the in-migration of people, in this case, primarily Latine/x populations. According to an Urban Institute report, between 2004 and 2016, construction, investment, and demolition per household was significantly higher in Highlandtown than in Upton (Theodos et al., 2020). A combination of private, city and state loans have also been used to entice businesses to relocate to Highlandtown. In 2018, Highlandtown's median rent increased to \$1,450, more than triple Upton's median rent, which dropped slightly to \$425 ([Table 2](#)).

In contrast, "investment" in Upton focuses predominantly on demolition of vacant housing. Evidence from Detroit demonstrates how demolition and blight removal are major capital-generating strategies guiding suburbanization (Koscielniak, 2019). Upton mirrors this "decline-as-urbanization" strategy. Much of the middle-income housing was destroyed and replaced with superblocks geared towards low-income populations. Upton has the equivalent of 14.5 football fields of unmaintained vacant land, about half of which the City of Baltimore owns (Upton Power, 2017, p. 38). Nearly one-third of homes are vacant and the City has been slowly clearing blighted buildings. There are few comprehensive plans outlining future development plans. Today, Upton is once again the recipient of a HUD neighborhood development grant (the Promise Zones grant) and is considered a priority area for funding by the Baltimore City government (Rao, 2021). Upton also continues to have an active community association working to attract investment in a way that benefits current residents. However, if investors (and appraisers) from outside of Upton continue to discount neighborhood efforts to maintain and improve the area, it is unclear to what extent "redevelopment" of Upton will be any different than in the past.

Discussion

Two neighborhoods that were redlined in the 1930s, with relatively similar housing values, experienced significantly different trajectories. To explain these differences, we situate redlining in the long progression of racial capitalism, suggesting that redlining cannot be understood as a one-time, finite event that determines a neighborhood's future. Rather, neighborhoods were devalued and invested in multiple ways over the course of the past century by city elites in pursuit of various and sometimes competing interests. Additionally, simplistic narratives of urban change, such as those about gentrification, overlook important differences in the ways in which racial capitalism and ethnic hierarchies combine with the uneven production of space.

Upton's change can largely be described by active disinvestment and destruction. As was often the case, redlining became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Limited access to finance made it hard to maintain property, especially in the face of population increases from Black migrants and from those being displaced from other areas. Deteriorating living conditions then became the justification for slum clearance policies, which destroyed a Black sense of place. The federal government used renewal funds to construct

superblocks for low-income Black residents, razing blocks of existing housing. Yet, mortgage moratoriums and significant population loss led to an increase in vacant housing.

Between 1940 and 2010, Upton lost nearly three-quarters of its population. The elimination of “blight” continues to serve as a primary justification for urban policy, ignoring *why* so many vacancies came to exist or in what ways such vacancies became a form of profit creation. The case of Upton indicates how government and private investors repeatedly *chose* strategies of predatory extraction.

Since 1937, Upton has stayed majority Black and today is 96% Black, whereas the city is 63% Black. We suggest that its depiction as a Black neighborhood has been central to the possibilities imagined for the neighborhood, particularly by developers and planners. Further, as has been found in other cities, the greater the Black population in a neighborhood, the lower the likelihood of white people buying homes. The neighborhood becomes stigmatized and loses population, further exacerbating problems with vacancies, capital investment, and a narrowing of imagined futures. Reflective of such limitations, 57 percent of Upton’s residential housing is multifamily superblocks, including public and subsidized housing (Upton Power, 2017).

In contrast, Highlandtown’s depiction as an immigrant neighborhood allowed it to avoid some of the challenges faced in Upton. Like Upton, Highlandtown did suffer population decline. Yet, while it lost white population, an increase in Black and Latine/x residents countered some of that decline. Further, Highlandtown was not a target of federal redevelopment funds (which the city was using for demolition and conversion to larger buildings). This meant that Highlandtown properties were not razed and replaced with subpar superblocks of low-income housing. Highlandtown did experience decline, but when various populations became interested in moving (back) to Baltimore, immigrant populations did not act as a significant deterrent as did Black populations. The affordability of housing and businesses attracted some of the first sizable Latine/x populations, who brought an influx of capital into the area. Baltimore’s Latine/x presence is newer and smaller compared to other East Coast cities. Most of the Latine/x population has settled in mixed-race or predominantly white neighborhoods. There is no overlap between areas with concentrated Latine/x populations and areas with concentrated Black populations. As younger affluent populations considered moving to Baltimore, the larger white population of neighborhoods such as Highlandtown, combined with the flavor of its immigrant history, made Highlandtown ripe for neighborhood change. In contrast, Upton continued to be seen through a lens of blight and redevelopment.

It is dubious to claim Baltimore is rapidly gentrifying when Baltimore as a whole continues to shrink. The development associated with gentrification enables property owners to extract higher rents from tenants. In Upton, a disproportionate number of investors are buying homes to rent out. Because of the abundance of vacant and poor-quality housing, the neighborhood is at risk for predatory milking, or what Mallach (2020) describes as buying low-cost housing, renting it out as-is without making needed repairs, possibly not paying property taxes, and then selling again a few years later having made a cash profit. Such practices raise concerns that tax breaks and other forms of finance may result in the continuation of on-going and long-term deterioration. The resulting state of the neighborhood is unquestionably far from notions of gentrification-based development, population growth associated with increased demand, the

extraction of higher rents, and price-based displacement. Instead, these development characteristics signal a predatory extraction of capital from those that are precariously housed or otherwise marginalized, a type of citymaking that necessitates a continued state of neighborhood decline.

Throughout Baltimore, on-going population loss is primarily concentrated in low-income, majority Black neighborhoods while growth is concentrated in primarily white, wealthy neighborhoods. Upton's change is akin to continuation of the active disinvestment that has been driving the neighborhood's population decline since the mid-twentieth century. In the case of Highlandtown, brownfield redevelopment⁹ and in-migration of Latine/x residents might inadvertently cause metrics to identify the neighborhood as undergoing gentrification and displacement. Yet, Highlandtown serves as an example of the tendency to mislabel urban investment as gentrification. Such an interpretation overlooks the critical nuances of urban investment and development. The reality in Highlandtown contradicts typical narratives of gentrification: without substantial population growth or clear evidence of displacement, what we observe instead signals ongoing development, potentially setting the stage for future gentrification.

These neighborhood transformations illustrate how city elites strategically use the gentrification narrative to further political and economic agendas, often obscuring the underlying realities of race and class-based inequities. It is a lack of gentrification that is presented as a problem in Black neighborhoods such as Upton – thus justifying the city's decision to provide funding to attract outside developers. But simplifying debates about whether gentrification is positive or negative obscures the other types of investment and disinvestment occurring. Thus, city elites mask the underlying logics of racial capitalism, shifting the focus away from the systemic inequities that these policies perpetuate.

Conclusion

Pervasive anti-Blackness in Baltimore resulted in greater interest in, and eventual acceptance of, immigrant communities, which eventually expanded to include Latine/x populations (regardless of actual immigrant status). Failure to interrogate how capitalism exploits difference beyond white/non-white divides allows powerful narratives of urban change to proceed unquestioned. While the presence of Black populations lowered rental values and the perceived desirability of a neighborhood, the presence of Latine/x populations contributed to rising rental values. As argued, Latine/x populations may have added to neighborhood appeal by continuing a narrative of vibrant immigrant communities. In contrast, Upton is continuously racialized as Black and as a result, the neighborhood is made and remade as a place of predatory capital extraction, obfuscated by narratives of development and disinvestment. Our results reinforce arguments about the relationality of land valuation (Launius & Boyce, 2021) and contribute to literature challenging gentrification as the dominant mode of understanding urban development (McElroy & Werth, 2019; Seymour & Akers, 2023). In Baltimore, developers and planners steered investment to Latine/x neighborhoods where such investments were presented as worthwhile. Conversely, planners and developers actively divested from majority Black neighborhoods. This mirrors Filomeno's (2017) findings: that cities

with bifurcated ethnic populations (in this case, a mostly Black and white population) and economic decline are more likely to embrace inclusionary immigration policies.

Racist logics structure the process of accumulation by dispossession in variegated ways. Launius and Boyce (2021) emphasize the importance of not “flattening” experiences across differences. To avoid this pitfall, it is important to interrogate how race and ethnicity are weaponized in narratives of change to justify investment and disinvestment. Further, dominant ideas about gentrification and legacies of redlining overlook ways in which other urban development strategies can also be exploitative. Our findings show that historical redlining alone cannot account for ongoing segregation. Instead, government officials, policy makers and investors actively reinforced racial segregation through ongoing rounds of uneven investment and disinvestment. Some may claim that Baltimore has too little gentrification because gentrification is seen as a main strategy, or the only method, of urban development (Smith, 2002), represented as a positive when it is used as a stand in for demographic change and investment. But if we only look for gentrification, ways in which decline is used to generate profit may be overlooked. In the specific case of Baltimore, while Upton is framed under a narrative of continuous decline, Highlandtown is framed as prospering, which makes any priming for gentrification and potential displacement that does occur appear to be less problematic.

Our goal with this paper is not to suggest that Latine/x communities have not suffered from dispossession. Rather, it is to expose how relational difference between non-white groups is exploited to extract profit through neighborhood investment and disinvestment. To understand urban change, scholars must closely interrogate demographic and economic shifts in *conjunction* with analyses of the ways in which Black and Latinx/e neighborhoods are portrayed. We found differing narratives about Highlandtown and Upton. Newspapers, and the city officials and philanthropists quoted in them, continuously framed Highlandtown as an immigrant neighborhood, worth preserving. In contrast, they framed Upton as a slum that could only become valuable by removing existing Black people and destroying Black neighborhoods. These narratives facilitate different ends: in one case reifying whiteness, investment, and rising property values, and in the other, anti-Blackness, which reinforces a state of decline, predatory extraction and reaping profit from continual rounds of “renewal” and blight removal. Failure to understand the nuanced and specific ways in which difference is used to extract profit hinders the possibility for more just urban futures.

Notes

1. Data is based on Census Tract data that approximates the neighborhoods.
2. At the same time, while neighborhoods are framed as either Black or immigrant such populations are not mutually exclusive (Cahaus, 2019).
3. Black domestic workers settled around Upton, in homes proximal to wealthy whites for whom they worked (Henderson, 1994). Highlandtown attracted immigrants because of its proximity to ports and factories.
4. While comprehensive data examining ethnicity, race and immigration status together is not available, Baltimore is home to Black immigrants from Africa and Latin America, as well as other individuals that defy easy categorization by the US Census Bureau. We focus on the narratives describing particular neighborhoods in Baltimore, while recognizing that the narratives themselves only reflect partial realities.

5. When Black displacement did occur, whites were also displaced (Meehan, Baltimore Sun, 2019).
6. See for example the article in *The Economist* titled “Bring on the hipsters” (2015).
7. We also searched through the *Afro*, Baltimore’s Black-led newspaper, but did not find relevant neighborhood specific articles. The *Baltimore Sun* publication history spans our time period, providing a consistent view of Baltimore’s history.
8. Eventually ruled unconstitutional, Baltimore’s 1910 housing ordinance prohibiting housing sales to Black people on majority white streets (and vice-versa) became a model for cities throughout the United States.
9. Sites of Baltimore’s now defunct heavy industry are undergoing environmental remediation and redeveloped for mixed-use urban development or re-use as warehouses.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the editor, the three anonymous reviewers, Dawn Biehler, Alicia Sabatino, and the audience at the 2021 Race, Ethnicity, and Place Conference for comments on an earlier draft, as well as Ari Cacic and Aren Warner for contributions to this research. All errors are our own.

Data availability statement

Data are available from the corresponding author, DM, upon reasonable request.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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