Media portrayal of gentrification and redevelopment on Rainey Street in Austin, Texas (USA), 2000–2014

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A B S T R A C T

The Austin-San Antonio, Texas metropolitan region has become one of the fastest growing U.S. conurbations in recent years. One derivative of this growth has been ubiquitous gentrification and urban renewal in portions of both cities. In this paper, we develop a contextual narrative of urban change in Austin, Texas (USA) and explore media portrayals of actors and impacts of urban renewal and gentrification. We present a case study of the Rainey Street Historical District, once a low-income, majority Hispanic neighborhood, and its transformation through rezoning efforts and entrepreneurial enterprises into Austin's newest nightlife district. We used a directed-content analysis approach to analyze 48 articles from three local news outlets from 2000 to 2014. Our analysis shows that much of the narrative presented by the news media focused on neighborhood-scale development impacts, followed by impacts related to resentment and conflict and the social costs of urban change. Results indicate that city officials and residents played a prominent role in shaping the discourse of the urban change narrative. We conclude by situating our findings within two pivotal events that occurred during the study period and argue that the context in which discursive frames develop, persist, and change is important to understanding the impacts of urban renewal and gentrification on a variety of actors.

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1. Introduction

Urban expansion and population growth across U.S. cities has prompted a range of development strategies — both planned and unplanned — to meet the needs of growing urban populations. Explorations of outcomes generated by urban redevelopment and renewal efforts in centrally-located urban environments have focused on a variety of social and economic impacts to urban dwellers, neighborhoods, resources, and other services. Gentrification, one of the most contested and discussed outcomes of urban change, has continued to be an area of intense interest to scholars, residents, professionals, government officials, and media. In recent years, many cities and conurbations in the southern United States, such as the Austin-San Antonio, Texas metropolitan region, have expanded rapidly, and one derivative of this growth has been ubiquitous gentrification and urban renewal in portions of these cities.

Gentrification has become a catchall for the displacement of lower-income families in deteriorating neighborhoods by middle- and upper-class households. The term is typically divisive and, from the perspective of local residents, elicits a number of negative and positive impacts created by a changing urban environment (Atkinson, 2004). The modes by which gentrification occur and how it is manifest on the urban landscape are diverse, and debate about what actually constitutes gentrification is ongoing (Lees, 2000; Maloutas, 2011; Redfern, 2003). This diversity and ongoing debate suggests that gentrification is often an outcome of many different forms of urban restructuring undertaken by a variety of agents (Ley, 1996; Maloutas, 2011; Palen & London, 1984). For example, gentrification has been identified as middle-class movement into historically low-income areas (Glass, 1964), conversion of industrial areas to residential lofts and retail stores (Zukin, 1982), and new-build neighborhoods on derelict post-industrial sites (Davidson & Lees, 2005).

Much of the work on gentrification has focused on the processes that create gentrified landscapes (Lees, 2000). Two main theories have been advanced to explain these processes: the production and consumption of urban spaces. The production of gentrified urban spaces is largely attributed to neoliberal policies in the form of entrepreneurial inventiveness and local government policies that

support these enterprises (Prior & Kemper, 2005; Macleod & Johnston, 2012; Marquardt & Fuller, 2012; Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013). Production-side proponents argue that economics and government policy drives gentrification (Bridge & Dowling, 2001; Prior & Kemper, 2005; Marquardt & Fuller, 2012). Whereby, government policies encourage redevelopment in areas in and near central business districts in an attempt to lure more affluent populations back to or into formerly neglected parts of the city (Jacobs, 1961; Prior & Kemper, 2005; Marquardt & Fuller, 2012). These development efforts are usually part of a program of urban renewal (Prior & Kemper, 2005).

Consumption of urban spaces as the process of gentrification is largely attributed to the arrival of "urban pioneers" in search of unique landscapes (Palen & London, 1984). Consumption-side proponents argue that social and cultural characteristics drive gentrification. The consumers are generally seen as arriving in waves, with the first wave usually attributed to artists and/or creative types, who are followed by other members of the urban middle-class (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Ley, 1996). The arrival of these new, more affluent, residents often results in an economic upturn for the neighborhood (Bridge & Dowling, 2001; Burnett, 2013; Hae, 2011; Marquardt & Fuller, 2012; Matthews & Picton, 2014; Thörn, 2012), but also leads to the displacement of the less affluent (Atkinson, 2004; Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Glick, 2008; Chaskin & Joseph, 2013; Matthews & Picton, 2014; Thörn, 2012). In this manner, urban landscapes, previously ignored by capital investment, become spaces of capital-driven change. They are purchased, or consumed, by wealthier residents who are prepared to outbid the existing residents.

While the production and consumption side theories of gentrification have in the past been discussed as different sides of the same coin, today gentrification is recognized as a more complex process (Lees, 2000; Zukin, 2010; Zukin, 2011). The intertwined web of actors that develop gentrified landscapes includes both producers and consumers of the urban environment. Overtime, empirical studies have emphasized a variety of situations in which gentrification happens and the processes — both production-side and consumption-side — that give rise to gentrified landscapes. Researchers have tied the gentrification of neighborhoods to historic districts (Prior & Kemper, 2005), tourism (Gotham, 2005), retail (Bridge & Dowling, 2001), food and restaurants (Burnett, 2013), policy, specifically renewal and mixed-use initiatives (Jacobs, 1961; Prior & Kemper, 2005; Matthews & Picton, 2014), nightlife districts (Hae, 2011), and social movements (Thörn, 2012). Gentrification has been so thoroughly discussed in the literature, that the term now comes with its own set of neoliberal assumptions (Maloutas, 2011), and some are calling for a closer contextual investigation into the many drivers and unique situations in which gentrification occurs (Atkinson, 2004; Davidson & Lees, 2005; Maloutas, 2011; Porter & Barber, 2006; Zukin, 2010). Researchers have begun to explore and critique the dominant explanations of urban redevelopment and gentrification, resulting in a reexamination of both consumption and production processes. In particular, recent research, focusing on the role of cultural economy in redevelopment and gentrification, has countered key assumptions in the literature and suggested that characteristics of gentrification differ from place to place, are contingent upon a host of locational factors, including local historical and social geographies, and capitalize on cultural and industrial heritage as sites of production rather than consumption (Hutton, 2016; Pratt, 2009).

Although much has been written on the role of capital and policy in exacerbating or attenuating urban renewal, other actors, such as the news and media industry, have also been shown to play a role in shaping social perceptions of gentrification (Podmore, 1998). At the neighborhood scale, it has been suggested that media, while not a cause of gentrification or a catalyst of urban renewal policies, seizes on the "upscaling" of a neighborhood that is undergoing change and can be a powerful force for how a landscape is perceived by the populous (Zukin, 2010). Media research has shown that newspaper coverage of urban development issues tend to preferentially select business sources (Gibson, 2004) and promote growth-oriented development (Lewis, 2000). Researchers also have explored newspaper coverage of social movements related to anti-gentrification efforts at a local scale (Gin & Taylor, 2010). Moreover, news media play a central role in agenda-setting and framing of events, and news media accounts of events "not only can be successful in telling us *what to think about*, but also can be successful in telling us *how to think about it*" (McCombs, 2005, p. 546, emphasis in original). Given the inherent bias in news media coverage of events, it is important to evaluate who and what is given preference in order to begin to disentangle the complex social power dynamics at work in changing urban landscapes. Few studies, however, have examined how news outlets represent gentrification processes, influence public perception of gentrifying landscapes, or bias their coverage of differing impacts of gentrification.

Following Lees' (2000, p. 404) call for research illuminating the "geography of gentrification" and specifically examining discourses on gentrification, including "how knowledge on gentrification is produced and constructed," the purpose of this research is to develop a contextual narrative of urban change and explore media portrayals of actors and impacts of urban renewal and gentrification. We present a case study of the transformation of the Rainey Street Historical District in Austin, Texas (USA) from 2000 to 2014. The Rainey Street neighborhood, once a low-income, majority Hispanic neighborhood, has been transformed through rezoning efforts and entrepreneurial enterprises into Austin's newest nightlife district. Rainey Street's popularity comes in part from the neighborhood's early-to-mid twentieth century homes, which exhibit Victorian-era and Craftsman-influenced designs that provide a much sought after historically authentic and culturally rich atmosphere. In recent years, many of the houses have been remade into restaurants and bars with venues for live entertainment. The first bar in the neighborhood, the Lustre Pearl, opened in 2009. Since its arrival, numerous bars, restaurants, condominiums, and hotels have appeared in the neighborhood, completing the transformation of Rainey Street from a quiet neighborhood to a cultural attraction and nightlife district.

Three research questions are addressed in the study through a survey of news articles from daily, weekly, and monthly newspapers. First, what characteristics of recent development on Rainey Street have been portrayed in local news media? Second, to what degree do media portrayals of development on Rainey Street align with recent scholarship on gentrification? And third, to what degree do media portrayals of development on Rainey Street exhibit positive or negative characterizations of change and agents of change? Finally, we situate our findings within two events that occurred during the study period and argue that the context in which discursive frames develop, persist, and change is important to understanding the impacts of urban renewal and gentrification on a variety of actors.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Site and situation

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Austin, Texas, is one of the fastest growing cities in the United States (Cohen, 2015). Its rapid expansion has been spurred by economic growth and bolstered by its commitment to "Keep[ing] Austin Weird." The city's complex