The Downside of Racial Uplift: the meaning of gentrification in an African American neighborhood

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In the last 20 years, African Americans have changed both their role in and orientation toward gentrification. Where once it was viewed with suspicion, the strategy of attracting middle class residents to poor, black communities is now gaining popularity—provided the new residents are themselves African American. This article draws from a 2-year ethnographic study of the Douglas/Grand Boulevard neighborhood on Chicago's south side to examine how black advocates of gentrification understand the process and its implications for their neighborhoods. It argues that those who support attracting middle-class blacks to the community see their financial and personal investment as a form of race uplift. This interpretive framework masks intra-racial class differences and minimizes the disproportionate negative impact that gentrification could have on lower-income residents. [African American; Chicago; Gentrification; Neighborhoods; Racial Uplift]

On the evening of May 6, 1997, a group of residents gathered in the library of Holy Angels elementary school for the monthly meeting of the Mid-South Planning and Development Commission. Since 1990, Mid-South had overseen a process of neighborhood planning in Douglas/Grand Boulevard, an African American[1] neighborhood on Chicago's south side. The meeting followed its usual format in which the Director's updates were followed by committee reports, presentations, and announcements by residents. The purpose of this information exchange was to keep residents informed about the changes taking place in their community. Among these reports were two that demonstrated the diversity of interests in the neighborhood, the varying meanings of gentrification that emerged from those interests, and the complex challenges they presented.

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The first report was given by Linda Tuft, one of three women chairing the committee in charge of Mid-South's upcoming Historic House Tour. This would be Mid-South's third annual tour, which they began both in order to raise money for the organization and to publicize Douglas/Grand Boulevard as an up-and-coming neighborhood. Interest in the event was high—in response to questions, Linda told the group that the tour would feature rehabilitated houses rather than newly constructed ones, including many of the greystone mansions that made the area so distinctive. Then she ended with an appealing offer: those who attended would be rewarded with an outdoor party in the garden of the final house on the tour.

The report immediately following Linda's was quite different. It was given by Elaine Xavier, a resident of Stateway Gardens public housing complex. She spoke not as a member of a formal Mid-South committee, but as a resident actively involved in Mid-South as well as other organizations. She briefly reported to the group that residents of her building had just discovered that the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) was conducting a feasibility study on the viability of public housing. They had until May 15th, only nine days later, to organize a response to the CHA. Unlike Linda's announcement, which caused a flurry of questions, Elaine's provoked little conversation. Elaine succinctly made her comments and promptly sat back down.

The reports given by these two women reflect the remarkable change in African Americans' role in gentrification over the last 20 years. During the 1970s, blacks were likely to be either victims of or protesters against gentrifying forces. But throughout the 1980s and 1990s they have increasingly moved into poor, urban neighborhoods like Douglas/Grand Boulevard and initiated processes of residential and commercial investment and upgrading. As defined in academic literature, gentrification is the process through which "poor and working-class neighborhoods in the inner city are refurbished via an influx of private capital and middle-class homebuyers and renters" (Smith 1996:32). Where they once identified this process as one of the primary causes of black urban poverty and struggled against its harmful effects, black neighborhood activists now regard it as one *solution* to disinvestment—when, that is, the middle class residents involved are African American.

These two reports also illustrate that gentrification has different meanings for different blacks: for some residents like Linda, gentrification is a process that will make the neighborhood more attractive to residential and commercial investors and thereby

increase the quality of life for both herself and her neighbors. By attracting middle class blacks to Douglas/Grand Boulevard, these residents hope to avoid racial displacement by whites and maintain the area as an African American neighborhood. Yet Linda's neighbors include low and moderate income residents like Elaine who are neither the initiators, managers nor beneficiaries of gentrification, but instead its observers and its possible victims. Black gentrification, like any other kind, threatens to displace the neighborhood's long-time residents. Thus while Linda is concerned with increasing the return on her investment, Elaine is more concerned with the immediate danger to her home and survival.

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The fact that gentrification is being promoted and carried out by African Americans contradicts what scholars have seen in the past and challenges conventional notions that it is an act committed by whites against blacks and other communities of color. It also raises questions about the meaning and representation of gentrification. Since the 1970s researchers have heavily debated both its causes and consequences. Lees (2000:404) has written about the discourses on gentrification, on the ways that "gentrification is represented. . . and how knowledge on gentrification is produced and constructed." How do promoters of black gentrification understand the process? And how do they interpret the role of African Americans in this process? This article addresses these questions by analyzing how Mid-South members understand gentrification in Douglas/Grand Boulevard.

The myths and meanings of gentrification

In the 25 years following World War II, America's metropolitan areas suffered from the decline of manufacturing and the movement of businesses and middle-class families to the suburbs and southwest (Hirsch and Mohl 1993; Mollenkopf 1983; Squires et al. 1987). The loss of this tax base dealt a hard blow to cities; thus, when middle-class whites began returning to urban areas in the 1970s, researchers and analysts characterized this movement as the answer to urban decline. This perspective was bolstered by research that minimized the negative consequences of gentrification and portrayed cities as an emancipatory space that cultivated tolerance and diversity. The view of gentrification as a benign or benevolent process relies in part on the depiction of the city as an "Urban Frontier" (Smith 1996). This characterization portrays gentrifiers as urban homesteaders or pioneers and labels the urban space that

they invade as savage, unexplored territory inhabited by unknowns. It also constructs gentrification as a process of "taming" and civilizing wild urban areas and of "sanitizing public space" through the removal or regulation of its original residents (Pérez 2002). This framework implicitly labels those long-time residents (who are often poor blacks or Latinos) as socially disorganized, unmanageable populations likely to benefit from the presence of middle-class, white urban pioneers.

Recognizing and analyzing the discourses that promote gentrification is increasingly important in the contemporary period. The discursive frameworks that individuals and organizations use to understand gentrification are more than rhetorical texts to be deconstructed; they are also reflections of political economic arrangements that have consequences for the quality of urban life. By providing evaluative criteria with which to consider and judge gentrification, they not only influence public debate on the subject; they also buttress the concrete distribution of material resources that supports uneven neighborhood change. The Urban Frontier discourse, for example, draws sharp distinctions between the gentrifier and the displaced and naturalizes their inequality. Smith (1996: xv) argues that doing so "serves to rationalize and legitimate a process of conquest" by justifying the inequality and exclusion that simultaneously drive and result from this process. Cities are more often pursuing gentrification as part of their broader strategy of urban revitalization. In particular, gentrification is espoused as fundamental to urban environmentalism, tourism, and culture-based development agendas (Lees 2000). African American tourism is one of the fastest growing forms of tourism, and thus likely to be an indicator of the ways that black gentrification is driven and supported by city-wide development processes. Given its centrality to economic policy and politics, the rhetoric supporting gentrification deserves more attention.

Much of the black gentrification that scholars have addressed has taken place in Harlem (Hoffman 2003; Jackson 2001; Prince 2002; Schaffer and Smith 1986; Smith 1996; Taylor 2002). Yet Chicago and Philadelphia have also begun to experience similar processes (Boyd 2000; Moore 2002; Pattillo 2003). Although cases of African American gentrification are the exception rather than the rule, they are particularly useful for examining current discourses. Black gentrification was initially dismissed by scholars as a temporary phenomenon in the 1980s, because most African Americans in urban areas lack the financial resources for the purchase and rehabilitation of homes in gentrifying areas (Schaeffer

and Smith 1986). But in the 20 years since, gentrification by blacks has become more widespread rather than diminished. The rhetoric surrounding this new pattern of gentrification differs from previous ones for two reasons. The first is that urban black communities' experience with gentrification requires black gentrifiers to fight against both the memory of neighborhood residents and traditional interpretations of gentrification as a tool for displacing blacks. Second, the history of political organizing in black communities has traditionally relied upon the myth that blacks have a monolithic racial identity and naturally shared group interests (Dawson 1994). Thus, black residents and community development organizations operate within a political environment that requires African American elites to articulate how their agenda advances the interests of all blacks.

In what follows, I examine the framework within which Douglas/Grand Boulevard's gentrification advocates understand the process, and analyze its political implications. I argue that proponents of black gentrification see attracting middle-class investors as a strategy for "uplifting the race." By promoting the presence of the black middle class, gentrification advocates hope to prevent further neighborhood disinvestment and displacement by whites. Yet this framework masks gentrification's differential consequences for blacks of varying economic means. Because it homogenizes the characteristics and interests of the African American population, the uplift frame obscures the necessary conflict of interest embedded in gentrification committed by blacks.

"Who are the people in your neighborhood?" The Douglas/Grand Boulevard community

Douglas and Grand Boulevard are located on Chicago's south side, at the far northern end of the city's "black belt," where African Americans were segregated throughout the 20th century. Although Douglas and Grand Boulevard are two distinct community areas, the neighborhood redevelopment plan encompasses both. Mid-South, along with the city's real estate entrepreneurs, has refashioned the Douglas/Grand Boulevard area into the single community of Bronzeville—the name by which it is referred in Drake and Cayton's 1945 classic study *Black Metropolis*. In 1990, the year Mid-South was established, most of Douglas/Grand Boulevard's 66,549 residents rented or lived in public housing. Owner-occupied homes made up a mere seven percent of the total

housing stock, while public housing units such as Prairie Avenue Courts, Dearborn Homes, Ida B. Wells projects, Stateway Gardens and Robert Taylor Homes made up half of the community's housing. In part because of these units, a significant portion of the residents were quite poor. The median family income in each community was $10,577 and $8,371 respectively. More than half of Douglas/ Grand Boulevard families survived on incomes below the poverty line, and 26 percent of residents were unemployed. In addition, the community had a large non-working population. Thirty-eight percent of its inhabitants were 19 or younger and residents aged 65 years or older constituted 14.5 percent of the community (Chicago Fact Book Consortium 1990).

While these numbers paint a portrait of a uniformly poor neighborhood, such broad strokes hide the significant variation found within the community. Rachel Dean, an architect who was involved with the Mid-South planning process, argues that in the early 1990s the neighborhood's residents were

> a very dichotomous population in terms of *need*. You've got very, very low income people on the one hand, who have a large need for social services that are not being provided, and other types of neighborhood amenities that were not provided as a result of them being there. And then you had people who had stayed over the years, elderly people. And then you have some young people who are beginning to move back, because of the housing stock itself, and the quality of the buildings.

Ms. Dean's description is borne out by census data. While the Douglas/Grand Boulevard area was generally poor, conditions varied significantly within its boundaries. While median family income reached a high of $51,563 in some census tracts, those containing public housing barely reached $5,000. In addition, while women outnumber men only slightly, there are a significant number of female-headed households in the area. Indeed, the concentration of such households is only one example of how the spatial organization of the neighborhood produces significant intra-racial diversity. Female-headed households are among the poorest in this neighborhood, and along with the unemployed, are concentrated in public housing. Likewise, elderly households, though spanning the area, are concentrated within few areas that include senior housing projects (Chicago Fact Book Consortium 1990). Despite their spatial concentration, these residents are within walking distance of the enclaves of relatively affluent, home-owning professionals. In

addition, the neighborhood is dotted with "white" health and educational institutions—such as the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), De La Salle High School, the Illinois College of Optometry, as well as Mercy and Michael Reese Hospitals.

The neighborhood's location, combined with relatively inexpensive land, deteriorating housing stock, and a population of poor, politically vulnerable blacks, made the Douglas/Grand Boulevard of the 1990s an attractive site for "reinvasion" by elites of any racial category. To avoid just such an occurrence, several black community organizations began collaborating in 1990 with the city and private institutions for the establishment of the Mid-South Planning and Development Commission. The aim of this organization was to develop a comprehensive economic development strategy for the two neighborhoods. Three years later they produced *Restoring Bronzeville*, a land-use plan that proposes to both revitalize the area and avoid displacement by relying on a combination of historic preservation and racial heritage tourism. From 1997 to 1999, I was a participant observer with Mid-South and three other community based organizations (CBOs) as they attempted to implement the plan. This article draws from ethnographic data, newspaper articles and site documents, as well as informal and formal interviews collected during those years.

Fear and loathing in Douglas/Grand Boulevard: the meaning of White gentrification

At first glance, Mid-South members' feelings about gentrification are unsurprising and straightforward. Community residents fear it, and they agonize over the probability of a white "invasion" at meetings, rallies, and in casual conversation. Ken Lacey, a resident and business owner in Bronzeville, expressed the views of many when he told me that

> I'm hearing the thing that's going on is. . . the whites coming from the suburbs into the city, and they look at [the neighborhood] and you're walking distance from downtown, McCormick Place [the city's convention center], everything else and they're saying 'Well hey, you know, maybe this isn't that bad after all and we want it back!'

Like many residents, Mr. Lacey perceives whites to be deliberate and purposeful in their attempt to "recover" Douglas/Grand

Boulevard from the black residents who live there. In this sense, he expresses both resident concerns and scholarly arguments that gentrification is an example of a "revanchist" desire among racial and economic elites who seek to take back the city from marginalized populations (Smith 1996).

Nevertheless, the members of Mid-South in fact show more ambivalence about the definition and value of gentrification than Mr. Lacey's comment initially suggests. This ambivalence is partly based on the fact that the neighborhood sorely needs economic development. One example can be found in remarks made by Wendy Brown, a resident and non-profit development consultant, at a neighborhood business council meeting. Wendy was leading a discussion encouraging council members to identify their priorities for the community's redevelopment. She suggested that those present form a partnership to insure that, as small business owners, they would be a part of development rather than its victims. They didn't want gentrification, she argued "because gentrification by its definition means that all of the people who are there will have to move out" and people who had invested in their companies for 20 years should not have to relinquish their businesses. With this comment, Wendy relies on the traditional understanding of gentrification. But as she continues, she argues that, while they did not want gentrification, these small local businesses "did not have the opportunity to grow" due to the present economic conditions in the neighborhood, and that the business council was the body that could work with developers to communicate the needs and priorities of local business owners. Wendy's comments highlight the fact that despite the danger posed by gentrification, the neighborhood is sorely in need of some form of economic development. The residents often complained that the neighborhood needed basic businesses such as a bookstore, sit-down family restaurant, photocopying shop, shoe repair, travel agency, coffee shop and deli.

The need for such services is just one reason that Mid-South's residents are receptive to the idea of attracting the black middle class to the neighborhood. Rachel Dean, the architect who earlier described the stratification in the neighborhood, revealed another reason. She argued that homeowners in particular

> don't care about economic [gentrification]. That would be great! That would enhance their personal property. But, I think, there's a feeling that, hey, we saw the value in this neighborhood first. We moved here. We sunk our dollars here. We worked to try to make it great. We don't wanna get pushed out.

Rachel's comment illustrates that what many residents object to is not gentrification—that is, the influx of the middle class—but displacement. As another resident explained it, they fear that "once the white folks find out that this is really a gem, you know, in terms of its proximity to the Loop and everything else, and they'll want the property and they'll buy it out then."

This contradictory stance towards gentrification is aptly expressed in the *Restoring Bronzeville* redevelopment plan (Mid-South 1993:25). The document insists, on the one hand, that development, in whatever form, should avoid displacement of "indigenous" residents. Thus, it explicitly and repeatedly articulates the importance of providing jobs and economic security for current residents. On the other hand, the plan advocates the development of mixed income housing with a heavy emphasis on owner-occupied units. Rather than demolition and reconstruction, the plan advocates the rehabilitation of existing structures and construction on vacant lots. Residents indeed have a broad-based commitment to the idea of a mixed-income black neighborhood. CBO head Randolph Jeffries asserted the ideas of many when he said that the neighborhood needed "housing to house the working people. And housing to house middle income. Cause you gotta create—in order to create community, you gotta [have] working people, middle income people and upper income people. And then you create community." Thus, while Mid-South members would not use the term gentrification to describe their own activities, the organization explicitly promotes and pursues the revitalization of Douglas/Grand Boulevard through the repopulation of the neighborhood by the black middle class. Using neighborhood historic preservation and racial heritage tourism, Mid-South has sought to make the neighborhood more attractive, not just to investors generally, but specifically to black investors. Given their fears of gentrification by whites, how do Mid-South members distinguish white and black gentrification? How do they understand blacks' behavior and its consequences as different from and more legitimate than that of whites?

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Uplifting the race: The meaning of Black gentrification

Comments by Mid-South members illustrate that they understand black gentrification as a strategy for racial uplift. Racial uplift ideology has been defined in many ways throughout history. During the 18th and 19th centuries it referred to

"organized social activities which are consciously designed to raise the status of the group as a whole" (Drake and Cayton 1993:716). During slavery, these collective efforts took the form of mutual aid and benevolent societies that opposed slavery and helped blacks support themselves in times of economic crisis (Perkins 1981). In the post emancipation period, they included struggles to educate freedmen and women in preparation for citizenship and political participation (Anderson 1988).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries however, black elites came to understand racial uplift differently. They defined it not as the collective struggle for equal citizenship rights, but as the individual effort to reform the race, which would prove blacks worthy of equal political status (Gaines 1996). Black elites sought to achieve this reform by adopting and advocating classed and gendered standards of moral behavior and economic success. Booker T. Washington especially championed the view that blacks should focus on achieving economic independence by working as laborers and establishing small businesses. His accommodationist philosophy emphasized the accumulation of capital and eschewed demands for political rights.

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Racial uplift ideology still retains its potency in the contemporary period, where it is expressed in arguments that role modeling by the black middle class is the answer to problems of urban decline and economic disinvestment. While previous forms of racial uplift were more focused on convincing whites that blacks deserved citizenship rights, contemporary racial uplift emphasizes the importance of changing the internal behavior and self esteem of blacks themselves (Smith 1999). The crucial assumption of 20th century uplift ideology is that the successes of individual, affluent blacks has a spillover effect, one that either improves the material conditions of all blacks or "'reflects credit on the race'" (Drake and Cayton 1993:716). As a result, modern uplift emphasizes the black middle class' responsibility to use its resources to advance the material status and mental mindset of all African Americans.

Advancing the race: The collective benefits of gentrification

Many Mid-South supporters express uplift ideas in their interpretations of black gentrification. They often understand middle income residents' personal and financial investment in the community as a *communal* act whose benefits will raise the status of all blacks. Grady Karl, a redevelopment proponent expressed this widely held opinion in an interview, when he described to me the appropriate role of the black middle class. He said that

> housing directs everything. So, first of all, you've got to come in and anchor the housing. By the black middle class buying these homes. . . two and three hundred thousand dollar houses, that's gonna stabilize the community. . . . Stabilize the community means, to be able to create a tax base first of all, and you do that by creating new businesses that [the] state taxes. You have people being employed, pay taxes, you create a tax base. That tax base supports the redevelopment of the community.

Mr. Karl emphasizes that black gentrification should take the form of residential investment, that is, the purchase of homes that will "stabilize" the neighborhood. With this comment he expresses the fairly conventional assessment that increasing the number of homeowners in a neighborhood establishes a population that will bring disposable and taxable income into a community. This strategy emphasizes a standard benefit that accrues from individual investment.

Yet Mr. Karl also argues that black investment strategies should have a broader purpose. He maintains that it is also the responsibility of the black middle class to

> come in and buy land; to create development groups; to create investment clubs, investment organizations; to attract new businesses to take care of their needs, in terms of their lifestyle; to establish new businesses to provide these services to the community; to work as part of a team effort to revitalize the commercial business strips.

In this comment, Mr. Karl defines commercial investment as also being a part of the obligation of black gentrifiers. In one sense he sees this establishment of businesses as a self-interested act responsive to the particular needs of the individual. Because residents lack high quality services such as dry cleaning establishments, banks, or grocery stores, CBO leaders expect that affluent blacks will establish these businesses in order to supply themselves with these amenities. Yet at the same time, this vision of investment is a vision of collective self help, in which residents will work in teams pooling resources to meet their needs. According to him, African Americans should take responsibility for more than their personal financial well being; they should also work to increase investment among other residents.

Mid-South members contend that affluent residents should at the bare minimum be involved with other CBOs, even if they

do not support the plan itself. Learneal Ogden, a staff member of one organization, suggested as much in his comment about a black developer who had failed to show up for a community meeting. When I asked him how the organization would respond, he said

> We're going to write a letter to him and try to get him involved. But if he's not involved, he's not involved. You know what I'm saying? But the thing is, if black folk don't come together on certain issues—you can have your own agenda. If [the developer] wants to make money, make money Nigger, nobody ain't saying you can't make money—but be involved with all the other little pieces that fit together.

In both their statements, Mr. Karl and Mr. Ogden express the idea that the ultimate aim of individual black investment is the pursuit of group advancement.

One of the forms of investment that is most frequently encouraged among black elites is the purchase and restoration of historic buildings that are threatened with sale or demolition. Douglas/Grand Boulevard's revitalization hinges on historic preservation efforts that seek to restore the physical and social community of the neighborhood as it existed in the first half of the 20th century, during its supposed "golden age" (Boyd 2000). In addition to their importance as physical structures, the buildings are also significant because of what they mean or represent. This was clearly expressed on a tour of the neighborhood, when resident and community historian Steven Anthony took us by two buildings in which the famous African American newspaper the *Defender* had been housed. When we arrived he announced, "This is the *Defender* Building. This building housed the most influential newspaper in America." Someone on the bus asked him if the newspaper is for sale, and he replied "the whole thing. The whole thing is leaving. And I hope some blacks get together and try to buy it. Cause you know, when I look at the obituaries, I look at the obituaries a lot now, according to the white newspapers, you didn't die. But the *Defender* listed it."

Mr. Anthony argues, not only that the building should be saved: he, like Mr. Karl, explicitly contends that African Americans should work as part of a group to save it. This remark reflects racial uplift ideology as well as the knowledge that few blacks in Douglas/Grand Boulevard have the resources to carry out such a venture successfully on their own. This hope—that blacks will invest in the community—is often interpreted as a duty of residents who live in

the area. CBO head Randolph Jeffries suggested to me that what the community needed were

> people that are willing to sacrifice, you know, and put this stuff together and understand that it will serve somebody long after they're gone. . . . And that's the kind of thinking that we have to begin to develop with businesses, with institutions, hospitals, everything. Everything.

Sometimes this argument about resident responsibility is made with no direct reference to race. At other times, Mid-South members see gentrification and entrepreneurship as a specific obligation of the black middle class. As Grady Karl explained

> The black middle class, [returning] from its corporate isolation and having done the integration thing, are now saying I need to get back to blackness, cause I'm still being discriminated against. I went out, I found out that I ain't got no more liberation than my money'll get me, and I still don't have a sense of community. So I'm going back. Now, when you get back, are you going to turn on your brother, or are you going to try to use your resources to help empower him? And that's the issue.

Grady, like many Mid-South members, uses the language of return to discuss the physical and financial presence of the black middle class in Douglas/Grand Boulevard. He understands them as returning, not just to the physical community of the neighborhood, but to their essential racial being, to blackness.

Reflecting credit on the race: gentrification and representation

These comments illustrate what *economic* impact Mid-South members think gentrification will have on the neighborhood. Communal investment strategies are promoted by Mid-South because of their potential effect on the exchange value of neighborhood property, or its worth as a commodity. By trying to address his individual consumer concerns, Mr. Karl and Mr. Ogden suggest the black gentrifier will revitalize whole subsections of the neighborhood and thereby address the needs of the entire community. Mid-South members and other promoters of gentrification also view black investment as having an important impact on the use value of the neighborhood. Use value refers to the worth or meaning of places that comes from the way individuals spend time in them (Logan and Molotch 1987). Neighborhoods are sites that

give individuals a sense of membership and community. Mid-South members see this sense of belonging and pride as yet another way that black investment improves the neighborhood.

The idea that individual entrepreneurship boosts the group's self-image is repeatedly articulated in the stories that residents tell about the history of Douglas/Grand Boulevard. Mid-South members often refer to historic Bronzeville as the "economic capital of Black America" and are quick to recite the achievements of the early twentieth century's black middle class. Mentioned most often are entrepreneurs like Joseph Jordan, Anthony Overton, and Jesse Binga, men who constructed the buildings and founded the businesses that make up the "Black Metropolis." In the neighborhood paper the *South Street Journal*, Harold Lucas (1997) of the Black Metropolis Convention and Tourism Council argued that "before the Great Depression the economic foundation of Bronzeville had become so powerful and prosperous that in 1925, the main business district on south State Street between 31st and 39th, was known internationally a[s] the Black Wall Street of America." Redevelopment supporters use uplift logic in portraying the individual successes of these men as success for the entire race. William Ingram, recalling his youth in Bronzeville, explained the inspiration and pride he felt knowing that blacks built and owned buildings in his neighborhood. He recalled going by

> the old Pythian building and be[ing] so impressed that black people [in that era] had enough ambition to build a nine-story building. The Binga Bank, that was the first skyscraper I ever saw—it was a skyscraper to me. . . . I went over to 35th and South Parkway, I had never seen a black statue before. The Supreme Life building, the Chicago Metropolitan Mutual Life Insurance Building—we don't realize the total psychological impact of this achievement, as meager as it is.

According to Mr. Ingram, the buildings in the neighborhood are physical monuments to the potential and abilities of the entire race, ones that serve as an example of what each black person can do, and achievements of which the entire community can be proud.

This sentiment is also expressed about contemporary entrepreneurs and businesses. After giving me an interview, long-time resident and business owner Mr. Franklin took me on a tour of his business establishment, pointing out pictures of the founder, and showing me additional rooms that can be rented for receptions.

He concluded by telling me that "when people ask me, 'what do you give back?' I say what I give back is a facility where they can hold their meetings, a business they can be proud of." According to Mr. Franklin, he has improved the community not only with his initial investment in commercial ventures, but also by his continued ownership of the business. With this statement he makes a classic racial uplift argument that his individual accomplishment is in fact a communal accomplishment because of the sense of pride it engenders in community members who may or may not ever be able to afford his services.

While Mid-South members see black entrepreneurship as enhancing African Americans' self-perception, they also see it as having the capacity to shape how outsiders see African Americans. Places are considered dangerous, not just because of the buildings or infrastructure, but also because of the behavior of the people who inhabit them. Likewise, the attractiveness and value of a location is partially based on one's potential neighbors: who they are, and how they behave. Therefore, attempts to re-construct place are fundamentally related to efforts to reconstruct conceptions of the people who inhabit it. Consider, for example, a remark made by Delia Chester, a developer and business owner in the neighborhood. She suggests that it is not just the *existence* of area businesses that matters: equally important is the fact that these businesses are catering to the "better" classes. She tells me that they

> didn't come in and take the project as it was and open the business back up and the same kind of thing. We looked to upscale our neighborhood; to upscale this commercial project and make it stand out to say 'This is us. This is who we are. We want upper-class commercial businesses in here.'

Who they are—and who they tell other people they are—is a well-to-do group of African Americans who have the desire and capacity to revitalize their community. By "reflecting credit on the race," economic investment bolsters the image and self-image of the neighborhood's African American population.

Sliding down uplift's slippery slope

Racial uplift rhetoric depends heavily upon the notion that the mere investment in commercial and residential properties is of benefit to all neighborhood blacks, regardless of their income level. This argument is based partly on the recognition that racists

universalize the behavior of black individuals, attribute the behavior of one to all members of the group. The resulting logic is that improving the circumstances of one individual or sub-group within the black population will improve perceptions of all. But uplift is also based on the assumption that blacks share a common set of racial interests.

This idea is clearly conveyed by resident Steven Anthony, an older resident of Douglas/Grand Boulevard. While giving a bus tour of the neighborhood to a group of community residents, he said

> Now we're passing Drake School. I went to Burke, and the thing about the people at Burke, we thought we were better than them [the people at Drake]. But one thing about those Drake people, they could really whup our behinds. They could beat us up. So that all went to income. That's class within race. But we had to learn to be friends back there. You know we thought 'you live in the slums.'. . . But you know. . . Michael Jordan, if he went somewhere, and they didn't know he was Michael Jordan, he'd get treated just like us. Same thing with Oprah Winfrey, she'd get treated the same way. We're all in this mess together. We have to learn how to identify our selves and our friends. In Unity is strength. We used to know that, and we will know it again.

Mr. Anthony's personal recollection illustrates several ideas and rhetorical strategies that are widely-held and well used in Douglas/Grand Boulevard. First, he suggests that class differences, although they exist, are irrelevant in the face of racism. He refers to the familiar present-day examples of Oprah and MJ to argue that the special status accorded to such legends is really only a result of fame, rather than class. Second, he not only asserts that racism is alive and well, but also suggests that residents of different income categories and life circumstances are part of a black "we" that has few meaningful divisions. He concludes by explicitly encouraging us to remain racially unified, something that he suggests we did in the past, but have forgotten in the contemporary period. This reference to the supposed solidarity of the past is used regularly by Mid-South activists and other supporters of gentrification to mobilize support for the *Restoring Bronzeville* agenda. It is important to note for instance, that Mr. Anthony made his remarks, not to a bus full of people interested in a bit of neighborhood history; but as part of the introductory session of an organizing and leadership class designed to mobilize residents to become active participants in the revitalization process.

The second assumption upon which uplift logic is based is that whatever class differences do exist among blacks are easily overshadowed by similarities. The construction of gentrification as a form of racial uplift assumes that Douglas/Grand Boulevard's blacks all have common needs that can overcome any differences they have. Sandra Marcus, a community organizer for the Bronzeville Organizer's Alliance used this rhetorical tactic in an exchange that took place during a meeting for residents of the mostly middle-class Lake Meadows apartment building. During the meeting, one tenant said to her

> **Tenant:** There are a lot of different levels of income in this community. What are the bonds that you think will hold us together?
>
> **Ms. Marcus**: There have always been class divisions in the community, but in the past we've been able to overcome those divisions. During the civil rights movement we were united against a common enemy. So we think that we can focus on *common community values*. Whether you're in public housing or you have a 200,000 dollar house. We all want a good education for our children. We all want clean, safe neighborhoods. [Our group] provides that table we can come to address those issues.

In her response to the tenant, Ms. Marcus makes two different arguments, both of which highlight the commonality among African Americans. She, like Steven Anthony, hearkens back to the segregated past as a time when blacks displayed a great deal of unity. She holds that time period up as a model for how the residents of Douglas/Grand Boulevard should respond in the current period, drawing particular attention to the fact that blacks were united by the common threat of whites. She suggests that part of the source of class division is this lack of unity. Ms. Marcus also brings attention to the fact that Douglas/Grand Boulevard's residents have common interests. By mentioning the shared need for good schools and safe streets, she suggests that common interests, in and of themselves, will "hold together" the population of Douglas/Grand Boulevard and transcend their class differences.

What is most important about Ms. Marcus' response is not her assertion that blacks share some common concerns. Douglas/Grand Boulevard residents are indeed widely interested in jobs and housing, whatever their economic circumstances. And as mentioned before, most fear displacement by whites. Rather, the problem lies

. . . the assumption is that commonalities themselves will naturally overwhelm conflicts, or at least minimize them.

in how reference to these commonalities can be used to sidestep the issue of competing interests, such as those of public housing residents and owners of high-priced housing. Nor does she ever articulate what agenda might be pursued or what compromises might be reached to address those competing interests. Instead the assumption is that commonalities themselves will naturally overwhelm conflicts, or at least minimize them.

Even when they do not depict class differences subordinate to racial bonds, Mid-South members may suggest that the needs of Douglas/Grand Boulevard residents are at least compatible. Portia Silk provided an example of this during a business council meeting, in which she describes the Douglas/Grand Boulevard population in market terms. In her presentation to business council members, she gave suggestions regarding the strategic vision of the council. Ms. Silk suggested that the arrival of middle-class homeowners was leading to the development of a new market in Bronzeville, one which she referred to as a "New Working Family Community." This group, she asserted, consisted of two primary parts: the first was what she referred to as the "Indigenous Families" who would be increasingly working as a result of the welfare to work program. The second group she referred to as "Urban Pioneers," those middle class families who were new to the area. When trying to assess their market potential, she suggested that the "need for goods" would change for the Indigenous Families, whose recent employment would provide them with disposable income. They would soon want the same goods and services as the Urban Pioneers, who want to maintain their lifestyle.

In this depiction, Ms. Silk assumes the increasing ability of poor families to find work, childcare that meets their work schedules, and earn a living wage—all circumstances that are necessary in order for unemployed and working poor families to do their share in the new community. More importantly however, she suggests that gentrification will bring to public housing residents, retired people, underemployed adults, unemployed teens, middle-class professionals, and low-wage service workers an equally paced improvement in their present circumstances which, like a rising tide, will lift all boats.

Despite their commitment to the uplift framework, Mid-South members realize that not all interests are equally served by the changes taking place in the neighborhood. Learneal Ogden echoed the comments of many CBO members when he suggested that, despite their hopes and efforts, he did not

> see a big change in people. . . . You know what I'm saying?

> I don't see it. I see it's like they have no control over this. [I'm not talking about] the young people who are involved in universities you know, making they little money now. Course they see a change cause they're going to these universities and they wanna live in the new Harlem Renaissance. . . . But I don't see a change in people who haven't gone to those schools, cause they feel like they have no control over this. You see 200,000 dollar housing going up, and you ain't got a—you know, you working at Mickey D's. . . you know, there's no possible way in your mind, that you can live there in my opinion.

With this comment, Mr. Ogden acknowledges that, even if neighborhood residents' interests are not in competition with one another, their attention is on different things. Public housing residents like Elaine Xavier have particularly been preoccupied with the issue of the demolition of both the Stateway Gardens and Robert Taylor housing sites. They needed affordable housing, employment, day care and an unchanging cost of living. Because of these different needs, revitalization means something different to middle-income homeowners than it does to those who rented or lived in public housing. Low income residents are afraid that revitalization will once again mean displacement for them and their families, while owners of high-priced housing want to increase the price of housing as well as the quality and cost of neighborhood goods and services. Yet Mid-South members continue to advocate attracting black middle-class residents to the neighborhood, even when they recognize that the black poor are more threatened by their doing so.

This contradictory stance is one of the most distinctive and problematic features of black gentrification. Its advocates do not suggest, in an over-simplified manner, that it is acceptable merely because it is being initiated and led by African Americans. Nor do they express an unabashed dismissal of the concerns of poor blacks. Rather, the problem is quite the opposite. The *rhetoric* of racial uplift acknowledges the inequality among African Americans while simultaneously minimizing its implications. This tendency reflects a force at play in all urban neighborhoods, and one that is particularly unwieldy in those that have historically suffered from race-based uneven development: whatever their commitment to their marginalized populations, communities are constrained by what Logan and Molotch (1987) refer to as the "Iron Law of Upgrading." Because they are so in need of economic development, they are pushed toward strategies that prioritize their more privi-

leged residents. They are constrained by the fact that "for neighborhoods. . . there is nowhere worth going but up. And going up means attracting, from a finite supply, the prized land users. This locks communities (even poor ones) into the same zero-sum competition across the cityscape. Neighborhoods thereby become wedded to the general rent intensification dynamic, making at least some of them receptive to the entrepreneurs' occasional offers of 'revitalization'" (Logan and Molotch 1987:145). What black proponents of such revitalization strategies add is an interpretive framework that minimizes competing interests and undermines the race-based opposition that would be more likely were the gentrifiers white.

One reason poorer residents do not present sustained opposition to this rhetoric is that they are filtered out of the community development process. When asked to describe which residents were most active, CBO staff and leaders made comments similar to those of Randolph Jeffries, who stated that those who were involved tended

> not to be [the people who live in developments]. We have been proactively trying to not allow that to happen. But we haven't been very successful. . . [addressing] issues that they're interested in like why are they tearing down the buildings.

Pressing survival issues, as well as the threat of development are what preoccupy the most vulnerable members of the neighborhood. Not only were their needs less likely to be discussed, but they experienced a great deal of friction with more affluent residents during the planning process. These tensions surfaced within the Mid-South Planning Group's housing committee. One participant told me that while planning for the land-use document, the housing committee had

> a faction that represented public housing. And there was a faction that had represented the urban pioneers, who came down and purchased a lot of their greystone homes and had invested, you know, considerable amount of money into maintaining them and they felt threatened by all the public housing people and the public housing people felt threatened by these people.

When faced with the issue of mixed income housing, some homeowners vehemently resisted the prospect of having former public housing residents as neighbors. Randolph Jeffries explained that homeowners

> were jumping all over [saying] 'We don't want those people living next door to us! Hell no!' You know. Oh yeah. Saying, 'Not in my backyard. We don't want those poor people over here. They're going to be breaking into our houses!' Our, you know, sweat and tears going into fixing these houses, these people are gonna break in and steal everything.

Low income residents were as fearful of and hostile toward middle- and upper-income black residents as they were of white outsiders and neighborhood institutions. According to Karl Grady, over the course of the planning process poorer residents "fell away from the table. And the homeowners stayed at the table. . . most of the public housing residents stopped coming because people were not dealing directly with their issues." This occurred despite efforts on the part of CBO leaders to include these residents. Mr. Grady suggests that "the plan did an adequate job of at least trying to address and being inclusive in terms of its writing. But in terms of its involvement, local ownership of the plan, I think it was inadequate." By homogenizing the needs and interests of the black poor and the black elites, promoters of black gentrification mask the extent to which their strategies differently and disproportionately threaten lower income residents.

Revitalization and racial uplift

Promoters of black gentrification in Douglas/Grand Boulevard understand the process in ways that reflect that community's particular history with disinvestment and commitment to low-income families. Thus, it is partly an attempt by black elites to be attentive to the needs of the black poor. Yet it is precisely that sensitivity that makes the logic of racial uplift so problematic: in their attempt to be attentive to the needs of poor blacks, Mid-South members become limited by an ideology that obscures the conflicts of interest implicit in gentrification. This frame not only masks the differences among black residents, it also helps prevent other residents from mounting objections to the *Restoring Bronzeville* agenda.

Like the urban frontier framework, the race uplift framework justifies gentrification but it does so using a different logic. It does not distinguish between the gentrifier and the displaced and naturalize their inequality; rather it elides the differences between the two and portrays their interests as compatible. Thus while both dis-

courses work to the disadvantage of poor and working class blacks, the racial uplift framework is more insidious, because it creates the illusion that gentrification strategies are implemented both in the interests of, and with the approval of the poor black residents it displaces.

African American gentrification is most disturbing because of what it suggests about the ultimate purpose of black elite strategies for economic and political advancement. Neither black gentrification specifically, nor uplift ideology in general, seek to disrupt the structures of political or economic inequality that maintain poverty and disinvestment. Instead they hope to help a larger number of blacks participate in those structures from a more advantageous position. The reliance on individual investment as the answer to African Americans' problems is a part of a broader ideological current that suggests that individual class mobility is the answer to racial inequality. Because these strategies tend to gain popularity in times of reduced resources and options, their adoption "is not accidental; rather it signals an ideological and social adjustment to new political-economic arrangements in the United States" (Smith 1999:258). Yet as long as African American elites' goal is confined to ensuring blacks' proportional representation in the middle and upper classes, uplift will remain limited as both a strategy and a goal, unable to challenge new political-economic arrangements in a meaningful, equitable manner.

Notes

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[1] I use the terms black and African-American interchangeably in this article. Immigrant status is not a meaningful division in Douglas/Grand Boulevard, as nearly all of the neighborhood's residents share the same national origin.

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