“The Social Life of the Socially Dead”: Gentrification and Displacement in the Five Points District of Denver, Colorado

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ABSTRACT

The establishment of historically Black towns and districts across the United States provided African Americans a sense of agency through developing wealth, residency, and sustainable businesses. Such areas highlighted the formation of hubs of Black affluence, which grounded the economy and infrastructure of such towns and generated community morale. However, these minority communities face the threat of gentrification when external groups relocate into these distinct areas and introduce other forms of commerce. Black citizens have often been forced out of these areas into surrounding cities and must attempt to rebuild their former identities elsewhere. Such is the case with Five Points, Denver, Colorado, which began as a hub of Black social advancement and a base for transient job opportunities. Ironically, its vibrant economic base became a key contributor to its subsequent downfall. This article seeks to examine the Five Points Historical Black District through a historical lens. It presents recommendations for the current planning and redesigning of the neighborhood, pointing out factors that might further prevent former and current Black residents from regaining a sense of self, both financially and socially. The case study of Five Points also allows room for discussion concerning issues of gentrification and the subsequent social death of the Black community in Colorado. The article ends by comparing the gentrification of Five Points to the Hayti District of Durham, North Carolina to demonstrate that such patterns are present in the larger, nationwide context.

Keywords: urban redevelopment, gentrification, displacement, exclusionary zoning, transit-oriented development, Black social death

Introduction

Gentrification refers to the altering of community dynamics in which poor urban areas experience an influx of wealthy residents who renovate and change the valuation of the area. The increased property values that result aid in the displacement of former residents. In most cases, the persons being displaced are persons of color. This article examines displacement and gentrification as experienced by the African American residents of Five Points, which is a historically Black district located in Denver, Colorado. Designated as a historic district in 2002, Five Points was once a hub of African American culture and city-wide transit. However, over the course of the gentrification of the area, which began as early as the 1920s and continues into the present day, many Black-owned business and housing centers have been closed by white property owners and reconstructed. As a result, African Americans have been pushed out of the community as poor urban areas have become hubs of new buildings and housing opportunities. The displacement of long-term residents has been amplified by the zoning of several corridors.
throughout Welton Street that has selectively preserved certain buildings as landmarks within the area (Bryant 2016). While landmarks such as the Nathan Savage Candy Company, Original Fire Station #3, Metropolitan Investment Company, and the Douglas Undertaking building were preserved, the Denver Community Planning and Development Department has not made attempts to create more affordable housing and business opportunities for Black residents (Bryant 2016, 17). As a result, former residents have experienced a type of social death, even as they have aimed to reclaim what was built and rebuild the communal spirit that once lay at the heart of the neighborhood. “Social death” refers to the exclusion of people or groups within a society because of changing social dynamics, which is often caused by economic vulnerability and/or racial hierarchy (Bauman 2000, 170).

![Image 1](https://www.nakeddenver.com/post/historic-savage-candy-company-building-hits-market-for-5-9m)

To better examine the issue of gentrification in Five Points, Denver, Colorado due to race-based tensions caused by urban redevelopment and the creation of new jobs, in this article, I first investigate the history of Five Points over time and the subsequent mass exodus of African American families from the area. I then point to the redlining of the historical district in earlier periods and to the more recent transit-oriented development as causes of this racialized exodus. I use the Hayti community of Durham, North Carolina as a comparator case to demonstrate that targeted commercial development and exclusionary zoning practices are engines of displacement and gentrification across contexts. Here, urban redevelopment and the creation of transportation infrastructure led to the destruction of the Hayti District as Durham’s Black Wall Street, and gentrification continues to have impacts on the displacement of African Americans in the area.
today. I then provide insight into the current social climate of Five Points, where citizens are rallying for the right to the city as changes in community dynamics due to gentrification and displacement have led to a decrease in affordable housing. Presenting these cases of racialized displacement through the mechanisms of urban redevelopment and gentrification helps demonstrate how Black residents endure a “social death” as they rebuild their former social identities.

**Black Utopia: History of the Neighborhood**

The history of the Five Points neighborhood of Denver, Colorado dates back to the 1870s. It was originally known for its interconnected transit hubs that helped citizens navigate 27th Street, Welton Street, 26th Avenue, and Washington Street. The Five Points neighborhood was originally occupied by white residents, and the surrounding areas were densely comprised of small businesses and large residential properties. This complex spatial pattern was the result of the construction of the Denver Horse Railroad Company, which began using street railcars as early as 1871 (Bryant 2016). Following the construction and success of the Denver Horse Railroad Company, the population of Five Points rose to 35,629 persons, which was a significant increase from the roughly 4,700 residents three decades prior (Duran 2019, 21–23). Scholar Genene L. Duran explains changing residential patterns around Five Points over time and asserts that:

Transit-oriented development was born as multiple businesses began to be built along the rail line. This contributed to a significant number of white community members vacating the neighborhood for nicer, more affluent communities and an influx of African Americans moving to the more modest Five Points neighborhood over the next two decades (2019, 19).

Over time, white former residents of Five Points started venturing into areas such as Capitol Hill and Park Hill. By 1930, over 90 percent of Denver’s Black population resided in the Five Points community (Duran 2019, 20). The community would later be nicknamed the “Harlem of the West”; it was a site of recreation for African American men seeking rehabilitation after World War II and would become a popular venue spot for jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Miles Davis.
Between 1930 and 1953, Five Points also became home to historical Black landmarks such as the Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library and the Black American West Museum, which would host the annual Black Arts Festival as well as Juneteenth celebrations. However, property values began to decline in response to municipal neglect caused by exclusionary zoning practices; eventually, the Black population of Five Points decreased as wealthier newcomers bought into the neighborhood (Hansen 2007). Laws for fair and equal housing under the Federal Housing Authority did not appear in Denver until the mid-1960s. However, even following these equal housing laws, African American residents were steered away by real estate agents who engaged in “bank redlining.” Redlining in this context refers to the practice of “refusing to give mortgages to African Americans or extracting unusually severe terms from them with subprime loans” (Rothstein 2017, 5). Under policies of redlining, real estate agents began designating certain areas as being appropriate for Black settlement. Real estate maps demarcated with a red line were used by mortgage lenders in practice to indicate the areas for which African Americans and certain other racialized populations should be refused loans for housing. These designated areas were often rampant with crime, situated well below the poverty line, and positioned in localities with limited job opportunities and access to features such as intercity transit. As a result of these exclusionary zoning practices, white residents in areas like Capitol Hill and Park Hill were able to expand their neighborhoods as they were able to buy out and flip properties in Five Points, and “by 1974, the Black population in Five Points was 8,700, which was significantly lower than the 32,000 people who resided there in 1959” (Duran 2019, 22). Due to this population shift, property values decreased in Five Points as the conditions of the homes surrounding the area improved but not those within the historical district. In turn, this caused home prices to increase in the area.

Given the disparity in home values between Five Points and its surrounding areas, discussions on the redevelopment of Five Points emerged in subsequent years. The Denver Urban Renewal Authority (DURA) further hastened the displacement of Black citizens when the Regional Transportation District began the development of a light railroad system, with the construction being completed in 1994 (Duran 2019, 22–23). Between the initial formation of DURA in 1958 and the completion of the light rail system, Black residents were actively discouraged by white land proprietors from moving into surrounding areas such as Highlands, Montclair, Park Hill, and Berkeley via the buying and flipping of new properties in these areas, with realtors often refusing to assist Black residents in purchasing these homes. The influx of white residents into the district shifted the socioeconomic outlook of the area. This has been seen in drastic increases in home valuation and a lack of Black representation in the community. The Piton Foundation highlighted such discrepancies in a 2011 housing and census report that stated:

In 2010, the average household income in the Five Points neighborhood was $35,519. In 2016, the average was $81,992. This is significant because in 2011, the number of whites who resided in the neighborhood skyrocketed to 56.95%, which was almost 4% greater than the population of whites in the entire Denver metropolitan area. As of 2016, only 12.76% of the population within the historically Black Five Points neighborhood was African American (as quoted in Duran 2019, 23).

Over time, these dynamics of gentrification and racialized displacement have meant that Black residents of Five Points have experienced what I think of as a quintessential “social death” penalty.
Persona Non Grata: “Social Death”

Social death theory helps us think about the ways in which the people of Five Points, Denver, Colorado have had to build sociocultural enclaves to combat mistreatment. Social death is an analytic and descriptive term used by scholars to encompass “the ways in which someone is treated as if they were dead or nonexistent. Social death is distinguished from biological or physical death” (Borgstrom 2016, 5). While originally used to understand slavery and the Holocaust by historians, Zygmunt Bauman (2000) extended his usage of the term to describe modes of social segregation and a loss of social connectedness through a loss of communal identity. Such exile can be compared to racial banishment. “Racial banishment,” as theorized by Ananya Roy (2019), refers to the ways in which the state perpetuates violence against racialized communities. Roy posits that,

Banishment is entangled with processes of regulation, segregation and expropriation and it is embedded in the legal geographies of settler-colonialism and racial separation. It often entails “civil death” and indeed even social death. Banishment shifts our attention from displacement to dispossession, especially the dispossession of personhood which underpins racial capitalism (2019, 227).

In the case of Five Points, displacement and gentrification were compounded by an increase in white business owners and increased access to commuter rail stations; as a result, low-income Black residents were unable to remain within the community. However, white home and business owners did not experience these same changes. Duran explains the linkages between neighborhood change, gentrification, and public services, emphasizing that race intersects these changes:

Community members feel a sense of helplessness over changes being implemented within their neighborhood and those yet to be displaced have expressed concerns about having to leave their current neighborhood, and that they will not find affordable homes with the same quality of living that includes support from other minorities, acceptance, and respect, as well as the access to train/rail stations they have in their existing communities (2019, 51).

Amidst gentrification, Black residents were provided no alternatives to offset the new housing costs in Five Points, which decreased their social capital and means to remain. For Black residents such as those in Five Points, social death hence serves as an intersectional lens to help explain the multifaceted process of losing one’s social identity. Such ostracism manifests both physically and psychologically, with independent social structures developing out of the need to combat gentrification.

To better understand the effects of gentrification and displacement on the Black population within Five Points, I will examine studies conducted with members of the town between its period of prominence (1930s to 1970s) and its rapid decline (which began in the late 1960s and continued into the 1980s). Qualitative interviews conducted in these studies have proved useful in demonstrating the factors linked to the displacement of long-term residents in the Black community. For her thesis “Psychopathology of the Insomniac American Nightmare,” Tiffany Tasker interviewed community members of Five Points from January 2020 to early January 2021. She split the interviews between policymakers, business owners, and former residents who had moved out of the area. Many Black community members left following the expansion of job
opportunities, which were often not accessible to people of color, and the mass flow of white residents into the area. Issues of inadequate educational opportunities and struggles with law enforcement arose as Black residents moved into areas surrounding Five Points.

Using the etic ethnographic approach to gain familiarity with the areas in and surrounding Five Points before and during her study, Tasker (2021) asked participants to define gentrification, detail what this looks like in neighborhoods (specifically Black neighborhoods), explain their opinion as to whether Five Points had become gentrified, and elaborate on the benefits of gentrification, if any. Using the etic perspective enabled Tasker to get to residents’ views on the physical characteristics of neighborhood level change and allowed for a holistic review of the information provided. Two of Tasker’s interviews deserve further examination here: interviews with Dr. Lisa Calderon and Brother Jeff Fard. Dr. Calderon grew up on Cole Avenue, which is adjacent to Five Points from the east.


In discussing gentrification, the question of what displacement is, and how gentrification affects the economic prospects in the Black community, Dr. Calderon answered:

Black economic infrastructure was created out of necessity for Black folks to be able to support themselves and their families. And part of that economy included folks who were also pushed out of other areas such as you know immigrant people and poor folks. Having
that economic, cultural, and racial legacy of self-sufficiency and economic empowerment, you know, is something that we should have preserved and expanded. But instead, as a result of government policies, both on the local and national levels we were essentially, you know, pushed out and then redlined out of other communities and what that did was that destabilized us for generations (Tasker 2021, 139).

The businesses that previously made up Five Points were a testament to a Black legacy of self-sufficiency and interdependence in the community. The result of white residents buying up properties and homes to flip was the impoverishment of Black residents who previously owned businesses and homes within Five Points and its surrounding areas. The result has been financial downfall and cultural devastation within the community. Calderon later explained her perspectives on the problem of gentrification as well as the benefits it may provide the community. Gentrification negatively affects those currently living in the area. However, Calderon noted that the benefit of this is that spotlights are placed on these areas as hubs of interest, emphasizing the racialized dynamics of attention to “up and coming” gentrified neighborhoods (Tasker 2021).

I now turn to Tasker’s second interview of interest, with Brother Jeff Fard, the founder and executive director of “Brother Jeff’s Cultural Center” in Historic Five Points. Fard grew up in two homes: his mother’s home in Park Hill and his grandparents’ home in Five Points. When asked what gentrification was, he instead described how it looked in a neighborhood. He gave an overview of Denver, Colorado and juxtaposed Five Points as a “photo finish” of urban renewal. His usage of the terminology “photo finish” reflects the changes in the community from its previous structure to its current one, which sees the exclusion of African Americans through means of gentrification. In narratives and photographs of the area, Five Points is portrayed as a successful case of redevelopment amidst urban decay. However, Fard described gentrification as a form of class warfare. His answer to the question posed by Dr. Calderon equates gentrification with colonization:

What you see in historic Five Points is the colonization of a community that is largely hailed as an asset to investors that are not in any way connected to Colorado, except through their investments. And how does that impact Black folks? Well, it impacts us because when you look at the policies that generate the, the investment of gentrification, then you start looking into property ownership. And when you think about property ownership, you will see that it was just in recent years that Black people across the nation have the largest loss of assets in terms of their equity, home equity in the, in our entire history of being here in America. So, with that being said, how does it look for Black folks in general as a mask, it looks like our property has been turned over through nefarious means (Tasker 2021, 177).

This response navigates the question of community benefit and answers the question of how gentrification looks in a neighborhood such as Five Points. Both interviewees acknowledged that displacement and financial constraint have led to a decrease in the Black community and its social capital in Five Points. This reasserts that social death, as experienced by the Black community, includes an element of spatial and social ostracism from the wider area that diminishes both their self and community identity. Tasker’s interviews highlight that these same practices have engendered the downfall of other historically Black spaces, and it is to a comparative case that I now turn.
Exclusion Elsewhere: Hayti, Durham, North Carolina

The gentrification of Five Points and displacement of its African American residents share parallels with various urban renewal projects that have resulted in the destruction of historically Black settlements. One example of this is the Hayti neighborhood of Durham, North Carolina.

Hayti appears in North Carolina historical records as early as the 1880s, at which time the name “Haiti” and its multiple variants were often associated with Black settlements outside of the broader Caribbean. W.E.B. Du Bois referred to the area as the “Black business Mecca of the South” and would further link Black affluence to the blossoming of historically Black towns and hubs of commerce (as quoted in Vann 1999, 7). At its peak, Hayti consisted of over two hundred African American owned and operated businesses that took up the majority of Fayetteville Street, Pettigrew Road, and Pine Street (each of which shared a border with the Hayti neighborhood), and it was formerly regarded as the Black Wall Street (Vann 1999).

Following the US Housing Act of 1949, Hayti became a space of interest for developing North Carolina’s Highway 147. The area was targeted for the initial mapping of the Durham Freeway, the construction for which started in 1950 and which was referred to as the “R-17 Project” (Ehrsam 2010, 11). Four renewal bonds for city development and expansion were voted upon by the North Carolina General Assembly and the Durham Redevelopment Commission. All four bonds mentioned the necessity of preserving Hayti and extending the community in a way that promoted the welfare of small and minority owned businesses, and the approval of the first bond in 1957 was based on the premise that “Hayti will be developed in the best interests of the citizens of Durham in general” (Ehrsam 2010, 7). However, a lack of financing for the preservation of the community and the destruction of public housing units forced many Black business owners out of the Hayti district, as it was determined that preserving and restoring the neighborhood would cost more than the construction of Highway 147.

Recent efforts to address the damage to the Hayti neighborhood caused by the construction of the Durham Freeway have failed, as private investors have succeeded in receiving funding and approval from Durham City. For example, parts of the area have recently been rezoned to build shopping centers. In the 2006 article “Project in Hayti Gets Go Ahead: The Durham Council Backs Rezoning for a Plan that Divided the Black Community,” social humanities writer Michael Biesecker discusses local developer Andy Rothschild’s plans to build a $130 million center featuring new retail shops, restaurants, condos, and offices in the heart of Downtown Durham. Biesecker recounts that the approval was a contentious process as many residents of the area compared the new plans to the destruction of Hayti to construct Highway 147 decades ago. Following a longstanding battle for approval with the Durham City Council, Rothschild acquired 9.6 acres of land to start the construction of his shopping center. Describing the emotions of long-term residents and apparent concessions made by the developers, Biesecker writes,

The site that Rothschild plans to raze is currently occupied by the downtrodden Heritage Square Shopping Center, a one-story strip mall just off the Durham Freeway. But the land under the shopping center was once the heart of the Hayti district that flourished under segregation. It is sacred ground to many of Durham’s black residents. Rothschild tried to soothe the concerns by promising to include public art, plaques and other features that honored Hayti’s heritage at his new development. He also promised to hire minority workers during construction, lease space to Black-owned firms and give any of the businesses displaced by the demolition of the old shopping center the opportunity to move into the new development (2006, 2).
However, construction of Rothchild’s shopping mall has not begun nor have the citizens of Hayti been provided any relief efforts needed as a result of the demolition of the old Heritage Square Center.

The redevelopment of Hayti and Five Points demonstrates the links between urban redevelopment, gentrification, and displacement across contexts. In late 2018, The Flyfisher Group spent approximately $12 million to buy eleven buildings along a two-block section of Welton Street, which borders Five Points (O’Neill 2022). However, small business owners in the area are now suing Flyfisher CEO Matthew Burkett, as his leasing policies are leaving them penniless (O’Neill 2022). Burkett has retaliated against these small business owners and filed lawsuits against them, as many were unable to pay him because of last-minute lease terminations and the frequent relocation of these businesses.


In addition to commercial redevelopment, the housing crisis in Five Points has also been addressed inadequately. The successful completion of Welton Park in 2016 aided former residents in moving back into the area. Welton Park is a 223-unit family housing project, in which 212 units are offered to households earning up to 60 percent of the area’s average median income, with the remaining 11 designated for those earning up to 30 percent of that income. The project cost approximately $40 million, with the bulk of it being financed through low-income
housing tax equity credits, which is an option commonly used by private investment brokers to reduce their own tax costs (HUD User 2018). However, following the completion of the project in 2016, city officials put a temporary ban on selling land for housing, as labor shortages and construction costs had left tenants unable to keep up with their payments and brokers were uninterested in taking such risks (HUD User 2018). In 2020, the Denver Board of Adjustment for Zoning rejected plans to erect affordable housing units in a series of empty buildings along 29th Avenue, which is adjacent to Welton Street. In 2022, Pastors Eddie and Robert Woolfolk bought this space, which will be turned into a complex called the Charity House (Hernandez 2022). The Charity House will be a 36-unit housing complex made especially available to residents living well below the poverty line. This proposal was initially met with much scrutiny by lawmakers, as the land had been selected for a plan to build more shopping centers. However, after the developers revealed their plans to also renovate the area, lawmakers approved of the plan (Hernandez 2022).

Comparatively speaking, in both the case of Five Points and the ongoing fight for the redevelopment of Hayti, private investors and lawmakers are neglecting the needs of those directly affected by urban renewal. Instead, lessons can be taken from these two cases in terms of recommending the prioritization of affordable housing across contexts. The importance of quality public housing in addressing the crisis of displacement is critical here. As Richard Rothstein demonstrates in his 2017 study of racial segregation and housing in the United States, *The Color of Law*, public housing in the country has segregated and marginalized just as much as it has helped. Rothstein argues that affordable housing’s original purpose was to provide shelter to those unable to find housing due to a lack of availability, often on a racialized basis. He states that public housing efforts were not designed to aid Black individuals, but rather to segregate them into areas less structured and far more densely populated than those lived in by their white counterparts. Rothstein asserts that,

>without the public housing, tens of thousands of African Americans would have had to remain in tenements that were out of compliance with the most minimal municipal building and health codes. But with the segregated projects, African Americans became more removed from mainstream society than ever, packed into high-rise ghettos where community life was impossible, where access to jobs and social services was more difficult (2017, 31).

While this segregation and neglect speaks to the ghettoization of Black neighborhoods through public housing programs, Rothstein’s scholarship also provides a lineage of city planning that needs to be remembered. Policy recommendations must factor in affordable housing that is sensitive to historic location and accessibility, and which addresses community life as well as access to basic needs. As seen in the cases of Welton Park and Charity House in Denver, many cities are focusing on housing residents who can afford to stay in certain areas, whereas they must instead act to house those who have limited or no housing options.

**Rebuilding Black Spaces: Conclusion**

The fight for the right to the neighborhood by African Americans and persons of color is deeply rooted in being able to navigate exclusionary geographical spaces where Black individuals make up an urban minority. Examples of such racialized exclusion related to redevelopment can be examined across contexts, for instance, the condition of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. New Orleans’s African American population dropped from 67 percent in 2004
to under 60 percent in 2005, whereas the white population increased from 24 percent to 30 percent during the same period (Sastry and Gregory 2014, 756). Over 100,000 Black individuals are still missing from New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. In the present moment, gentrification and targeted policies are focused on remaking certain parts of the city. This selective focus includes the renovation of white-occupied spaces and an overt disregard for Black communities affected by the hurricane’s flooding, such as in the Lower Ninth Ward (Sastry and Gregory 2014, 758).

As this article has demonstrated, gentrification and racialized patterns of displacement across contexts mean that inner-city dwellers are forced to leave their homes. Zackary’s work on the gentrification of Denver sums up changes in income and rental value:

In 2012 median income in Denver had gone down more than 15% since 1997; but between 2010 and 2014 median incomes increased by 21.9%, far more than the national average. But even that was not enough to keep up with increasing real estate prices. Rents had increased by an astonishing 50% between 2011 and 2015 (2005, 86).

A decrease in income in conjunction with an increase in the cost of living means that long-term residents have no choice but to allow their homes and businesses to be bought out. There are no clear signs of these trends changing in Five Points, as homes in the area with property values in the tens of thousands at the height of its golden age are now multimillion-dollar mansions. While the building of affordable housing projects and urban redevelopment seems promising in the cases of Welton Park and the Charity House, many more such projects must emerge for Five Points and its surrounding neighborhoods to even mimic a fraction of what once lay there.

As gentrification disproportionately affects people of color, historically Black communities such as Five Points have experienced an overall decrease in their quality of life as a result of struggling to remain in and around the area. Five Points’s Black population has experienced a lapse in community vibrancy, and this has led to a social death that is only now being addressed. As shown in the legacy of Hayti in Durham, North Carolina, Black “representational spaces” (Mitchell 1995, 115) are negatively affected by capitalistic refurbishment. Black residents thus become a form of social currency; the areas they have enhanced through their building of place and community are able to thrive because of their initial inputs, even as Black long-term residents can no longer stay. Providing Denver’s former Black residents of Five Points with affordable housing may provide a temporary solution to the problem of gentrification, but it does not restore the social capital and lineage of success they previously built. To ensure that cases like that of Five Points are handled effectively, policymakers must call for an end to the privatization of historical neighborhoods and enact ordinances that protect not only the buildings within these urban spaces, but also those who inhabit these districts.

References


