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A Critical Discussion of the Relationship Between Processes of Spatial Transformation and Youth Gang Activity in Denver

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Denver, Colorado is one of the most rapidly gentrifying cities in the United States. Case studies of gentrifying cities, including Chicago and Los Angeles demonstrate a relationship between urban restructuring and the emergence of youth gangs. However, this phenomenon is under-investigated in Denver. Drawing on an integrative literature review, this paper engages in a critical discussion of the relationship between processes of spatial transformation and youth gang activity in Denver. The contestation of urban space is identified as a central contributor to rising rates of gang criminality in the city's gentrifying areas. These findings highlight the significance of community activism in popular resistance to gentrification and the protection of residents' rights to the city.

Introduction

Gentrification and the redivisions of urban space are inherent to globalised urbanisation.[1] Wright defines the process as the economically motivated repair and reconstruction of deteriorating areas in the inner city, resulting in the significant socioeconomic restructuring of urban space.[2] Urban revitalisation in the context of a globalised capitalist system is characterised by instability and exclusion; the expansion of the urban core results in a conflict over space and the forced displacement of marginalised populations.[3,4] The city of Denver has

1 John M. Hagedorn, *A World of Gangs: Armed Young Men and Gangsta Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

2 Travis D. Wright, "Gentrification and Its Effects on Changes in Neighborhood Socio-Economic Characteristics and Crime Patterns for the City of Denver, Colorado from 1990 to 2015," (PhD diss., University of Denver Colorado, 2020), 1.

3 Laura Conway, "Gentrification In The Neoliberal World Order: A Study of Urban Change in the River North District of Denver, Colorado," (PhD diss., University of Colorado Boulder, 2015), 1.

4 Hagedorn, *A World of Gangs*.

undergone significant spatial transformation, starting in the 1970s and continuing at a rapid pace today.[5] The first wave of gentrification – the demolition and reconstruction of Auraria starting in 1968 – enabled the extensive physical and socioeconomic overhaul of the city's urban core in subsequent years.[6]

In recent years, Denver has experienced a steady increase in rates of gang-related violence.[7,8] 2015 reported 23 dead in gang-related homicides on the city's northeast side, with gang violence accounting for 15% of all homicides in the period between 2016-2019.[9] Hagedorn links historical processes of spatial transformation to shifts in gang activity in the city of Chicago, a relationship applicable to Denver as another major U.S. city undergoing rapid gentrification.[10] The definition of gangs and the nature of their relation to the city are widely contested in sociological research.[11] As such, the present paper aims to investigate the relationship between gentrification and gang activity in relation to power, identity, and resistance in the battle for space in Denver's urban core.[12]

Using Langegger's concept of the 'right to the city'[13] to explore

5 Wright, "Gentrification and Its Effects", 2.

6 Brian Page and Eric Ross, "Legacies of a Contested Campus: Urban Renewal, Community Resistance, and the Origins of Gentrification in Denver," *Urban Geography* 38, no. 9 (September 2017): 1316, https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2016.1228420

7 Lacretia Wimbley and Allison Sherry, "A wave of gun violence in Denver and Aurora troubles community members and law enforcement," CPR News, November 2, 2022, https://www.cpr.org/2022/11/03/denver-aurora-gun-violence/

8 Elise Schmelzer, "Denver homicides fell slightly in 2022, but non-fatal shootings rose — and more teens are being killed", *The Denver Post*, January 29, 2023, https://www.denverpost.com/2023/01/29/denver-homicides-shootings-2022/

9 Elise Schmelzer, "Killings among Denver's teens continue, even as city and community leaders try new solutions", *The Denver Post*, February 16, 2020, https://www.denverpost.com/2020/02/16/denver-aurora-youth-gun-violence-2019/

10 Hagedorn, *A World of Gangs*

11 John M. Hagedorn, "Gangs, Institutions, Race and Space: The Chicago School Revisited," in *Gangs in the Global City: Alternatives to Traditional Criminology*, ed. John M. Hagedorn (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007a)

12 Page and Ross, "Legacies of a Contested Campus", 1295.

13 Sig Langegger, "Viva la Raza! A Park, a Riot and Neighbourhood Change in North Denver," *Urban Studies* 50, no. 16 (April 2013) https://doi.

the contestation of space in Denver, this paper will outline the role of racialisation and segregation in the gentrification of downtown Denver, as well as the role of law enforcement in the construction of gang activity and youth criminality.[14] The Chicano movement and its legacy of youth activism, the emergence of Latino gangs in inner-city neighbourhoods, and the intersection of class and race in power relations between gangs, and institutions of social control will be analysed as well.[15] Continuities in the processes of spatial transformation will be explored focusing on areas experiencing significant degrees of historical and contemporary gentrification, spanning a timeframe of three decades (1970s-2000s). These areas include Auraria, Lower Downtown, and Highland, all neighbourhoods with historically high Latino populations in the vicinity of Denver's central business district.[16,17]

Methods

An integrative review was conducted, combining the investigation of Denver's history of gentrification with a critical review of literature investigating the prevalence, nature, and socioeconomic antecedents of the city's youth gangs phenomenon. This was followed by the application of sociological theory to explain and critically discuss the relationship between processes of spatial transformation, community activism, and youth gang activity in Denver.

Denver's History of Gentrification

The creation of the preconditions of gang affiliation in Denver predates gentrification and can be traced back to the early 20th-century industrial era. According to Wacquant,[18] residents of the urban ghetto have historically been subject to institutionally mandated ethno-racial

org/10.1177/0042098013483603

14 Hagedorn, *A World of Gangs*

15 Zackary Ridge, "Racial Capitalism in Denver: Gentrification and Racial Capitalism in Denver," (PhD diss., University of Colorado Boulder, 2020), 8.

16 Langegger, "Viva la Raza!".

17 Page and Ross, "Legacies of a Contested Campus".

18 Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 49.

closure and control, setting the precedent for contemporary uses of spatial change as an instrument of social closure and control. This is no different in the case of Denver. Socioeconomic inequalities were drawn along racial lines by discriminatory hiring practices targeting recently arrived Latino immigrants.[19] The relegation of Latino residents to overcrowded, decaying inner-city housing precipitated the spatialisation of race and the stigmatisation of the deteriorating urban core used to justify contemporary processes of gentrification.[20] The connection between urbanisation and gang activity is illustrated by the criminalisation and over-policing of Latino youth in the 1940s.[21] Denver law enforcement sought to justify increased punitive interventions against 'delinquent' youth through the application of the gang member label. Night-time curfews were put in place to restrict the activities of youth of colour, contributing to a rise in reported rates of juvenile delinquency and arrests.[22] Tensions between Latino youth and law enforcement manifested in the escalation of gang conflicts and violence in the late 1940s.[23] This dynamic between social control agents and Denver's urban youth sets the precedent for gangs' responses to changing processes of urban transformation in the city of Denver.

Conway conceptualises space as a social structure,[24] within which spatial transformation functions as an expression of power and an instrument of social control. Within these spatial structures, 'blighted' neighbourhoods are frequently constructed as a "social *elsewhere*," internally disorganised and threatening the stability and prosperity of the greater city.[25] Gentrification pursues the removal of these designated

19 Robert J. Durán, "Racism, Resistance, and Repression: The Creation of Denver Gangs, 1924-1950," in *Enduring Legacies: Ethnic Histories and Cultures of Colorado*, eds. Arturo J. Aldama, Elisa Facio, Daryl Maeda, and Reiland Rabaka (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2010).

20 Page and Ross, "Legacies of a Contested Campus".

21 Durán, "Racism, Resistance, and Repression".

22 Page and Ross, "Legacies of a Contested Campus".

23 Durán, "Racism, Resistance, and Repression".

24 Conway, "Gentrification".

25 Jock Young, "Globalization and Social Exclusion: The Sociology of Vindictiveness and the Criminology of Transgression," in *Gangs in the Global City: Alternatives to Traditional Criminology*, ed. John M. Hagedorn (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 54.

'areas of change' through the extensive demolition and reconstruction of the city's urban core.[26] In Denver, the historical genesis of this process of spatial transformation is illustrated by the demolition of the district of Auraria in the 1970s.[27] Designated as a blighted area since the 1940s, Auraria was characterised by widespread physical dereliction and was inhabited primarily by low-income, working-class Latino residents.[28] Its condemnation and redevelopment were prefaced by decades of strategic rhetoric emphasising the threat posed by concentrated urban poverty, associated in local political discourse with criminality and social blight. The characterisation of this 'blight' as "capable of overrunning the rest of the city if left unchecked" contributed to the stigmatisation of the neighbourhood as well as its population and aided the justification of securitisation and redevelopment.[29,30] The case of Auraria illustrates the significance of aspirations to gentrify in the social construction of youth delinquency and gang activity by agents of social control as outlined in Durán.[31]

This process is further demonstrated by the systematic restructuring of the neighbourhood of Highland, precipitated by the la Raza Park riots in 1981 and resulting in the extensive physical and social reorganisation of shared neighbourhood spaces.[32] In this instance, spatial transformation was used as "restoration of public order" in the face of escalating social unrest, achieved through the restriction of the local community's access to urban space.[33] Authoritarian control and the city's right to space were reasserted through the increased enforcement of nuisance laws, disproportionately targeting Latino youth, once again underlining the role of social control agents in the construction of Denver's gang problem.[34] In the case of Lower

26 Lucas W. Palmisano, "Post-industrial approaches to urban development in Denver, Colorado: evaluating strategic neighborhood plans," (PhD diss., University of Colorado Denver, 2014).

27 Page and Ross, "Legacies of a Contested Campus", 1294.

28 Ibid., 1299.

29 Ibid.

30 Ridge, "Racial Capitalism in Denver", 80.

31 Durán, "Racism, Resistance, and Repression".

32 Langegger, "Viva la Raza!".

33 Ibid., 3368.

34 Sig Langegger, "Right-of-way gentrification: Conflict, commodification

Downtown in 1995, gentrification as a method of spatial control was manifested through street-level securitisation and the stigmatisation of the neighbourhood's 'ethnic' character.[35] Urban planners called for increased landscaping "without creating meeting places as 'hang outs' for people perceived to be physically threatening," advancing a criminalised image of Latino youth and further restricting their access to public space.[36] These examples illustrate the nature of spatial transformation as a self-perpetuating process, sustained by the criminalisation of Latino youth as justification for prolonged and escalating intervention. The systematic targeting of working-class, Latino-majority neighbourhoods by policies of gentrification demonstrates the mechanisms of structural racism underpinning gang affiliation and its preconditions.[37]

Youth Gangs in Denver

Thrasher describes youth gangs as an aberrant, spatially, and socially interstitial phenomenon, localised to bounded, ethnically segregated spaces and integrated through conflict.[38] They are differentiated from other stable social formations by their continued engagement in conflict, most notably with other gangs and law enforcement.[39] According to Spergel,[40] deprivation and marginality interact to create the preconditions for a rise in gang affiliation and activity in gentrifying areas. In this context, gangs act as a viable organisational substitute and source of stability, status, respect, and personal dignity in the absence of sufficient social integration and authoritarian control.[41,42] This view

and cosmopolitanism," *Urban Studies*, 53, no. 9 (May 2016): 1811., https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098015583783

35 Palmisano, "Post-industrial approaches", 73.

36 Northeast Downtown Neighborhood Plan, 1995: 48 in Palmisano, "Post-industrial approaches", 75.

37 Irving A. Spergel, *The Youth Gang Problem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

38 Frederic M. Thrasher, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 6.

39 Spergel, *The Youth Gang Problem*, 149

40 Ibid., 110.

41 Alistair Fraser, *Urban Legends: Gang Identity in the Post-Industrial City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 45.

42 Spergel, *The Youth Gang Problem*, 62.

is supported by the findings of the Denver Youth Survey, a longitudinal study investigating the incidence of gang activity in "socially disorganised, high-crime areas" between 1988 and 1991.[43] The areas examined were minority-dense neighbourhoods, characterised by high rates of economic disadvantage and a general lack of established informal structures of social control.[44] Gang involvement was indicated by participation in acts of juvenile delinquency, defined as street offending in the form of altercations with other gangs, robbery, theft, assault, and joyriding.[45] According to the findings, 5-6% of at-risk youth identified as gang members in a given year, though this membership was often short-lived, lasting only between one to two years.[46] The majority of serious criminal offenses committed in at-risk areas were attributable to gang-affiliated youth, though not all of these could be confirmed to be gang-related.[47] Additionally, only a minority of respondents reported involvement in drug sales, with no evidence indicating that this was a coordinated as opposed to individual enterprise.[48] The high rates of attrition and transitory membership indicated align the Denver gangs of the late 1980s and the early 1990s with Thrasher's definition of youth gangs of industrial Chicago.[49] The lack of organised involvement in an informal economy indicates the absence of heavily institutionalised gangs, emphasising the social, as opposed to economic function of gangs in Denver.[50]

Gentrification and Thrasher's Gang Theory

One explanation for the prevalence of gangs in Denver's gentrifying urban core is Thrasher's theory of gangs, which underlines the constitutive

43 Finn-Aage Esbensen and David Huizinga, "Gangs, drugs, and delinquency in a survey of urban youth," *Criminology*, 31 no. 4 (November 1993): 568, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1993.tb01142.x

44 David Huizinga, Anne Wylie Weiher, Scott Menard, Rachele Espiritu, and Finn-Aage Esbensen, "Some Not So Boring Findings From The Denver Youth Survey," (Boulder: Institute of Behavioral Science University of Colorado: 1998).

45 Esbensen and Huizinga, "Gangs, drugs, and delinquency".

46 Huizinga et al., "Denver Youth Survey".

47 Ibid., 14.

48 Esbensen and Huizinga, "Gangs, drugs, and delinquency", 582.

49 Ibid., 575.

50 Hagedorn, "Gangs, Institutions, Race", 22.

role of social disorganisation in the emergence of urban gangs.[51] Social disorganisation is characterised by the collective failure of formal and informal social control and manifests in substandard living conditions, lack of access to amenities, political disempowerment, unemployment and social disintegration at the family or community level.[52,53] Social disorganisation is associated with spatial transformation and has been linked to the development of 'conflict subcultures,' arising from a lack of legitimate opportunities, economic insecurity, and stunted social mobility.[54] They are symptomatic of "disorganisation in the larger social framework", marked by precarity, instability, and conflict, and crystallize through their opposition to external agents or structures of formal organisation.[55]

The escalation of gang-related violence and criminality in Denver is concurrent with the gentrification of Highland and neighbouring areas.[56,57,58] In the period between 1979 and 1991, the incidence of gang fights increased from 8% to 16%. The use of weapons in gang fights increased from 42% to 58%, and violence resulting in hospitalisation increased from 33% to 58%. In the period between 1987 and 1991, 85-87% of youth in high-risk areas were victimised, with 66% of respondents being chronic victims of multiple offenses.[59] In the summer of 1993, a total of 108 Denver youth were killed in violent gang conflicts.[60] These increases in gang-related deviance are attributable to the lack of adequate provisions characteristic of low socioeconomic status neighbourhoods and the temporary social disorder stemming from residential instability in gentrifying areas, demonstrating the significance of gentrification as a wider structural

51 Ibid., 18.
52 Thrasher, *The Gang*, 33.
53 Huizinga et al., "Denver Youth Survey".
54 Spergel, *The Youth Gang Problem*, 149.
55 Thrasher, *The Gang*, 33.
56 Huizinga et al., "Denver Youth Survey", 5.
57 Langegger, "Viva la Raza!".
58 Wright, "Gentrification and Its Effects", 19.
59 Huizinga et al., "Denver Youth Survey", 11.
60 Sig Langegger, "Emergent public space: Sustaining Chicano culture in North Denver," *Cities* 35 (December 2013): 28, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2013.04.013

determinant of deprivation and the breakdown of social order as it relates to crime and gang activity in the city of Denver.[61,62,63]

However, it is important to note that the initial rise in gang violence coincides with the arrival of Los Angeles gangs in Denver in the 1980s.[64] According to Hagedorn's study of gentrification in Chicago,[65] processes of spatial transformation have the potential to exacerbate gang violence by undermining the spatial autonomy of gangs and making low-income urban neighbourhoods more vulnerable to external attack.[66] Increases in gang conflict can therefore in part be ascribed to local street gangs defending their territory, limiting the significance of social disorganisation as an isolated variable in the modulation of gang activity. Additionally, the social disorganisation view fails to account for the influence of political narratives and institutional aspirations to social control in both the reshaping of the city and the appearance of youth gangs, instead portraying social disorganisation as a naturally occurring feature of urban poverty.

Securitisation, Territorial Stigmatisation, and the Development of a Resistance Identity

The alternative perspective to social disorganisation theory emphasises the significance of space and the exercise of power within said space in the interaction between urban renewal and gang dynamics. Contemporary urban renewal policies represent a continuity from historical expressions of power, gentrification becoming a new mechanism of the maintenance of power inequalities along racial lines.[67] Gentrification is described as a form of physical

61 Huizinga et al., "Denver Youth Survey", 10.

62 James Diego Vigil and Steve C. Yun, "A Cross-Cultural Framework for Understanding Gangs: Multiple Marginality and Los Angeles," in *Gangs in America* (3rd ed), ed. C. Ronald Huff (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002), 167.

63 Loïc J. D. Wacquant, "Three Pernicious Premises in the Study of the American Ghett,." in *Gangs in the Global City: Alternatives to Traditional Criminology*, ed. John M. Hagedorn (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 36.

64 Langegger, "Viva la Raza!", 3365.

65 Hagedorn, *A World of Gangs*, 125.

66 Ibid., 121.

67 Durán, "Racism, Resistance, and Repression".

and symbolic spatial violence, directed at populations left vulnerable to gentrification by socioeconomically determined restrictions to their spatial autonomy.[68,69] State-mandated processes of urban revitalisation facilitate the reproduction of areas of urban blight, concentrated deprivation, and misery.[70] They sustain perpetual and involuntary segregation along racial lines through the stigmatisation of deteriorating urban spaces with substantial working-class minority populations and the extensive criminalisation of Latino communities.[71,72,73] Spatial revision functions as an instrument of social control, maintaining social exclusion and perpetuating an unequal power dynamic between state and community central to gang identity.[74]

In accordance with this line of argument, restrictions of access to physical space result in increased territoriality and the development of a gang identity as a form of resistance to racial oppression. According to Fraser,[75] gang membership plays a significant role in the identity formation of marginalised urban youth. Intersecting oppressions and social stigma encourage the establishment of social enclaves external to the hostile mainstream in urban minority population.[76] Youth's immersion in gang culture functions as a defence against the symbolic and physical violence of gentrification, as well as a compensatory strategy against the loss of social status inherent in the marginality of racialised urban existence.[77] Spatial transformation and displacement challenge spatially defined social identities, contributing through a reactionary increase in territoriality and attachment to locale.[78,79] Gangs arise in an identity vacuum, functioning to offset ontological insecurity

68 John M. Hagedorn, "Gangs in Late Modernity," in *Gangs in the Global City: Alternatives to Traditional Criminology*, ed. John M. Hagedorn (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007b).
69 Ridge, "Racial Capitalism in Denver", 30.
70 Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts*, 52
71 Hagedorn, *A World of Gangs*, 120.
72 Page and Ross, "Legacies of a Contested Campus".
73 Ridge, "Racial Capitalism in Denver".
74 Hagedorn, "Gangs in Late Modernity", 307.
75 Fraser, *Urban Legends*, 52.
76 Ridge, "Racial Capitalism in Denver", 64.
77 Langegger, "Viva la Raza!", 3361.
78 Ridge, "Racial Capitalism in Denver", 4.
79 Fraser, *Urban Legends*, 43.

stemming from an undermined sense of locality, disconnection from space and spatial identity brought on by gentrification or forced displacement.[80]

The processes of securitisation inherent in processes of urban renewal violate urban minorities' 'right to the city,' i.e., their ability to inhabit and act within urban spaces freely and without fears of violent repercussion.[81] Increased police presence in gentrifying neighbourhoods delegitimises territorial claims to public spaces, establishing an unequal power dynamic between local youth and external control agencies.[82] Delinquency and gang affiliation thus function as a vehicle for resistance and defence against gentrification and historical and contemporary experiences of racial oppression.[83,84] Gangs become social actors in a battle for space, conceptualised by Hagedorn as a battle against structural racism and segregation.[85] Engagement in agentic violence facilitates the creation of self-defined and self-regulated autonomy in opposition to the encroaching threat of the city, with delinquency representing a rejection of oppressive authority.[86] The development and exercise of this identity of resistance is best illustrated by the reactionary deviance displayed by Latino youth during the 1981 la Raza Park riots, where vandalism served as a form of protest and a reassertion of personal agency and right to the city in the face of increased spatial restrictions, criminalisation, and escalating police aggression.[87,88] The example of la Raza illustrates the function of gangs as sources of empowerment in the face of unequal power relations manifested through the city's repossession of community spaces.[89] Moreover, it highlights the catalysing role played by agents of social control in the emergence of gang violence.

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80 Young, "Globalization and Social Exclusion", 72.
81 Langegger, "Viva la Raza!", 3372.
82 Ibid., 3373.
83 Hagedorn, "Gangs in Late Modernity", 299.
84 Hagedorn, *A World of Gangs*, 60.
85 Ibid., 129.
86 Fraser, *Urban Legends*, 43.
87 Langegger, "Viva la Raza!", 3367.
88 Langegger, "Right-of-way gentrification", 1811.
89 Ibid.

Explaining the Phenomenon of Denver Youth Gangs

As demonstrated above, though there is a link between urban transformation and shifts in gang activity exists in the city of Denver, it is less significant in comparison to U.S. cities undergoing similar levels of gentrification. Nor can the appearance of Denver gangs be traced back to the first wave of gentrification in the 1970s, contrary to expectations based on research conducted in other American cities.[90] This is due to the city's history of organised community resistance to urban transformation. Originating with the contestation of the Auraria project by Chicano activists and residents, beginning in 1968, political mobilisation for Latino rights to self-determination in the face of social and spatial marginalisation has provided an alternative expression of resistance for Latino youth.[91] The gentrification of Auraria galvanised Latino political consciousness, with the tendency of community organisation carrying over to subsequent waves of gentrification affecting neighbouring areas in the decades following.[92]

This alternative method of claiming space and asserting agency in the face of the encroaching city served as a protective factor against gang involvement.[93,94] The heightened tensions between law enforcement and Latino youth in the early 1970s are attributable to youth involvement in radical political activism as opposed to gang affiliation.[95] Police aggression was used as a strategy to incite violence and combat political organisation through the control of space.[96,97]. The conflict, localised to Highland, contributed to the blanket criminalisation of local Chicano activists "based upon fears over gang violence from the 1980s to the 1990s" and served to justify neighbourhood gentrification as a crime reduction initiative.[98] This example demonstrates the continuity between the historical and

90 Hagedorn, *A World of Gangs*
91 Page and Ross, "Legacies of a Contested Campus", 1305.
92 Ridge, "Racial Capitalism in Denver".
93 Langegger, "Emergent public space", 30.
94 Page and Ross, "Legacies of a Contested Campus", 1311.
95 Ridge, "Racial Capitalism in Denver".
96 Hagedorn, *A World of Gangs.*
97 Langegger, "Viva la Raza!", 3368.
98 Ridge, "Racial Capitalism in Denver", 89.

contemporary role of law enforcement in the social construction of crime and gang criminality in Denver, as well as the city's uniqueness in the maintenance of youth's access to alternative organisational structures through the development and cultivation of political consciousness.[99,100] Furthermore, the presence of a strong political consciousness in the city's marginalised communities may account for the lack of a significant institutionalised gang presence in Denver relative to cities such as Chicago or Los Angeles.[101,102]

Krohn and Thornberry identify Denver as an emerging gang city,[103] with the gang problem first being recognised around the 1980s. This is in contrast with Los Angeles and Chicago, both cities with long histories of gangs, altering the interaction between spatial change and gang dynamics in Denver relative to cities undergoing similar processes of gentrification.[104,105] The territoriality and relative impermanence of Denver gangs aligns with Thrasher's conception of deviant youth groups, realised at a time when Chicago gangs themselves were a relatively recent social phenomenon.[106] This explains the limited institutionalisation of Denver gangs, as well as the lack of an organised response to processes of spatial transformation. Additionally, it supports the argument that gangs originating in Denver are the product of reactionary deviance, produced by the restriction of their right to the city by gentrifying forces.[107]

Evaluation of Denver's Gang Literature

This perspective is further supported by the import of Los Angeles

99 Durán, "Racism, Resistance, and Repression".
100 Langegger, "Emergent public space".
101 Page and Ross, "Legacies of a Contested Campus".
102 Vigil and Yun, "A Cross-Cultural Framework".
103 Marvin D. Krohn and Terence P. Thornberry, "Longitudinal Perspectives on Adolescent Street Gangs". in *The Long View of Crime: A Synthesis of Longitudinal Research*, ed. Akiva M. Liberman (New York: Springer, 2008), 148.
104 Hagedorn, *A World of Gangs*
105 Vigil and Yun, "A Cross-Cultural Framework".
106 Thrasher, *The Gang.*
107 Langegger, "Viva la Raza!".

gangs in the 1980s.[108] According to the Denver Youth Survey, a significant portion of self-identified gang members were affiliated with the Bloods and the Crips.[109] The attribution of Denver's recent increase in homicide rates to the resurgence of conflict between the Park Hill Bloods and the Crips from the city's northeast side provides additional support for this perspective.[110] A potential interaction with processes of spatial transformation is indicated by the concentration of these imported gangs in Denver's central 'areas of change' (primarily Highland), though the literature supporting this is highly limited.[111]

This ties into a second issue, the lack of academic research investigating contemporary gang dynamics in the city of Denver. The underreporting of the city's gang presence makes it difficult to link processes of spatial transformation to changes in gang activity even in neighbourhoods with a stronger gang presence. The scarcity of sociological research on this interaction leaves crime rates as the chief indicator of gang activity, restricting the present analysis to a criminological framework in determining the nature and prevalence of gang activity in gentrifying areas.[112] The lack of recent academic literature on gang activity in Denver compromises the temporal relevance of the analysis included in this paper.

Furthermore, existing literature heavily emphasises the role of social disorganisation in the formation and maintenance of gangs in Denver, failing to consider the active role played by social control agents in the criminalisation of urban youth.[113,114] This is illustrated by the data presented in analyses of the Denver Youth Survey, the most comprehensive investigation of youth gangs in Denver to date.[115] Though the study links delinquency to processes of spatial transformation in

108 Ibid., 3365

109 Finn-Aage Esbensen, David Huizinga, and Anne W. Weiher. "Gang and Non-Gang Youth: Differences in Explanatory Factors", *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 9, no. 2 (May, 1993): 101.

110 Schmelzer, "Killings among Denver's teens".

111 Palmisano, "Post-industrial approaches".

112 Wright, "Gentrification and Its Effects".

113 Spergel, *The Youth Gang Problem*.

114 Wright, "Gentrification and Its Effects".

115 Huizinga et al., "Denver Youth Survey".

vulnerable neighbourhoods, it relies on a criminological definition of youth gangs. Its emphasis on criminal conduct as a requirement for gang membership contributes to the potential underreporting of gang prevalence in gentrifying urban areas and the presentation of a skewed image of Denver's 'gang problem'.[116]

Moreover, its analysis is largely divorced from the active role played by state institutions in driving processes of urban renewal and shaping the preconditions for the emergence of gangs. In line with this is the tendency of prior research to treat race as a politically and socially neutral variable, spatially associated with reduced quality of life and social disadvantage.[117,118] There is a limited emphasis on the influence of the city's history of racial oppression directed at Latino populations in the consideration of the interaction between social groups and spatial processes in the context of urban development and gang activity. The perspective identifying gentrification as a significant driver of racial segregation and the criminalisation of minority youth is rarely considered, diminishing the role of state policy and police intervention in the creation of gangs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the reaction of gangs to spatial transformation in Denver is a complex and dynamic process. Existing research on gangs in Denver focuses primarily on the impact of gentrification-induced social disorganisation on gang affiliation in deprived areas surrounding the city's central business district.[119,120] This paper offers an alternative view, accounting for the historical and socio-structural frameworks underlying the processes of urban renewal in the districts of Auraria, Highland, and Lower Downtown over a period of five decades. Considering the active influence of social control agents on the systematic restructuring of Denver's urban core, the control of space and the city's infringement upon citizen's 'right to the

116 Esbensen and Huizinga, "Gangs, drugs, and delinquency".
117 Huizinga et al., "Denver Youth Survey".
118 Spergel, *The Youth Gang Problem*.
119 Huizinga et al., "Denver Youth Survey".
120 Spergel, *The Youth Gang Problem*

city' appears to play a more significant role in the formation and maintenance of Latino youth gangs.[121] Spatial and racial stigmatisation play a significant role in this process. The centrality of territorial legitimacy and spatial belonging to identity formation in urban youth in Denver catalysed the integration into youth gangs as a conduit for the formation and expression of resistance.[122] Authorities' restriction of access to space through securitisation, surveillance, and racial profiling contributed to the criminalisation of Latino youth, furthering gentrification on the grounds of security provision.[123] The relationship between spatial transformation and gang activity is best illustrated by the case study of the la Raza riots in Highland, where delinquency functioned as a vehicle to defend residents' right to the city.[124] The alternative – community activism and the development of a strong political consciousness – appears to be a protective factor against youth's involvement in gang criminality, though authorities treat it as a crime all the same. To summarise, spatial transformation and gang activity appear to be mutually constitutive phenomena, where urban renewal spurs resistance and the criminalisation of resistance provides a rationale for further gentrification of areas constructed as threatening and blighted.

121 Langegger, "Viva la Raza!".
122 Langegger, "Right-of-way gentrification".
123 Hagedorn, *A World of Gangs*.
124 Langegger, "Viva la Raza!".

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