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Introduction to Foreign Policy

POLS 3318

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## **Gentrification in Houston**

### **Inequality in the Houston area**

After the oil bust in Houston, the prospects of gentrification occurring anywhere in the area would have been unimaginable. Yet, as the Houston area has boomed during the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it has become apparent that neighborhood lines are beginning to serve as demarcation lines of class inequality in our area. (Binkovitz 2015)

### **The Gentrification Threat**

Thus, gentrification is now an increasing problem for the Houston area, with neighborhoods traditionally inhabited by the working class and people of color facing pressures from developers and the city itself to change its distinctiveness. Thus, we now see the displacement of long-time residents and families due to the influx of wealthier newcomers. A comparison between a map of the census tracts that gentrified (Appendix A) and a map of the census tracts by level of income diversity and high poverty (Appendix B) would suggest that mostly high poverty census tracts with high income diversity (e.g. the Third Ward) are on the frontlines of gentrification in Houston. This may suggest a correlation between high income diversity areas and gentrification.

### **Perceived Positive Effects of Gentrification**

But is it possible that gentrification offers benefits? Justin Davidson (2014) of New York Magazine claims the dichotomy between “the fast-moving, invasive variety nourished by

ever-rising prices per square foot” and “a more natural, humane kind that takes decades to mature and lives on a diet of optimism and local pride.” But Dan Zehr of the Austin Statesman claims that “As Austin grows, the African-American share of the city’s population is declining, and minorities face poverty and isolation more than their white counterparts.” (2016) Thus, gentrification does result in displacement and further inequality while the myth of a more benevolent type is usually misrepresentation.

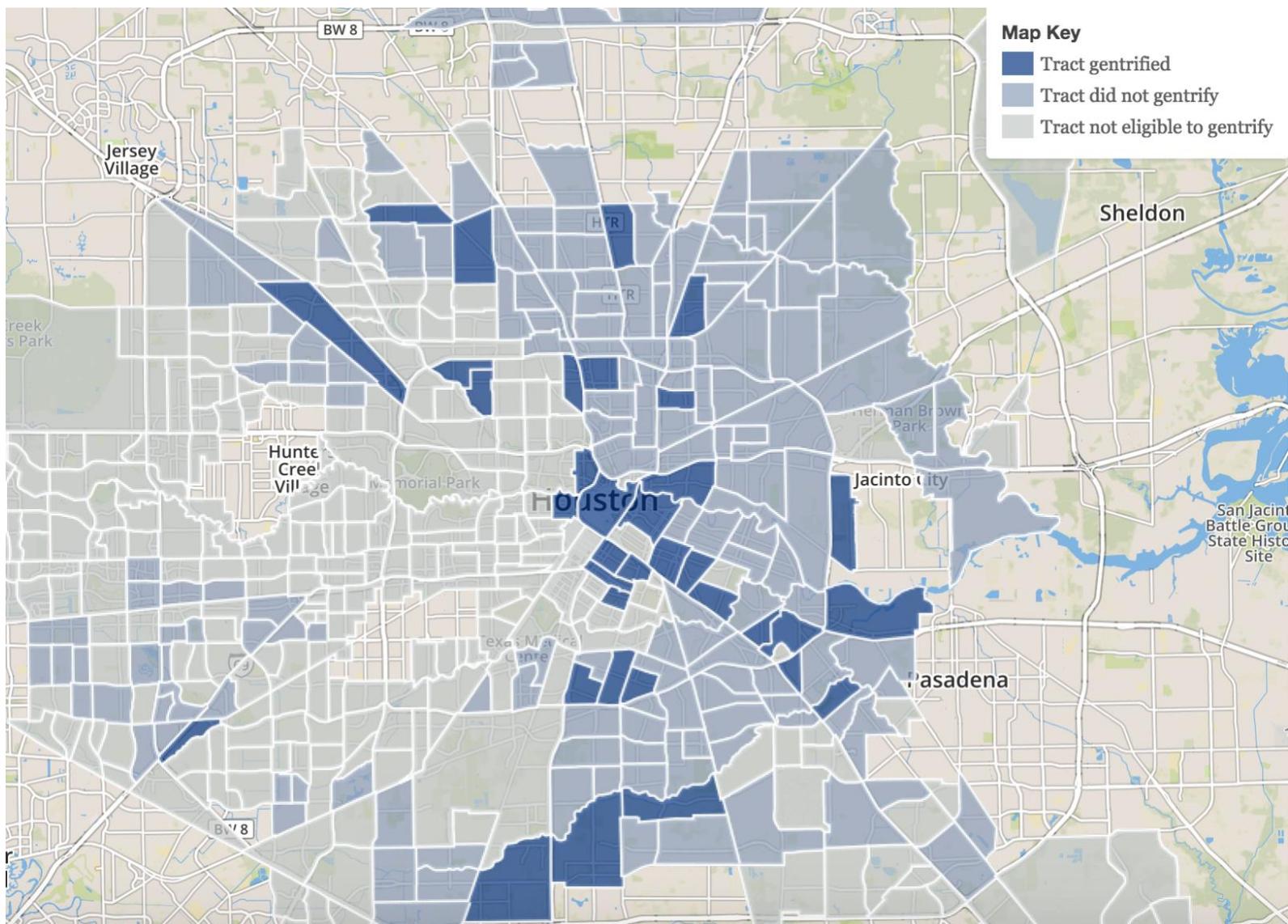
### **Preventing Displacement: Marketview Heights, Rochester, New York**

The thesis by Aya Alfonso “is a case study of the Marketview Heights neighborhood in the city of Rochester, NY, the main target of the City’s Urban Renewal District Plan.” (2016, p.1) Marketview Heights is a neighborhood in the city of Rochester with a rich history and social activism that is, in many ways, similar to the historic Third Ward in Houston. Currently, “Young people of color, primarily Black and Boricua [Puerto Rican], make up the bulk of the population, and poverty still persists as a major challenge for the community.” (Alfonso 2016, p.22-23) 75% of the population in Marketview Heights makes below \$35,000 a year while almost half of residents earn less than \$15,000 annually. Additionally, “Residential units are primarily renter-occupied” while “In 2006 owner-occupied housing units were only 35 percent of all occupied residential units”. (Alfonso 2016, p.23) However, with its “tradition of sense of place, caring for where they live and wanting a clean and safe space for the community, the Marketview Heights neighborhood has gained momentum in the recent decade with its engaged citizens and organizations” (Alfonso 2016, p.24), proving the importance of localized community advocacy in bridging disparities. This initiated “The Marketview Heights Urban Renewal District Plan (URD) of 2014” which aims to redevelop “vacant and underused properties

for economic activity..., decreasing crime..., and investing in the public spaces” (Alfonso 25), with additional affordable housing units to replace poor housing. The Marketview Heights Collective Action Project also resulted from resident-based committees created in the process of this program as the city, non-profits and residents have all joined in the effort. Findings in this study included that “it is in the areas where low income residents are concentrated that the community is very engaged and thriving in other aspects” (Alfonso 2016, p.70) that aren’t simply measured by demographic data. In fact, “The time spent in the community and the interviews revealed that there is tremendous power in coming together and taking action to improve conditions for the community.” (Alfonso 2016, p.72) Simultaneously, the process of beautification has “enhanced residents’ sense of place and created a sense of caring for the environment, keeping spaces clean, and tending gardens that feed and nourish the community.” (Alfonso 2016, p.72) Beautification efforts by the city nudged residents towards continuing community advocacy in Marketview Heights. Thus, Alfonso states that “It may be powerful for planners and policymakers to envision neighborhood change or urban renewal that is rooted in and seeks to preserve Sense of Place by including the active participation of community residents in the process.” (Alfonso 2016, p.73) The more accessible the process of neighborhood-based urban renewal is to its residents, the more passionate a neighborhood will be in allowing such renewal.

Public-private partnerships between the city of Houston and local organizations, such as Project Row Houses, and input from community-based groups, like the Third Ward Redevelopment Council, could apply these lessons in the Houston area. Thus, necessary changes should also be made in the Third Ward Urban Development Plan.

## Appendix A



Shown here is a map of various census-designated tracts in the city of Houston according to their gentrification status. Census-designated tracts shaded in dark blue have gentrified. Tracts identified in a lighter blue did not gentrify but were gentrification eligible. Tracts colored in gray were not eligible to gentrify. (Houston 2010)

Appendix B

**Figure 5b.** Neighborhoods by Income Level and Income Diversity, 2006–10

Neighborhood Types

High Poverty

- High Income Diversity
- Low Income Diversity

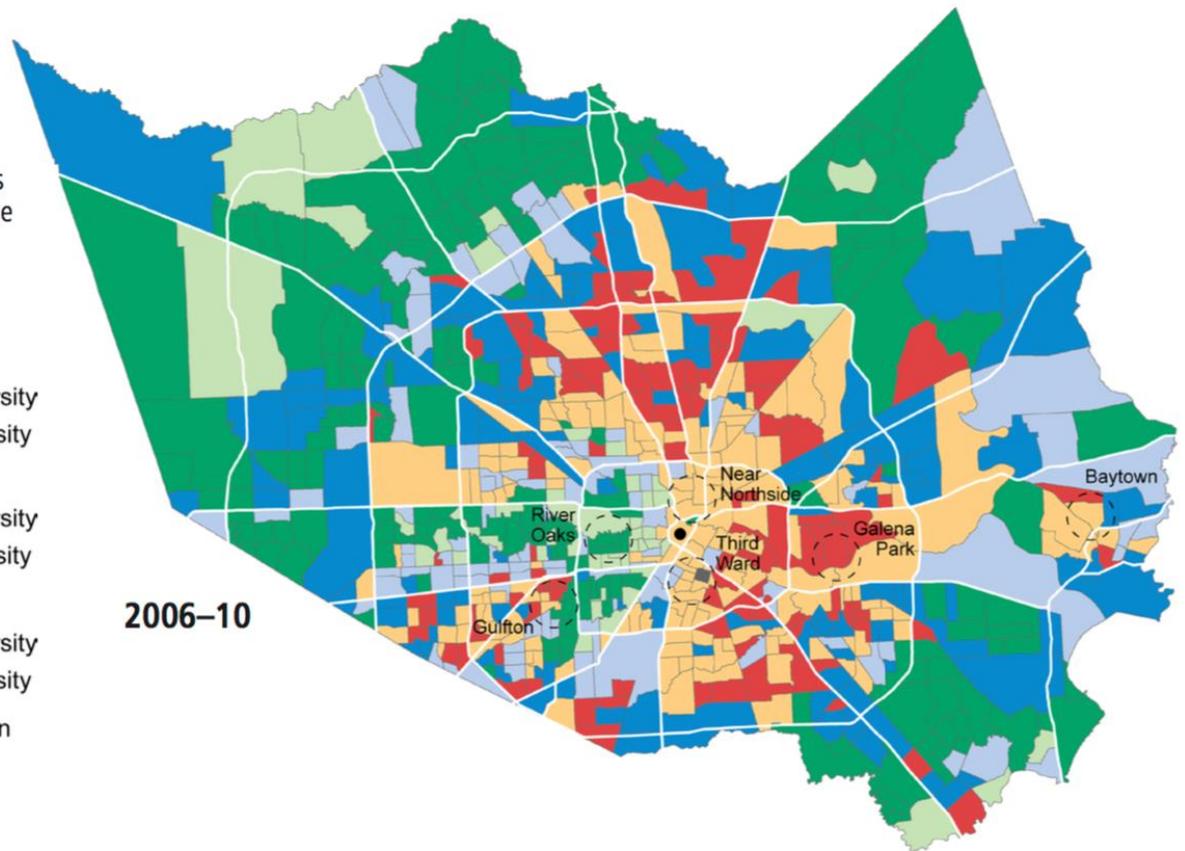
Middle Class

- High Income Diversity
- Low Income Diversity

Upper Class

- High Income Diversity
- Low Income Diversity

- Houston Downtown



Featured are a map of census-designated tracts based on relative income level. In red or orange are tracts that have high poverty, middle class tracts are shown in blue, while upper class tracts are shown in green. Then these tracts are gradated in lighter tints and darker shades. Lighter-colored tracts have high income diversity while darker-colored tracts have low income diversity. (Binkovitz 2016)

**WORKS CITED**

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