

The racial fix

White currency in the gentrification of black and Latino Chicago

Jesse Mumm

Abstract: In Chicago, real estate value is fixed by race through the process of gentrification. I present findings from an ethnography of the black, Mexican, and Puerto Rican neighborhoods of the greater West Side. Gentrification here is a “racial fix”: a consensus-building process to inflate value in a speculative market reliant on the historical legacies of racism. The white flight era devalued neighborhoods now facing speculation and hyperinflation as increased global investment, debt culture, and debt financing fuel the growth machine. The discourses of residents, randomized survey results, and a built environment scan show that property value corresponds more to white residence than material improvement. White people cultivate the currency of whiteness through gentrification to build social status, capital, and the city of their dreams.

Keywords: Chicago, gentrification, markets, race, whiteness

Do they have to be white for the area to change? No. I'd like to say it's more about economics.

— Jane Carey

What is gentrification? In gentrification studies, there are few universal laws (Lees et al. 2010), but the popular sphere buzzes with theories many would “like to say” are true. Over the past generation in Chicago, once black- and Latino-majority neighborhoods surrounding the downtown Loop have gentrified and whitened, raising the question Jane Carey¹ feels compelled to address without my asking. Can it be “more about economics” *and* still mean that they “have to be white”? This white woman from downstate Illinois and the organized actions of her all-white staff at the Northwestern Corridor

Business Association demonstrate how clearly socially produced gentrification is, how obviously not natural or inevitable, given how many players had to be aligned to spark and sustain speculation. Race here is continuously recognized and then denied, seen and unseen, clear and obscure—the emperor’s new clothes *and* the elephant in the room.

In the public sphere as well as in scholarly work, race is often treated as irony, an after-effect, or a symbol of much larger forces that together form what we call gentrification. Without question, race is a major factor in structures



of disparity in global capital moves (Clarke and Thomas 2006; Melamed 2006), local historical political structures (Hyra 2008; Spear 1967), shifts in the division of labor (Roediger 2005; Sassen 1998), historical legacies of unequal lending and housing policy (Satter 2009; Seligman 2005), and the present crisis of housing affordability and foreclosures (Henry et al. 2013; Niedt and Silver 2011). Arguably, the white gentrification of areas consigned for the past half-century to the popular labels of black ghetto or Puerto Rican or Mexican *barrio* makes these racialized changes the most clearly visible, but “race” here is not merely the ironic surface observation of who now walks the streets. Rather, I interrogate how race is itself an organizing principle of gentrification and how gentrifying Chicago neighborhoods become sites for the reproduction of white privilege and the marginalization of people of color.

So how does gentrification reveal and construct race in Chicago? This research question guided two years of full-time, multimethod, multisited ethnographic fieldwork and many more months of historical archival research, data processing, and ongoing public observations. I look at three neighborhoods within the greater West Side, each associated with the black, Mexican, or Puerto Rican communities within the hypersegregated landscape of Chicago, where I incorporated a randomized survey and visual scan and GIS mapping into my ethnography.² Directly west of downtown is Garfield Park, a 97 percent African American community with a high rate of poverty and a strong history of neighborhood activism (Seligman 2005), including the rise of the Black Panthers. Several miles northwest of the city center lies Humboldt Park, a mixed area viewed as the heart of the Puerto Rican community, and the most publicly contested of the three, where half a mile of Division Street has been recreated as Paseo Boricua (Puerto Rican Corridor, roughly) (Flores-González 2001; Ramos-Zayas 2003). Just a mile southwest of the greater Loop, Pilsen represents the most central area of the predominantly Mexican Southwest Side, a historic port

of entry for migrants, and a vibrant cultural hub (DeGenova 2007; Dohan 2003). In this article, I focus on what I call the “racial fix,” the fixing of value into place amid the logics of racial capitalism, using ethnographic data and elements of the interviews, survey, and GIS mapping. I explain the racial fix; situate it in the history of racial capitalism; outline its relationship to gentrification, globalization, finance, and debt; and apply it to the history of white flight and racial segregation in Chicago. I then present my findings on the racial fix made legible in the actions and discourses that confirm the market formation process at the intersection of culture and political economy that enables gentrification.

The racial fix

The history of capitalism is embedded in global colonialism, and while race, class, and gender intersect in heterogeneous forms across time and space, one constant in the modern world is racial capitalism—processes of deriving social and economic value from racial subordination (Clarke and Thomas 2006; Leong 2013). This spans the early global trades in fur, spices, and enslaved peoples, and the colonization of the Americas (Wolf 1982) through the present rise of the carceral state and the “new Jim Crow” (Alexander 2011), through debt financing to extract profit from the ongoing devaluation of people of color (Gilmore 2007: 87–127). These “systematic efforts from colonial times to the present to create a possessive investment in whiteness for European Americans” fuel a “discourse that demonizes people of color for being victimized by these changes” (Lipsitz 1998: 18). Whiteness is not merely a cultural essence or social position but a constant historical process of engaging in the world to inscribe value in places and practices that reify and extend economic superordination.

Whiteness manifests in global and local sets of imaginaries, relations, and practices, historical “racial projects” (Omi and Winant 1994) creating wealth disparities in homeownership

(L. Cohen 2003; Jackson 2000; Katznelson 2003), and forms of labor inclusion and exclusion and capital advancement (Brodkin 1998; Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 2005). Whiteness as a shifting and renewed “covenant” bound heterogeneous European descendants together as “whites” in exclusionary terms of labor not just across the Southern United States but from the beginnings of northern cities like Brooklyn (Wilder 2000) and Chicago (Drake and Cayton 1945; Satter 2009). While the concept of “white privilege” as “an invisible package of unearned assets” (McIntosh 1999: 134) is commonplace in popular organizing contexts, the term, despite its contextual dependence and multivalence, is a relevant shorthand for this set of quotidian experiences of structural superordination. White privilege is a “social fact” in the US context (Hartigan 1997), where a majority of white adults are socialized in white-majority social landscapes with qualitatively distinct social status and treatment, life course events, forms of institutional access, and political economic power from those of people of color.

So what is a racial fix? It is a consensus-building process that enables white people to create and sustain a market in order to secure social and economic benefits from the historical consequences of racial disparity and racism. A racial fix is a kind of *spatial* fix, a term coined by the social geographer David Harvey. Harvey notes that periodic crises in the overaccumulation of capital require specific sites and fixed geographies in which to adhere in order to generate further profit from the gap between previous states of devalorization and newly invented value (2003, 1989: 66–98; Marx [1867] 1992). Capital may contain the arcane quality to add value to itself, but it does not do so in universally dispersed space, nor in a truly liberal, completely open, and totally free market, but ideally when existing social conditions, state-sponsored incentives, and insider information ensure less risk and a greater return. This is a “fix” in several senses: a correction in a previous pattern, an agglomeration of new value in place, but also an insider agreement—as in “the fix is in.” Just as a

boxer might secretly agree to “fix” a match and lose on purpose to make a profit from betting against himself, social conditions of inequality and discrimination allow buyers and investors to “fix” value by betting on the collective actions of others. In its most lucrative form this is called “insider trading” and is ostensibly immoral and definitely illegal, however laughably punished. But when the fix depends on local increases in white residents and white spaces, the displacement of black and Latino residents and institutions, and the denial of black and Latino claims to space, then it relies on, rewards, and reinscribes race. Seeing race this way is consistent with the call by Leith Mullings for engagement in “a critical interpretation of race not as a quality of people of color, but as an unequal relationship involving both accumulation and dispossession” (2005: 685). This is a spatial fix that depends on race—thus, a racial fix.

Gentrification, “financification,” and the rise of debt culture

Yet race was not included when the term “gentrification” was coined by Ruth Glass. She describes 1960s changes in central London as a “an upper-middle class takeover” of “shabby, modest” housing “upgraded” into “elegant, expensive residences” that are “enormously inflated” in “status and value” until “all or most of the original working class occupiers are displaced” and “the whole social character of the district is changed” (1963: xviii–xix). As a set of intersecting processes varying across geographies and contexts, “gentrification” is many things and almost never all at once, and a common position in scholarship and in the public sphere is that the term cannot be stably defined (e.g. Brown-Saracino 2010). Yet whether interpreted in supply or demand terms, as either the result of shifts in middle-class labor, consumption, and lifestyle preferences (e.g., Ley 1980) or as the result of a “rent gap” in devalorized central cities (e.g., Smith 1996), the process involves a locale with privileged newcomers and the displacement of

marginalized residents. Gentrification tends to advance where there are tight housing markets, rapid job growth, devaluated central neighborhoods, a rent gap, city amenities, tax incentives, and city policies in favor (Kennedy and Leonard 2001: 9–14), but ultimately operates as “a *market-defining* process” (Zukin 1991: 215; emphasis in original). And race was never separable from US housing markets.

Still, the racial fix I present below should be viewed as an instantiation of larger global economic restructuring. Gentrification is in many ways a localization of globalization and what has been called “financification,” the increasing complexity, speed, and liquidity of finance and the generation of new financial products, services, and investment markets (Blackburn 2006: 39). Global neoliberalism involves the opening and deregulation of markets in the interests of capital investment, assuring greater concentrations of wealth and increasing income disparity and polarization (Harvey 2005; Piketty 2014). Under Rahm Emanuel, city policies, services, zoning, infrastructure, and urban development initiatives increasingly work to cultivate foreign investor relationships (Moskow et al. 2012) and accelerate real estate markets that are racially exclusionary in practice but justified with color-blind racial discourses (e.g., Mele 2013).

The deregulations of the banking industry in the 1980s, coupled with the initial government arrangement of financial “conduits” to float portfolios of pooled mortgages, served to create a massive, global surge in investment in real estate debt, which by 1995 outvalued all corporate bonds (Ranney 2003: 134–135). These mortgage-backed securities (MBSs) are grouped by similarity of investment profile, and the most lucrative for capital speculation are those held in areas of low property value anticipating a boom in home prices. By the early millennial years, the “full integration of local real estate mortgages into the growing global capital markets” meant that it was “the supply and demand for housing development funds rather than the supply and demand for housing itself that determines the value of local properties” (135). Thus,

urban areas face gentrification not driven by local shortages of housing but because speculator investors are poised to create markets wherever possible. This is hardly the “natural” supply and demand model used to justify gentrification in the public sphere.

Yet gentrification is still a profoundly local phenomenon, dependent on geographically localized structures of power and local markets (Davidson 2007). The majority of white newcomers we surveyed in neighborhoods like Garfield Park, Humboldt Park, and Pilsen largely depend on the flexible economies of information technology, cultural production, the arts, and the FIRE (finance, insurance, and real estate) industries. They are a narrowly rewarded service class performing a host of niche cultural and information production roles, for whom speculation in real estate is one major form of increasing wealth and belonging to the middle or upper-middle class (Sassen 1991, 1998). For many of them, the debt culture sustains and rewards a precarious and declining middle-class identity by reflecting in material possessions and housing a vision of success based in ideologies of meritocracy and individualism that also blame poor people of color for their poverty (Williams 2004: 57). As the middle classes are compressed, the search for prosperity turns traditional home buying toward devalued areas where extant popular sphere cultural scripts indicate that increasing value is imminent. This cultural knowledge is understood, shared, and read in Chicago through the lens of whiteness transforming black and Latino urban landscapes.

The last racial fix: White flight and urban segregation

The white lens on these landscapes—and the reason gentrification works in Chicago—is predicated on racial devalorization. Black neighborhoods formed in the era of the “Second Ghetto” (Hirsch 1983) through a complex intersection of federal policies and banking prac-

tices, highway sponsorship, restrictive covenants, panic peddling, blockbusting, and urban renewal programs (Sugrue 1996). These factors also affected Mexican and Puerto Rican settlements, which increased dramatically in the 1960s in the wake of the Bracero Program (Arredondo 2008), changes in naturalization laws in 1965 (Lamphere 1992), and Operation Bootstrap and the recruitment of Puerto Ricans from the island to US cities (Fernández 2012, for an integral overview of Latino settlement in Chicago; Padilla 1987). Black and Latino settlement in white neighborhoods met with redlining by lenders, as overt racism emerged locally in intense civic debates, incendiary newspaper stories, open political opposition, and white vigilante violence (Dzik 2009; Fernández 2012: 131–172; Pacyga 1995; Rosen 1998; Rúa 2012: 78–102; Seligman 2005: 183–207).

Policy makers, banks, and investors created subsidies and protections to “reward the results of past discrimination” (Sugrue 1996: 379) by channeling investment to white areas while the black and Latino inner city saw disinvestment and abandonment. Whites sold to blacks and later to Latinos, as both groups became largely redlined out of equal access to credit, and paid artificially inflated prices through “contract” sales. Meanwhile black and Latino “property value” plummeted, since that value was set by white customers in a dual housing market (Seligman 2005), a process that denuded the first generation of black wealth in Garfield Park (Satter 2009). This racial project is perhaps easier to view as a racial fix, since overtly racial prerogatives, now illegal, clearly generated profit for white realtors at the expense of black and Latino buyers.

But the legality of restrictive covenants, redlining, and outright racial discrimination slowly fell in the face of challenges from the late 1940s onward (Hall 2005), although remaining in practice often until huge civic battles broke out led by community groups over the next two generations (Pierson and Smith 2001). The long urban renewal era of this time was defined by large plans generated by experts, guided by urban economic and political elites, who could

manage but never wholly determine the fates of neighborhoods, residents, and consumption choices (Bennett 1990; Conditt 1974; Teaford 1990). Urban renewal in Chicago from the 1940s to the 1980s reflects an attempt by elites to re-establish a white middle class inner city and to contain urban populations of color in the wake of the dismantling of official racial segregation and exclusion. The earlier conversation on race was far more overt, as seen in the words of realtor Mayer Singerman at a 1962 meeting of the Real Estate Committee of South Shore Commission:

We must find new sources for White tenants. In terms of market research, we must approach the problem of attracting new White tenants into our neighborhood. We can discern ways of drawing tenants from other neighborhoods. At the same time, we can ferret out the techniques for getting out-of-towners—coming into Chicago for the first time—to want to settle in our neighborhood. You would be surprised how many new people are moving into Chicago every day.

This vision emerged in practical form in a few areas in Chicago, New York, and other major cities from the late 1960s into the 1970s (Laska and Spain 1980), often hailed as a renaissance in new “singles areas” (de Visé 1980), and eventually critically studied as “gentrification” (see Lees et al. 2008: 3–85). This was popularly understood as attempts to recruit not merely middle-class but *also* white residents, and from the beginning whiteness was associated with the project of market promotion and the urban policies that increased property value.

Still, black, Mexican, and Puerto Rican residents, organizations, and leaders have not passively accepted gentrification and displacement. Residents have waged epic local battles against luxury megaprojects, demonstrations demanding affordable housing, and dozens of initiatives in community building, household stabilization, and incumbent upgrading. Award-winning affordable housing construction has been led by

Bethel New Life in Garfield Park; Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation, Hispanic Housing, and the Latin United Community Housing Association (LUCHA) in Humboldt Park; and the Resurrection Project in Pilsen. Community opposition to the collusion of city officials with real estate speculators predates even the release of the Chicago 21 Plan in 1973, which sparked a backlash by community groups who produced their own series of “Community 21” plans.

This struggle continues amid an onslaught of city, press, and newcomer discourse that positions predecessor residents and people of color generally as pathological, problematic, and inexorably linked to lower value (Pfeiffer 2006). From the urban renewal era and into the era of rampant gentrification, its trajectory, pace, and qualities have been confronted and reshaped by local community efforts to preserve and redefine place on their own terms.



FIGURE 1. Gutted, rehabbed, and abandoned. This classic Chicago grey-stone building dating to the Gilded Age was bought, gutted, and rehabbed like many in West Garfield Park awaiting the arrival of a white market that was slow in coming. Despite its new windows, new gate, new fixtures, and tuckpointing, once it was offered to sell and rent at prices unaffordable to local residents these buildings remain empty and boarded up (photograph by Jesse Mumm).

Summary of findings

So how do you know your neighborhood is improving? “It could just be because I see more people like me,” says Carla Abruzzio, a white woman from downstate Illinois living in a new luxury single-family home in Humboldt Park. This is consistent with scores of similar replies from white newcomers in all three neighborhoods, who often followed such observations with immediate discursive positioning as non-racist individuals. The racial fix relies on an overarching narrative of increasing value associated with white people, white space, white symbols, and white public consumption—framed against local Others. “I think the way people complain about their neighbors, you know, is just in terms of property value,” says Dan Bridges. Dan is friendly with his Puerto Rican neighbors, and officially against gentrification, but also naturalizes the process, has nothing positive to say about the Puerto Rican community, a long list of negatives, and openly denies their cultural and historical claims to local space. Regardless of the positions individual white newcomers take, the majority reinforce the notion that value is linked to their growing presence and the declining presence of people of color.

Because this observation surfaced so much in informal talk, I conducted a randomized sur-

vey on interactions and perceptions of gentrification and race with a race-matched research team. We found that nearly 60 percent of residents surveyed agreed that “white people” are making their neighborhood more expensive, and this percentage held evenly for whites and for people of color. While 33 percent of whites and 28 percent of nonwhites disagreed, our surveyors recorded in field notes that many added comments suggesting that they saw this as a class phenomenon that only secondarily appeared to be about race because the new gentry were supermajority white. How do we disentangle the connection between people with more wealth improving the material conditions of the built environment, and an artificial hike in property values that precedes or even funds improvements based on the racial valuation of white people? For this I turn back to my ethnographic interviews and the stories respondents told on front steps, at parties, and in kitchens over coffee.

Sophie Haverbeck is a white woman from Maine who recognizes that white newcomers first came to her block in Garfield Park because they knew her and saw that she was successful, safe, and—importantly—making a profit. The premise of a lucrative buy linked with white racial solidarity and black threat is vivid, even if at times talk collapses into sentence fragments, as she often avoids saying the word “white”:

TABLE 1. Perception That White People Cause Increased Housing Costs

Sample Neighborhood	Race	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
Garfield Park	nonwhite	64%	31%	5%
Garfield Park	white	31%	56%	13%
Humboldt Park	nonwhite	51%	26%	23%
Humboldt Park	white	55%	25%	19%
Pilsen	nonwhite	60%	28%	12%
Pilsen	white	45%	32%	23%
TOTAL	NONWHITE	59%	28%	13%
TOTAL	WHITE	47%	33%	20%

Note: This table illustrates for the following statement the raw percentage of residents by neighborhood who agree, disagree, or respond with neutrality, no opinion, or not sure: “White people are making it very expensive for blacks/Latinos to live here in the neighborhood.”

I would say it probably started as the center of the newcomer action because it, and it really did, and it's not a tooting my own horn thing, it's, it's sort of, "Sophie did it, so we should be able to do it." And other people came. They came and they felt safe because they were in proximity to other, um. And then their—and it sort of spread—their friends saw that they could do it, and that they were going to be in proximity of others as well, and it became safety in numbers.

Here the "proximity to other, um" is clearly *whites* to *whites*, who urge her not to sell and move away, since her household became the center of one white social nexus in Garfield Park. She later expresses the basic economic metrics of her move:

I would say it's about 30 percent white on this block. And it, you know, definitely wasn't when I moved here. But it's very interesting, all of my friends said, "Well, if she can do it, we can do it." Well, first, they said they, first, two years they were waiting to see if I was going to survive. [laughter] And then ... nothing bad happened. And the property value just like skyrocketed. Well, property value everywhere skyrocketed and nobody could afford homes in other places, like this. I mean, where can you have a, a 2,500-square-foot, three-bedroom home? ... I bought—this house was \$30,000. And it's now worth \$350,000.

Her property value reportedly multiplied by 1,167 percent in 10 years. Was this because she installed new kitchen fixtures and a half bath and repainted the walls? This kind of change in market value for a row house that was not gut rehabbed, not on a historical registry, and not outfitted with luxury amenities is not due to "gentrification" if that means material housing improvements owing to her capital and class status. It is a naked register of the phenomenally artificially depreciated values historically

assigned to the black West Side, and the radical change that occurs when the white market shows the general public—and other whites—that it has arrived.

Luke Cresswell and Janet Bogan are a married white couple who bought a row house in Garfield Park. They are eager to talk about both gentrification and race, and many stories they share reveal not only the racial fix but also its circulation as an idea among their supermajority black neighbors. As Janet explains:

We're walking down the street and all the sudden, "Hey!" This woman, she comes running out, she goes, "10 thousand dollars! 10 thousand dollars!" Really. "What?" She goes, "See, you! It's what I tell the neighbors. Every one of you that comes into this neighborhood, it ups our property rate 10 thousand dollars." ... She was telling her African American neighbors that they shouldn't be upset that whites were starting to move in here, that it was only going to raise their property taxes, property rate, uh, uh, that, the housing prices, like 10 thousand dollars for every white they see.

This black woman interjects this equation of value to a passing white couple, complete strangers called out from her front porch, reassuring them in this encounter that she is not angry, but still quite conscious of the irrational and unequal local economic fix.

In Humboldt Park, social space and discourse intersect in the most overt way to racially "fix" new value by denying it is Humboldt Park at all, a name that is heavily and popularly associated with Puerto Ricans. Instead of selling properties in "Humboldt Park," realtors affix labels that echo the previously invented names applied to gentrified areas to the east, or new lexical inventions, as attested by realtor and resident Rebecca Shapiro, a white Jewish woman in her forties. "West Bucktown has become an accepted term," she says, "but I think it's more from the real estate community than anyone else. Because when Bucktown became so expen-

sive, and you know, that was the way to make it pop quicker.” She herself accepts and promotes the term, commonly used in her social circles, but really sees her area as part of Logan Square and will often use that name as well. Yet there is one term she avoids at all costs. “I’m certainly not going to say Humboldt Park,” she says with mock terror, “If I said to someone, ‘I live in Humboldt Park,’ you know, if I said to someone, ‘Well, why don’t you come by, you know? I live in Humboldt Park.’ Oh, I don’t think I want to

do that.” She ends with a wry, suggestive smile, as if we both know what that means.

As realtors, white newcomers, and the larger real estate industry rebrand areas to suit the white market, they divide Humboldt Park into segments with a range of labels. They move the boundary of Logan Square south to North Avenue, dub the northeast half mile square West Bucktown, and call the blocks east of the park West Wicker Park. They use the terms Ukrainian Village—or “West Village” to harken to Man-

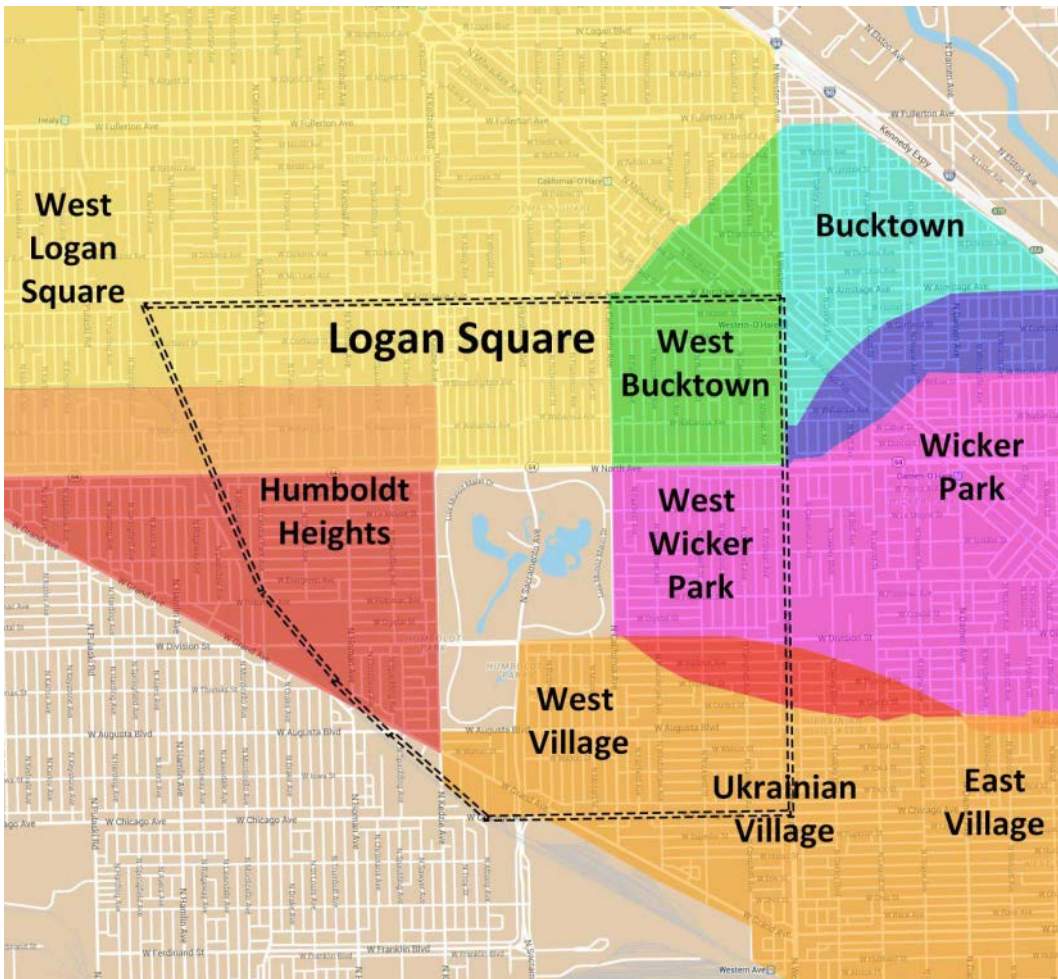


FIGURE 2. The Balkanization of Humboldt Park. This map provides a cursory illustration of roughly where white newcomers and members of the real estate industry designate portions of the area by any term except “Humboldt Park,” using labels associated with gentrification and with whiteness. The boundaries of the neighborhood as outlined in dotted black lines more closely correspond to designations shared among the Latino majority (image by Jesse Mumm).

hattan chic—for the southeast half mile as well as the blocks just south of the park, and then rename anything west of Kedzie not included in Logan Square as Humboldt Heights. In this way, Humboldt Park is effectively balkanized by real estate discourse until not a single block is left that could not be located in another neighborhood entirely. José López, the executive director of the local Puerto Rican Cultural Center, is well aware of this racial project:

So when I look at it as a lived experience, I'm looking at it totally different than someone who wants to come in and say, "Wow, that building looks really nice, and this is the way I want to put that building, and I want to change that building,

so it will look a lot like my homogenized, suburban area." You know? And that's what we do to the cities. That's what we're basically doing to the city. We're creating false neighborhoods, like Wicker Park and Bucktown and East Village and West Village. I mean, all of those things we've done so we can erase the memory of what these areas used to be ... I mean, where is West Bucktown? In other words, in whose imagination? For a yuppie, West Bucktown exists. For us, it doesn't.

While the obviously invented nature of such place name changes has long been linked to the creation of new real estate markets (Kasinitz 1988; Osman 2011), this is also a testament to



FIGURE 3. This factory loft conversion embeds the “West Bucktown” neighborhood name in its building title along with the address number on West Moffat. This reinforces the association of this property with the invented title of Bucktown as it applied to the gentrified area to the east of Western, rather than the name “Humboldt Park,” despite its location approximately two city blocks north and two blocks east of the park itself (photograph by Jesse Mumm).

local Puerto Rican claims to place. Over a generation, local activists effectively rebranded a neighborhood name loaded with negative racial ascriptions into a positive affirmation as Puerto Rican, through a host of programs, events, and celebrations like the daylong street festival *Fiesta Boricua* (Flores-González 2001). Whether received as positive or negative, the association is so strong that even real estate developers could not co-opt Humboldt Park—and instead seek to erase it or openly attack it.

“Why don’t they go back to Puerto Rico?” says Frank Battaglia, “Every time I go down there I see more white kids running around there, which everybody likes, because they got money.” A retired firefighter and lifelong resident of several West Side neighborhoods, this Italian and Ukrainian white man in his sixties has made thousands later in life as he bought, rehabbed, managed, and sold several properties as the wave of white newcomers arrived. He recalls another white landlord welcoming white newcomers to his building, saying, “Let them pay! They pay 100 dollars more a month!” He and other white property owners often suggested that they happily raised rents when they saw the visible presence of white newcomers on the streets surrounding their blocks, even if they were students or artists with little immediate disposable income. Material improvement of housing was secondary to the increase in rents and the subsequent increase in property values due to a white newcomer presence, an inverse of the process often presented as gentrification in academia and the popular imagination.

But the racial fix does not happen by itself or merely through discourse. White newcomers actively engage in forms of social disciplining of neighborhood space, both as individuals and in new majority white groups claiming to represent majority Latino areas, such as the West Bucktown Neighborhood Association (WBNA). They are often quite effective in demanding and receiving city services, and point to local tree planting, the repaving of North Avenue, rodent abatement, better trash removal, and park upgrades, as part of the social goods conferred

due to their interventions. Mindy Tannen links those improvements with her own presence and desire, and champions the mayor, who she applauds for responding so well to the concerns of herself and her allies. “If we want something, we get it,” she smiles, “which is pretty interesting.” Their suggestion of privileged access is fairly clear, but presented in color-blind behavioral rather than racial terms.

Puerto Rican lifelong resident Juanita Irizarry noted that local public meetings with police through the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS) program had become forums to bash Latinos and blacks as unwanted and dangerous residents. White newcomers often used coded language calling for the removal of “loiterers” from the sidewalk—a substantively illegal proposition—and proclaiming “they had a higher investment in the area because of the high price they paid” for their new condos. Thus the framing of local legitimacy in making claims is directly tied in some newcomers’ minds to the exorbitant prices of their luxury properties, rather than predecessor residents’ years of tenancy and community involvement. It becomes strategically forgotten that for generations, local black and Latino organizations, churches, nonprofits, and activists made major gains in reducing gang activity, improving education, health care, and the quality of life in Garfield Park, Humboldt Park, and Pilsen.

Even initiatives in community improvement are often opposed if they seem centered around Latino or black residents. But when white newcomers in many cases directly oppose providing resources, building institutions, or supporting affordable housing that serves blacks and Latinos, their views and positions are most often expressed in color-blind racism relying on the language of implication and fear. One white couple living across the street from Moos Elementary School in Humboldt Park joined the struggle to prevent a new, small charter high school program from opening there, a battle they eventually lost because of the program’s strong local Latino support. George Abruzzio states simply that high schools “attract a differ-

ent element,” referring vaguely to safety concerns and to their toddler daughter. So I ask if anything bad had happened since it opened, and they confess that, no, it has been very quiet—the teenagers do not even congregate near them. I ask if they see any gang members outside the school, and they confess they have no idea what a gang member looks like. They continue to talk about all the crime around them and refer me to a Chicago crime website to track it, but when I ask if there was much crime on their block, they confess there was not. In sum, this white couple living in a newly built luxury single family home act in opposition to Latino community-building efforts based on their fears of people of color and their unabashed, stated orientation to increasing their property value. Yet their possessive investment in whiteness structures these subjectively real racial fears that nonetheless correspond little to their actual experiences of danger or even threat.

Ironically, the racial fix depends on a constant stream of dialogue among white people that they are in fact relatively safe here, conveyed to other whites outside of the neighborhood who then invest their own capital and presence. “So I didn’t feel the danger,” Mindy says. “My neighbors felt the danger.” And yet the

impetus to displace people of color is predicated on an equally constant refrain of danger, dirt, and disorder continually associated with people of color. White newcomers learn that they generally do not experience violence or most other “neighborhood effects” when living among blacks and Latinos, and the discovery of this extension of white privilege helps build the white market. “I was surprised how much we’re not a part of that,” Dan says. “They really left us alone, as white folks.” Yet the continued cultivation of white fear discursively positions people of color as marginal and in need of removal, and underscores the supposed benefit of a white presence. These discursive acrobatics of safety and danger, tolerance and marginalization, ascription then denial, not coincidentally reflect the emergent model for how we deal with race in America today.

One further line of evidence in the built environment corroborates the ethnographic data on the racial fix. With a team of research assistants I conducted a visual scan of more than 160 miles of street fronts, coding every property parcel for signs of abandonment, upgrading, new construction, and various forms of land use, and correlated that data with censuses from 1990, 2000, and 2010, and 30 years of Cook County

ACCORDING TO THE FOLK EXPLANATION OF GENTRIFICATION



ACCORDING TO THE EVIDENCE IN CHICAGO



FIGURE 4. According to the folk explanation of gentrification, first the gentry arrive, then they vastly improve the built environment, and then property value steadily rises. The evidence from this ethnography, the visual scan, Cook County Assessor’s Office data, and the census shows instead that in Humboldt Park, steady housing improvement preceded the mass arrival of white newcomers, which then spurred a massive and generalized inflation of property value (image by Jesse Mumm).

property assessments. I found that proportional increases in property value did not align with blocks with the greatest amount of rehabbing and construction nearly as much as they aligned with specific moments in time when the white market arrived in the neighborhood. This means that previous devalorization combined with new white residence has a greater effect on revaluation than black, Mexican, and Puerto Rican owners upgrading their own houses, even though this accounts for the vast majority of material improvement in these neighborhoods.

This finding alone could still be explained other ways, were it not for the interviews, housing life histories, and popular sphere data collection confirming roughly when structural, symbolic, and discursive signals began circulating within the white community. This is corroborated with changes in media reporting, new city investment, and the startups of flagship businesses and white-majority organizations. It may not be possible to render an exact comparison of how much material improvements versus how much white population increase affects property rates. Like any market valuation, the racial fix is changeable and subjective, but its effects are rendered in hard, cold, real dollars and cents.

The racial fix and the currency of whiteness

Gentrification in a historically racially segregated city like Chicago represents a racial fix, a way for capital investors and property buyers to assign value that is artificially inflated by constant reference to whiteness in relation to people of color. Here in Chicago, that process depends heavily on cultivating, convincing, and enabling a white newcomer market that their reclamation and transformation of historical and cultural centers of black, Mexican, and Puerto Rican life in Chicago is possible, inevitable, and even ostensibly benevolent. The racial fix is at once so pervasive and so obvious that it is rarely addressed and claimed as a central premise, though it is staunchly opposed and denied in

the public sphere and often in academia, in the present era of color-blind discourse (Kim 2000) and the myth of the “post-racial” (C. Cohen 2011). I do not suggest that race is the only determinant of local property values, or that black or Latino people cannot contribute to gentrification, or that all white newcomers to Chicago are in support of racism. But these markets had to be created and invented, and while hearing the life stories of white newcomers I saw how the structuring elements of race intersected with their estimations of risk, benefit, and comfort level in relation to people of color. While the racial change of the white flight era denuded inner city neighborhoods like Garfield Park, Humboldt Park, and Pilsen of real estate value, denying people of color the equity capital their white suburban counterparts gained, the racial change of today revaluates the neighborhood. In the white flight era, white residents often claimed not to hate blacks or Latinos or want to exclude them, but rather that they were forced by the prejudices of others to sell (Rosen 1998). But whites today are betting on other whites and on a generalizable racism to calculate their next move (e.g., Low 2009). In the 1960s, they lost money and community but reinscribed value in whiteness that they recuperated in capital in the suburbs. In the era of gentrification, they get the money, the value, *and* the neighborhood, not by betting against but by betting *with* each other—a win-win for whiteness.

Yet and still, any market that is fixed can be unfixed, as we confront its constructed nature, and realize that endless and artificial market escalation is ultimately unsustainable. I do not suggest that race and racism may be undone in one generation, nor separated from the larger racial capitalist investment and divestment structures in which they are embedded, but rather that socially constructed valuations are susceptible to resistance, change, and transformation. One front involves the work of people like Juliet De Jesús Alejandre, the youth program director at the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), where youth organize demonstrations against luxury tower

construction on Milwaukee Avenue. In one recent action, youth flash-mobbed a lounge of the rehabbed Logan Theater, owned by local real estate developer Mark Fishman, whose upscale building conversions are at the forefront of the evictions of low-income residents, and a Latina teenager spoke on a bullhorn, echoed word-for-word by her crew, in a challenge to the majority white patrons. “In 2010, you have displaced 19,000 families!” they said. “Whether you realize it or not, by supporting businesses like this, you are supporting the displacement of families!” Actions like this in Chicago and around the country illustrate the growing recognition that the economic order of gentrification is predicated on their racial subordination and sutures value to white bodies in place—and that that landscape can be disrupted. I have a vision that white currency can be undone and that we are in fact on the cusp of new appraisals of value in both land and people.

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Jesse Mumm holds a doctorate in cultural anthropology from Northwestern University and teaches in Latin American and Latino Studies and Community Service Studies at DePaul University. He grew up in Chicago and worked for a decade with the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and has been involved in critical pedagogy, antiracism, education reform, and community development for more than 20 years. His ethnographic fieldwork looks at how gentrification intersects with race and racism in Chicago neighborhoods.

E-mail: jmumm2@depaul.edu

Notes

1. Names given throughout the text are at times pseudonyms used to protect the identities and social lives of my respondents, in accordance with the Northwestern University Institutional Review Board protocol #STU1510 approved for this research. As a further measure of protection, there is no distinction made in the text between pseudonyms and actual given names, although public leaders who speak on record are always identified by name.
2. Credit is due to the research team members who carried out the surveying and visual scanning portions of the research project: Felicia Butts, Elizabeth Frantz, Laura Mieczkowski, Verónica Morales, Sofía Narvaez Gete, Sara Raftery, Myra Rodríguez, and Luisa Rollins. I am forever grateful.

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