Summary

My guiding question is, "how can we use storytelling to empower the stories and experiences of the black community in the Central Area, all while acknowledging the city's history?" My secondary question is “How can we explore the role of tech companies in the longer history of redlining, racial covenants, and divestment?"

In 1865, Seattle's First City Council banned Native Americans from living in the city – but restricting people's right to a home hasn't stopped there. It's clear that Seattle hasn't stopped changing, as evidenced by the increased growth of tech companies like Google, Airbnb, and Amazon and their obtrusive presence in Seattle (Buhayer & Bass, 2018). The repercussions of the tech boom are felt in the increase of high-income earners and real estate investors that build at their price range (not to mention the traffic, never-ending construction projects, and posters on every bus that invite everyone to change their life by learning to code (Excluded, Inside the Lines, 2019).

As tech companies continue to expand their presence in the greater Seattle area, property owners continue to build expensive apartments and living complexes for the influx of workers with a high income. This expansion has displaced people of color who have historically lived in the Central Area. Moreover, there are stories of resilience in communities that have been displaced by gentrification, but they are often not showcased in large media outlets. As a journalist, I believe that I can start to put stories of community members in conversation with current policies and the history of redlining.

Methods

My approach is informed by Villanueva et al.'s (2017) approach to community-based research, which emphasizes the importance of breaking down power dynamics in interviews to avoid perpetuating the dynamics of colonialism (Villanueva et al., 2017). It also focuses on centering people's lived experience, which was my approach when talking with Central District members.
I will apply Deahl's (2018) approach to narrative journalism, which will include interviews, literature, and insights from events in the CD to tell the story of how the Central District has changed over time (Deahl, 2018). My methods are also informed by critical race theory as a framework for understanding how law socially constructs race to disadvantage people of color, and the movement to social transformation. Delgado and Stefancic (2013) also focus on the power of storytelling to highlight the narratives that are often oppressed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013).

One challenge is my positionality as a non-black person of color who is exploring gentrification in the CD a community that is not my own. For this reason, I conducted interviews with CD community members that could speak to their vision for their community and how they had seen it change.

The history of movement in the CD

Historically, the CD housed the city's Jewish population in the central and southern part, and the northern part was primarily Catholic. Taylor (2011) notes that the influx of the Black community into the CD began with an influx of southern Black individuals during World War I (Taylor, 2011). The black population of the CD grew during World War II to over 15,000 people by 1950 (Morrill, 320). More than movement, “Black urban culture is not simply the distinctive food, dress, music, or language emanating from city streets; it is ultimately the infinite variety of interactions that allow a people to define their sense of collective identity and values” (Taylor, 2011, p. 6).

Over time, people began migrating to the suburbs, which raised taxable incomes and property values. In 1990, there were triple the number of Black residents as white residents. However, white residents outnumbered black residents by 2000 (McGee, 2007).

In response, activists advocated for more affordable housing and financial assistance for people who were at risk of eviction (Freeman, 2004). Freeman (2004) notes that gentrification occurs when higher income households move to the suburbs and raise taxable income and property values (Freeman, 2004).

Displacement in Seattle and similar cities

What story do you usually hear about Seattle? There's a chance that your computer's software, morning coffee, jet from your recent flight, or online store began in this area, and the city is often portrayed as a place of innovation and global connections (True Northwest: The Seattle Journey, 2019). Seattle's economy has shifted from timber to gold to the aerospace industry with the advent of World
War II. Now, the city has kept building, and the repercussions of this are felt all over Seattle.

Seattle is certainly a place where gentrification occurs, but the divisiveness of a boom doesn’t just affect Seattle. Black residents in Harlem, Chicago's South Side, South Central L.A., and San Francisco’s Fillmore District, among others, have seen the influx of “white-flighters who now crave the proximity, convenience, and ‘hippiness’ of living close to downtowns where they work and play” (McGee, 2007, para. 3). Lartey (2018) notes that after the 2008 mortgage crisis, Atlanta’s vacancy rates increased by 50 percent, and residents were met with a sign that said “we buy houses” on every corner. Atlanta is an interesting case study because it was the city to develop public housing in 1936 and the first to close it down. Between 2000 and 2010, the percent of white Americans doubled from 16 to 34 percent, and the average price of a home doubled between 2000 and 2018. Much like the CD, legislators are responding by building affordable housing (Lartey, 2018).

Much like Atlanta, the Central District has seen movement of its residents. It could be residents going to college and not coming back, children selling their home after their parents pass away, or people losing their home because of drugs. This movement of people is also a reflection of displacement. The displacement of black residents has also occurred in cities like Harlem, Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco among others (M. Barnett, personal communication, March 14, 2019). This phenomenon was also seen in San Francisco, where over a quarter of its residents were at risk of displacement (CityLab, 2015).

Oakland, a city with a large Black population, could act as a model for cities like Seattle. Libby Schaaf, the current mayor of Oakland, focuses on building housing for protecting the tenants who were built there and putting down roots. The affordable housing development branch of the city of Oakland works with non-profit and for-profit developers to preserve the rental and ownership of low and moderate income households (City of Oakland, n.d.). Contrastingly, in the neighboring area of the Bay Area, 11 jobs have been created for every 1 unit of housing since 2010.

“This is not just about building housing,” Schaaf said. “It is protecting your tenants from being displaced from the community where they have put down roots. And yet, Oakland cannot do this in a vacuum (L. Schaaf, personal communication, May 4, 2019).

More broadly, Schaaf said that community members need to take care of each other.
“We are all interdependent on one another, and we have to behave that way,” Schaaf said (L. Schaff, personal communication, May 4, 2019).

Prevalent systems of the past: Redlining, lending practices, and racial covenants

Long before tech companies were a staple in the Greater Seattle Area, deed restrictions became common after 1926 when the Supreme Court upheld their use. McGee (2007) notes that banks in the Central Area wouldn't always give loans to black residents and if they did, they would charge more. Although banks said that money wasn't available for African American neighborhoods, this money was being funneled into suburban neighborhoods (McGee, 2007). Redlining, racial covenants, and limited resources were pervasive barriers in the CD (W. Garrett, personal communication, April 18, 2019).

It wasn't until the late 1960's that the Fair Housing Act prohibited discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of housing. Racial restrictive covenants and lending practices made it difficult for communities of color to own and live in certain properties, which maintained Seattle segregation (Central Seattle Community Council Federation, 1975). Additionally, the impact of gentrification and its policies still exist in the form of homelessness, income inequality, and institutional racism. In the words of the Wing Luke Museum, “different rules, same game” (Excluded, Inside the Lines, 2019).

The state of Washington went on to pass the Mortgage Disclosure Act and the Fairness in Lending Act, which increased the number of Black residents in the suburbs by the early 1980s (McGee, 2007). A 1983 study of 5 cities, including Seattle, found that almost one-fourth of residents in urban neighborhoods were displaced because of eviction or increasing rent (Vertz, 1985). Even today, 500 deeds and covenants for north, south, and east Seattle retain language from racializes covenants. A modern-day deed for a property in North Queen Anne reads “”No person or persons of Asiatic, African or Negro blood, lineage, or extraction shall be permitted to occupy a portion of said property” (Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project, n.d.). A 2003 study by the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now found that Seattle Black loan applicants were 2.5 times likely to be denied a conventional mortgage loan when compared to their white counterparts. Additionally, people of color were more likely to pay high rates on their mortgage loans and if they failed to repay them, they could lose their homes and ruin their credit (McGee, 2007).

More than that, the repercussions of gentrification are personal. In 1960, 90 percent of Seattle's black population lived in the CD. With the increase of property taxes, rising rent prices, and lack of access to resources to maintain older houses,
it's predicted that the CD will be less than 10 percent Black in a few years. In addition to these segregated housing practices, members of the CD have faced intergenerational poverty, school segregation, crime, and crimes, which has “generated growing alienation, despair, and anger among black Seattleites” (Taylor, 2011, p. 235).

Displacement as a result of gentrification is a much more nuanced concept. Martin (2016) notes that displacement occurs when residents leave their neighborhood because of increasing housing prices, but these moves can be voluntary or involuntary. A resident may involuntarily move because of events beyond their control like eviction or divorce. However, gentrification does not impact voluntary moves by homeowners because they have more equity in their homes (Martin, 2016). The impact of gentrification disproportionately impacts renters, regardless of whether they are individuals, families, or businesses. These individuals tend to have lower incomes, face rising rent, and can be evicted by their landlord (Florida, 2017). This challenge is exacerbated by the fact that Seattle's housing prices have grown faster than the national average since 1950, which means that housing prices continued to outpace the incomes of people who live in them (McGee, 2007).

For many immigrants and communities of color, homeownership is a significant way to build assets and create stability for future generations. Homeowners are also less likely to move because they live in a community longer, are older, and see their home as an asset (Martin, 2017). However, less than 28% of Black households in King County own their homes, and homeownership for Latino households has also declined sharply. The question is – do communities of color have the income and resources to own their own property? Will their rent continue to increase faster than their income? (Excluded, Inside the Lines, 2019).

Moving businesses and the need for ownership

The CD as a central place for the Black community's lives and imagination. Caupain remembers coming to the salon to her hair done, something was part of her routine and identity. It also made her feel connected to generations of Central District residents (A. Caupain, personal communication, April 19, 2019).

“The elders were there. You would pick up on a conversation you had before. There was banter of the way the older women provided their wisdom to the older women. Even the babies in the salon got to be in proximity of that,” Caupain said. “It created this awesome thread of connectivity across generations that I don’t see at hair salons anymore.”

Many small businesses do not own their property, which means that they pay commercial rents to landlords. This can make businesses susceptible to sudden
rent increases, harassment or eviction (NALCAB, 2016). This means that a lot of those small businesses like hair salons and restaurants have been priced out of their buildings and forced to move. This shift has also meant that people open up their homes as gathering spaces. This is a common side effect of gentrification – businesses may need to relocate, close, or change the products they offer. However, their customers cannot always follow them to new locations (NALCAB, 2016).

“My hair salon is no longer out here. She's doing hair in her kitchen now. My brother's barber is in Renton. There are specific places that people would come here for services that are no longer her,” Caupain said. “I see them being directly affected by gentrification. Their landlords raised their rents and they couldn't afford it. they just have to move and hope their clients move with them.”

There are some measures that communities can do to support local businesses. One small thing is supporting these businesses by buying their products, building alliances with other organizations, and offering business development support (NALCAB, 2016). Beyond businesses, some churches have split their presence between the Central District and parts of South Seattle. Caupain said that some level of community exists online, but there aren't as many central places for meeting. When reflecting on the Central District and how it has changed, Caupain remembers that it used to compromise of single-family homes. Now, townhouses are being built on every corner. Even recently, a nearby church sold their parking lot to house eight new townhouses. Caupain has been reflecting on how new residents will interact with the new residents in these buildings, and the question of who will benefit and be burdened by this (A. Caupain, personal communication, April 19, 2019).

After 2000, people with higher incomes began to move into historically black areas like the Central District. This displacement impacted low-income communities, especially people with lower incomes. Adamson (2019) notes that is evident in the rise in property values. Zillow estimates that the price of a 1-bedroom apartment in Seattle is almost $2,000. Low-income housing can have prices as low as $600 with waitlists of six months or more (Adamson, 2019).

The lack of belonging is reflected even in streets that are named after people like Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, which were people who traded community member’s ancestors for molasses (W. Garrett, personal communication, April 18, 2019).

Amid all of these changes, Caupain said that Byrd Barr Place rents out its space on evenings and weekends (A. Caupain, personal communication, April 19, 2019). This
is an act of placemaking, which can be a tool to support public safety and support neighborhood revitalization. It also requires the consideration of factors like individual health, gentrification, and belonging.

“We get the value of placemaking, not just through highlighting the work of the organization, but also having a physical space,” Caupain said. “Being able to fortify the space so people can continue to be here and be a source of physical support, safety, and stability. That's what a physical sense of space provides.”

“For people with history attached to the Central District of a longing to remain there, it could be difficult if they don't have the means,” Barnett said.

Over time, the Central District has become increasingly white. Ultimately, the repercussions of gentrification will continue to be felt today.

“It will never be what it used to be,” Barnett said. “Once the community is gone, it's hard to get back. It's not just a matter of geography.”

Upon reflecting on where to buy a home, Caupain and her husband looked into the Central District (CD) but couldn't find anything that fit their needs and budget. She said that their house in South Seattle is becoming a home, but they often find themselves returning to the CD.

“When I look at the territorial view of Seattle and the way it's shifting with the development, there's still a familiar sense with the people, type of services, [and] activities,” Caupain said. “It's the strong sense of connection I have with the community.”

Working at Byrd Barr Place for 16 years means that Caupain is often in the CD for work, but it's not the only reason she's drawn to the area. Caupain has fond memories of visiting the Central District, even when she was living and attending high school in Kent (A. Caupain, personal communication, April 19, 2019).

“I always had grandparents and aunts that lived in the CD and drew us here, so I would have sleepovers with my friends show grandparents had homes here,” Caupain said. “… It was a social gathering place for me.

Seattle, a city of innovation, tech companies, and displacement

The Museum of History and Industry describes Seattle as a “city of tinkerers and problem solvers.” Companies like Aldus, a software company that made a desktop publishing software and Zillow, an online real estate company, led to the beginning of the tech boom in the 1980s – and all of these ideas started with Seattle's brainpower. It's true that Paul Allen and Bill Gates wrote a programming language in 1975 that went on to transform personal computing, and the work of Amazon as
the “inventor” of online retail has transformed the world. Still, I feel like something is missing from this narrative.

“More people and more money have flooded into the [state] and made it challenging to support the people who built it,” Catherine Hinrichsen, project director of Seattle University's Project on Family Homelessness, said.

In the late 1970's, Seattle boomed with civic innovation. Seattle shifted from the traditional manufacturing industry to health services and tech through companies like Microsoft, Adobe, Starbucks, and Amazon (Morrill, 317). Medic One also launched a system for emergency response, and three researchers from the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center won Novel prizes for their work in the 1970's (Berger, 2019). As the country was recovering from a recession, Seattle citizens advocated for the historic preservation of Pioneer Square and International District. As a result, the area attracted people o the center of the city. The Burke-Gillman Trail was transformed from a railroad to a trail for bikes and pedestrians, Bumbershoot came into existence to celebrate the arts, and organizations like El Centro de La Raza were founded to support the city (Berger, 2019).

Seattle’s growth shows no signs of letting up, particularly as more people come to the city to escape the unlivable cost of other tech hubs like San Francisco (The Economist, 2018). In Seattle, there are more cranes in the sky than any other city in the United States for the third year in the row, which is a product of increased construction and development. Most of these cranes are concentrated in Downtown Seattle and around South Lake Union (Millman, 2019). This has led to circumstances we can’t even plan for. At the end of April, a crane crashed in South Lake Union and killed 4 people: a freshman college student, former city employee, and two iron workers. This was the first crane accident in the city since 2006 . (Paul & Mettler, 2019).

The growth of tech companies has led to massive growth and employment in Downtown Seattle and South Lake Union (Taylor, 2011). Since its inception, “Amazon [has been] in the business of disruption, of turning the world on its head and to its advantage” (Berger, 2018, para. 3). Long before Amazon struck down the head tax, Jeff Bezos moved the company to Seattle because of Washington’s lack of an income tax. Amazon says that its headquarters employed 45,000 people by 2018, and its new headquarters will house 50,000 more employees (Buhayar & Bass, 2018). The presence of these tech workers has driven up rent prices in the center of Seattle and the periphery, which included the Central District. It has led to the closure of independent retailers and increased construction, but it has also created more barriers for communities of color who are accessing education or owning businesses (CityLab, 2015).
Amid the growth of tech companies, there are things to lose.

“We're losing his character and the kinds of spaces in which culture can happen,” Dow Constantine, the King County Executive. “We have to be intentional about protecting them not just in downtown, but in all of our neighborhoods” (D. Constantine, personal communication, May 4, 2019).

Other cities have tried to reduce the spread of tech companies. When Amazon announced its plan to open a second headquarters, over 200 cities made bids and vied for the promise of 50,000 jobs. Queens was one of the two proposed sites for Amazon’s second headquarters alongside Virginia. Some residents were certainly hopeful that the company would bring more jobs to the area. However, there was backlash from state and local politicians, activists, and community members, particularly because of Amazon’s anti-union stance and work with federal immigration officials (Goodman, 2019). This combination of factors led to Amazon backing out of their original plan to build a corporate campus in New York City, although they do plan to expand the Amazon teams in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Staten Island (“Update on plans for New York City headquarters,” 2019).

Caupain said that she’s drawn to Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella’s concept of “democratizing technology,” but she hasn’t seen this concept lived out yet. For example, Caupain explained that the process of applying for energy assistance can take up to three weeks and requires an in-person meeting for a person to bring in their documents. She envisions that technology could streamline this process so it could exist online, which would reduce the time burden, especially for people who work multiple jobs and cannot come into Byrd Barr Place during open hours (A. Caupain, personal communication, April 19, 2019).

Some tech companies have committed to take action. In early 2019, Microsoft pledged to donate $500 million to build affordable housing (Weise, 2019). Similarly, Tableau agreed to donate $1.3 million to respond to veteran and chronic and homelessness. The question is, “is this funding enough?” Instead of just writing checks, Caupain envisions that tech companies could provide mentorship for growth management to organizations like Byrd Barr, but also use their resources to fulfill their responsibility to serve vulnerable communities.

“Many of us are struggling to keep our business alive and our clients safe,” Caupain said. “...We’re struggling hard and money is not enough. We need the knowledge.”

One challenge of Seattle’s development is the way that urban developers and architects are taught to approach their projects. Rex Hohlbein, the founder of Facing Homelessness, discussed this challenge and the way that cities are built.
“You’re taught that were site and client is there all the information is – your job as an architect is to ... find the questions,” Holbein said of the process for designing a building.

Holbein suggests that one way to be community-oriented in supporting communities is to move away from a criminalization approach and talk to people.

“Are you okay?” Holbein said. “That’s a profound different question that leads to profoundly different answers.”

For Caupain, one potential way to increase awareness of urban developers is to bring them in to meet community members who use Byrd Barr Place.

“We like to bring people here, especially when programs are open, so they can put a face to the services we provide and hear directly from clients,” Caupain said. “I’ve seen it make a difference, provided that people make the time to listen.”

Reclaiming Space: “This was born out of community”

The Central District is still healing from the trauma of gentrification and redlining, and its repercussions will continue to be felt in the emotional health and physical landscape of the space. In the process, one might ask, “How do we use well-being as the starting point for creating a place where people want to be, even in the midst of hostility or lack of representation?

For artists like Jessica Rycheal and Matthew Miller, healing can start with reclaiming space.

“What I hope to provide with Black urbanism is a counterweight that allows us to see that Blackness is beautiful and celebratory and poetic,” Miller said (M. Miller, personal communication, Feb. 7, 2019).

This act of reclamation can often be challenging, but it’s a necessary part of reclaiming space.

“I'm at the table intentionally because we need to be visible in those spaces. We need to be present even in spaces that weren't made for us,” Rycheal said. “We are forcing people to move around us for a change. The more work I do to unlearn, the more I'm OK with being who I am.”

Andrea Caupain is the current CEO for Byrd Barr Place, an organization that not only provides direct services to people living in poverty like energy assistance but also works with the government to change systems and policies. The building is physically positioned in between a hospital and church, which reflects its role as a central place for rest and support (A. Caupain, personal communication, April 19, 2019).
“We want to be relevant to everyone in this community who needs us, or people who want to volunteer, donate, or be civically engaged,” Caupain said. “We've expanded our view of what service to the community looks like.”

Another organization that focuses on healing and reclaiming the space is Africatown, which takes a comprehensive, community-based strategy. In their work, they reclaim narratives about the Black community by highlighting the richness of the culture (W. Garrett, personal communication, April 18, 2019).

Barnett suggests that awareness is the first step to responding to gentrification. She also said that there needs to be more low-income housing and tax savings for people who are burdened by property taxes. Most importantly, there needs to be collaboration among stakeholders.

“We need to think of the community holistically, not ‘us’ and ‘them,’” Barnett said.

It’s clear that the story of the CD is one of resilience. This became clear with the opening of the Liberty Bank Building, a corner of the CD that’s been reclaimed by the Black community. It embodies principles related to ownership and equitable development. March 23 was a monumental day for the city of Seattle. The opening of the liberty bank in 1968 was a response to the exclusionary act of redlining.

“We live and feel gentrification every day. Lack of affordable housing options forces our families further away from education, employment opportunities, and culturally relevant resources,” said Kevin Dawson, the board president of the Byrd Barr Place, during the ribbon cutting.

When it opened in 1968, Liberty Bank was Washington State’s first primarily Black-owned bank. It was developed to create an institution that would lend to Black homeowners and businesses. The property was closed in 1988 and later sold to Capitol Hill Housing in 2015 (Pien, 2018). Now, the six-story Liberty Bank Building hosts 115 units of affordable housing that are priced at 30 to 60 percent of the median income in the area, and small businesses will occupy the first floor. The work is a partnership across community-based organizations like Africatown, Byrd Barr Place, and the Black Community Impact Alliance (Pien, 2018).

Kevin Dawson (personal communication, March 23, 2019), the board president of Byrd Barr Place, highlighted the building’s opening as a step towards creating a more equitable Seattle.

"If people have access to basic human needs, they become strong people," Dawson said. "Strong people [build] strong communities."

The inpouring of support for this building also encourages ownership and serves as a model for inclusive housing developments.
“This isn’t just about the Central District. It’s about black communities in this world,” said Wyking Garrett, the CEO of the Africatown Community Land Trust.

Garrett (personal communication, March 23, 2019) also emphasized how this building creates a space for members of the Black community to live in the Central District instead of being pushed to cities south of Seattle like Rainier Beach or Renton.

“Our community wants to come back it to their roots,” Garrett said. “It’s hard to borrow sugar when you have to cross a highway.”

This building creates space for Black men to raise their songs in the community where they live and work. Garrett said that now, parents can walk 10 minutes to school to check on their kids. In doing so, this building responds to the need for affordable housing, but also ownership.

“Raise your hand if we need 10 more liberty buildings,” Garrett said (W. Garrett, personal communication, March 23, 2019).

The future of the Central District: A place of art and resilience

As for the future of the CD, there is transformative work occurring, all with the goal of supporting the community in its healing process and working towards equitable development.

For example, David Rue has his foot in many doors as an educator, arts leader, and dancer. Throughout his work, he has explored Blackness, gender, and community-building in movement. Rue learned to celebrate being different because he had to, all while navigating the third culture of being American at school, and celebrating his pride of Libya and West Africa at home. It’s clear that Rue gets a lot of his joy from his community and the arts. Through getting his bachelor’s degree at the University of Minnesota and performing with TU Dance for four years, he learned the importance of excellence and rigor. He said, “art teaches you how to show up in the world,” and dance has taught him strategies for self-care.

Now, Rue is moving into arts leadership. As a dancer in the museum space, Rue embraced his unique perspective and skill set as a dancer. Based on this description, I’m so drawn to the workplace culture at the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) because they focus on turning ideas into programs and community partnerships. In Rue’s words, “arts administration needs to show rather than tell.” The work of arts leader should reflect the world we live in, which includes artists of color. This work led him to plan events like Legendary Children, an event that creates space for conversation, representation, dance, and empowerment of QTPOC voices. This
event reflects SAM’s goal of being an arts non-profit that serves the community, which is why Rue said he worked closely with community curators.

One of the most powerful quotes from the event was, “just because I’m Black doesn’t mean I’m not capable of laughing.” He said this in response to questions about how he’s often expected to dance his trauma because people are drawn to the pain of Black artists, Rue sees the SAM as a place to create a counternarrative and celebrate joy, a feeling that should happen just as frequently as others.

As for the continued growth of the Central District, Caupain hopes that it is an inclusive space where people feel connected. Thankfully, she has seen moments of that.

“There are people that when they learn about who we are what we do, they’ll stop by and drop off a bag of groceries on the way back from the grocery store,” Caupain said. “They’ll say, ‘I know you have a food bank and I bought an extra bag of groceries.’ There is [sense of] connection in a different way, but there’s still a sense of isolation.”

Amid narratives of displacement, CD residents have continued to advocate for affordable housing and access to amenities and opportunities like public transit, cultural opportunities, and availability of land (NLCAB, 2016). For Byrd Barr Place, Caupain hopes to see the continued growth of their services in a way that’s community-oriented (A. Caupain, personal communication, April 19, 2019).

“I’d like to see use the program as an incubator to serve people and share what we learn with our partner organizations.”