Retail Gentrification and Race: The Case of Alberta Street in Portland, Oregon

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Abstract
Alberta Street is emblematic of Portland’s image as a city that embraces the “creative class,” ranking high in being “bohemian” and embracing “diversity.” It is a street that has had a decline in Black businesses and an increase in White ones, both mainstream and bohemian. Through interviews with long-time Black and White residents, we find that race is salient for understanding their use and opinion of the new retail sector. Many Blacks have negative feelings, and they use racial language to articulate why they dislike the products offered and how they feel culturally excluded. Longtime, mainstream White residents, in contrast, fully embrace the new retail. These findings should give pause to cities that promote economic development by making themselves attractive to the “creative class”: They may be refashioning their cities and neighborhoods—including their retail—in a way that is hostile to some forms of diversity, including longtime Black residents in gentrifying neighborhoods.

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Since its beginning, the gentrification literature has focused largely on the residential aspect of neighborhood change. This has shifted recently, however, as scholars from a range of disciplines have started to examine the retail sector. This new focus is vital because, at an instrumental level, retail gentrification influences the goods and services available to residents, both long-time and new ones (Byrne 2003; LeVeen 2004). At a cultural level, retail gentrification creates quasi-public spaces in which (some) residents feel comfortable shopping and hanging out (Patch 2008; Zukin 2008; Zukin et al. 2009); it gives them a reason to spend time in the neighborhood.

Most retail gentrification studies take a *semiotic* approach, focusing on the symbolic language of the new businesses (Bridge and Dowling 2001; Zukin and Kosta 2004; Deener 2007). They highlight the social class divide that typifies gentrification, and some also suggest racial divisions: New retail offers goods and services that cater to newcomers, charge prices that correspond to professional incomes, and create cultural symbols and spaces that tend to attract newcomers but alienate long-time residents (Patch 2008; Zukin 2008; Zukin et al. 2009). A few studies include an *interpretive* account by interviewing residents, some of whom are long-time. These studies confirm that long-time residents do not find many of the new products and services meeting their instrumental needs, they feel culturally uncomfortable shopping in them, and they are resentful that new businesses have displaced established ones (e.g., Freeman 2006; Maurrasse 2006; Deener 2007). Although by definition there are social class differences between long-time and new residents in gentrifying neighborhoods and many involve racial change, it is unclear how much race plays a factor in long-time residents’ use and opinion of new retail. This lack of clarity is the result of previous studies not interviewing both Black and White long-time residents who live in the same neighborhood.

This study contributes to the retail gentrification research by using an interpretive examination of long-time residents in the Alberta neighborhood in Portland, Oregon. Portland—like Austin, Minneapolis, Seattle, and others—is a midsized city that has gentrifying neighborhoods (including retail sectors), is majority White, and has a smaller Black population and less racial segregation than larger cities (Renn 2009). Like these other midsized cities, Portland is also recognized by Richard Florida (2002) and other “creative city” advocates (e.g., Bulick et al. 2003) as having a significant amount of people who are “creative,” “bohemian,” and attracted to “diversity,” which describes many recent newcomers to the Alberta neighborhood particularly well. It would seem that if new retail were to be used and accepted by long-time residents in any racially mixed, gentrifying neighborhood, then the Alberta neighborhood would be a very good candidate since local organizations have
touted the importance of racial diversity (Portland Bureau of Planning 1993b; Art on Alberta 2010), and it has had a substantial amount of both Black and White residents since the 1950s. It is this racial diversity among longtime residents that gives us a methodological advantage: If we find differences between Blacks and Whites, we can affirm with more confidence the salience of race.

The Salience of Social Class and Race in Retail Gentrification

We argue that residents in any neighborhood are more likely to have a favorable view of new retail if three conditions are met: (1) new retail provides desired goods and services, (2) residents feel comfortable shopping there, and (3) there is minimal displacement of established businesses, especially ones owned by the racial majority. In gentrifying neighborhoods, there are substantial social class differences between longtime residents and established retail, on one hand, and newcomers and new retail, on the other, and the three conditions for longtime residents liking new retail are rarely met. Studies suggest that race may also affect how longtime residents use and feel about new retail.

Instrumental Aspect: Providing Desired Goods and Services

Poor neighborhoods suffer from a lack of retail, including those that supply basic goods and services such as banks, drug stores, and groceries (Wacquant and Wilson 1989; Alwitt and Donley 1997; Pattillo 2007). Most studies of gentrifying neighborhoods, in contrast, find an increase in retail. Some serve basic needs (Grogan and Proscio 2000; Kennedy and Leonard 2001), and others cater to discretionary tastes. In cases where new retail offers basic goods and services at an affordable price, residents are likely to see the benefits since it means that they no longer have to shop outside their neighborhood (Maly 2005).

The majority of new retail, however, reflects the social class divide within gentrifying neighborhoods. Businesses such as art galleries, yoga studios, clothing boutiques, and restaurants appeal to the discretionary tastes and incomes of newcomers and nonlocal consumers (Zukin and Kosta 2004; Freeman 2006; Lloyd 2006); longtime residents are less likely to want or be able to afford these goods and services.

The salience of social class, at first glance, is also evidenced by cases of Black gentrification. Freeman (2006), Maurrasse (2006), and Pattillo (2007)
examine gentrifying neighborhoods in which many new middle-class residents and businesses are Black. When poorer, longtime Black residents complain about new retail being too expensive, therefore, it seems that social class explains their negative reactions since race is held constant. However, Freeman (2006) and Pattillo (2007) admit that, despite demographic data painting a picture of largely Black gentrification, some longtime Black residents overestimate the number of Whites moving in and perceive new retail as part of a larger trend toward eventual neighborhood Whitening. The relative influence of race and social class is unclear, therefore, in explaining longtime residents’ perception of neighborhood change.

**Cultural Aspect: Comfort Level in New Retail**

Most researchers focus on the symbolic language of new businesses, highlighting how their cultural symbols reflect neighborhood change (Bridge and Dowling 2001; Zukin and Kosta 2004; Deener 2007). Some of these cultural symbols, such as restaurant tables on sidewalks, cutting-edge music piped into the street, and eye-catching awnings and business signs, are located in the streets (Patch 2008). Other cultural symbols, such as music, art, and products that are prominently displayed, are located inside the stores (Katz 2009). New owners try to create a welcoming space in which newcomers can build neighborhood relationships by providing such amenities as coffee and couches (Patch 2008; Zukin 2008).

These symbols not only reflect the personality and tastes of new owners and their clientele but also create symbolic boundaries that exclude longtime residents since they are not part of that subculture (Deener 2007; Zukin 2008). Katz (2009) argues that new retail often has such elaborate decorations and symbols that customers feel, upon entering, that they are in a distinctive cultural space. They need to act in a culturally competent manner, by how they behave and dress, to interact successfully with the staff and to have a satisfying buying experience. Katz argues that this is especially true in bohemian stores, where clients are buying not just tangible products but also an attitude and lifestyle (see Lloyd 2006). He goes as far as to claim that the failure to act subculturally competently can lead to feelings of shame.

It is likely that, given the history of racial mistrust and animosity, longtime Black residents feel especially uncomfortable in White businesses. Deener (2007), for example, illustrates how new business owners in Venice, California, most of whom are White, create and maintain “symbolic ownership” of their commercial district, fashioning a “Brand Venice” of small, independent, anti-corporate, art-themed retail. Longtime residents, most of whom are minority
and lower income, lament the loss of the Black barber shop and teen center and feel excluded economically and culturally from the new stores. They patronize only the few remaining longtime businesses that are Black owned. Unfortunately, none of the Black interviewees state their reasons for avoiding new retail, so it is unclear how important race is in comparison to social class and length of residence.

Zukin (2008) interviews longtime lower-class Black residents in Brooklyn who shop and socialize in the Fulton Street Market. They feel comfortable shopping in what Zukin calls a Black public sphere because it is filled with Afro-centric signifiers such as Black music piped into the street and storefronts that display “urbanwear.” Zukin argues that these Black customers feel uncomfortable shopping in nearby White upscale retail districts and that White, middle-class gentrifiers who live in surrounding neighborhoods feel similarly uncomfortable shopping in the Fulton Street Market. Yet despite the Afro-centric semiotics and abundance of lower-class Black shoppers, it remains unclear whether their main reason for shopping there is racial comfort, social class comfort, or the opportunity to buy goods at affordable prices. There is no mention of poorer Whites or middle-class Blacks living in the area, and certainly none are included in the analysis, and this lack of racial and social class diversity makes it difficult to discern the relative importance of race.

Retail Displacement

Longtime residents are more likely to view new businesses favorably if they do not displace established ones. Maly (2005, chap. 3), for example, argues that the chronic dearth of established businesses in the Chicago neighborhood of Uptown resulted in longtime residents from diverse social classes and races feeling positive toward new retail. It is reasonable to assume that at least some of the neighborhood groups would have felt resentful had new businesses displaced established ones. This assumption is supported by studies that find that longtime residents resent new retail in neighborhoods where established businesses are displaced (Maly 2005, chap. 4; Deener 2007).

Resentment can be especially strong when it involves racial change. Freeman (2006, 69) documents, for example, how some residents lament the loss of “mom-and-pop” stores that they associate with proneighborhood qualities: owners living and being involved in the community, more money staying in the neighborhood, and hiring local residents. A native of Harlem states that “whenever we [a neighborhood organization] had a party or an event they would pitch in, soft drinks, a little money, whatever. But now you’re seeing all these little boutiques and chains open, but they don’t give
anything to the community.” It is clear that longtime residents lament the loss of established businesses, not only because of the goods and services they offered but also because they were considered vital neighborhood institutions. What is unclear, however, is whether they needed to be longtime Black stores to be considered neighborhood institutions. It is also unclear whether new retail is disliked because it is White owned or because many of them are retail chains (and hence they are less likely to be involved in neighborhood activities).

Although the above example makes it difficult to understand the relative importance of race and social class, there are reasons to believe that race has some independent influence on understanding longtime Black residents’ negative reactions to new retail. Neckerman, Carter, and Lee (1999), for example, detail how Black businesses such as barbershops and salons serve as social spaces for Blacks to relax without the strain of interacting with Whites. So in neighborhoods where Black businesses are in decline, Black residents may feel a loss of community space. Lee (2002) and Boyd (2008), in addition, find that Black residents often revere Black-owned businesses because they symbolize racial opportunity. So the replacement of Black businesses by those owned by other races may signal to longtime Black residents the loss of control and opportunity in their neighborhood. New White-owned businesses might even trigger fear of displacement among longtime Black residents (Zukin et al. 2009).

To understand more clearly the salience of race in regards to retail gentrification, our study examines both longtime Black and longtime White residents’ use and opinion of the new retail on Alberta Street.

Method

Alberta is located in the inner northeast section of Portland, Oregon, and is about 30 minutes by bus from the city center. Two researchers interviewed 39 residents in 2005, most of whom we label as longtime residents (31) because they had lived in the neighborhood since before gentrification began around 1997. To include renters and bohemians in our study, we also interviewed some (8) who had moved in more recently. Of the interviewees, 24 had previously participated in a survey of randomly selected households and 15 were recruited using snowball sampling. In total, we interviewed 23 Black and 16 White residents, 28 homeowners and 11 renters. Participants had lived in the neighborhood between 4 and 53 years ($M = 17$ years). Interviewers and interviewees were race matched to maximize comfort level and minimize the social desirability effect.
The semistructured interviews included questions about their patronizing (current and past) Alberta Street businesses and their opinion about changes in the retail sector. We complimented these interviews with primary site content, including newspaper articles, Web site content, and neighborhood brochures. To identify themes, we conducted a four-stage analysis of the interviews. First, we noted their current and previous use of the retail sector. We then put their responses into one of three categories: positive (opinions were all positive or only one minor problem was cited), negative (all negative or only one minor improvement was cited), and ambivalent (mix of positive and negative). After that, we coded the reasons for their positive and negative opinions, paying close attention to racial arguments. Finally, we examined whether their responses correlated with their race. Three types of opinions about the retail sector emerged from this iterative process.

Residential and Retail Gentrification

The Alberta neighborhood, which spans five blocks to the north and south of Alberta Street, had been a predominantly poor, majority Black neighborhood since the 1950s. Like some neighborhoods in other midsized cities, however, it had a substantial amount of longtime White residents and many Black and White homeowners. It falls clearly into Nyden, Maly, and Lukehart’s (1997) “laissez-faire diverse” category: Diversity has occurred without a concerted, explicit campaign to promote and maintain racially stable neighborhoods. Although there have been some attempts to promote racial diversity—for example, creating multicultural public murals—they have been modest and intermittent.

Like most poor neighborhoods with Black residents, it suffered from housing discrimination, redlining, and disinvestment (Portland Bureau of Planning 1993a). The neighborhood had a high crime rate, especially during the crack cocaine epidemic, and heightened gang activity in the 1980s and early 1990s (Dawdy 2000). But in the mid to late 1990s the Alberta neighborhood began to gentrify. Since then there has been an influx of middle-class residents—some who embrace a bohemian lifestyle and others a more mainstream one. Newcomers tend to have more education and income and most are White, resulting in a substantial change in the neighborhood’s racial composition: Alberta went from being majority Black in 1980 to now being majority White. There also has been a decline in housing affordability, resulting in displacement of some longtime residents (Burk 2006).

Alberta Street has 17 blocks of retail. There are still some Black businesses and institutions in operation—for example, several Black barbershops
and salons, a ladies’ boutique, and social institutions like the Black United Fund and several predominantly Black churches—to sustain an African-American presence (Fitzgibbon 2006), although some have moved out of the neighborhood or have ceased to operate. Most of the new retail is White owned and caters to a largely White clientele. Some have moved into and renovated buildings that were previously occupied by Blacks, and others have built on vacant lots.

Some stores are geared toward satisfying instrumental needs—for example, several car repair businesses, a used-bike store, a laundry mat, and a food co-op—but many are not. Most new businesses, which are a mix of upscale and bohemian, appeal to the tastes of new residents and nonlocal customers, including art galleries, boutique clothing stores, bars, restaurants, and what Bridge and Dowling (2001) call “mind and body management” businesses (e.g., yoga, day spa, alternative medicine). The number of businesses and organizations has more than doubled in the past 15 years, from 45 to 105; only industrial businesses have declined. They composed 57% of the businesses and organizations in 1990 but only 11% by 2005 (Rizzari 2005).

The Art on Alberta organization, with help from the city and local businesses, asserts to a large degree “symbolic ownership” (Deener 2007). They do not promote racial diversity explicitly or consistently but instead focus on constructing and maintaining an “Alberta Arts” neighborhood identity through a series of complementary activities: a walking map of art galleries and art-inspired businesses, several annual art fairs, a monthly art walk called “Last Thursday,” and public art on the new sidewalks, lamp posts, and bus stops. Many new businesses, despite not selling art, contribute to the Alberta Arts identity by hanging art on their walls, allowing bohemian- and art-inspired fliers to fill their bulletins and window displays, and creating original art on their menu boards and signs.

Residents’ Opinions About the Retail Sector

We interviewed a more racially diverse group of longtime residents than the ones interviewed by Freeman (2006), Maurrasse (2006), Deener (2007), and Zukin (2008), and our interviewees’ responses were more varied. In particular, they express one of three types of reactions: racial exclusion and resentment, complete acceptance, and bohemian acceptance—Yuppie scorn. The distribution of these reactions illustrates three trends, the clearest of which is Black–White differences in opinion that illustrate the significance of race. Within each racial category, however, there are differences in opinion: Some Blacks fall in the “complete acceptance” category, but others express racial
resentment and exclusion; all culturally mainstream Whites fall into the “complete acceptance” category, but White bohemians embrace only businesses that reflect their subcultural tastes and abhor the “Yuppie” ones.

**Racial Exclusion and Resentment by Some Black Residents**

Some longtime Black residents express general feelings of racial resentment and exclusion. They mention the increase in White residents and the decrease in Blacks and many believe that Black residents have been displaced. One resident

like[s] that Alberta has created much business. . . . It’s a shame that it had to take for *them* to come here and fix up the streets and . . . property. . . . [W]e’ve been here long before they even got here . . . ; I don’t like that it’s not my people here anymore. . . . Black people can’t get back into it, even if they wanted to; there was a time before when all the Blacks were right here and now you find them all out there.

Others express two specific concerns: one instrumental and one cultural. First, some Black respondents, although patronizing a few new businesses, feel that most do not cater to their needs and incomes. One claims that “they are coming in and they are transforming Alberta Street . . . into another world,” one in which “they don’t have exactly what I’m looking for.” Another states that “I don’t go into the shops. . . . [I]t’s not the people or anything like that. . . . just not anything that really attracts me. . . . I go into the bike shop because . . . my kid’s bike has got to be fixed . . . but there’s a lot of shops . . . that don’t meet what I like. . . . [I]t’s cool for all the people that it meets their needs.” His open-mindedness about the new businesses is tempered later, however, when he admits that many are “a little exclusive.”

Second, some Blacks combine their complaint regarding lack of desired, affordable goods with feeling culturally uncomfortable and excluded. One resident, for example, recounts being discriminated against in restaurants. “I’ve been in two restaurants on this street and both of them, I just felt uncomfortable . . . so I just don’t go back, ’cuz they gonna make it either with me or without me.” Another likes that there are two new grocery stores, but she finds faults with them. “I would like to see like what Alberta is right now, but . . . I’d like to see . . . Blacks there . . . and . . . going to New Seasons [a new upscale grocery store] is so high [expensive] . . . and the [food co-op], they don’t want you to go in there and still feel comfortable.” She believes that “it’s just all White shops, and the shops are basically the things that they like,
like their art work.” For her, an ideal world “would bring Black people back into the neighborhood . . . have Black and White art together . . . let us get a chance to put a business there.”

Although some Blacks express discomfort with an undifferentiated White culture (“another culture of people,” “a way out street”), a few cite middle-class White businesses as the culprits, referring to them as “uppity” or “Yuppie.” One resident, for example, argues that “there’s no place on Alberta for Black people to hang out in other than Joe’s Place [a bar patronized mostly by Blacks that went out of business after the study].” The new places are for Yuppies, who are “people who want to go sit down and drink coffee and eat donuts and eat whatever it is that they eat.”

Quite a few others specifically mention bohemian businesses as the problem, referring to them as “punk,” “hippie,” “hand-me-down,” or “organic.” In fact, some argue that White, middle-class stores have a positive effect on the neighborhood; it is only the bohemian ones that are undesirable. One resident states, “I don’t think they’re billed to longtime residents. . . . A lot of the new businesses are art galleries that sell . . . art pieces for two and three thousand dollars, and it’s like ‘You’re in a low-income neighborhood!’” She also is uncomfortable with their “hippy” goods.

[T]he newer art galleries, coffee shops, and clothing stores . . . it’s like hippy stuff; it’s not . . . what people in this community would wear. . . . It’s not the typical jeans and t-shirts. . . . And I don’t know who’s buying this stuff up but I don’t know anybody that’s wearing it. . . . [O]nce they moved in and got comfortable, you know the long boot shops, the crazy paint shops . . . and put in five coffee shops on one corner.

There are some differences among these longtime Black residents: Some feel excluded for instrumental reasons and others for cultural reasons; some are unsettled by all White retail, while others by only Yuppie or only bohemian ones. What is consistent, however, is that these Black residents articulate sentiments of resentment and exclusion that are race based, referring to new White business owners as “them,” “White shops,” and “not my people” and to White customers of the new businesses as not being “longtime residents” or not belonging to “this community.”

**Complete Acceptance by Some Black Residents**

Although some resent and feel excluded from the new retail, other Blacks view most retail changes positively, citing both instrumental reasons and
improved aesthetics. One, for example, likes “just having the different businesses available, the different restaurants, so we don’t have to go outside of our area.” Another opines that “As far as the stores and the new businesses that are opening up and all, that’s great! [If you] get bored and you want to go take a look, I mean you just go walk down the corner and see pretty much anything; or wanna eat, they got different restaurants there.”

They also like the improved aesthetics that has resulted from the new businesses replacing vacant buildings and lots. One resident says that “it is more of a business area. . . . [Y]ou used to go there and everything was kind of dying out; you had a lot of empty buildings and now they’re filled up.” Another states that “boy, they really have fixed Alberta. It’s something they should have did years ago, but they finally, finally did it, and it looks really, really nice up there . . . it just makes the neighborhood so much nicer to live in.” Yet another states that he wants Alberta Street to “continue to revitalize. . . . [I]n these areas where we have these old dilapidated buildings that could be turned into office buildings with some kind of business establishments, keep that stuff going.”

It is worth noting that none of the Black interviewees mention cultural reasons for liking the retail changes. In contrast to the White respondents in the next section, there is no mention of new retail creating comfortable social spaces within which to interact with neighbors, nor allusion to attracting desirable newcomers to the neighborhood.

**Complete Acceptance by Some White Residents**

All of the longtime White residents we interviewed who are not bohemians like the new retail sector, citing three specific reasons: improving aesthetics, enhancing “community,” and attracting desirable newcomers. First, like some Black residents, many feel that the new businesses make the street more beautiful, with more new and renovated buildings and fewer vacant lots. One says that “the eye appeal is better. . . . Before everything was boarded up and it was dreary and drab looking.” Another compares the new stores to flowers blooming. “[T]he bulbs are poking out now, it’s going to flourish. . . . [A] lot of buildings still [are] empty. I foresee in the next five years it’s going to be Northwest 23rd [an upscale shopping district in Portland with many boutique stores]. There’s so many little niches hidden behind this door and that door, and all of a sudden you walk by or drive by and it’s opened up.”

Second, many longtime White residents believe that new businesses enhance neighbor relations. One states that the street has gone from being “nothing” to a “happening” place. “I really like how Alberta Street has gotten
cleaned up and businesses moved in and took over, so it’s not like there’s nothing there. It’s a little more happening; people congregate down there.” Another feels that the new businesses encourage people to walk more in the neighborhood, which in turn fosters neighborly relations. “I like the sense of community, that people know each other in the neighborhood, that people walk to the shops. There’s a real ‘front porch’ element to it. . . . [Y]ou can wave to your neighbors.”

Another resident is an enthusiastic supporter of local businesses. “I don’t think there’s a restaurant that I haven’t supported on this street.” When asked whether she belongs to any neighborhood organizations, she replies that she does not but that “I mostly just participate in visiting the local businesses and knowing the owners and . . . I have two dogs, so I walk them and wave and check in with people.” When asked whether she feels she has influence over how the neighborhood is changing, she again discusses making a connection with business owners and the neighbors who patronize their businesses.

I feel like I am [an influence] by my involvement with the businesses on the street. I help to enhance that connection . . . to keep it going . . . by supporting them, going in and talking to them and getting to know them and hanging out there.

She does not mention race or social class, but these new quasi-public spaces are largely White owned and cater to a mainly White clientele.

Third, some believe that new businesses not only benefit current residents but also attract desirable newcomers. One states that “people are starting to fix up their houses and their properties. Certainly the [new retail] has encouraged people who want to live here.” In fact, she has urged her friends to take a fresh look at the neighborhood.

I always encourage people to come look at what’s happening because it’s exciting . . . to have the galleries and restaurants, the activities that go on, Last Thursday. . . . [T]hey’re taking an older neighborhood and developing it into something special.

Another states,

Twenty years ago, had you seen Alberta Street, you would have said, “You know, this is a slum.” . . . And people that lived here, they really didn’t care, or they did care but they didn’t know how to get the environment to change. . . . And then when the businesses started moving
into Alberta, you got a lot of this, “Who’s wasting their time and money here? . . . This neighborhood will never support it.” And then all of a sudden you saw the residents switch. . . . The older and the elderly, they either moved into nursing homes, moved in with kids, or they died. And then all of a sudden the houses went up for sale because there was a lot of people that lived in the area, they didn’t like what they saw as far as Alberta Street, the transition, so they decided to move. . . . [T]he area does bring in a lot of people from the outside, and it has no where to go but just to grow.

These White residents do not mention race when they discuss former residents “who didn’t care” or who “didn’t like what they saw.” The closest allusion to race is made by a resident who says that “I used to feel like I lived in the ghetto.” Neither do they refer to race when discussing desirable newcomers. However, the neighborhood’s racial change is clear: The neighborhood is Whitening, as most new residents are White. It is likely, therefore, that longtime White residents associate their dissatisfaction with how the neighborhood used to be with Blackness and link their optimism with how the neighborhood is changing, including new residents, to Whiteness.

**Racial Differences in Instrumental and Cultural Concerns**

Even though these White residents are similar to some Blacks in holding positive opinions of the new retail, their reasons for liking it are different. Whites are less likely to mention that the new retail satisfies their instrumental needs. Instead, they express enthusiasm about the growing retail sector in general terms. One White resident, for example, is not picky about what kind of stores open up. “[I]t doesn’t matter what it is. I think it’s probably good that any business is anywhere for a decent amount of time, rather than just block after block of empty storefronts.” Another claims that even people who do not patronize the new retail feel that it has improved the neighborhood. “[Many residents] have taken a real personal interest in the fact that these businesses are there, even though it is something that they wouldn’t participate in . . . ; but they’re still personally interested in it, the improvement of the neighborhood.” Longtime White residents seem to trust that whatever kind of business opens—whether they patronize it or not, whether it is mainstream or bohemian—is going to improve the neighborhood. This confidence is not shared by their Black counterparts.

Longtime White residents, in contrast to Black residents, also feel that the new retail is facilitating positive cultural changes in the neighborhood by
creating social spaces for neighbors to interact and attracting desirable newcomers. None of these longtime White residents, in addition, express discomfort or feelings of exclusion or resentment with the new bohemian retail, despite not patronizing them or being culturally similar to them. The general acceptance of and openness toward new retail is illustrated best by an elderly White couple who are so distant from the bohemian lifestyle that they were unaware of the monthly art festival that draws thousands of people to Alberta Street. The husband admits that he has not checked out the new businesses but expresses his openness to the possibility of liking them by saying that “I just need to get out more.” His wife agrees; she ends the interview by saying that “it sounds like we need to get out more and see more of what’s out there.”

**Further Blurring of Racial Boundaries: Bohemian Acceptance and Yuppie Scorn**

Although race is helpful in understanding why some Black residents do not like the new retail, despite the increase in goods and services, it is not the only salient factor. Some Blacks view most retail changes positively and, as this section illustrates, not all White residents are in agreement. In particular, those Whites involved in the neighborhood’s bohemian subculture—artists, activists, some students, and others espousing antimainstream lifestyle ethos—are ambivalent about the new retail sector. Like Lloyd’s (2006) findings, they embrace businesses that reflect their cultural tastes but oppose Yuppie ones.

One point of contention is that, like some interviewed by Brown-Saracino (2004), bohemians feel that many new business owners and developers are concerned only about making money. One artist states that “it’s all become about capitalism.” An artist, herbalist, and teacher who has lived in the neighborhood for 10 years declares that “Alberta Street [is] pretty gross. . . . [I]’s really strange to watch all of the new buildings go up . . . and the people who . . . just want to make money.” Another who has lived in a neighborhood “punk house” for seven and a half years argues that “[the new businesses] want things to be fancy . . . to draw people from other parts of the city to just come here and spend money.” She states that “everything’s money motivated and business motivated. . . . I want to separate from that and . . . live amongst . . . people that are . . . about loving people and not about money.”

Another discusses the Star E. Rose coffeehouse, which is similar to those in Wicker Park (Chicago) in regard to allowing local residents to hang out without having to spend a lot of money (Lloyd 2006).
Another criticism is that many new businesses cater to the tastes and income of newer, wealthier residents and nonlocal consumers whom they derisively call Yuppies. For one artist, the new restaurants and bars are “not what people need” and “feels [that they are] so distant from . . . the spirit of people wanting to know each other.” Another opines that Alberta Street is “going to go the way of Northwest 23rd Ave. I’ve noticed a lot more little boutiques.” Yet another says that “I don’t really like the ‘chi-chi factor.’ . . . It’s gonna be a little of the Northwest [23rd] . . . and I don’t think that that is the true character of the street.” These bohemians derisively compare retail changes on Alberta Street to the expensive, eclectic retail district called Northwest 23rd, in contrast to the longtime White resident in the previous section who was hopeful that Alberta Street would become more like it.

There are businesses that bohemians support enthusiastically, however, such as some coffee houses. One states that “it’s nice to have cafes where people can meet and get to know each other.” They provide what Lloyd (2006) calls material and symbolic support for bohemians: space for artistic activities, cheap food and drink, and ample time to network and share political and creative ideas. Many were also fond of an affordable restaurant called Chez What? which closed down and was replaced by an upscale restaurant, Ciao Vito. One bohemian, a punk rock musician, was a cook at the now-defunct restaurant and does not feel welcome in the new one.

I went in [Ciao Vito] . . . and I had dressed up nice . . . just to check it out. . . . I told [one of the current workers] that I used to work there [Chez What?] for five years, and she was thankful that that place was gone. . . . Her attitude was that that was a horrible place.

Another discusses how comfortable she felt at the old restaurant and how uncomfortable she feels at the new one.

I could go [to Chez What?] all the time . . . everybody was really nice. . . . [B]ut the new place [Ciao Vito] . . . I don’t think I look like a Yuppie and my boyfriend, he’s a musician, he definitely doesn’t look like a Yuppie. And we were . . . sitting outside on . . . a summer day drinking. . . . I could tell that people who were driving around weren’t
from the neighborhood ’cause they drive around in their big old SUVs. . . . [A]nd they . . . would glare at us . . . because my boyfriend’s hair is all fucked up and my hair probably was too . . . and it’s people looking at you like, “What are you doing here?”

Overall, bohemians do not discuss the new retail in terms of satisfying instrumental needs. They instead focus on the cultural aspect: those businesses in which they feel comfortable and reflect their lifestyle (“loving people,” cheap bohemian coffee shops and restaurants) or those that get in the way of positive social relations (“capitalism,” “distant from . . . the spirit of people wanting to know each other,” unwelcoming staff). Their opinions about Yuppie establishments illustrate that not all discomfort is based on racial boundaries; social class boundaries are also present, in terms of both culture and prices.

**Conclusion**

How important is race in understanding longtime residents’ views on retail gentrification? Previous studies suggest it is important, but its salience remains unclear because most studies take a semiotic approach—focusing on the symbolic language of new retail—or use an interpretive approach that does not include the views of both Black and White longtime residents. The Alberta neighborhood’s demographics—which include a mix of Black and White longtime residents—and our method of interviewing these residents, rather than analyzing only the semiotics of new retail, allow us to examine more directly the salience of race.

Our findings add to the current knowledge of retail gentrification in two ways. First, they provide substantial empirical support for the argument that race is key for understanding the varying interpretive frames of longtime residents negotiating neighborhood change. Many Blacks not only express negative opinions but also use explicit racial language when describing how the new retail on Alberta Street does not satisfy their instrumental needs and make them feel uncomfortable. And those Black residents who hold largely positive views cite only instrumental reasons rather than cultural ones. Some like the convenience of being able to walk to a few new businesses; however, none of them feel that the new retail enhances neighbor relations or facilitates integration among the diverse residents.

Their reactions are similar to those of Blacks in previous studies *despite the fact* that the Alberta neighborhood, unlike most gentrifying neighborhoods in larger cities, has always been racially mixed. Although in the past it
was considered by some to be a “Black neighborhood,” it never resembled the hypersegregation that rigidly divides Blacks and Whites spatially, economically, and culturally (Massey and Denton 1993). This suggests that the salience of race is not exclusive to neighborhoods in hypersegregated larger cities like Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles; it can be a powerful, divisive dynamic also in gentrifying neighborhoods in less segregated, midsized cities.

Longtime Black Alberta residents, in addition, hold similar interpretive frames to Blacks in previous studies despite the fact that some new retail on Alberta Street has been built on vacant lots or in previously abandoned buildings (i.e., only some new White businesses have directly replaced previous Black ones). Retail displacement does not fully explain longtime Black residents’ negative reactions; the substantial increase in White retail, with its accompanying efforts to refashion the material and cultural aspects of the neighborhood, coupled with the modest decline (at least numerically) in Black retail, exacerbates feelings of racial exclusion and resentment.

The salience of race is further illustrated by longtime, mainstream White residents’ overwhelming approval of new retail. And unlike Black respondents, they largely cite cultural reasons for liking it: creating social spaces for neighbors to interact and attracting desirable new residents. They do not even harbor resentment toward bohemian businesses that are not geared toward their cultural tastes or toward middle-class retail that is too expensive. Instead, they express confidence that whatever investment there is on Alberta Street contributes to neighborhood’s general improvement.

Second, although race is salient, this case study adds nuance to our understanding of the intersection of race and culture. Among Whites, there is a clear divide between longtime, mainstream ones who overwhelmingly accept the new retail and those who embrace bohemian businesses but scorn middle-class ones, which they label “Yuppie.” Among Blacks, some are resentful of a racially undifferentiated “White” retail presence; however, others have a more nuanced reaction. A few express resentment specifically toward middle-class or “Yuppie” retail, but even more target their resentment only toward bohemian ones. In fact, a few Blacks who hold largely negative reactions to the new retail admit that they like the new mainstream retail—for example, restaurants, ice cream shop, and bike store—but disapprove of the bohemian ones.

These findings do not fit well with the “creative cities” rhetoric that lauds cities like Portland for their ability to attract creative talent through an array of complementary actions such as promoting bike riding, public transportation, “green” building practices, and a wide range of art festivals (Florida 2002; Bulick et al. 2003). Some scholars, such as Peck (2005) and Lloyd (forthcoming),
criticize officials from a wide array of cities, such as Memphis, Providence, and Tampa, who attempt to promote economic development by making their cities more attractive to the “creative class”: people who espouse a bohemian flare and an attraction to “diversity.” Our study adds to this criticism by including the voices of longtime Black and White working-class residents. We find that, despite city officials, developers, new business owners, and members of the creative class embracing the principle of diversity and an ethos of progressivism, their actions privilege White “creative” place entrepreneurs and undermine racial diversity by excluding longtime Black residents.

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References


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