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Abstract

In this paper, I will analyze gentrification in the city of Seattle, Washington. I argue that gentrification in Seattle is driven by the tech and real estate industries that are powerful and lucrative enough to deter accountability despite the City Council's efforts. First, I will discuss gentrification mostly through a sociological lens. Then, I will consider gentrification in Seattle, focusing on the Central District, South Lake Union, Capitol Hill, and First Hill neighborhoods. Additionally, I will discuss the role immigration plays in gentrification and the vulnerability of certain communities in Seattle. Finally, I will analyze the efforts the City Council has made to curb gentrification and the challenges they have faced in their efficiency.

Keywords

Gentrification, Seattle, Tech, Racism, Housing discrimination

Disciplines

African American Studies | Inequality and Stratification | Race and Ethnicity

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Gentrification in Seattle: Amazon Overpowers the City Council

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AFS 250: Housing & Race

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Amazon Overpowers the City Council

As early as the 1950s, a series of white flights occurred throughout the US in cities including New Orleans, Minneapolis, Seattle, and New York City. White residents fled the urban centers for the “safety” of the suburbs, which allowed metropolitan areas to become centers for racial and ethnic communities. Now, these urban areas are going through another demographic change. From the 2000s onwards, metropolitan areas have experienced an influx of college-educated, typically white, and/or higher income communities. With the influx of these populations there have been spikes in housing costs and values, educational opportunities, high-skilled career opportunities, artisan pizza shops, and yoga and cycling studios. This population migration is known as gentrification. Scholars in urban development, sociology, public health, and critical race studies have analyzed gentrification with various spheres of their work including community development, environmental health, and immigration.

In this paper, I will analyze gentrification in the city of Seattle, Washington. Seattle is a port city located in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. The city is known for its coffee, vast outdoor recreation, and as a hub for technology giants like Facebook, Microsoft, and most notoriously, Amazon. I argue that gentrification in Seattle is driven by the tech and real estate industries that are powerful and lucrative enough to deter accountability despite the City Council’s efforts. First, I will discuss gentrification mostly through a sociological lens. Then, I will consider gentrification in Seattle, focusing on the Central District, South Lake Union, Capitol Hill, and First Hill neighborhoods. Additionally, I will discuss the role immigration plays in gentrification and the vulnerability of certain communities in Seattle. Finally, I will analyze the efforts

the City Council has made to curb gentrification and the challenges they have faced in their efficiency.

Gentrification is occurring in major cities across the US. The phenomenon is easy to spot as more modern-looking houses and luxury apartments pop up in seemingly out-of-place neighborhoods. Balk (2019) characterizes gentrification as, “not the easiest thing to define, but like a Supreme Court justice once said about pornography, you know it when you see it” (para, 1). Gentrification sticks out like a sore thumb—the energy of the neighborhood is off. Gentrification looks like yoga studios, SoulCycle’s, new sidewalks, and Tron-like houses with big windows and an even bigger entry price.

While Balk (2019) maintains that gentrification is “not the easiest thing to define,” a definition does, in fact, exist. According to De Witte (2019), sociologist Jackelyn Hwang defines gentrification as, “an influx of investment and middle/upper-income residents into previously low-income neighborhoods” (para. 2). Hwang’s definition addresses the displacement that is inherent to gentrification. Low-income residents, who are typically of color, often cannot keep up with the imploding costs of their neighborhoods causing them to move; the skyrocketing costs caused by gentrification also cause reorganizations of families’ and individuals’ incomes restricting their disposable income and affordability of other essential costs outside of housing like food, healthcare, and transportation. Some have identified benefits of gentrification, specifically the new, white wealth that is brought into neighborhoods and the city. While gentrification brings wealth into an area, it does so in a displacing way that is detrimental to the original residents. Since gentrification occurs in low-income

neighborhoods that have been plagued by blight and population loss, the new wealth is seen as a solution to the decades of suffering; however, gentrification does not work to ameliorate community's condition. Instead, gentrification works to displace what is seen as the non-white, poor "problem," so that the suffering can occur elsewhere.

Rice et al (2019) goes further in defining gentrification, addressing its links to location within the city:

... more middle- and upper-income urban residents are choosing to live near public transit, on bike- and pedestrian-friendly streets, and in higher-density mixed-use areas. This rejection of classical forms of suburbanization has, in part, increased property values in neighborhoods offering these amenities, displacing lower-income, often non-white, residents. Increased prevalence of creative and technology workers appears to accelerate this trend. (sec. 1)

The acceleration of gentrification in areas that offer the amenities described by Rice et al (2019) is exactly the case in the city of Seattle. Seattle offers employment opportunities for creative and technology workers who accelerate gentrification. Next, I will analyze gentrification in Seattle.

Gentrification can be seen everywhere in Seattle; Balk (2019) identifies it as, "formerly modest neighborhoods transformed by luxury apartment buildings, trendy restaurants, crossfit gyms and so on" (para. 2). The demographics and housing and property costs in Seattle began increasing around 2010. Gentrification in Seattle is largely due to the presence of large technology and biotechnology companies like Amazon, Microsoft, and Google. From 2012 to 2019, Seattle's population increased from 609,000 to 725,000 as Google, Facebook, Salesforce, and Amazon expanded

their campuses and workforce (Read, 2019). These companies increased the number of college-educated residents needed in Seattle. These changing demographics of college-educated people can be seen in the city. According to Balk (2019), a study conducted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia found the following:

the bulk of gentrification in Seattle occurred in the central part of the city. But there are pockets of gentrification across the city—North, West, and South Seattle all contain formerly low-income areas that experienced a dramatic increase in the share of college-education residents. (para. 11)

With the influx of higher-income college educated residents, the needs and priorities of Seattle's neighborhoods changed. Low-income, often of color, residents were left feeling out of place and completely financially displaced as the composition of their neighborhoods changed. Read (2019) describes the population and economic boom in Seattle as the transformation of a "once economical, laid-back city" into a "country club" those not in real estate or Amazon are able to join (para. 3).

Real estate companies acted as a catalyst for gentrification as they bought out apartment buildings and properties and set housing costs on-par with the salaries of well-paid technicians, software engineers, marketing executives, and so on within Amazon, Google, and Microsoft. According to Read (2019), "rents are up nearly 70% on average since 2010. Luxury apartments have been so hot that downtown leasing agents operate like future traders, quoting prices that float daily" (para. 4).

Gentrification hit hardest in the Central District of Seattle. The neighborhood was historically Black but has now become majority white and much more affluent (Balk, 2019). Black residents in the Central District have been displaced by the influx of

technology and biotechnology workers who have moved into the neighborhood to be close to their employment campus. With regard to displacement, Suttner (2019) mentions that “The Central District used to be the largest African American community north of California, but that population is now moving outside the city” (para 6). Similar neighborhoods-- South Lake Union, Capitol Hill, and First Hill-- have undergone relating demographic changes.

The South Lake Union neighborhood, formerly an industrial and commercial area, has been transformed by technology giants, like Amazon, Google, and Microsoft and biotechnology companies who have made the area home (Rice et al, 2019). The presence of these companies has spiked housing costs and caused influxes of young, highly educated, affluent residents. This gentrification has resulted in Black resident populations decreasing by, “more than 2% (10.3 to 7.8%) and 28% (52.7 to 24.7%) respectively between 1990 and 2010” in the Capitol Hill, First Hill, and South Lake Union neighborhoods (Rice et al, 2019, p. 6). These demographic shifts have caused the absence of a majority Black American area in Seattle. Additionally, these areas have higher educational attainment, incomes, and average median home values. The number of residents 25 years and older with a Bachelor’s degree increased by 14.1% and 19.9% in the Capitol Hill/First Hill/South Lake Union and Central District neighborhoods, respectively over the past 10 to 15 years; between 2000 and 2015, the average ratio of median household income in these neighborhoods, relative to the city median household income, increased by 18% and 20% in the Capitol Hill/First Hill/South Lake Union and Central District, respectively; and finally, average median home values

grew by 11.9% and 17.7% in the Capitol Hill/First Hill/South Lake Union and Central District, respectively between 2011-2015 (Rice et al, 2019).

Immigration in Seattle plays an interesting role on gentrification. Asians are the predominant immigrant in the city. In Seattle, areas with higher populations of Black Americans have been subjected to more gentrifying redevelopment than areas with higher populations of Asians (De Witte, 2019, p. 2). Therefore, Black Seattleites are disproportionately affected by gentrification. De Witte (2019) reports that:

Hwang found that arriving immigrants, who are predominantly Asian in Seattle, have concentrated in neighborhoods with more Asians, which has deterred gentrification in those areas... The results suggest that increased immigration to a city with a tight housing market may have unintended consequences on black urban neighborhoods, because black urban residents may disproportionately face displacement and subsequent disadvantages on the housing market. (para. 4-5)

Previous studies by the sociologist Hwang have found that large densities of people of color, specifically Black Americans greater than 40%, deters gentrification. Seattle is unique in that large densities of non-white communities do not exist besides the immigrant community. Additionally, increased populations of Black residents escalate a neighborhood's gentrifying potential. Hwang found a correlation between neighborhoods' Asian population and gentrifying potential. De Witte (2019) presents:

Hwang's analysis showed that a 1 percentage point increase in a neighborhood's share of Asians in 1990 was associated with a 3.9 percent decrease in the odds of a neighborhood gentrifying by 2013. However, when there was a 1 percentage

point increase in a neighborhood's share of African Americans it was associated with a 3.4 percent increase in the odds of a neighborhood gentrifying. (para. 13-14)

The link between immigration and gentrification in Seattle can be related to the influence of technology and biotechnology companies in the city. While career opportunities presented by tech giants like Amazon and Microsoft are not the calling of all Asian immigrants, there is a large population of Asians in the tech industry. Therefore, the gentrification happening in Seattle is still of large influence from the tech industry even with the link of immigration to gentrification in the city.

Finally, I will discuss how the tech and real estate industries are powerful and lucrative enough to escape accountability for Seattle's gentrification. In 2019, the City Council made public efforts and progress towards curbing gentrification. In March of 2019, Seattle's City Council unanimously adopted a measure to build affordable housing; however, the plan's goal to create 6,000 affordable housing units falls 150,000 units short of what the metro area needs (Read, 2019). The measure also included forcing real estate companies to either build low-income units in their existing properties or pay into the city's affordable housing fund. This inclusion does little to ameliorate the current housing crisis and rapid displacement caused by gentrification as most companies pay the fee rather than build low-income units. Read (2019) states that, "...paying the fee avoids the uncertainty of how regulations could change during the 50 years building owners are locked into keeping the units low-income" (para. 17). While the city is funding more and more affordable-housing construction, the waitlists for subsidized housing in the area are often months or years long. There is a movement for

rent control building that is led by Seattle City Councilmember Kshama Sawant. The City Council has targeted Amazon directly in its lack of effective community development and accountability. Read (2019) reports that, “last year the council imposed an annual tax of \$275 per worker on Amazon and other large employers to fund housing and services for homeless people” (para. 27); however, this tax did not last long as the council quickly faced backlash from Amazon and other companies causing them to repeal the tax.

Besides the tech and real estate companies in the city, another challenge to constructing low-income and affordable housing units are zoning regulations. Read (2019) identifies single-family zoning as a large detriment to affordable housing:

to make real progress, the city would have to allow apartment buildings and other multi-unit building in residential neighborhoods that have long been zoned for single-family houses... In Seattle, it was residents of single-family neighborhoods who most vigorously fought the affordable-housing initiative, filing a lawsuit that delayed the measure for a year. (para. 23-25)

While tech and real estate companies provide some capital in the construction of affordable housing to offset the displacement caused by gentrification, zoning regulations impede the actual construction of these units by the City Council. This obstacle points to the need to hold real estate companies accountable by enforcing them to build low-income, affordable housing units in areas where zoning already permits, which they own; instead, the ability to contribute to an affordable housing fund allows the company to dodge true accountability and action. Along with zoning, affordable housing initiatives are derailed by cultural norms of the area. Hess (2019)

maintains that the “vestiges of historical discrimination, therefore, underpin redevelopment opportunities created by public investments in racially diverse, central-city neighborhoods” (p. 155). Therefore, despite the best efforts of the City Council, efforts must be made by the community and larger structure of the city to ameliorate the effects of gentrification.

Gentrification in Seattle is driven by the tech and real estate industries that are powerful and lucrative enough to deter accountability despite the City Council’s efforts. The presence of the large technology and biotechnology campuses for companies like Amazon, Microsoft, and Google in neighborhoods like Capitol Hill, South Lake Union, First Hill, and Central District have driven the influx of investment and middle/upper-income residents into these lower income neighborhoods. For Central District especially, which was a historically Black neighborhood, gentrification has caused the displacement of Black residents as the neighborhood is now majority white and more affluent. The City Council has made efforts to slow and stop gentrification and its effects, especially displacement, through measures forcing tech and real estate companies to maintain some accountability. However, their efforts do not do enough to combat gentrification’s displacement as the construction low-income and affordable housing units does not meet the needs of those affected in the city. Gentrification in Seattle is driven by the tech and real estate industries that are not held accountable effectively.

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