THE SACRED AND THE URBAN:

THE CASE FOR SOCIAL-JUSTICE GENTRIFIERS

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By

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined

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THE SACRED AND THE URBAN:
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A Candidate for the Degree of Master of Arts,

And hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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ABSTRACT

Building on research of both social movements and urban sociology, this study

extends three core proposals: 1) that groups of "social justice gentrifiers" have in

recent decades purposely and collectively settled in urban American

neighborhoods; 2) that these groups are differentiated from the "traditional

gentry" by the centrality of religious and moral convictions in their choice of

living spaces; and 3) that these groups – though not always affiliated with

structured social-action networks – constitute a recognizable social movement

operating at the level of individual neighborhoods. Additionally, this study

suggests a broader project to evaluate the impact of "social justice gentrifiers" on

the processes of urban redevelopment and community change.

Introduction

Sociological research concerning community – particularly in urban settings – has represented a distinct course of study at least since Robert Park first proposed his theory of "neighborhood ecology" (Park [1925] 1952). Though contemporary theorists invoke a more nuanced and flexible conception of "space" than that developed within the Chicago School, a similar curiosity as to how community is done and undone drives this project. Indeed the study of gentrification in particular has experienced a critical revival (see Smith 1996; Lees 2000; Roberts 2003; Rose 2004; Freeman 2006, Slater 2006 and DeSena 2006, to tip the iceberg that is the study of gentrification) both in the U.S. and globally, as scholars consider shifts in the social and physical geography of post-industrial urban centers. Specifically, this project has adopted a narrow focus on a particular subset of gentrifiers, as will be explained.

Meanwhile, the sociology of social movements has produced a theoretical spectrum including the business-like models of resource mobilization theory (Zald and McCarthy 1977) and James M. Jasper's artful argument for ethnography (Jasper 1997). The latter proposition is of particular interest to this author, as it speaks directly to the intersection of identity and social movements. Biography, I too argue is key to understanding the whys and hows around which social movements organize – in particular movements that operate in resistance by employing an *uncommon sense* that frequently runs counter to both market logic and established avenues of technocratic power. This literature is the sociology of resistance.

This project mines both of these broad traditions to describe a group of urban dwellers who inhabit an unique intersection of geography and ideology, where projects of urban and community redevelopment exist alongside desires for social justice and "diversity" or "integration" inspired, at least in part, by religious convictions. Through an exploratory study of three St. Louis neighborhoods, a case will be made for the existence of "social-justice gentrifiers." As a group, these individuals are almost exclusively white, middle-class, college-educated professionals, and they have chosen in recent decades to move into neighborhoods populated largely by working-class and poor nonwhites. That is, they appear to play the role of the gentry – occupying and ultimately purchasing and rehabilitating properties in their respective neighborhoods – *if* viewed only through a narrow and market-minded lens. When interviewed, however, these same individuals espouse goals that include equity in access to public services including a quality education, affordable housing (includes both rental and owner-occupied properties) and the creation of "diverse" neighborhood dynamics that include a mix of people of different class and racial locations. And centrally, the informants of this study have organized into intentional communal groups where these ideals are linked to religious and moral convictions, specifically of the Christian tradition. In short, they model in word and deed some of the ideals of the citizenship movements of the 1960s and '70s (Jasper 1997), but attempt to manifest their ideals in neighborhood action, not mass protests.

Indeed, when speaking to these "social-justice gentrifiers" about their motivations and beliefs, at least two distinct "spiritual" traditions emerge. The first is a vague-but-vocal connection to the social-justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly as they regard integration of people of different races and economic classes. (It is also

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noteworthy that two of the three groups here studied were formed in the 1970s.) The second is a call to service and/or hospitality couched in explicitly Christian beliefs. Two groups in this study are part of the (highly visible and politically active) St. Louis Roman Catholic community, while the third is connected to the contemporary evangelical Christian community.

That said, social-justice gentrifiers – owing to their own unique socio-economic locations – are not easily studied with either the literature of urban sociology or social movements alone. As revealed in their own words, they inhabit cognitive and physical spaces that are contested. In both their individual and group interactions, they engage in complex identity work and meaning making. Therefore, this project also represents a fusion of two unique literatures into a distinct analytical lens, which (when applied to the ethnographic data at hand) yields three core contentions for differentiating social-justice gentrifiers from their peers in the traditional gentry:

1. At least since the 1970s, groups of social-justice gentrifiers have settled in American urban neighborhoods (specifically within St. Louis in this study) in order to form collectives or other similar intentional communities of like-minded believers.
2. These collectives and their members are differentiated from the "traditional gentry" discussed in previous studies of gentrification by their personal and collective connection to ideals of "social justice" including racial and economic diversity and the practices by which they pursue those beliefs. Moreover, religious and moral convictions (specifically Christian beliefs in service and hospitality) are central to the "reasoning" behind decisions to live in urban, impoverished, and largely nonwhite neighborhoods. The sacred informs the urban.
3. While not always linked to structured activist organizations (such as the broad social movements of the 1960s), social-justice gentrifiers still may be described as a unique social movement working at the local level. There also is evidence of some collaboration or cognitive crosspollination among groups within the city at large.

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Additionally, it is important to note that – although this research is necessarily located within a history of St. Louis redevelopment and community change – it is also a contention of this project that social-justice gentrifiers exist in other urban centers throughout America. Indeed, at least two informants have participated in or had other social contact with like-minded groups outside of metro St. Louis.

Chapter 1: Literature, Theory & Application

A. Urban Redevelopment & Gentrification

In 1983, Sharon Zurkin noted that it nearly every article on gentrification began with a lengthy literature review, necessitated not so much by a scholarly desire for self-reflection, but by the divergent nature of theories among sociologists and geographers alike. Simply put, explanations for the return of the traditional gentry – as I will call them – to the urban core ranged from near exultation of market-driven-equality to charges of class warfare. This researcher, too, offers a summary of theoretical options and the ideas that ultimately guide this study. However, it is my hope that this necessarily brief review has the specific intent of revealing the need to draw a distinction between social-justice gentrifiers and the traditional gentry first named by Glass (1964).

The study of neighborhood change in America traces its academic lineage to the Chicago School of Sociology and, most notably, to the work of Robert Park ([1925] 1952) and his associates. The ecological perspective proposed by these researchers posits the neighborhood as a natural area that, to quote Schwirian's (1983) summary, involves:

> (a) a geographic area physically distinguishable from other adjacent areas;
> (b) a population with unique social, demographic, or ethnic composition;
> (c) a social system with rules, norms, and regularly recurring patterns of social interaction that function as mechanisms of social control; and (d)

aggregate emergent behaviors or ways of life that distinguish the area
from others around it. (1983, pp. 84)

Chicago-school sociologists developed these notions into the invasion-succession model, where resident groups compete among themselves. Not only was this "natural" view of community change – propelled by the forces of mortality, fertility and migration – widely adopted within and without sociology, but also it has shown amazing persistence in the 50 years since it first was articulated. For instance, *Streets of Glory* (McRoberts, 2003)*,* though a study of urban identity more than gentrification*,* references an ecological frame as the author – citing Park as his inspiration – explores the relationship of black churches with the population and real estate of a Boston neighborhood.

Hoover & Vernon (1959) put forth a closely related neighborhood life-cycle model where, in a similar "natural" way, the life of a community flows through five stages: development, transition, downgrading, thinning out and renewal. Some neighborhoods never move through the complete cycle, while abandonment often is seen as a transition between life-cycle stages.

Beyond economic or market-driven explanations, another line of inquiry follows Greer (1962) in seeing neighborhood change as an outcome of a broader course of social change. Individuals' lives are organized – to paraphrase Schwirian (1983, pp. 85) – around social status, urbanism and ethnicity. Neighborhoods further have been theorized as interaction systems, while other authors have considered how subcultures adapt communities to their own ends. Socio-cultural theorists also have proposed a "loss of

community" hypothesis (Schwirian 1983, pp. 93) where neighborhoods' occupancy patterns change when residents lose their sense of interconnectedness.

Among the most influential Marxian analyses of gentrification is Neil Smith's *The New Urban Frontier* (1996)*,* in which gentrification is a manifestation of class conflict – indeed revenge – of capital (personified as the upper- and middle-classes) on the poor and working class residents of urban centers. While some aspects of gentrification have been valorized (Zurkin 1983, pp.143), the geographer is keen to see the term remain "a dirty word." Smith further ties gentrification to the processes of global capital, providing but a little stretch to attribute the destitution and reclamation of urban areas to the increased appetite for efficiency and profit.

> Gentrification and homelessness in the new city are a particular
> microcosm of a new global order etched first and foremost in the rapacity
> of capital. Not only are broadly similar processes remaking cities around
> the world, but the world itself impinges dramatically on these localities.
> (Smith 1996, pp. 28)

If Smith's work has been said to address the "economic" forces of gentrification – perhaps unintentionally excusing gentrifiers of responsibility – then David Ley's (1996) *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City* locks its critical sights on the "culture" of the middle-class gentrifiers returning to the city. The differentiation of the gentrifiers as a separate social class becomes central to this thesis. However, as Slater (2006) notes, there has been some tendency to unnecessarily reduce the gentrification debate to two opposing camps, following Smith and Ley respectively:

> Furthermore, the influence and volume of their work was such that both
> Neil Smith and David Ley became treated by almost every researcher as
> the de facto representatives of the 'economic' and 'cultural' explanations

of the process, respectively, something which many writers insist on re-emphasizing time and time again. But if we take a closer look at these quotations, published in 1987, we can see that both analysts were committed to searching for an explanation of gentrification that took into account both economic (production) and cultural (consumption) factors. Indeed, their books on gentrification, published in the same year (1996) are not nearly as one-sided in the explanation of gentrification as many newcomers to the topic might think. (Slater 2006, pp. 746)

Lees' (2000, pp. 400, chart) critique of the three most common thesis regarding gentrification finds each limited in some regard. The emancipatory city fails to address issues of livability, conflict between new and existing residents and the impact of third-world immigration; new middle class theorists struggle to explain the causality of race in the process, as well downplaying the influence of financiers in the gentrification process; and the revanchist city thesis fails to account for the possibilities of black gentrifiers and subversive tactics by existing residents.

What these examples point to are the problems with the implicit race and class oppositions organizing the gentrification literature: middle-class gentrifiers/incomers (white) versus working-class residents/displaced (black). (Lees 2000, pp. 400)

The long-standing existence of divergent explanations for gentrification led even early theorists (Rose 1984) to label gentrification a "chaotic concept," that is, to again take from Smith (1996, pp. 101), "ill-defined and incapable of grasping the real situations they are meant to convey." I agree that the perceived "chaos" in theory may result from the application of too much specificity in the "whos" and "hows" gentrification. Indeed, the genesis of this paper was an ill-fated attempt to apply a "usual suspects" approach to the would-be gentry that are my informants. That said, to study gentrification without

acknowledging the vastly different socio-economic locations of actors would be to blind

oneself to the human repercussions of the process (Smith 1996, pp. 104).

I would be remiss not to mention at least two other recent studies of urban change.

First, Judith DeSena's study of the impact of gentry mothers on both public and private

schooling in urban Boston (DeSena 2003) and Lance Freeman's *There Goes the Hood,*

which is an ethnography of black residents in the gentrifying New York neighborhoods

of Harlem and Clinton Hill. Freeman, as with study, hones in on the cultural dimensions

of urban change. As it seems to offer a sufficiently critical definition of gentrification

without an immediate condemnation or assessment of blame, I will follow Freeman in

offering the following definition of gentrification taken from the Encyclopedia of

Housing, although Smith (1996, pp. 32) offers similarly helpful explanation.

> **Gentrification:** The process by which central urban neighborhoods that
> have undergone disinvestments and economic decline experience a
> reversal, reinvestment, and the in-migration of a relatively well-off,
> middle- and upper middle-class population. (Van Vliet, 1998, pp. 198)

So, what of the actual people labeled gentrifiers in previous study? Who are they?

What are their common traits and practices. Conceptions of the gentry or gentrifiers –

usually seen as shorthand for young, white, college-educated professional of the middle

class – have a unifying focus on their social distance from the low-income, nonwhites

into whose neighborhoods they settle. Zurkin's discussion leaves little room for

differentiation: "The gentrifiers' choice of neighborhood does not imply their integration

with existing neighbors of a different race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status." (Zurkin

1983, pp. 133)

Freeman's informants in New York so closely equate race with gentrification that the appearance of whites on the streets alone constitutes evidence of the process (2006, pp. 80, 82-83). Even when existing residents and the incoming gentry collaborate to protect a neighborhood, those older residents are at risk of aiding the process by which they or low-income neighbors are forced out. While Smith (1996, pp. 23) places more onus on developers in drafting the unspoken policies of the revanchist city, he maintains that a frontier ideology (1996, pp. 18) guides the young gentry to play "urban pioneers" (1996, pp. 33), trekking into the savage urban wilderness. Thankfully, this romanticized vision of gentrifiers is tempered by allowances for comparatively practical decision making, where "it is possible that some gentrification involves younger people who moved to the city for an education and professional training … but who did not follow their parents' migration to the suburbs." (Smith 1996, pp. 33)

Rose (2004, pp. 284) refers to several research projects that suggest "recent waves of gentrification seem to be associated with far more individualistic mindsets, with neighbourhood-based or other civic participation a rarity" and "reflect a long-term societal trend toward individualism as well as a general sense of economic and cultural insecurity within the new middle-classes." Meanwhile, Ley (1996) contends that the foundation of the new middle class is culturally rooted in the youth movements of the 1960s, representing a generational shift from hippies to yuppies. The above research sets a stage where socially "liberal" individuals act out the neo-liberal economic policies of the global economy by becoming gentrifiers, enablers of the revenge posited by Smith. However, gentrification also continues to have its champions, even some who valorize gentrifiers themselves.

For reasons that will be obvious when considering the content of the below ethnography, I feel it important to frame the discussion of "social-justice gentrifiers" in a way that references its distinction from the concept of the "emancipatory city" as put forth by Caulfield (1989, 1994). Taking from Rose's (2004) summary and critique, this thesis holds that:

> … A significant fraction of gentrifiers as believing in an "emancipatory city" based on social justice and an openness to living amidst many forms of diversity (Caulfield 1994; Glass 1964; Ley 1996). These groups were believed to seek out socially-diverse inner-city neighbourhoods and advocate measures such as coop housing so as to maintain such diversity. Yet self-interest is at work here too: they want their idealized vision of a diverse urban Lifeworld' to be preserved (Caulfield 1994: 166-168). (Rose 2004, pp. 283)

This broad affirmation of the traditional gentry cast the "pioneering" middle-class families returning to the inner cities in an admittedly rosy light, and in Rose's view creating a "slippery" discussion of the benefits of "social mix" that ignored the ultimate processes of displacement that followed in the gentry's wake. Moreover, and to again follow Rose in summary, other authors (Butler and Robson 2001, pp. 2157) have asserted that the perceptions of "social justice" attached to the decisions to live in urban neighborhoods is largely "in the minds" of the incoming gentry, constituting a fictive reality that serves the identity claims of the individuals in question. Rose (2004) identifies these "egalitarian perspectives" as central to the identity of residents "grappling openly with the paradoxes" of gentrification.

> These interviewees believe that a certain amount of condominium development and commercial gentrification contributes to the overall revitalization of a neighbourhood, and that they have a right to live there, rather than having to move to the suburbs in order to become a home-

owner. For some interviewees, knowing that they did not displace anyone because they bought into a new building or into a converted building that had stood empty for years helps them resolve the paradoxes of their position. (Rose 2004, pp. 298-99)

It is undeniable that many of the stated beliefs of the egalitarian gentry map closely with those of the "social-justice gentrifiers" I herein propose, but I hope to show that the "social justice" beliefs of my informants extend well beyond the mental and into both practical and political activities. In short, I contend my informants give more than lip service to the idea of "social justice" in their daily lives.

Finally, it is important that I offer a strong caveat related to the use of the term "gentrifier" as it applies to the subjects of this study. For one, evidence presented below presents a contradictory picture of the social location of this study's informants. They meet – in all but one case – the definition of "relatively well-off" financially, especially when considering the levels of poverty in their communities. Yet, it is not as clear whether they all represent the first-wave of incoming gentry in their communities. Perhaps another term would better describe them, such as missionaries (a thought I will revisit in the conclusion). In short, "gentrifier" is an imperfect fit for all my subjects, a better descriptor for some rather than others. Therefore, this study employs the term "gentrifier" in an attempt to connect the discussion here with the on-going and evolving discussion of gentrification, at large. It is my hope that (as this line of inquiry proceeds) better definitions and nomenclatures will be developed (within this project and others) to describe the religious/morally motivated movement of people into impoverished urban neighborhoods.

B. Social Movements

As this is an ethnographic study, James Jasper's "artful" approach to the study of social movements (Jasper 1997) provides a second theoretical footing from which to approach to the study of social-justice gentrifiers. An artful approach encourages us to consider the importance of "self" (1997, pp. 56) and personal biography in participants of social movements. The author contends that social movements provide a power and unique venue for people to express their moral visions of the world (1997, pp. 7-9). It is when those moral visions overlap and coalesce that collective action becomes a recognizable social movement (1997 pp.5, 253). Jasper also notes that moral protests often are inspired by religious and moral convictions (1997, pp. 76) *and* by the forces of urbanism and capitalism, which create a "restless formation and reformation of geographic landscapes" (1997, pp. 94). As we consider how space and society are co-created, so it must follow that a rearticulation of space is in meaningful ways a rearticulation of the social world, bounded not just in time (1997, pp. 70) and geography, but also in histories and biographies. Contentious spaces – like gentrifying neighborhoods – may become battlegrounds of competing moral visions (1997, pp. 72).

Moreover, even when presumably "self-interested" actors take part in a social movement – as is the case in Lo's study of the California property tax revolt (Lo 1992) – structural arrangements can create paradoxical outcomes. Lo reports that even white, middle-class homeowners found their efforts impeded by corporatism, which suggests that the intra-neighborhood efforts of social-justice gentrifiers may be more productive than attempts to court corporate "sponsors," although this remains an empirical question to be explored in a more long-term project. Still, even in this exploratory study it is clear

that social-justice gentrifiers are operating with a different mix of use and exchange

values (fully explained below) than the white homeowners of the tax revolt. The

informants of this project – as will be seen – express a desire for diversity above safety or

familiarity, a value position almost precisely opposite Lo's subjects. This is evidence of

the distinction between the subjects of this project and the white urbanites commonly

imagined when the term gentrification is deployed.

Taking a different tack, it is perhaps unsurprising that communities of faith

represent a power base for social movement and political action. Beyond their place in

the popular imagination, black churches' connection to the history and ideals of the Civil

Rights movement remains vital, according to at least one contemporary study (Patillo-

McCoy 1998). In an ethnographic study of the Groveland community, the author finds

that black churches impart a cultural blueprint to their congregations, which carries over

to practices in public meetings, schools and even in interactions with the police.

> The mass movement for civil rights has passed; yet the civic activism of
> black churches and church members persists at the local level and
> provides and provides an opportunity to investigate these group's daily
> organization-building activities. (Patillo-McCoy 1998, pp.771)

Reinforcing this view of church as social movement catalyst, Doug McAdam

(1999, pp. 150) also looks to the indigenous power of black churches in providing a

supply of ready recruits for the political actions of protest groups. Thus it might be

instructive to consider where and how social-justice gentrifiers align themselves with and

participate in other social/political movements.

Catholic lay women and women religious (nuns and sisters) also have been studied via a feminist lens on social movements lens (Katzenstein 1995). The researcher finds that conflicts with male church leaders from the Pope on down led to the development of the "Women Church" (1995, pp 39). This effort was not aimed at changing the institutional Church, rather the women worked to create a separate but connected praxis and spirituality. A broad social agenda emerged in the 1980s to include, "the sanctuary movement, racism, abortion, sexual assault, lesbians keeping the faith, community organization South Bronx style, women and AIDS, economic literacy," and so on (1995, pp. 32).

Further, it might be tempting to dismiss the intensely micro-level actions of social-justice gentrifiers as not constituting a social movement in the proper sense, but Wells (2002) reminds us that "global processes are mediated through local practices, institutions, political structures, ideologies and divisions of labor." Though, Wells' interview subjects were affiliated with the national Women, Food and Agriculture Network, they speak to the same type of neighborhood-level change that interviewees within this project also seek. The belief that broad societal change can be "modeled" and ultimately achieved one neighborhood at a time may be the common thread that unifies social-justice gentrifiers in St. Louis and, presumably, beyond.

A final factor prompting the inclusion of social movements literature is the issue of recruitment within the intentional communities described below. David A. Snow et al (1997), in a study of the Nichirien Shoshu Buddhists and Texas college students, suggests that people join in social movements because they have social ties to members already involved in the movement and because they are not involved in any countervailing social

networks. This study illustrates how interpersonal relationships are the primary recruiting tool of the social-justice gentrifier communities outlined below.

C. Marxian connections

That material objects hold two types of value for individuals, those of use and exchange, is a Marxian formulation, though this project draws primarily from the use/exchange value definitions employed by Logan & Molotch (1987) in *Urban Fortunes.* The authors' provide this concise explanation of the terms as they relate to urban real estate:

> Any given piece of real estate has both a use and an exchange value. An apartment building, for example, provides a "home" for residents (use value) while at the same time generating rent for the owners (exchange value). Individuals and groups differ on which aspect (use or exchange) is most crucial to their own lives. (1987, pp. 1-2)

Logan & Molotch conceptualize the American city as a site of struggle revolving around differing use and exchange goals for property, pitting "residents against property entrepreneurs" (1987, footnote, pp. 2). This contest, however, is not a battle of equals. Cities are stratified by systems of both place and individual, and an actor's ability to affect his/her surroundings is necessarily varied by location within systems of space, time and economy.

Within the context of these unequal power relations – and often driving them – are the "growth machines," coalitions state and private progrowth agents. From the perspective of the machine, neighborhood change guided by capital investment (market self-regulation) has been viewed as generally beneficial, despite empirical evidence that such development and redevelopment have the direct effect of displacing low-income and

minority residents from the very communities being "revived." Other neighborhoods may simply be sacrificed at the altar of growth, a contention well in line with Smith's own view of international capital.

Marxian concepts also flow into this project from the social movements' work of Doug McAdam (1999). In his model of social movements, change occurs when mass protests override the control of power elites. While this project is in fundamental agreement that social movements turn on the axis of class, it differs from the two-class model McAdams employs, owing to the uniqueness of social-justice gentrifiers. As a group, they carry markers of the white ruling class of St. Louis, but they reject connections to technocratic power and embrace the ethos of cooperation above competition. Yet, in occupation, status and income, they differ from the working-class and poor residents in their chosen communities. To reconcile this contradiction, the project employs a loose three-class model in which the true power elites (technocrats and corporations) are distinguished from a muddied middle-class of upwardly mobile professionals (including the traditional gentry), municipal/state workers, and general laborers. This leaves an equally blurry underclass of the un- and under-employed, transient workers and the indigent or state-dependent population. It is important to note, however, that the boundaries between these classes are permeable, serving as an analytic guide more than a hard-and-fast rule or fixed locations.

Chapter 2: Methods & Background

Before getting into the nuts and bolts, I feel it is important to note that – as with many of life's journeys – this paper represents a destination (or at least a waypoint) that was unforeseen when I first became curious about neighborhood change in St. Louis two years ago. In no way do I intend this paper to represent a definitive picture of any of the three neighborhoods and groups studied. The potentially controversial content of this study alone warrants a call for a larger, longitudinal study, and the line of inquiry proposed here intentionally begs more questions than can be immediately answered. Instead, what follows is an attempt to make sense of people who seem to simultaneously fit and break the mold of the traditional gentry described above.

I also want to make a short case for St. Louis as more than a convenient city in which to conduct this study. Rather, I believe St. Louis has a history that encompasses most (though not all) of the major themes of urban change in America since the Inustrial Revolution. The city has an ongoing history of immigrant populations (first from Europe and now from South America, Bosnia and African nations), it experienced a large influx of African Americans during the Great Migration and saw the subsequent rise of suburbia and the decline of populations (particularly of middle-class and wealthy whites) within the core city. Economically, St. Louis has residual manufacturing (blue-collar) jobs, but increasingly can be described as a post-industrial city with large, professional employers (such as insurance companies, banks, hospitals and universities) located both in the core city and in the surrounding St. Louis County and beyond. In this sense, I argue that St. Louis is an excellent microcosm for the U.S. as a whole, serving as a nexus of the

regional "flavors" of urbanity common to northern and southern cities alike. This creates a venue of study that is representative more often than exceptional, i.e. if you can find it in St. Louis, it's likely you can find it somewhere else.

The existence of "social-justice gentrifiers" was first suggested in the Forest Park Southeast neighborhood of St. Louis, Mo. In fact, this paper began as a broader study of gentrification and quickly shifted to its current focus only after some initial scouting uncovered a group of residents who moved to the neighborhood to live communally beginning in the 1970s. After conducting interviews with several members of this collective and their associates, the majority of whom are graduates of St. Louis University, another urban collective was identified in the St. Louis Place neighborhood of north St. Louis. This second communal group is part of the national Catholic Worker movement, which later will be explained in greater detail. Then, as fate would have it, an acquaintance in Columbia, Mo., revealed that yet another communal group had recently established itself in the West End, a part of the metro area within a few miles of Forest Park Southeast. Again, this final group also was organized around religious beliefs, specifically as evangelical Christians.

As exploratory research, the interviews that form the core of this study were gathered as a strategic sample of individuals who – as will be shown – typify the ideologies and behaviors that I contend mark "social-justice gentrifiers" as a unique subgroup of the gentry and one that has not been studied on their own terms. Questions asked of the informants were designed to elicit personal histories, particularly as they related to where and how the subjects chose to live, and to prompt a discussion of use and exchange values (although not in those exact terms). Informants were asked to suggest

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other informants, leading to a "snowball" of sources that continues to build. To date, more than a dozen subjects have been interviewed, although not all of those interviews play into this thesis. Long-form interviews of at least 40 minutes were conducted with all subjects either alone or as couples, by their preference. These interviews were recorded both as digital audio files (then transcribed) and in detailed field notes, both of which were used to craft this paper. Supplemental field notes also were collected from personal observations and informal conversations within three neighborhoods of study. Additionally, I make use of documentary photographs (collected by the researcher), which are intended to function as a visual essay and to convey at least some of the "feel" of the neighborhoods of study.

While the goal of this project is not to create a predictive model of gentrification, greater St. Louis does appear to be an ideal site to study the process. Local research in community development and redevelopment inform this study, most notably Daniel Monti's *Race, Redevelopment and the New Company Town* (1990) and Mark Tranel's *St. Louis Plans* (2007). Together, these authors reaffirm the case for viewing St. Louis as a prototypical American city, with the former text providing a near neighborhood-by-neighborhood guide of the largest projects in St. Louis history as well as an invaluable history of St. Louis from the 1930s to the 1980s.

To summarize, the city grew first as a center of trade and agriculture. Industrialization brought dense employment and population shifts first driven by immigrants from Europe. Later the Great Migration brought an influx of black residents that was followed by years of "white flight" and suburban growth that left the core city depleted of both population and (in many cases) in a state of physical disrepair. Even

before World War II, city officials identified a need to revitalize core St. Louis neighborhoods, and major investments have been made to revitalize the city through private and public funds, meeting mixed success (Monti, 1990). The author makes a case for St. Louis as being a model of corporate-government cooperation in maintaining and restoring neighborhoods.

Current trends in urban St. Louis include corporate-led redevelopment projects, a new surge of immigration (led now by an influx of Eastern Europeans) and by the slow but steady creep of white professionals back into newly "hip" city neighborhoods.

The social-justice gentrifiers of this project include a mix of at least two generations, one which moved into urban St. Louis during the 1970s and a younger cohort which arrived only in the past few years. All subjects are identified by pseudonyms, although the names of the neighborhoods of study have not been changed. Likewise St. Louis landmarks, employers and institutions are referenced by their proper names. The communities in question contain of a mixes of races and classes, as well as a mix of rental and owner-occupied housing, while the subjects themselves (perhaps tellingly) are white and (in the vast majority) college educated. Some are occupied as professionals, while others live in states or semi-employment or intentional poverty in keeping with their religious/moral convictions.

Chapter 3: Forest Park Southeast

As its name implies, Forest Park Southeast is located near the landmark park that is home to the St. Louis Zoo, Art Museum, Municipal Theater, Science Center, as well as

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a golf course and numerous biking/foot trails. Geographically, the FPSE is bound by Highway 40/Interstate 64 to the north, Kingshighway to the west with a series of railroad tracks to the south and Vandeventer Avenue on the east. The largest nearby employers are Barnes-Jewish Hospital and the Washington University Medical Center, both of which are located immediately to the north of the neighborhood.

Roughly 3,700 people call FPSE home, occupying a mix of single and multi-family residences. Huge gaps in the quality of housing are evident from an informal survey of houses for sale in May 2007. Prices varied from an asking price of more than $200,000 for a recently rehabbed brownstone to $14,000 for a "fixer-upper" just three blocks away. (These and other statistics in this study are collected from a database on The City of St. Louis's Web site at: http://stlcin.missouri.org/)

The neighborhood is roughly 77 percent black and 18 percent white, with 36 percent of residents (29 percent of families) living in poverty, according to US Census data. The 1999 per capita income of the neighborhood was $12,817, significantly below the St. Louis average of $16,108 and the national average of $21,587. Unemployment in 1999 stood at 27

Image A.1

Vacant and boarded-over storefronts line Manchester Road (Highway 100) in Forest Park Southeast.

percent, while vacant residences account for about 23 percent of the housing stock.

Manchester Road, a historic commercial thoroughfare, runs east-west through the heart of the neighborhood. Years of general decline, however, have left only two corner markets operating among a sea of vacant storefronts and homes. Yet in the past few years, a crop of new, trendy restaurants and bars has sprung up on the eastern end of the neighborhood. Catering largely to commuting young professionals, these bars are notable in that they draw college students from several nearby universities and have become fashionable within the St. Louis gay and lesbian subculture. Previous studies (Fitzgerald 1986) have considered the impact so-called "gay gentrifiers," but it remains unclear if many or any of the clubs' clientele are settling into Forest Park Southeast, so the question of if or how the gay/lesbian community is gentrifying is better left for a subsequent phase of this study.

Several sub-neighborhoods exist, with the most central to this project being Gibson Heights, located in the northwest corner of the neighborhood. Housing in Gibson heights consists largely of the multi-family, brownstones (pictured on page 13) that are common throughout much of old St. Louis. While many remain rental properties, the current trend is toward rehabilitation into single-family dwellings. Asking prices for these homes have been on the rise, with homes that sold for $60,000-90,000 in the late 1990s now commanding more than $200,000, according to local residents.

Image A.2
A look down Oakland Avenue, where a banner displays the distinctive architecture of the homes of Gibson Heights behind it.

Monti references a portion Gibson Heights as the Ranken Neighborhood in his chapter on the development of Barnes-Jewish Hospital and the Washington University Medical Center, which began in the early 1970s. The neighborhood lies south – across Highway 40 – from the two institutions, the former of which is one of the city's largest employers and the later of which is one of the city's largest private landowners. Tellingly, Monti points out that the "six-block sliver" of the Ranken area was added to the broader redevelopment project only with some gentle prodding by Joe Roddy, alderman of the 17th Ward (Monti pp 100-101). Over the years Washington University has invested millions of dollars in Forest Park Southeast, helping to reopen the local public elementary school among other projects, but the majority of redevelopment efforts have focused north of the hospital and the medical center in a neighborhood called the Central West End. These efforts have been viewed as a model of success, at least in economic terms. (On a related note – no pun intended – Roddy's son presently serves in the same post his father occupied for decades.)

Although the neighborhood is majority populated by blacks as a result of the "white flight" patterns of the 1960s and 1970s, the processes were never perfect and some element of racial diversity has remained a constant. Likewise the class make-up of Forest Park Southeast includes firmly middle-class households, the working-class, the working poor and a population of older or retired persons (some still in the neighborhood after 50 years). This marginal, consistent level of diversity also makes the neighborhood a functional (if not exactly ideal) microcosm of greater St. Louis.

In the summer of 1973, a group of recent St. Louis University graduates moved into two rental houses in Gibson Heights with the specific goal of creating an intentional

community. The group – which will be referred to as Open Door to preserve anonymity –

consisted of fewer than a dozen individuals, men and women, who having grown up in

urban areas, actively sought to stay in the city while they pursued their first jobs or

graduate degrees. The group was bound not only by a desire to reject the perceived

homogeneity of suburban life, but also common religious and moral beliefs rooted in

Catholicism. (SLU is a Jesuit institution.) The decision to live in Forest Park Southeast

and to do so as a collective was both "practical and political" according to group member

Matthew.

> **Matthew:** We were, as we would term ourselves, radical Catholics
> interested in pursuing our lives: going to school, doing social work, you
> know, and so on, and living together, sharing our resources. So we looked
> around, and found a couple of houses. … This was a big movement in the
> Catholic Church among leftist Catholics in those days, those post Vatican
> II days. … We really liked that (the neighborhood) was integrated,
> because we really wanted to bring our children up in an integrated
> neighborhood. We hate the ghettoization of the suburbs.

A belief that the "social mix" (Caulfield 1994) of city living is preferable to the

perceived homogeneity of suburbia emerges as an important theme among informants in

Forest Park Southeast and elsewhere. Indeed it would be fair to say that a desire for

"integration" and "diversity" of community guided the group's decisions on housing as

much or more than economic self-interest. Maggie, now Matthew's wife, described the

criteria by which Open Door went looking for a community in terms that might mildly be

called anti-capitalist.

> **Maggie:** So we were looking around for a neighborhood in which the
> following conditions were met: It would be economically diverse (OK,
> that excludes about 95 percent of neighborhoods in the country); it would
> be racially diverse. I guess more accurately I would say, more than
> economically diverse, we wanted to make sure there were people living in
> poverty in the neighborhood we moved to. … We also needed to have it

be housing that we could afford, and we had no money at all. And we weren't concerned about buying. Probably we thought buying was, for want of a better word, too bourgeois. And so, we were looking to rent, and we wouldn't have been able to buy a house of any kind at that time anyway.

In terms of practices, group members shared finances and transportation, as well as a roof. Rather than being constricted by her bonds to her fellow collectivists, group member Rachel described the Open Door's practices as in many ways liberating in an essay published in a 2000 newsletter:

> **Rachel:** We had liturgies in our home, cooked and ate meals together, had weekly meetings and shared work and automobiles. … For me, the loss of personal control of my money was more than offset by the sense of common purpose this move brought. I was no longer struggling alone with my questions about how to be a good person and make right choices; I had company and counsel.

The local Catholic Parish, St. Cronin's, also became a rallying point for group members and their friends in the wider community. Designated a "social justice parish" by the local dioceses, Open Door members helped breathe new life into the parish's defunct elementary school as a site to deliver church-funded social services. As Matthew said: "We felt, both by our presence – the neighborhood groups and our parish and its work – that we were influencing the community for the better."

Open Door members and friends that followed through the years also have been a presence in neighborhood life as organizers and attendees of block parties and attending community steering meetings where they interacted with developers, business leaders and fellow residents. Most all of these events continue to draw both black and white residents.

Still, life in the
neighborhood was not all
brotherly love. Beginning in the
1980s and lasting at least until the
mid-1990s, crime in Forest Park
Southeast became both violent
and increasingly visible. Gangs,
the drug trade, robbery and even
murder were lived realities for

Image A.3
Concrete barriers block access to a section of Gibson Avenue, a
measure taken to prevent easy travel up and down the block,
which was believed to be facilitating drug dealing in the
neighborhood.

group members. Matthew recalled the morning when a female group member found a

corpse while taking out the garbage. Drug deals went down on the corner. The group's

minivan was shot at several times while parked in a back alley. Luke said Open Door

members and their friends went so far as to write down the license plates of cars visiting

the area to purchase drugs and then sent postcards to the car owners, saying "We're glad

you visited our neighborhood," in an effort to show that someone was watching. To date,

Washington University continues to pay for additional security patrols of the area. Group

members were reticent that crime was a reality when they moved in, according to Luke:

"We wanted to have some degree of safety, but we didn't want to live in a completely

safe environment. We wanted to have a mix of people that we were living among. We

didn't want to be in a lily-white neighborhood"

Forest Park Southeast was dangerous enough in the mid-1990s that the hospital

advised employees not to drive through the area at night, Luke said. A few group

members would move away over the years, but as Matthew explained, he believes the

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rationale that brought the group to Forest Park Southeast also helped keep the collective

functioning.

> **Matthew:** We held these convictions. We want a world that isn't racist. We want a world that's integrated. So, you've got to put your body on the line. You can't just talk about it from the ivory tower. ... We met, prayed, argued, talked a number of times through the years - should we move out when things were tough here. ... Especially when the kids were here.

And he added that Open Door has also "recruited" new residents to the neighborhood.

> **Matthew:** There are a number of people who moved into the neighborhood because of our community. ... They knew us. They came. They visited. They liked it. We encouraged them. ... And then the more that happened, the more settled the neighborhood got, the more the parish grew. That got more people interested. … So anytime we heard anything from anybody about, 'Oh, I'm thinking about buying a house,' we'd say, 'Come look at our neighborhood."

But the impact of Open Door members has not been limited to social influence,

Luke himself has rehabbed both houses and rental property, saying he believes it is one

way of seeing that affordable housing remains in Gibson Heights. He said that the

purpose of the communal group was to create a "critical nucleus" that would attract "like

households" to Forest Park Southeast. He estimated that 100 people have relocated to the

neighborhood as a direct result of Open Door's presence, although the group itself never

grew beyond 16 or so members. Luke also is the only member of Open Door to run for

local political office, albeit unsuccessfully.

> **Luke:** We wanted to stabilize the neighborhood. We wanted to not have it become a poor haven and a place where only poor people lived. We wanted to maintain some level of economic integration, and that was important to us. … It was rental housing and we look at it as a way of making an impact on the neighborhood.

While it is true that many of Open Door's members acted out roles identical to those of the traditional gentry – purchasing and restoring or improving homes and acting as landlords – it is interesting to note that Luke sees his role as making room for everyone by keeping the neighborhood from hitting the kind of rock-bottom vacancy that has rendered other areas of metro St. Louis virtual urban ghost towns and facilitated huge projects of demolition and new construction. Moreover, Open Door first bought property in part because of circumstance, not calculated investment. The group purchased the building Open Door called home and one alongside it when their respective landlords (a pair of brothers) fell behind on paying their property taxes. One brother continued to live in the house even after the deed changed hands to Open Door.

> **Luke:** Nothing had been done in regard to improving housing prior to when we moved in. … Without those kind of investments the neighborhood probably would have been flushed down the toilet a long time ago.

Indeed, Luke said he is most frustrated by the arrival of other middle-class residents in recent years who do not share the political/moral agenda of Open Door and their compatriots. These new arrivals (members of the traditional gentry, arguably) have not taken as active a role in the neighborhood, he says. By his description, the "new arrivals" seem to fit the description of the "individualistic" gentrifiers offered by Rose (2004, pp. 284).

> **Luke:** What really frustrates me is people that move into the neighborhood and then take no part in the neighborhood. … They're free-riders. …They may think they have no responsibility to do that, and I'd like to persuade them otherwise. …What we're most interested in is a way of being present to other people in the neighborhood and moving the agenda forward.

Looking toward where community members see success, Mark, who joined up with Open Door in 1984, said group members helped support a local free clinic, which eventually grew with outside funding into a state-of-the-art clinic now operating on Manchester Ave. One Open Door member now runs a primary school in the neighborhood. However, service and social conscious alone has not been enough to escape the larger specter of gentrification and with it the threat of displacement. "Low-income people distrusted the efforts because they thought it would gentrify the neighborhood," Mark said.

Image A.4
Just east of the vacant storefronts on Manchester, one of several new bars is now open for business.

In reference specifically to gentrification, it was clear that group members now have mixed opinions on whether the process is or is not happening at present. The divergence of opinion was not more striking than between Matt and Maggie, with the former saying he believes gentrification has been halted and the later saying the battle already is over.

> **Matthew:** I think the gentrification has kind of failed, anyways I'm hoping it has. … I had the feeling people thought they were going to come in, these developers, whoever they are. I guess they were going to, my idea, sell to the people at the medical center.

> **Maggie:** It's already tipped ... and I don't think it's retrievable. And I say that because in the 30 years we've been here ... I've never seen this, never seen the neighborhood look like this.

One sign that gentrification is afoot is the radical decline in vacant properties in Gibson Heights. Aside from a failed effort several years ago (by developers) to rehabilitate more than a dozen homes at once, a one-house-at-a-time effort to restore and then rent or resell homes is underway and property values (as noted in the early summary) have climbed significantly. A major project aimed at building townhouses near Highway 40 is stalled at present, but seems inevitable by most accounts. Additional storefronts along Manchester Ave. are being renovated, mainly for additional club and restaurant use. (The area has been newly dubbed "The Grove" as evidenced on banners along Manchester.) As recently as mid-July 2008, neighborhood residents learned of a plan to build a multi-story hotel near Kingshighway and Highway 40, stomping over a row of vacant buildings and potentially taking some homes now occupied by owners and renters. However, the southern half of the neighborhood – the area near St. Cronin's Parish – has yet to experience the land-grab and retrofit occurring just blocks away. Most of the housing is not of the "historic" character seen in Gibson Heights, and numerous vacant commercial properties (warehouses and the like) are present. Manchester has become a psychic line between the gentrifying side of Forest Park Southeast and the stagnant.

> **Luke:** There are any number of individuals and corporations interested in buying up whatever is available, especially north of Manchester. I would say, north of Manchester, you would be hard-pressed to find any property that was not being actively worked on in some fashion. South of Manchester there's still a big problem.

In summary, it seems instructive to consider both how these subjects talked about community and what they collectively seemed to want from their local community. While it is clear that issues of exchange – rents, home values, etc. – are in the vocabulary

of these individuals, their primary means of thinking about their community is not in the vulgar terminology of capital. Rather, the subjects express a more artful vision of community that places value on more the abstract notions of the "diverse" urban community. Religious and moral convictions also appear to act as a gateway to local activism, as well as providing a framework through which to act out desires for social justice.

Chapter 4: The West End

On the border of St. Louis city and the surrounding like-named county, even further west then the aforementioned Central West End, lies the aptly named West End. The neighborhood is bound on the east by Union Boulevard, on the west by Skinker Boulevard (the city/county line), on the north

Image B.1
A row of restored housing along Etzel Ave. shows the face of some areas of the West End since the arrival of Fellowship community members.

by Page Avenue and on the south by Delmar Boulevard. According to 1999 census figures, the area has a population of nearly 6,500 residents, and is 95 percent black by race, boasting just a 2 percent white population and an increasing number of immigrants

of both Latin and African origins. Of that populace, 37 percent live in poverty, 18 percent unemployment and a residential vacancy rate of 22 percent.

Like Forest Park Southeast, the neighborhood lies in the ever-expanding shadow of Washington University, the main campus in this case, which lies about three miles to the north. Unlike Forest Park Southeast, the white-flight in the West End was a near-complete turnover, a fact that likely was attributable to the neighborhood's proximity to available newer housing in the county

Image B.2

The Etzel Market is one of the few businesses located in the West End, which lacks for common services like a pharmacy or hardware store.

and to the fact that the majority of homes in the area historically have been rental units and multifamily homes. Unlike Forest Park Southeast, there is no major employer hovering on the horizon of the West End, which also differentiates the neighborhood from those outlined by Monti.

Abe and Sara – now married with two children – were college students from Iowa when they first visited the West End in 1998 to do some Spring Break service work at a local Protestant church community called The Fellowship (for the purpose of this project). It was not the first such trip the two had made. As before, the decision to live in the city is set in opposition to suburban living.

> **Abe:** In college, my wife and I were involved in a Christian group called InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. They had different urban projects around the United States. We had gone to a few different ones – one in Jackson, Miss. and another in Los Angeles, Calif. And when I did staff for InterVarsity, I brought some of my students down over spring break here (to the West End), and basically at that time we decided we were going to move. We loved (The Fellowship). … We did not want to live a

stereotypical suburbanite or small-town Iowan-type life, when we graduated from college.

The two moved into the neighborhood in 2000 and initially lived in rental housing. Later, along with several other Fellowship members, the couple purchased housing and renovated the homes. In fact, The Fellowship for a time operated a development corporation, as Abe explained.

> **Abe:** So what's happened in the last eight years – the church, or people in the church, have bought the abandoned buildings on this (south) side of the street. … A lot the church people used to live on (the north) side of the street in apartments. Then we started buying houses on this side of the street and rehabbing them. And the church at that time had a development corporation, which was to fix up houses and sell them.

Although not as old as the Open Door community, The Fellowship does consist of two generational cohorts, couples in their 30s and another group in their 50s. Both groups have raised children (or are now raising them) in the neighborhood. Congregation members also operate a youth job training program that teaches construction trades. Other outreach programs have found Fellowship members helping tutor neighborhood children or reaching out to single mothers (all with victories and failures).

Image B.3
Foliage overgrows an abandoned house on Bartmer Ave.

Rather than living in a central area or structure, there are pockets of Fellowship families throughout the West End, which Abe explained is an attempt to integrate with their non-Fellowship neighbors. In fact, exposing themselves and their children to diversity – in terms both economic and racial – was a motivating factor in the couple's decision to live in the West End. As Sara said:

> **Sara:** I love my children being exposed to kids who don't have as much stuff. … I want them to be aware of the world. … As Americans we are always lusting after the newest, better, bigger thing and can be so focused on that that we miss everything else that's going on. … I don't want them to feel like, "I have to have this next gadget to be OK."

Sara and Abe's house had been a multi-family residence, but suffered a major structural fire and then was vacant for a long time (years the couple believes). Though the house and an adjacent lot cost the couple less than $10,000, the extensive repairs to the home cost them more than ten times as much.

Image B.4

A sign on the outside of a vacant property – a multifamily residence –warns West End residents to stay away.

In fact, Abe said the home has been appraised at just $60,000; "We lost $50,000 by moving into our house. Instantly." Additionally, Sara believes the decision to buy communicates something important to their non-Fellowship neighbors.

> **Sara:** Part of it is, if you know you are going to stay, why not go ahead and buy. Financially it makes sense. On the flip side, we've had some neighbors say, not to us, but to some of our friends, who are white, … 'You can leave any day you want.' You know, kind of like, 'Why do you care? I don't believe you care, because you can pick up and leave any day. Kind of like, we're waiting for you just to pick up and leave. … It (buying a home) definitely communicates a lot more commitment.

This story – anecdotal as it may be – is in striking opposition to the individualistic logic usually ascribed to the traditional gentry (Rose 2004). Moreover, the West End has not been St. Louis' the safest neighborhood in Sara and Abe's tenure. Police chases have ended with guns drawn just outside their front door. Sara came home to a neighbors warning that a drive-by shooting had just occurred, and drug deals and murders (at least five in the year 2000, according to Abe) occur just a block away. Fellowship members have even been accused of doing their children a disservice by remaining in the neighborhood.

Thus, the question becomes: Why would white, college-educated professionals make the decision to live in a place that is neither the economically rational or safest choice, particularly when they have the means to do otherwise?

> **Abe:** God is the only real answer. I mean, the only reason we're here is because we believe God has called us here. If we didn't believe that we'd have left after our apartment got broken into. If we didn't believe a) that God had called us here and b) that he can protect us here, we would have left after that for sure.

> **Sara:** We're not looking for trouble, but it has stretched our faith to say, 'God ultimately is the one who is going to protect our children or not.' … I feel like it's kind of helped us to see how much we like to have an illusion of our own ability to control safety.

> **Abe:** If anything it's pointed out to us how little we do care about our neighbors no matter where we live - how hard it is. … How easy it is to be really self-focused and selfish instead of loving other people.

And like Luke in Forest Park Southeast (located just a few miles southeast), Sara and Abe see the encroachment of people – typically other middle-class whites and often college students – who do not share their embracive view of the poor as a threat to their work and the neighborhood they would envision.

> **Sara:** They're not looking out for the good of the people that already live in the neighborhood. They want to push them out and applaud themselves. … It's totally disregarding the people that live there. … We came into this knowing we're probably not going to get our money's worth out of it if we ever sold. … That's why some of these families have spread out, to avoid developers jumping on.

Indeed, when Sara and Abe talk about their community they do so in human terms, referencing an the artful visions of life that researchers like Jasper (and this author) believe drive decisions of individuals and groups as much and sometime more than raw economic self-interest. Listen to how Abe talks about the Fellowship school:

> **Abe:** At the school what we've been trying to do is take these kids and bring them along. And the cool thing at the school that's really pretty unique is we have kids from the city, kids from the county. My kids go there. A lot of black kids go there. A lot of immigrants go there. And it's not just for diversity. We're trying to bring them together in what the kingdom of God looks like. In our minds, it's a very diverse place…. At the University of Iowa, in the lunchrooms, all the black kids sat at three tables and the white kids sat over here (gestures). So it gave the appearance of diversity. ... We want it to be deeper than tables with black kids and with white kids. We want them to grow together. And what that looks like we are trying to figure out. It looked like: kids from the city, kids from the county, rich kids, poor kids, white kids, black kids, immigrant kids. All can come together and really deeply care and love one another. … It's kind of changing values, all of that stuff.

And yet Abe also said he struggles with how to employ a term like "social justice" in talking about his community's work in the West End, noting that racial and

class tensions complicate the use of some terms and risk communicating a "superior" understanding of society, pushing away the very people the Fellowship wants to reach.

> **Abe:** it sounded very paternal to me – like the white people were parenting the black people in how to be. … If there is one thing that we didn't expect to see here since we moved here is our hearts have been changed toward the people that live here, toward our neighbors. … When we moved here our idea of social justice was: 'We're going to come in and fix you.' And now, saying, 'We need to be fixed just as much as our neighbors.'

While it is clear at this point that there is not one narrative at work in these communities, and strategies necessarily differ in time and space, even within a venue as limited as St. Louis. Yet common themes tie the Fellowship to the Open Door, and a Christian belief is just the first of them. But let us consider one more case from greater St. Louis before were render any summary judgments.

Chapter 5: St. Louis Place

North St. Louis occupies a unique location in the popular imagination as the known-unknown. Rappers like Nelly and his fellow St. Lunatics drop street names in their lyrics while some of the same addresses appear in the police blotter and on nightly news reports. About 2,800 people call the neighborhood home, 88 percent are black and another 10 percent are white. Of them, 36 percent live in poverty, unemployment in the community stood at 15% in 1999 and vacant property accounted for 33% of buildings in the neighborhood. Of course, the lived experience of North St. Louis is more than the boasts of a hip-hop artists or a tale of demographic and crime statistics. A more accurate

picture can be found in the personal and community histories of places like St. Louis

Place.

As in many of the city's core neighborhoods, areas that were largely occupied by

the Irish- and German-Catholic and working-class shifted in the course of a single

generation to be the home of a largely black working-class. As Monti (1990, pp. 25-30) explains, some of the earliest attempts at redevelopment in St. Louis led to the displacement of blacks by the thousands, sending them (more often than not) to seek shelter in the whiter neighborhoods of north St. Louis. This "white flight" of the largely German and Irish descendent population also brought the closure of many mom-and-pop merchants, while property ownership cycled away from owner-occupied, multi-family homes toward absentee landlordship. General disrepair of buildings led to large-scale demolition,

Image C.1
Jackson Elementary School in St. Louis place is closed and the property is up for sale.

sometimes leaving only one or two buildings standing in a square block. Plans for large-redevelopment were carried out in the nearby Desoto-Carr area (the now infamous Pruitt-Igoe housing projects, demolished in 1972), but never came to pass in St. Louis Place.

Recently, numerous residential developments (mainly of town homes) have

sprung up in the place of the old homes, with the new dwellings catering to municipal

employees (like firemen and police) who are required to live in the city. These efforts

have not, however, lessened the number of impoverished or transient people living in

substandard housing just blocks away. Meanwhile, St. Louis Public Schools – which has become infamous for its poor academic performance (Ayres-Salamon 2007) – has closed many neighborhood schools, including the Jackson Elementary School in St. Louis Place.

In 1977, a group of seven women obtained permission from the dioceses to move into a closed convent in St. Louis Place and founded Hospitality House (again, a name of convenience). The home provides shelter for women and children (as many as 80 guests at a time), later a soup kitchen and pantry was added. The group attached itself to the Catholic Worker movement, which according to the house's Web site is in "the vision of Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day which includes personalism, nonviolence, voluntary poverty, decentralization, the works of mercy, manual labor, and the green revolution." Catholic Workers were established in 1933, and more than 180 such communities are in existence today. (In fact, another Catholic Worker House is very near Hospitality House, and another nearby group has started a collective urban farm.)

Phoebe, although not a member of that first cohort, is one of the most senior members of the worker community. She described her decision to join as committing to acting out "works of mercy and works of justice." She said the Catholic Worker vision, in her mind, included a desire to push for diversity and to counter the forces of displacement in the community by offering hospitality to all. Though she moved out of the worker house and into a nearby private home about seven years ago, her description of the worker house remained similar in tone to the practical utopianism (an oxymoron?) expressed by the informants of Open Door and The Fellowship.

> **Phoebe:** We're part of the Catholic Worker movement. ... It was a vision
> of how to build a new society in the shell of the old, how to live as
> Catholics, Christians, …to really take the message of the Gospels and to
> live them seriously … And so our idea was not to have a set plan of what

we thought people should do, because the whole vision was really one more of loving a neighbor, giving them acceptance … So no individual can run things, and yet no individual is squashed by the group.

Phoebe eventually moved out of the house itself and continues to live in the community. She and other former residential Hospitality House residents helped form transitional homes for former House guests, where they too could live collectively. The

Image C.2
An older St. Louis Place residence shows signs of demolition next door, while new houses sit just around the corner near Hospitality House.

projects lacked long-term success, lasting just five years, but Phoebe says many former guests have kept contact with House members even as they have moved on. Her husband, Job, meanwhile has been active with the Pruitt-Igoe Development Corporation, which for years has been renovating homes in the area with the intent of attracting low- and moderate-income owners in a manner comparable to Habitat for Humanity.

> **Phoebe:** It was sort of a phoenix rising out of the ashes of the old Pruitt-Igoe development in the early '70s. The goal really was to provide people housing and to keep people here. … Their goal was to rehab a lot of housing at very little cost, using a lot of volunteer labor and some borrowed money.

This small scale, home-by-home strategy, at least form Phoebe's perspective, is a more attractive way of reshaping community that the large-scale demolition and redevelopment of efforts like the 57 acre Pruitt-Igoe development. She referenced a

perennially rumored plan to build a golf course in St. Louis place, and said it is not difficult to perceive purpose behind the decay of north St. Louis neighborhoods.

> **Phoebe:** The Catholic Worker vision would not be to really move toward redevelopment to come to where the poor are living. And what happens is, at some point that area becomes sort of attractive to developers. And so for us, rather than being a part of that groundswell, it's more of trying to communicate with folks who are doing that development. … What I've always pushed for is diversity and not putting people out, obviously, not using eminent domain. … Development tends to wait until an area is almost cleared out. … It really allows and area to kind of decay until it's basically a house here, a house there.

Like the Forest Park Southeast group, the worker house members have connections to St. Louis University, where students in the Jesuit tradition are encouraged to lead lives of service. As such, many volunteers from the university have worked at Hospitality House and then moved in there. The SLU connection provides more than a network or support

Image C.3

In a manner similar to that seen in Forest Park Southeast, barriers redirect traffic along what used to be through streets in St. Louis Place, arguably creating a suburban cul-de-sac effect on a block of new homes.

opportunity for the House, it functions as a passive recruiting tool. Moreover, it creates the potential for new cohorts to replenish the House. Phoebe followed SLU connections to the House in 1977, and Ruth followed a similar trajectory in 2007. The 20-something Catholic Worker committed to a life of simplicity and service in St. Louis, having already worked outside the U.S., in El Salvador.

Ruth: All of us have revolutionary aims. … All of us are going to do it because we think something better is going to happen. … If we can imagine a transformation in a small community, and if we can imagine 12-year-olds coming to (the House) instead of going back home, … if we can imagine that they want to be here, I can assume, then, that most people want to be in a better place, and therefore that that's possible. I can assume that most people want to be nonviolent and are sick of all this violence that's happening both systematically and personally and in our culture. … Maybe we can help people realize that's possible. … This neighborhood is arguably better because of (the House), and if I didn't believe that I couldn't live here.

Ruth is just one of a new cohort of Catholic Workers who have migrated from SLU to the Hospitality House after graduation. In manner similar to Rachel of Open Door, Ruth explained how she derives a personal benefit from her in-house interactions with guests, other workers and the visiting public.

Ruth: You join community, and then you realize that everyone is good at something. If you live in community for a really long time, there are two things: it's the hardest thing you'll ever do, I think. Just as hard as really intimate relationships, except you have to do it with so many people at the same time. But the second piece is, it's the most joyful you can ever live, because it's so true. … They continue to urge me to be a better person, to create those habits of good and call me out when I'm being stupid. … You can always do more in community than by yourself.

Image C.4
Signs on a vacant apartment building offer a contradiction to the hospitality of the nearby Catholic Worker House.

Ruth also expressed an optimism that the actions of her and her fellow Catholic Workers provided more than temporary relief to the people they housed and fed. Like Phoebe, she feels the House plays a role in creating stability in the wider neighborhood. By leaning on

their shared Christian beliefs for guidance, she said Hospitality House can project a vision of society that transcended the walls of the former convent.

> **Ruth:** If we can create a habit of inclusivity in people's lives, even when they're excluded, they can create inclusive communities. … A lot of people who come here have been excluded before, but when they go out – even those kids who maybe were the outcast in their class, because they were the kid who was homeless, they still learn how to create their own communities, I think, around them.

To summarize, it is again constructive to consider how religious and moral convictions – in this case explicitly spelled out in the tenets of the Catholic Worker – served as gateway to communal living and social justice ideals. Similarly to their peers in Forest Park Southeast and the West End, the Hospitality House women (and men) reject definitions of community in economic terms, embracing a view of community that is more people-centered and a view of property that is use-centered.

More importantly, looking at the Catholic Worker movement in terms of beliefs and practices, it does not appear that its members fit the bill of gentrifiers in any but the most superficial ways. They may hail from the same class and racial locations of the traditional gentry (even from the same locations in suburbia) but it is not clear that their practices on intentional poverty, hospitality and service are contributing to the turnover of St. Louis Place to the incoming (or lurking?) gentry. In fact, present changes in the housing and geographic landscape of the neighborhood make a case for the arrival of black gentrifiers (Bostic and Martin 2003). And there was no evidence of a connection between the location of Hospitality House and new private developments on surrounding streets.

Chapter 6: Discussion, Conclusions
& Suggestions for Future Research

Working from the definitions of gentrification and gentry/gentrifiers introduced earlier in this paper, it is evident that the communal groups in Forest Park Southeast, the West End and St. Louis Place occupy a unique intersection of social forces. On the one hand, they are the very white, college-educated, middle-class professionals that typically are seen as the agents of displacement or at the least class conflict– the traditional gentry. Yet members of all three groups identified in this ethnography specifically organize their lives around an embrace of "diversity" and a vision of urban living as path to something of a utopian vision of society.

In the strict economic terms, these men and women may be gentrifiers. In every case presented, group members have purchased and then renovated abandoned or deteriorated properties for their own occupancy and even for economic gain. Still, it would be hard to argue that any of the above-mentioned practices were exploitative. And in the case of Hospitality House, it is fair to say that Ruth and her fellow Catholic Workers are not in any meaningful way a gentrifying force. Even, Phoebe's residence and actions outside Hospitality House are overshadowed by what may be a new cohort of black gentrifiers in the neighborhood. Likewise, the Fellowship's practice of renovating houses and selling them at below-market costs is not a clear case of gentrification, although group members renovation of whole blocks of houses meets at least one common vision of gentrification. Only in Forest Park Southeast, where Open Door members helped *recruit* other white, middle-class families does the full definition of

"gentrifier" appear to be met (despite a host of non-gentry practices and beliefs self-reported). The contradictions persist.

Like the traditional gentry, "social-justice gentrifiers" are out to reshape the neighborhoods they occupy. But the community change the social-justice gentrifier envisions is not toward the exclusive neighborhoods resembling suburbia, rather it is an inclusive community that makes room for racial and class plurality, and does not model the perceived homogeneity or "safety" (in terms of violence or class/racial conflict) of the suburbs, gated communities or contemporary planned communities, some of which are paradoxically Christian as well.

Likewise, social-justice gentrifiers are not Rose's "marginal gentrifiers" (1984, pp. 62), being drawn into the role by economic forces beyond their control. It would be fair to say that my informants take leadership roles (working in neighborhood organizations, founding and/or operating new neighborhood institutions, supporting or becoming political candidates and practicing other forms of activism) in their respective communities, just as they also represent the privilege of the white, middle-class. They do, however, inhabit a notably contested socio-economic location whether they are neither perfect gentry nor perfect activist. The reconciliation of this conflict in practice and ideology provides for a fascinating dialogue between a sincere desire to create a new image for society and the inescapable realities of a post-industrial capitalist city. They are a study in how to play one's own game with another's rules.

Clearly, my informants also reference the best intentions and outcomes of what Caulfield hoped for *all* gentrifiers in his "emancipatory city," however it is clear from previous studies that well-intentioned gentrifiers are gentrifiers nonetheless (Rose 2004).

It is possible that "social-justice gentrifiers" ultimately will serve to bring about changes that benefit similarly privileged people more so than poor and working-class residents. However, there is a critical differentiation between my informants and the egalitarians earlier described in that my informants *carry out* their beliefs in "diversity" and "integration" by deed as well as word. More than talking about "new community," social-justice gentrifiers attempt to model it. They live in voluntary poverty, operate schools and shelters, feed the indigent and needy, challenge politicians aligned with corporate interests, organize against criminal actions, and generally reach out to neighbors through a vision of Christian fellowship. It is also important to note that social-justice gentrifiers are not a bandwagon phenomenon. Based on these examples, they relocate to neighborhoods well before profit-motivated parties pave the way for the gentry's return.

In fact, of the three neighborhoods described above, none has seen a wholesale turnover to the gentry, although the 1999 figures cited above are becoming dated. Forest Park Southeast appears to be the most "tipped" community even by the admission of my informants, while the area near Hospitality House may be experiencing black gentrification with the continued construction of new town houses aimed at the civil working class (police, fireman, government clerks, etc.). The West End, meanwhile, has yet to see a significant inflow of gentry outside of The Fellowship and a few families from another religious community in the neighborhood. All of this is to say that I believe the verdict is out on the impact of social-justice gentrifiers, which again offers a clear suggestion to pursue this thesis in a longitudinal study. (And I am poised to do as much, having recently relocated with my own family to an apartment in Gibson Heights.)

A belief that community can be transformed in ways that spreads advantage across class and racial lines pervades these interviews. It is this belief and the ways in which the informant-activists live it out that provides the most compelling evidence for treating them as a distinct subgroup – "social-justice gentrifiers," which leaves this project in need of a formal definition:

> **Social-justice gentrifiers** resemble the traditional gentry in that they occupy dominant class and/or racial locations and in their choice to reside in urban neighborhoods that currently are home to majority populations of the structurally disadvantaged. As a group and a social movement, however, they organize around notions of racial and economic diversity and utilize religious and moral convictions as a guide rather than market/consumptive ideologies. While more individualistic peers or business interests may later exploit their efforts, they themselves make efforts to bridge the racial and social divides in their respective communities.

To put it in Marxian terms, social-justice gentrifiers organize their lives in terms of use and exchange values in ways that appear to be distinct from notions of what traditional gentrifiers do. Rather than placing higher value in the market-worth of their individual properties, social-justice gentrifiers place greater value on building a community that offers hospitality to residents of diverse backgrounds. Rather than a willingness to sacrifice the needs of less powerful people at the alter of the efficiency and profit, they actively reject the economically "responsible" choices and seek out the choices they deem the most just, using faith as their guide. And unlike some egalitarian peers (Rose 2004, pp. 300) they appear willing to sacrifice financial gain in order to achieve a common goal of bridging economic and racial divides.

Social-justice gentrifiers also appear to form a recognizable social movement in that they organize collectively with intentions of transforming their communities, and

perhaps the broader social fabric, if only one neighborhood at a time. As evidenced by

Rachel's essay, they are in communication with one another, leaving an opening for

further collective action should immediate mutual concerns arise. They also recruit new

members to their communities in ways similar to those described in other studies (Snow,

et. al., 1997). A longitudinal study might also reveal whether social-justice gentrifiers

will significantly feed into a larger, yet unseen, movement to reshape inner cities.

However, it is no small caveat that the term *gentrifiers* (although not gentry, I

would argue) still fits some of these subjects. Their actions – particularly the solicitation

of like-minded and privileged individuals and families – though motivated by a desire for

justice and integration, may ultimately create the nucleus for the traditional processes of

investment, renovation, inflation and displacement. Despite the best of intentions, social-

justice gentrifiers may still be serving as the "urban pioneers" of Smith's vision, although

this remains an empirical question to be tested. Rose is right to forewarn of the "slippery"

path paved by highlighting only the "benefits" of the gentry's arrival in the city.

The order of presentation in this ethnography – from Forest Park Southeast to the

West End, to St. Louis Place – was an intentional choice aimed at placing the

communities in order from most secular to most sacred. While sharing a Catholic

background and attending the same congregation, the Open Door group did not create

separate institutions unique to the group, nor did they create the myriad outreach

programs of The Fellowship. Likewise, Fellowship members did not take "vows" of

intentional poverty and service that render the Hospitality House a lay sister/brotherhood

in the Catholic tradition. Yet in all three communities, it is equally clear that the sacred

plays a daily role in their interaction with urbanity. The sacred provides guidance to

living a good life, as Rachel said, and provides comfort when physical danger is a lived reality, as both Matthew and Sara explained. It also provides guidance on a life path that contradicts expectations of social location, as in the case of Ruth. And though in all three cases economic activities of the traditional gentry were evident, at least in their own ideologies, these individuals believe themselves to be acting out of a concern for their neighbors as much as themselves. Perhaps the Golden Rule does rule in the lives of these communities and their members.

Likewise, I would argue that the communities are presented in an order that reflects how closely members in each area map to the concept of "social-justice gentrifiers" proposed in this study. Open Door members closely follow the model, while Fellowship members are not as easily labeled, and the Catholic Workers of Hospitality House offer a poor fit in all but the most marginal ways. These findings strongly suggest that new nomenclature is needed and that it is possible to play a role in gentrification while working toward very different ends. It is my hope to pursue this as a possible alternative naming of the phenomena at hand, particularly owing to the centrality of religious convictions to the decision of my informants to live in the impoverished, inner city.

The conclusions of this exploratory study also suggest several directions in which research could and should be extended. The first and perhaps most obvious direction would be to gather additional interviews with individuals who appear to embody the more classic model of gentrification for the purpose of comparison. Additionally, interviews with long-term residents in the same communities might shed further light as to how social-justice gentrifiers might find allies among the diverse racial and economic

groups they claim to value. Questions of allies and opponents remain. My goal is to focus in on Forest Park Southeast and extend the ethnography to include members of the local black community, merchants and (with all hope) developers and representatives of the nearby corporate interests.

Among these branches of study, one – that of interviewing black residents – would seem to be a top priority. As Freeman (2006) and Slater (2006) both note, the process of gentrification should not be studied from the perspective of the incoming residents alone. Existing residents also find themselves in contradictory locations, potentially aligning with or opposing the gentry on a case-by-case basis. It is also clear that there are unspoken issues of racial identity and stereotypes that underlie the conversations I had. Serious "unpacking" of the wages of whiteness, cultural assumptions about blackness and whiteness and color-blind ideologies all are worthy of further consideration.

As I type these words, news from Forest Park Southeast is that redevelopment efforts are gaining traction, particularly in regard to commercial redevelopment The above queries are now part of a larger research agenda, as this study is intended as but the first component of a detailed ethnography of the entire Forest Park Southeast neighborhood. The impact of social-justice gentrifiers may then be weighed with that of existing residents (particularly blacks), business leaders, and emergent gay community, developers and corporate stakeholders. A long-term goal will be to extend the theorizing here to St. Louis and ultimately to a global frame.

It is both pessimistic and asociological to assume that all gentrifiers look and act similarly in all contexts. Instead, we must consider that the forces of capital and personal

religious and moral convictions place many individuals in a contradictory location – at once resisting and acting out the role of gentrifiers. Thus, the Catholic Workers' conviction becomes our own question: Can a new form of redevelopment – one which unites, not segregates – be built within the shell of the growth machine? How do we invite investment without displacement? This study strongly suggests that social-justice gentrifiers hold the answers.

Comments and further discussion of the topics covered in this study always are welcome via email: ces6df@mizzou.edu.

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