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RACIAL SOLIDARITY, SELF-INTEREST AND 'THE MAN'

DIVIDED

As city gentrifies, black professionals squeezed in the middle

By Mary Pattillo

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"No more blacks." That was the forecast of a resident of the Oakland community when asked about the future of her South Side neighborhood.

"No more blacks?" I responded, worried in no small part because my research is about black gentrification.

"[A] couple of blacks" would be left, the woman then allowed. "They got money."

This simple prediction is rich with meaning. For one thing, it helps establish the players in the widespread upscaling of Chicago: The little man. The middleman. And then, The Man.

The prediction also lays out what's at stake, not just in Oakland and North Kenwood on the South Side, but in various Chicago neighborhoods. In the process of "building, breaking, rebuilding" the City of the Big Shoulders, as Chicago's poet Carl Sandburg so eloquently put it, who is going to keep the little man from being left behind? Are Chicago's shoulders big enough to serve, include and celebrate everyone?

This is an especially acute question, and a source of tension, for black professionals like me.

In the North Kenwood-Oakland area, where I have lived and done research since 1998, the little man is the public-housing resident or the low-income homeowner.

The middlemen are mostly newcomers, African-Americans with money.

And atop the power pyramid is The Man, the proverbial "they," as in another resident's proclamation that "they're building all these homes knowing damn well most of us cannot afford them."

"They're trying to get the white people back in," this resident complained. "And they want this lakefront back."

All of these players, who, not incidentally, may be women, too, have a role in neighborhood development. But ultimately, it is The Man who has to get his priorities right. And when those priorities are skewed, it's the job of the middleman, as the broker between two worlds, to stand up for and alongside the little man.

I don't mean to let the little man off the hook. But the voices chastising poor people for their shortcomings

and lack of initiative are everywhere in this country. I prefer to hold up a mirror and measure my own practices and pronouncements. How do we judge ourselves against the yardstick of inclusion?

The gentrifying black middle and upper classes recognize a shared history of oppression and the lingering effects of racism. They tend to be grounded by an upbringing in more humble black surroundings. Yet our society prizes individual success. It promotes aspirations to one day become The Man.

This creates a tension that few in the white middle class know much about. It tears at the middleman's allegiances and alliances. And it means that, sometimes, in the pursuit of racial solidarity, we black professionals act in ways contrary to our own class interests.

For example, by deciding to move into North Kenwood-Oakland, many black professionals pit their class and racial interests against each other. Wanting to take part in the renaissance of a historic black community, many sacrifice the greater home value and appreciation that would more reliably come from buying in whiter areas of the city.

An appraiser told one North Kenwood couple that nearby public housing depressed home values enough that the couple could not borrow the money needed for a rehab. Marshaling knowledge of building codes and home-financing rules, the couple basically rewrote the appraisal to secure the loan.

"I made it justified based on floor space," the wife said, explaining how she focused on the value of the large home itself and not on questions about the neighbors. "I can't fight the subjective subtracting, [but] at a minimum I was going to get credit for my third floor."

The benefits of this feisty insistence don't help just the middleman; the little man who lives a block away might now get a fairer price for her house. Being a black middleman means standing up in the face of the kind of discrimination that has long denied mortgage capital to African-Americans across the city.

But black middlemen sometimes act in ways that dismiss the little man. Some black leaders in North Kenwood-Oakland have joined calls for the demolition of public housing. And they have criticized the lifestyles of their poor and working-class neighbors.

"When we're thinking about working on Drexel Boulevard," remarked a black police officer during a planning meeting in the neighborhood, "we should really think about discouraging some of the current uses there."

Some objectionable uses included barbecuing, selling Sno-cones and drinking. It didn't matter that people barbecued on Drexel's wide parkway because they lived in apartment buildings with no grassy area for safely lighting the grill or spreading out a few chairs. No one seemed to recognize the Sno-cone vendor as a striving businessman. There was no hint of the double standard that said people drinking in Grant Park for city festivals was acceptable, but Chicagoans drinking on Drexel was not.

Instead, we middlemen pandered to the anti-urban ideal of nice, single-family homes with tidy back yards where people should do their barbecuing, drinking and socializing. And the meeting consensus drifted toward turning Drexel's parkway into a passive decorative space with large flower arrangements and sculptures.

Flowers and sculptures bring me to the priorities of The Man. No Chicagoan enjoys the spring tulips on Michigan Avenue, the summer petunias on Wacker Drive or the Frank Gehry-designed Pritzker Pavilion more than I do. No one!

But I would be willing to sacrifice that enjoyment if it meant the city could afford the original bold proposal to set aside 25 percent of new housing units for affordable housing, rather than the 10 percent compromise

recently passed in the City Council. Or to avoid the following farce: That demolishing the Lathrop Homes projects, which have become surrounded by a completely gentrified Lakeview, is being done to provide a "mixed-income community" for Lathrop residents.

I would even give up the Grant Park Outdoor Film Festival if it meant that more schools could get new funds.

I know it's not that simple. (And I hope I don't have to give up Summer Dance). But the City of the Big Shoulders has to make some choices between holding up the new "Cool Globes" lining Lake Shore Drive or supporting its residents, including the littlest of us.

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