

# Divided over Diversity: Political Discourse in a Chicago Neighborhood

Ellen C. Berrey\*

*Northwestern University*

In a Chicago neighborhood made up of different racial and economic groups, nearly everyone claims to value diversity. Yet, this powerful and plastic symbol can influence political activity in opposite directions. An ethnographic study of the neighborhood shows how three different groups—white real estate professionals and politicians, white progressive organizers, and black low-income housing advocates—deploy diversity. It presents three key findings: (1) mixed-income housing often becomes a proxy for diversity; (2) the diversity concept can support progressive politics while downplaying certain racial and class disparities; and (3) a focus on neighborhood diversity can obscure issues that poor people care about, including tenants rights. By providing a microlevel perspective on diversity discourse, these findings demonstrate how a shared symbol can both illuminate and veil fundamental disagreements over race, class, inequality, and gentrification in cities today.

Rogers Park is a racially and economically mixed neighborhood in Chicago where discourse about diversity is ubiquitous. Nearly everyone involved in politics endorses this colorful and slippery concept, as the following excerpts illustrate:

Welcome to Rogers Park: The Global Village on Chicago's North Shore. Surprising, Welcoming, Interesting, Convenient. . . . Rogers Park is one of the most diverse populations in the metropolitan area. (Introduction in the brochure of Rogers Park Enterprise, a pro-gentrification organization led by white real estate professionals.<sup>1</sup>)

In the face of remarkable development. . . we remain the most racially and economically diverse neighborhood in Chicago. (Alderman Joseph Moore, a white Democrat, in a public speech.)

Justice Alliance seeks social justice and builds power by organizing and empowering residents. . . to maintain and improve a livable neighborhood for our economically and racially diverse community. (Mission statement for an organization led by predominantly white, middle, and working class progressive activists.)

But one neighborhood group does not stand by the diversity trope. The mission statement for Section 8 Rights Now, an organization led by low-income, mostly African

\*Correspondence should be addressed to Ellen C. Berrey, Department of Sociology, Northwestern University, 1812 Chicago Ave, Evanston, IL 60208; eberrey@northwestern.edu.

American housing advocates states, “Section 8 Rights Now is made up of Section 8 Tenants organizing. . . to develop, educate and advocate for Tenants Rights in Rogers Park.”

In both Rogers Park and the rest of Chicago, there is a popular image of the neighborhood as a model diverse community, a rainbow of demographic groups living together peacefully. This article, based on ethnographic evidence, presents three key findings that reveal greater nuance behind such a depiction of the neighborhood. First, when white pro-gentrification advocates articulate their housing agenda, they turn mixed-income housing into a symbolic proxy for diversity. These politicians and professionals suggest that upscale housing and affluent residents will *improve* Rogers Park’s *economic* diversity.

Second, contrary to assumptions in the urban literature, the diversity trope can support multi-issue, progressive politics. White progressive organizers rhetorically connect diversity with concerns about structural inequality, while their use of the term also downplays racial and class power disparities between their organization’s leaders and members. Finally, the poor, African American subsidized housing activists rarely mention the word at all. Instead, they speak about discrimination and tenants rights. This points to the third finding: a focus on neighborhood diversity can overshadow the concerns of low-income, minority tenants, especially concerns about their rights.

These findings show that a multivalent and plastic concept like diversity makes room for vastly different meanings and goals in the context of neighborhood redevelopment politics. The article challenges scholarship that assumes diversity is either an inherently good thing (e.g., Florida, 2002) or a symbol manipulated by urban elites to exploit marginalized groups and pursue gentrification (e.g., Mele, 2000). Rather, the powerful, shared idea of diversity can communicate contradictory understandings of social differences that challenge, reinforce, or sidestep existing inequalities. It can paradoxically influence political activity in opposite directions, as people conceal their disparate, opposing political and economic agendas by using such a trope. Thus, discourse about diversity can both illuminate and veil fundamental disagreements over race, class, and development in cities today.

## BACKGROUND

Scholars have long understood diversity as a defining feature of modern cities (Fischer, 1975; Park and Burgess, 1925; Simmel, 1971). The influential work of the early Chicago School of sociology generally posed diversity in terms of interethnic conflicts, often in pejorative terms (Bhattacharyya, 1999). Wirth’s (1938) classic treatise described how social heterogeneity in cities disrupts the intimate relationships found in homogenous settings, so urbanites are more sophisticated but more alienated. Subsequent scholars challenged these assertions, arguing that successful cities have an “intricate and close-grained diversity of uses” (Jacobs, 1961, p. 19) and that people of varying class and cultural backgrounds can be amicable neighbors (Gans, 1962).

Today, commentators tend to understand individual-level diversity in terms of cultural exchange, charged interactions, and new identities. Diversity, it is so often said, makes cities vibrant albeit contentious places (Fischer, 1999). Many analysts of segregation and poverty have equated neighborhood-level diversity with racial and economic integration, implying it is a blueprint for city living (e.g., Farley and Frey, 1994; Wilson, 1987). Florida (2002, 2003) asserts that urban economies prosper where there is widespread support for

the abstract values of tolerance and diversity, best predicted by a large concentration of gay people; he observes that members of the highly educated “creative class,” who work in knowledge-based occupations and drive economic growth, want to live in places that they perceive as diverse.

The diversity concept has become more prevalent in U.S. cities since the early 1970s. Its rising popularity has coincided with dramatic economic and political transformations and broader shifts in popular language about social differences, like race (for insightful reviews see di Leonardo, 1998; Downey, 1999; Omi and Winant, 1994; Schuck, 2003; Wiewiorka, 1998). In this era of de-industrialization, industries such as, information technology, tourism, entertainment, and other specialized services have become leading economic sectors in many cities (Sassen, 2001; Wilson, 1996). Such industries tend to provide job opportunities at opposite ends of the pay scale and occupational ladder. This labor-market structure contributes to rising income inequality and helps to create a bifurcated urban workforce, with pools of affluent and disadvantaged workers that each rely on different types of housing and commercial and public services.

By the 1980s, city governments began embracing neoliberal urban development strategies conducive to these economic trends. Such strategies prioritize free market capitalism and the tenets of economic efficiency, privatization, and individual responsibility (Reed, 1999; Ruben, 2001). Many city agencies eschewed the urban policies of the recent past, which had supported supply-side public housing and large-scale land clearance (Hirsch, 1983). They have cut public funding for social programs and encouraged fiscal growth through policies promoting historic preservation, condominium conversions, and subsidies for private investment in disadvantaged communities (Zukin, 1987). Although suburbanization was still the dominant trend in the 1990s (Wyly and Hammel, 1999), upscale residential and commercial amenities have proliferated in gentrifying cities and neighborhoods. These changes also frequently displace the low-cost housing, social services, businesses, and social networks that poor and minority residents rely upon (Kennedy and Leonard, 2001).

Amidst these transformations, government officials and for-profit entrepreneurs have tried to symbolically reconstruct cities as places of consumption and spectacle (Fincher and Jacobs, 1998; Lloyd and Clark, 2001; Mele, 2000). People depend upon symbolic means to exercise political and economic power, communicate their agendas, and distribute material resources (Edelman, 1967; Kertzer, 1988); accordingly, enthusiastic endorsements for diversity are often a part of efforts to remake cities as cultural, tourist, or investment destinations. Ethnographies of changing neighborhoods show how elites instrumentally manipulate terms like diversity, multicultural, and mixed-income to encourage gentrification (e.g., Bennett and Reed, 1999; Conquergood, 1992; Goode, 2001; Mele, 2000). For example, elites sponsor community festivals and bicentennial commemorations that portray communities as mosaics and market demographic differences as if they were commodities (Goodwin, 1979; Spillman, 1997). Zukin (1995), among others, maintains that city boosters are depicting a fictitious kind of community equality through the lens of diversity, making it easier to govern development and obscure their political power. More generally, both glamorized portraits of ethnic diversity (Goode, 2001) and gritty, seemingly authentic images of bohemian diversity (Lloyd, 2002) appear to be classic symbols of the contemporary urban order.

Such depictions of diversity are amenable to a neoliberal vision of racial and ethnic differences as exotic, aesthetically pleasing, and controlled. Neoliberal ideology, as

interpreted by its critics, does not uniformly strive to erase race or ethnicity (di Leonardo, 1998; Reed, 1999; Ruben, 2001). It actually allows for and even endorses certain racial identifications. Reed (1999), for example, suggests that neoliberals may take conventionally liberal stances on many social issues like integration, as long as those issues do not interfere with free market capitalism or draw attention to racial inequalities. Therefore, popular discourse about contemporary development frequently frames diversity as a sort of warm fuzzy multiculturalism, an image that papers over the very inequities that development depends upon and exacerbates (Zukin, 1995).

The urban scholarship on culture and political economy rightfully turns a discriminating lens on boosters' praise for diversity. It also challenges uncritical academic endorsements that take the concept of diversity for granted as a common sense, moral directive rather than an "object for scrutiny" (Bhattacharyya, 1999, p. 149). These critiques generally favor a structural and macro-level analysis of the larger institutions and social structures that shape discourses about diversity and difference. For instance, scholars note the popularity of symbols of sanitized diversity in the process of making broader claims about the political economy of culture within contemporary global capitalist restructuring (e.g., Ruben, 2001; Zukin, 1995; also see Gibson, 1998), or describing other observations about discourse and redevelopment (e.g., Conquergood, 1992).<sup>2</sup> The few qualitative studies that analyze local discourse about diversity in depth emphasize how political elites frame and impose their visions of difference (e.g., Bennett and Reed, 1999; Mele, 2000; Zukin, 1995), but not how people understand the meaning of diversity in their everyday politics. Similarly, these studies suggest that the discourse is the province of just one group—coalitions of corporate leaders and politicians (for an exception, see Goode, 2001).

Downey (1999) and Martiniello (1998) have urged scholars to pay greater ethnographic attention to the cultural, social, and political dimensions of local discourses about diversity. Lloyd (2002), too, points out the need for nuanced understandings of how city residents—not just developers, political elites, and tourists—produce, consume, and experience cultural meaning.

This article follows their edicts. It looks at how people shape the cultural meanings of diversity within a historically specific context and how these meanings, in turn, shape people's understandings and experiences of cities. Cultural elements like symbols can contain many subjective and ambiguous interpretations. So, people may rely on the same symbol or trope without necessarily agreeing about what it signifies (Durkheim, 1912). In the case of Rogers Park, interest groups draw upon the thinly shared prism of diversity to construct different interpretations of race, class, and social difference as they pursue their polarized political goals.

## METHODS

Rogers Park is considered one of the country's stable racially and economically mixed neighborhoods, making it a strategic field site (Nyden, Maly, and Lukehart, 1997).<sup>3</sup> My study examined local organizations active in neighborhood redevelopment politics and focused specifically on housing. These organizations included business-interests associations, tenant and worker organizers and their allies, service providers, and quality-of-life initiatives like block clubs and community policing, as well as the city government.<sup>4</sup> With a few exceptions, participants and leaders in all these groups were conspicuously white,

educated, and middle class. Although many groups had racially mixed boards of directors, most had just a couple of black members, employees, or board members active in housing issues, and Latino participants were virtually absent.

My findings are based on ethnographic field notes, interview transcripts, and primary documents that I collected for almost 3 years (summer 2000 to spring 2003). Triangulating these multiple sources of qualitative data with quantitative data has enabled me to make more valid inferences about the phenomena studied (Stake, 1995). I observed or participated in organizations' internal meetings, coalition meetings, and public forums; political activities like marches, door knocking with a tenant organizer, and an anticrime sit out; community events like a playground-building day; social activities; and casual conversations in parks, stores, and people's homes. When appropriate, I wrote field notes during these events using standard ethnographic techniques (Emerson, Fretz, and Nagda, 1995). I conducted 24 semistructured interviews and one group interview with organizational leaders, participants, and some nonparticipants. The interviews usually lasted about 1 hour. I drew on organizations' documents and print and electronic media, like community listservs, as well. Through an iterative process of gathering and reviewing evidence, I identified salient themes in the data and coded my evidence based on these terms. To refine my conceptual categories, I looked for instances when I expected people to talk about these themes but they did not (Katz, 1983).

Doing fieldwork in a politically divided neighborhood can be trying. People invariably suspected that I was siding with their adversaries, especially with the tenant activists.<sup>5</sup> In addition, participants frequently asked me to take on leadership roles within their organizations, or even assigned me roles without my knowledge. I avoided taking these positions as best I could, wary that it would compromise my ability to cross over political battle lines. Instead, I offered technical or research support when it seemed appropriate, such as teaching computer classes or creating charts of demographic data.

#### "THE MOST DIVERSE NEIGHBORHOOD IN CHICAGO"

Rogers Park sits along Lake Michigan on the North Side of Chicago (Figure 1). The neighborhood's tree-lined streets are interspersed with large pre-World War II apartment complexes, condominiums, smaller two- and three-flat buildings, and single-family homes. It is home to 12 schools, Loyola University, a handful of retirement homes, and at least 25 churches, temples, and other religious institutions. Train lines provide easy access to downtown Chicago and northern suburbs. Mexican, Belizean, Thai, and other restaurants as well as laundromats, Afro-centric shops, and liquor stores flank the commercial strips. African Americans—primarily young men—congregate on Howard Street, the northern commercial corridor. Mexican families and vendors stroll the sidewalks on Clark Street to the west. Cafés on Sheridan Road, the eastern thoroughfare, attract racially mixed crowds. Dog walkers, tennis players, and a visible population of Eastern Europeans all flock to the popular lakefront beaches.

Rogers Park has an array of reputations. Some people see it as an outpost of white liberals, aging hippies, and college students. Others view it as a crime-ridden area. Still others consider it an immigrant gateway, or a welcoming area for gay people, or a sleepier, affordable alternative to other North Side lakefront neighborhoods. And a growing number of people regard it as a ripe investment opportunity. With a long tradition of

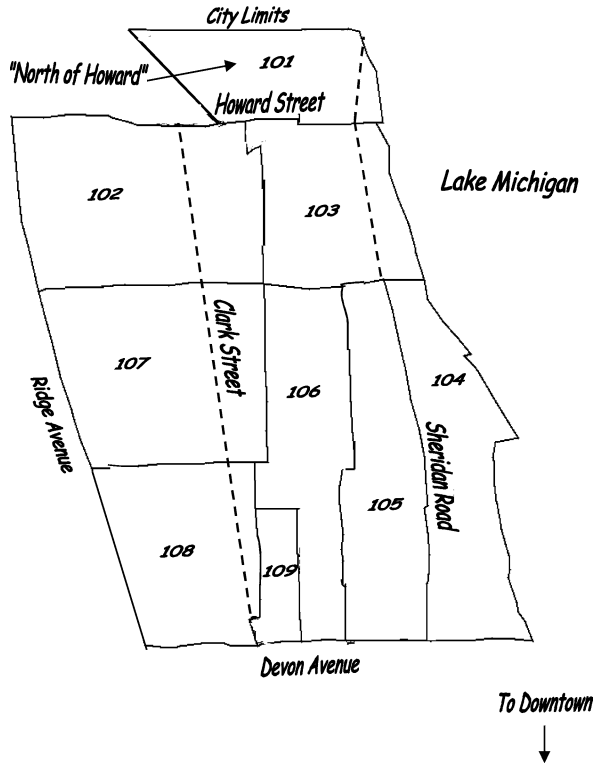


FIG. 1. Map of Rogers Park.

activism, Rogers Park has also earned notoriety for its spirited politics. But, if you ask residents, especially whites, to characterize their neighborhood, the first thing they are likely to tell you is that they live in one of the most diverse—if not the *most* diverse—neighborhoods in the city. As one white professional said to me, with some accuracy, “If you interview anybody, what’s the first thing out of their mouth? Diversity. We love the diversity.”

The most publicized interpretation of Rogers Park’s diversity depicts the neighborhood as a rainbow of demographic and cultural groups coexisting harmoniously, united by their assorted backgrounds and their acceptance of their differences. This image appears everywhere from media coverage of the neighborhood to exhibits at the Chicago and neighborhood historical societies. For example, the banner hanging on street poles throughout the community portrays different colored hands forming a tree (Photograph 1). Local high school students painted an award-winning mural near the lakefront with the words “Power in Diversity” surrounded by faces from different ethnoracial and religious backgrounds (Photograph 2).

Local political officials are perhaps the biggest advocates of this idealized image. Alderman Moore reiterated one of his boilerplate comments in an interview with me.

[The] overarching reality that we’re trying to preserve [in] this neighborhood is its diversity—its racial diversity, its economic diversity. We’re a bold



**PHOTO. 1.** Neighborhood banner.

*Source:* Photo by author.

experiment. . .whether this whole diversity thing can work and whether our nation can survive as we move forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

People use such statements and tropes to differentiate Rogers Park from the many segregated neighborhoods in Chicago and the city's history of racial conflict and institutional discrimination (Hirsch, 1983; Massey and Denton, 1993).<sup>6</sup> In so doing they insinuate that residents have a moral commitment to tolerance, genuine or otherwise, and play a role in a bigger national and even international drama of urban change (Cox, 1999).

Census data confirm some popular characterizations of Rogers Park. In 2000, about 34% of the neighborhood's 63,484 residents were born outside the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The racial composition was almost equally divided between white (32%), African American (30%), and Latino (28%) residents, mirroring the profile of



**PHOTO. 2.** Lakefront mural.

*Source:* Photo by author.

CITY & COMMUNITY

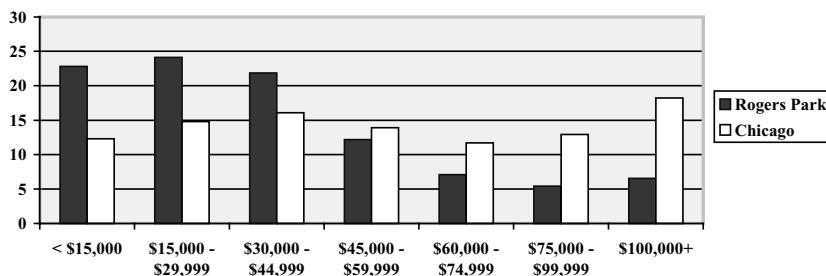


FIG. 2. Percentage of households in each income bracket, for Rogers Park and Chicago, 1999.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2000).

the city of Chicago. This ethnoracial variation also existed at the census tract and block levels. According to the Neighborhood Diversity Index, eight of the nine census tracts were “integrated” in 2000 and five of them were among the most integrated in the city (Maly, 2000).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in both 1990 and 2000 all the block groups in Rogers Park had a Diversity Index of over 70, among the highest in Chicago (Sandoval, 2004).<sup>8</sup>

Household income in Rogers Park varied considerably, as well. The median income was \$31,600 in 2000, compared with \$38,625 for the city of Chicago (Center for Urban Research and Learning, 2002). In Rogers Park, 23% of households earned less than \$15,000 and 31% earned \$45,000 or more, making it relatively poorer in relation to the rest of the city (Figure 2).

Yet, these data capture only a slice of the momentous population shifts that began over 30 years ago when 96% of the residents were white (Figure 3). Throughout the 20th century, Rogers Park was a residential renter community served by small businesses. It experienced its largest population and real estate boom in the 1910s (Samors et al., 2000). Also in the 1920s, developers constructed new houses, apartment buildings, churches,

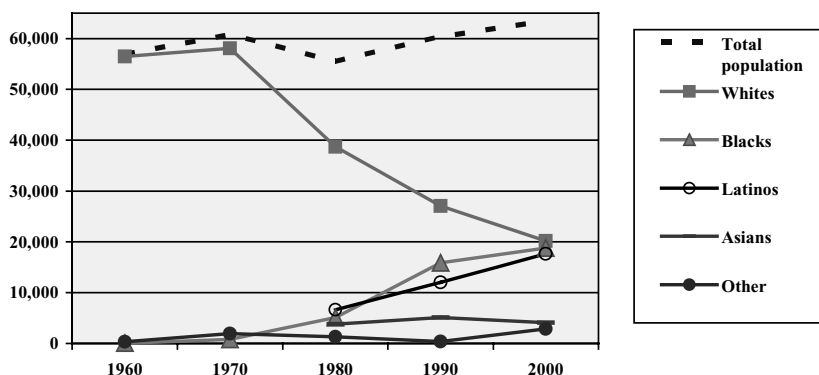


FIG. 3. Population trends in Rogers Park by race and total population, 1959–1999.

Source: Kitagawa and Taeuber (1963); Chicago Fact Book Consortium (1984); Maly and Leachman (1998); U.S. Census Bureau (2000).

Note: 1980, 1990, and 2000 data are adjusted to represent Latinos as a racial group.



synagogues, and theaters. By the 1920s, Howard Street had become “one of the liveliest entertainment centers on Chicago’s North Side,” with taverns, nightclubs, theaters, and apartments that attracted “a high-class tenancy” (Samors et al., 2000, pp. 65, 55). Over the next 50 years, local businesses like banks, butcher shops, and ice cream parlors flourished. Two major companies were located in the neighborhood: the marketing firm A.C. Nielsen and S & C Electric Co., an equipment manufacturer that still remains in Rogers Park. By 1950, white Catholics and Reform Jews from Germany had a strong local presence.

Starting in the late 1960s, many Reform Jews and other middle-class whites began to move out of Rogers Park or opted not to move in, following national patterns of neighborhood exodus and racial turnover. Local historians obliquely refer to the subsequent decades as “Years of Transition and Diversity” (Samors et al., 2000). Since the mid 1970s, there has been an influx of Eastern Europeans, Orthodox Jews, and African American and Latino residents, especially young residents (Welter, 1982). Rogers Park has continued to have a large number of white residents, many of whom are elderly.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the poverty rate rose and many local businesses faltered (Welter, 1982). The metamorphosis around Howard Street was especially dramatic. A large portion of the poor African American and Latino in-movers settled in North of Howard, the portion of census tract 101 west of Sheridan. The story of North of Howard parallels the stories of public housing and other very poor, minority communities suffering from government disinvestment and real estate speculation during this time period. According to one local religious leader, many African Americans moved in because they had been displaced by urban renewal projects on Chicago’s West Side. The non-white population in the census tract 101, which also includes North of Howard, as well as a few affluent blocks on the lakefront, skyrocketed from 9 percent to 51 percent between 1970 and 1980, and has since increased by about 50 percent (Chicago Fact Book Consortium, 1984; Center for Urban Research and Learning, 2002).<sup>9</sup> A number of social service organizations and churches formed to serve these largely low-income residents and implemented controversial plans for low-cost and subsidized housing, a common strategy at this time for sheltering low-income people. Some of the early subsidized housing still stands. North of Howard also has high crime rates and an active drug trade, and, as discussed below, this small corner of the community has become a local political lightning rod.

In the early 21st century, there are signs that gentrification is gradually and unevenly changing Rogers Park, although journalists (Finley, 1999; Palmer, 2001), researchers (Maly and Leachman, 1998; University of Illinois at Chicago, 1999), and residents all disagree on whether gentrification is happening at all. The housing market rebounded in the mid 1990s and became increasingly tight, following trends in Chicago and similar U.S. cities. The median cost of a single-family detached home almost doubled in 8 years, and developers converted at least 80 rental buildings into condos between 1996 and 2000 (Center for Urban Research and Learning, 2002). Pro-gentrification groups have targeted North of Howard in particular over the past 10 years, with some success. During the 1990s, the homeownership rate increased by 50% in census tract 101, with white residents benefiting more from these changes (Center for Urban Research and Learning, 2002; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Throughout this study, low-income renters and their advocates reported stories of displacement and landlord discrimination, as property owners raised rents and converted buildings into high-end uses and the city cleared land for development and public works, like a new park and school renovations. At the same time, Rogers Park

remained less expensive than other nearby lakefront neighborhoods, and only 17% of the housing units were owner occupied in 2000 (Pearce, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

The neighborhood has had greater difficulty attracting and maintaining businesses, especially ones that cater to the middle class. A Starbucks—the “green siren” of gentrification, in one activist’s words—opened on Sheridan, but empty storefronts still checker the commercial streets. The city has taken a number of measures to encourage private investment. These include the establishment of a Tax Increment Finance (TIF) zone around Howard to help subsidize a \$75 million shopping mall; a \$20 million renovation of train, bus stations, and streetscaping on Howard; and a 120-unit mixed-income building for seniors (Pearce, 2001).

Battles over development in Rogers Park are common and ensue on a politically fractured, project-to-project basis. There is no elected board to formulate a broader neighborhood plan or convene periodic public forums, nor is there a master plan for a large-scale state intervention. This political *modus operandi* dates back to the 1950s, but current conflicts are rooted in the early 1970s when organizations representing white homeowners clashed with those representing low-income and minority tenants over redlining and subsidized housing (Welter, 1982). These dynamics were indicative of historical turning points in urban activism across the U.S. Educated, wealthy professionals were mobilizing around quality of life concerns and unfettered growth. Meanwhile, groups that organized poor and minority residents were active but faced dwindling resources (Logan, Whaley, and Crowder, 1999). Also during the late 1970s, leaders in Rogers Park began praising the area’s diversity (Suttles, 1990; Welter, 1982). What follows here is an in-depth investigation of contemporary political discourse about diversity. It reveals how people articulate race and class in the lingua franca of diversity and how this concept can obscure divergent, even oppositional agendas for neighborhood change.

#### MIXED-INCOME HOUSING AS A PROXY FOR DIVERSITY

The politically active real estate professionals in Rogers Park generally talk about diversity in four ways: as a commodity, as an identity for white and affluent residents, as a goal yet to be achieved, and in economic terms like homeownership. Most strikingly, these professionals and political officials rhetorically use mixed-income housing as a surrogate for diversity. Each interpretation is congruent with an economic strategy to promote growth and sell the neighborhood to investors. Members of pro-gentrification groups also draw on these interpretations as cultural explanations for why they and their clients belong in the neighborhood.

Rogers Park Enterprise, founded in 1993, is the local trade association for real estate professionals. It functions as a platform for over 100 developers, realtors, property owners, investors, bank representatives, and representatives of select community agencies. All but three or four of the most active participants are white. According to one leader, about a third of the members live in Rogers Park. The organization tries to help members profit from their local investments, sponsors networking opportunities like a monthly breakfast for artists and small business owners, and promotes cultural events such as the Rogers Park jazz festival.

The leaders work to maintain positive relations with certain social service agencies and quality of life groups, as they are well aware that a local premium is placed on liberal

tolerance and that neighborhood constituencies can either facilitate or disrupt their work. Some members have a service ethic and volunteer at the school, belong to other community organizations, or donate resources to local artists or immigrants. Still, most RP Enterprise participants are concerned with neighborhood social problems to the extent that these problems interfere with property values, building management, and attracting and maintaining clients, particularly affluent clients. Despite their boosterism, many members pessimistically believe that the neighborhood is not gentrifying, or at least not quickly enough. They worry that this will affect their ability to pay off their mortgage, cover their children's college tuition, or retire early. The local chamber of commerce, which is also a community development corporation, pursues a similar redevelopment agenda. It is a small operation that has become more influential and assertive around redevelopment in recent years.

Like many of their counterparts across the country, these pro-gentrification groups pitch the community's diversity as profitable commodity and asset (Photograph 3). For example, the Chamber of Commerce hosted an annual State of Rogers Park address by the Alderman at a local coffeehouse, with a \$15 entrance fee for nonmembers. A white Chamber of Commerce employee said in her introduction, "We're leading the effort to revitalize Rogers Park from the inside out. . . . Diversity isn't only what we've come to love. We believe it's marketable and we'll trumpet it around town." Similarly, RP Enterprise members regularly organize networking events to patronize local minority-owned eateries in the name of supporting diversity.

These individuals often applaud the abstract image of Rogers Park as a model diverse community. The RP Enterprise's housing policy statement outlines the goal: "To preserve and enhance Rogers Parks' stable residential environment so persons of all ages, races and income can continue to live in sound affordable housing." But, at the same time, participants talk about neighborhood diversity as a goal yet to be achieved. They draw on discourse about growth to argue that redevelopment is the best strategy for improving a neighborhood (see Logan and Molotch, 1987) and it will actually enhance Rogers Park's diversity. Such arguments are especially common when developers and public officials



PHOTO. 3. Excerpt from RP Enterprise brochure.

Source: Photo by author.

talk about North of Howard. This view is illustrated in an interview exchange with Mark Feinstein, an influential RP Enterprise officer:

Mark: . . . I will view this community as having made progress when I could walk up Howard Street and enjoy it.

Author: What would that mean, to enjoy it?

M: . . . To enjoy it would mean that there is diversity, that I would want to take my daughter and not have to worry. I wouldn't have to park my car and leave my dog in it, just to make sure I don't get busted. That I don't see people hanging out in front of storefronts . . .

A: And when you say diversity, what kind of diversity do you mean? . . .

M: . . . I think that this community is uniquely situated to reflect the type of diversity racially, ethnically, and economically that exists [in the U.S. today]. We are truly a rainbow society, and I would like to see this community become even more diverse. . . . You know, I think, when people can learn and do business and associate with one another. That's diversity. . . . I've got a real blend of different racial, ethnic, and economic levels in my apartment building. I take pride in that.

From this vantage point, real diversity is a goal yet to be achieved. It has not quite arrived, especially in North of Howard, but when it does it promises a better quality of life for residents. Similarly, these real estate professionals seem pleased with the idea of new and existing middle-class minority residents and business owners. A white developer asserted in an RP Enterprise newsletter, “[In Rogers Park] the typical buyers are 25 to 40 years old, single, professional. . . . Our clients are very diverse, multi-ethnic, and typically Lincoln Park or Lakeview refugees.” Some RP Enterprise members refer to their organization's membership as multicultural and diverse, constructing an affirming identity politics for affluent white people (Lipsitz, 1998). For these professionals, a more representative form of diversity in Rogers Park would make room for middle and upper class residents and businesspeople who themselves embody diversity.

When members talk specifically about implementing diversity in housing development, they sometimes rely on economic terms and refer to mixed income as a proxy for diversity. As indicated by the interview excerpt above, Mark and many of his peers quantify diversity as income and focus on economic diversity in less gentrified sections of the neighborhood.<sup>10</sup> They claim that those poorer sections are demographically homogeneous and have a “concentration of poverty,” which is antithetical to the community's overall mix. They then suggest that upscale development and mixed-income housing policies for middle-income buyers will bring those anomalous sections in line with the neighborhood's overall demographics. For example, in this same interview, Mark continued on to say, “The way to get to my vision of Howard Street . . . what I'm striving for—and I've told you this before—is a *stable* mixed-income community. Without a doubt in my mind, the way to obtain that is to bring more ownership into the community.” In sum, these real estate entrepreneurs claim that gentrification and mixed-income housing will enhance Rogers Park's economic diversity.

Improving North of Howard's economic diversity became the central topic of one RP Enterprise meeting where Alderman Moore was the featured speaker. Moore is a liberal white Democrat who entered office in the early 1990s. He has a challenging job—in this politically divided neighborhood, he stands at the nexus of the most controversial redevelopment decisions. He and his small, predominantly white staff are acutely concerned with appeasing the vocal interests pounding on the ward office door. He has the tacit albeit unenthusiastic approval of many community residents and organizations, winning 54% of the vote in the 2003 ward elections. Many people accuse him of being unassertive and either too supportive or not supportive enough on issues like low-income housing. He has a reputation, especially outside the neighborhood, for being receptive to community input, yet his redevelopment task forces and committees almost always consist of white, affluent organizational leaders and homeowners. When under political pressure, he has lent some support to low-income housing and small business preservation. Developers are beholden to the Alderman because most redevelopment involves revisions to zoning codes, which he must approve.

The RP Enterprise meeting where the Alderman spoke focused on the fate of a subsidized apartment building, the Meridian, in North of Howard. The Meridian and another building, Carter Gardens, had been embroiled in community conflicts for years. The nonprofit organization that had owned the buildings went bankrupt in the mid 1990s. The buildings first came under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Housing and Development (HUD) and then under the city government, but the city had no plan to preserve them as low-cost housing. With the support of a few local groups, Justice Alliance—the local progressive tenants organization—organized the predominantly black and very poor tenants, lobbied the Alderman to protect the buildings, and sued HUD on technical grounds. After much stalling, the Alderman agreed to preserve the Meridian as a low-income rental building under a 20-year contract. A nonprofit housing developer and RP Enterprise member would convert Carter Gardens into “affordable” condominiums for middle-income buyers through Mayor Richard Daley's New Homes for Chicago program. Once the plans for the Meridian and Carter Gardens were established, Moore and his staff pointed to them as evidence of their commitment to diversity, in the form of mixed-income housing.

At the RP Enterprise meeting, held in the conference room of a branch of a national bank, Alderman Moore explained to the 50 attendees:

I have an interest in stabilizing housing. There is an overabundance of rentals and there has been a recent wave of condo conversions. . . . I have the goal of a stable, mixed-income community, so there should be ownership opportunities, too. But not everyone is able to become an owner, so we still need to have rental options. . . . [These buildings are] good for efforts to maintain economic diversity.

The response to the Alderman's comments revolved around what was and what should be the proper mix of types of housing to achieve economic diversity. Brenda Meyer, a white RP Enterprise officer, told the Alderman, “RP Enterprise has always recognized the need for supporting mixed-income. But it also wants to diversify. There's already too much low-income housing there.” Mark referred to some maps that members had created to prove that North of Howard was “saturated” with low-income housing. He said, “We're trying to figure out the real numbers, so we can understand if the ‘great gentrifiers’ are coming in.” The Alderman got angry, “This [map] must include single family homes! You're screwing

the numbers.” Quiet laughter broke out in the back of the room. Brenda continued, “RP Enterprise has always recommended mixed-income. I don’t want to see more housing tied up for twenty years!” The snickers grew louder. “Not *more*,” he replied. “This isn’t new. This is just preserving fifteen units.” Brenda snapped, “How can we expect to diversify if it’s tied up for twenty years!” “Fifteen units!” exclaimed the exasperated Alderman. “This week!” she shot back.

At a bar later that evening, the RP Enterprise members talked about why they thought low-income housing was so detrimental to North of Howard’s economic mix. Carl Branford, a white developer and RP Enterprise officer, explained that it was not the number or percentage of low-income units that mattered. “The real issue,” he announced, “is income.” The others nodded over their drinks. Brenda asked the group, “How do we diversify economically?” Carl responded, with an eye toward me, “There’s someone named—um, Julius Wilson William? He wrote about the importance of mixed-income neighborhoods, that people need to have other opportunities and a concentration of poor people is bad. He said that this shouldn’t happen. I completely agree with that.” The others nodded again. Carl’s idea had staying power. More than 2 years later, he and other members of an RP Enterprise committee contemplated giving the Alderman a copy of a book by William Julius Wilson and inviting Wilson to a meeting.

The exchanges that evening are indicative of the real estate industry’s (and many residents’) aggressive resistance to low-cost housing programs in Rogers Park; for both sides, diversity boiled down to economics. Diversity morphed into words like diversify or mixed income or, simply, income. Of course Rogers Park is not the only place where this language has strong political appeal. Policymakers, politicians, and real estate professionals beyond the neighborhood have linked economic indicators of diversity with social scientific arguments to justify neoliberal development policies, particularly public housing policy (Bennett and Reed, 1999). For example, the Chicago Housing Authority (2000, p. 1) purports that its Plan for Transformation will create housing that attracts “a mix of incomes so that public housing does not again become home to extreme concentrations of poverty.” The current overhaul of public housing in Chicago and Rogers Park’s history of poorly managed subsidized housing loom in the background of the discussions like the one at the RP Enterprise meeting. It comes as no surprise that members invoke similar social scientific and policy concepts to make their claims.

Talking about diversity as individuals’ income or housing status is a savvy strategy for RP Enterprise members. This is a relatively benign way to argue over development and demographics. It is far more acceptable in Rogers Park to criticize specific kinds of housing, champion certain income levels, or cite the need for disposable income than to publicly scorn minorities and, to a lesser extent, poor individuals. Yet, members still point out the racial identities of minorities whom they perceive as legitimate and beneficial for economic growth. For example, Judy Berman, a banker and RP Enterprise officer, frequently praised her “hard-working” minority clients such as the Latino household that pooled its assets to start a bicycle shop.

At the same time, when these and other local pro-gentrification activists think that poor people—and low-income minorities in particular—are interfering with development, they do not talk about these groups as valued members of the community’s diversity. Instead, the activists may imply that they feel personally uncomfortable around these groups or outright state that these groups hurt their property values. For instance, when the city announced a proposal to demolish a mall where Latino, African, and Asian vendors sold items like

socks and CDs and build a much-needed firehouse in its place, a heated community debate broke out. RP Enterprise endorsed the proposal, and a leader in the organization posted his opinion on a listserv discussion about the plan, "I'd love to have a place to shop in the neighborhood. I went into the mall once when it first opened. I felt like I was in a third world country."

In sum, the real estate entrepreneurs in Rogers Park acknowledge and applaud, as a part of the community's diversity, the race of people in certain economic strata, but not others. This take on diversity silences certain racial and class dimensions of gentrification, especially the ethnoracial identities of poor people hurt by gentrification. Ultimately, their discourse is not at odds with the commodification of diversity as a product for sale, declarations of social liberalism, or an agenda for economic diversification.

### DIVERSITY AS A SOCIAL JUSTICE MANDATE

Many white progressive activists in Rogers Park use diversity discourse to talk about diversity at the neighborhood level, raise concerns about social justice, describe poor people and minorities, or express their identity politics. They often critique the ways that their adversaries talk about diversity, as well. Their particular use of the diversity trope can deflect attention from the racial and class power disparities between organizational leaders and participants.

Justice Alliance is the main grassroots organization in Rogers Park that politically mobilizes poor people and minorities and one of a few that pressures decision makers to protect low-cost housing and businesses. It follows in a 30-year tradition of progressive neighborhood organizing.<sup>11</sup> Members use direct action, protests, a tenant hotline, and training sessions to organize tenants and workers, promote low-cost housing, denounce discrimination, and interfere with upscale development. The organization claims 250 members, the most active of whom are middle aged or older. While the board of directors tends to be racially and economically mixed, most of the leaders directing the day-to-day political work are middle-class white progressives. Members tend to be female, low-income, African American, and to a lesser extent Latino.

Justice Alliance activists have angered and alienated many residents and members of mainstream local organizations, who perceive them as obstructionist and counterproductive. There is often a mutual antagonism between Justice Alliance and these groups. In some cases, the organizations systematically exclude Justice Alliance from decision-making opportunities. In other cases, Justice Alliance actively refuses to participate in political coalitions. Justice Alliance has some local allies, like an arts organization and a few churches.

Like other transformative community organizations (Smock, 2004), Justice Alliance subscribes to a model of neighborhood activism that presumes that global structural inequalities are at the root of local problems. The organization identifies itself as "the progressive voice in Rogers Park." The leaders believe that in order to address neighborhood issues, Justice Alliance must also work for broader systemic change and challenge unjust political and economic institutions. One of the group's primary goals is to question existing ideological frameworks and encourage members to formulate new conceptual categories. So, like similar transformative organizations, their activities often incorporate popular education and reflection.

Justice Alliance activists—especially those who are white and middle class—tend to enthusiastically embrace the diversity trope. They invoke the familiar image of Rogers Park as a model community to suggest that the current demographic mix is good and that poor people, minorities, and renters belong in this mix. A favorite Justice Alliance protest chant repeats “1-2-3-4 Diversity’s worth fighting for! 5-6-7-8 Mix us in, it’s not too late!” These activists add a warning: diversity is in danger. A low-income white renter who faced imminent displacement from her apartment lamented at a meeting, “What’s unique about Rogers Park is the incredible variety of races and economic groups. . . . Why are all these yuppies trying to come here and ruin it?” Justice Alliance’s task, then, is to defend certain elements of the diversity rainbow already in Rogers Park.

These white and middle-class progressives usually use the word “diversity” to refer to poor people and, especially, minorities both in Justice Alliance and in the neighborhood (also see Brown-Saracino, 2004), as the following field note excerpt from a Justice Alliance meeting illustrates:

At the end of the meeting, three or four white people volunteered for the outreach committee. Jackie [a white leader] started to lament that the committee would be “all white” just as Regina [an African-American member and Section 8 activist] raised her arm to volunteer. Then Jackie, looking pleased, put her hands on Regina’s shoulders and said, “Good. We don’t want it to be an all white committee, because that doesn’t represent the diversity of Rogers Park. We already only represent one language group.”

Jackie’s comments were, in fact, an unusually straightforward reference to a committee’s demographic composition. These white progressives do not typically refer to themselves as diverse. Moreover, in their day-to-day political work—like meetings, marches, and routine office conversations—Justice Alliance leaders and members alike rarely talk openly about the organization’s internal racial or class dynamics.

At the same time, these activists promote a progressive agenda by connecting diversity with concerns about structural inequality and social equality. For instance, they rhetorically link diversity with calls for justice and low-income housing preservation. Since 2000, the Justice Alliance T-shirt has had the slogan “Diversity/Affordability” on the front and “Join the campaign for Diversity, Affordability & Justice” on the back (Photograph 4). These



**PHOTO. 4.** Justice Alliance logo.

*Source:* Photo by author.



activists want to show that different demographic groups threatened by gentrification have shared interests. Diversity is a convenient umbrella term for referring to all those groups.

In the spirit of rethinking popular ideology, Justice Alliance leaders also dissect how public officials and members of pro-development organizations use language about diversity. They criticize pro-gentrification groups for giving lip service to diversity, but not supporting it in their actions, or for misrepresenting the meaning of diversity all together. One evening, for example, organizers from a few neighborhood groups met to plan an upcoming Justice Alliance march. They debated for at least half an hour about whether they should invite the Alderman to speak at the march. Frank Stubbs, a white board member, made a prediction about the Alderman: "He'll get up there and say, 'I support diversity.' And someone will say, 'Why didn't you support. . .?'" (implying there was a litany of diversity-related projects that the Alderman had not backed). Frank later added animatedly, "Look at diversity on his projects. His committees don't look like the neighborhood. The most diverse neighborhood in Chicago? Not even cosmetic!" Some of the other activists rolled their eyes, smiling in agreement. On this and other occasions, Frank reasoned that the political bodies that make decisions about development should reflect the local demographics; therefore, the larger power structure in Rogers Park was inequitable because it excluded a diversity of poor renters, people of color, and religious minorities. Diversity was his measure for proportional political representation.

White Justice Alliance organizers have yet another strategy for connecting diversity to social justice issues. They teach members to question and redefine the meaning of diversity as they train them to be politically active. This happened during the Community Exchange, spearheaded by Justice Alliance. According to the brochure, the Community Exchange would host workshops that "raise community awareness on selected topics, educate a cross-section of the community and enable us to seek common ground on strategies to make Rogers Park a successful, diverse community." Justice Alliance leaders convened a small steering committee of white church leaders and activists from a few local organizations. The first phase was a three-part series on "Development and Diversity," piloted at a partner Christian church. The Community Exchange was similar to many of the educational workshop series sponsored by Justice Alliance. In this case, leaders would urge participants to critically rethink the dominant ideological framework around diversity and development, using intellectual analysis and open discussion. At one steering committee meeting, Bill Lyons, a white Justice Alliance organizer and the primary leader for the project, described the upcoming series, "Part of it is talking about what it means to be diverse. For a lot of newer people [to the neighborhood], their idea of diversity is very different."

Fifteen people attended the first workshop in the series. Most were middle aged or elderly and appeared to be middle class. Four were African American and the rest, white. Bill introduced the first session by asking, "What do we mean by diversity? . . . Do we have the same perceptions and definitions of what it means?" he queried. "We've all been to lots of meetings. . . . [The] leaders don't represent how we talk about diversity." Following Bill's instructions, everyone wrote their definitions of diversity on a map of Rogers Park that hung on the wall. A white woman noted, "all kinds of races and genders, language." A white man cited problems with "community unification" and knowing "how to talk to people." A gay white man jotted, "economic status, nationalities, and sexual orientation." A black man added, "kids to seniors." Bill built on this exercise, shifting the conversation

to a discussion of housing quotas, landlord control, and the best balance between home ownership and rental units.

A few participants gradually began posing questions similar to Bill's. A white man asked, "We can take a position to maintain our current diversity. Or is diversity something you're working for? . . . When you talk about diversity, which approach are we working for?" An elderly white man commented, "Diversity may not always be the goal. Inclusiveness . . . may be." Participants pressed Bill for more information about demographics and housing policy. He used these comments to segue into other exercises—like an activity in which the participants physically created a human bar graph to represent rising national income inequality—to reconstruct a definition of diversity conducive to progressive politics and ideology.

While it is impossible to measure Justice Alliance's broader impact on residents' understanding of diversity, the activists have used diversity discourse to raise the visibility of political representation in the local government, like in their letters published in the local newspaper. The organization also has been somewhat successful at implementing its version of demographic diversity by, for example, electing minorities and low-income residents to its board. The organization was not free from internal racial and class divisions. For instance, it lost many low-income black activists when a committee of Section 8 tenants split off to form their own organization. As Smock (2004) observes, racial and class cleavages within groups such as Justice Alliance may be unintentionally exacerbated by discussions like the one at the Community Exchange. It is often easier for the predominantly middle-class members to take part in these discussions, as they depend on "a culture of interaction rooted in a middle class tradition of individualism that assumes a certain level of cultural capital" (Smock, 2004, p. 138). This is not to say other members are incapable of participating; rather, for the poor and minority members, such workshops can seem like a diversion from their pressing basic needs.

The diversity discourse used by the Justice Alliance organizers is an unlikely expression of their identity politics, as well. They politicize their personal identification with a geographic place and their preference for living around people of other racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds. Take, for example, how Renee Jones, a middle-income white Justice Alliance leader, introduced herself at a joint meeting of the Justice Alliance housing committee and Section 8 Rights Now. She told the other attendees, most of whom were African American, "One reason I moved to Rogers Park is because I believe in diverse neighborhoods, and I want to support affordable housing." Activists like Renee pose their pro-diversity stance as a rejection of discrimination, segregation, and suburban-like homogeneity. They emphasize their affinity with the neighborhood, not their ethnoracial or class identity, as the basis of their political commitments and entitlement to make political claims.

These interpretations of diversity can enable white and middle-class Justice Alliance activists to elide or excuse their racial, economic, and political privilege relative to the groups on whose behalf they are fighting. Their endorsements for diversity are distinct from neoliberal appeals to a celebratory multiculturalism (Goode, 2001). They also differ from a more traditional identity politics in which people explicitly connect their politics with their identities as, say, white but antiracist or middle class in solidarity with the poor. The activists' discourse is color blind (i.e., Bonilla-Silva, 2003) in that it downplays the white members' own racial identities and their class status, if they are middle class.

Furthermore, by discussing diversity in terms of racial minorities or as an abstract feature of the neighborhood, Justice Alliance leaders can circumvent discussions about racial and economic power differences in the organization. These include the leaders' greater economic security in the face of gentrification, the lack of minority leadership in the Justice Alliance's daily work, and public-education strategies that may not be immediately relevant to disadvantaged members.

The Justice Alliance activists' version of diversity is somewhat contradictory. It suggests that the progressives, too, have a place in a community, but they do not explicitly have a place in its diversity. The white and middle-income progressives can use diversity discourse to both affirm that marginalized groups are entitled to stay in Rogers Park and to justify their own presence without drawing attention to their relative positions of power within the organization or the community at large.

### WHITHER LEGAL RIGHTS?

Diversity is not a useful trope for all local groups. The members of Section 8 Rights Now have little need for it. Section 8 Rights Now is an organization that formed to support the tenants in Rogers Park—2.8% of local households in 2003—who have government-subsidized vouchers to supplement their rent.<sup>12</sup> The members are primarily concerned with helping local voucher holders deal with landlords and CHAC, the organization that manages the program. There are few, if any, other neighborhood-based groups of this kind in Chicago and possibly the state of Illinois. The leadership consists of about six middle-aged and elderly African American women and a few white and black men, all of whom usually refer to themselves as advocates or as “Section 8.” They staff a tenant hotline, educate voucher holders about the program and their rights, and occasionally meet with CHAC administrators. One member maintains that she sued landlords in three buildings for discriminating against her as a voucher holder; under the Chicago Human Rights and the Chicago Fair Housing Ordinances, it is illegal to discriminate against someone based on their source of income, which includes these vouchers.

Section 8 Rights Now began as a Justice Alliance committee. In 2001, Justice Alliance secured funding for Section 8 organizing, but the committee had to form its own nonprofit organization to access the grant. The departure provided the members with more funding and greater opportunities for leadership development. It fueled tensions with Justice Alliance, as well. A number of black Justice Alliance participants shifted their energies to a separate project. A few low-income, African American women in Justice Alliance who did not have vouchers also joined the Section 8 Rights Now advocates as they formed their new organization, largely because they were friends and shared a sense of economic and racial solidarity. Those women referred to themselves as affordable people or affordable housing people. During the group's first 2 years, it was stymied by in-fighting, difficulties developing leadership, and lack of a clear direction. Eventually, it collaborated more with Justice Alliance and then moved to its own office.

The word diversity is virtually absent from the black Section 8 Rights Now advocates' political vocabulary. Instead, the advocates draw on discourse about tenants rights, empowerment, and discrimination. A few leaders articulated these sentiments when they gave invigorating speeches at the beginning of a joint meeting with the Justice

Alliance housing committee. Dionne Thompson, an African American leader, stood up and said:

There are so many tenants that get knocked around. We need to let them know not to be afraid. Landlords have a tendency to frighten tenants. . . . I'm an affordable person, and I'm not afraid of any landlord. We have to fight for our rights!

Ruby Bridges, a black Section 8 Rights Now leader and Justice Alliance board member, built on her enthusiasm:

I am a Section 8 holder and I fight. . . . Tenants have power! We just have to come together. Power is in education! In power we can win! . . . Let's stop some of this! We have a right to be here as much as anyone else! I'm not going to be pushed around!

Soon everyone in the room was clapping, looking excited and motivated.

While the Section 8 Rights Now leadership does not have a formal critique of diversity discourse, members occasionally show skepticism about other groups' use of the word. For example, Ruby and Marnie Pierson, another advocate, sat in on a Community Exchange steering committee meeting. After Bill, the Justice Alliance leader, said that the first workshop would involve "talking about what it means to be diverse," Marnie appealed to the white attendees, "We've been talking about diversity for a long time in Rogers Park and across Chicago. Trying to get people to come in and talk about their ideas—it will be hard. . . . How are we going to keep people here? How we going to teach people to keep fighting?!" No one responded. She and Ruby soon left to attend a Section 8 Rights Now member's birthday party.

Yet Section 8 Rights Now advocates only rarely pose criticisms like Marnie's. They are far more likely to denounce public officials' statements about new programs for low- and mixed-income housing. At a training session about HUD and changes in public housing, Latoya Williams, a former Carter Gardens resident and activist, pointed out, "My building said it would be 'affordable,' but that's not true." Another African American woman added, "They're tearing down [the Cabrini Green public housing] projects and building little Stepford houses with driveways. There is no black skin in there. Where are we going to go?" The African American facilitator added, referring to redevelopment near Cabrini Green, "They said it was going to be mixed-income at Cabrini. There are four families! It's all smoke and mirrors. It was never real."

These advocates have good reasons to be skeptical about promises for better housing programs. Most have been displaced from their apartments at least once because their landlords increased the rent or converted the building into condos, and they have repeatedly experienced landlord discrimination when looking for new apartments, with little recourse from the city. Few have seen the benefits of new initiatives like mixed-income public housing or the Section 8 homeownership program which, despite much fanfare, had enabled just one voucher holder in the city to close on a home as of June 2002. These programs have actually hurt some members, like Latoya. She received a voucher when she was displaced from Carter Gardens to make room for the so-called affordable condominiums supported by the mayor's New Homes program. After months of searching, she found a landlord who would rent a three-bedroom apartment to her and her sons, but she had to move within a year because that building was converted into condos. The city and many local groups have been less than helpful for the organization, as well.

Over the years, these advocates have struggled to develop a stronger relationship with CHAC. Early on, the advocates proposed that they could become formal liaisons to CHAC, but the agency rejected that idea. In June 2002, the group held a forum for about 75 people who had vouchers or hoped to enroll. Five administrators from CHAC attended the forum, including the agency director. Since then, the organization's relationship with CHAC has improved.

Unlike Justice Alliance organizers or the real estate professionals, the Section 8 Rights Now advocates do not use diversity discourse to talk about their personal identity or political values. One could imagine these members asserting themselves as "the face of diversity" or a critical stripe in Rogers Park's rainbow, but they do not. On rare occasions, they might offhandedly mention diversity as a characteristic of the neighborhood (and not necessarily as a positive one), yet they seem to view it as an external category. They do not use it to express their views of themselves or their location in the community. Rather, in discussions about housing, they explain their presence in the neighborhood by referring to specific identities that they can use to make claims about their rights, such as Section 8 or less often, tenants, black, or disabled.

In Rogers Park, white people seem especially comfortable with the diversity trope as a way to express their tolerance. These advocates have not needed, or at least tried, to appeal to white tolerance to pursue their goals. Furthermore, the diversity trope does not evoke the same sense of black pride, call to action, or a demand for racial justice for the Section 8 Rights Now advocates. As further discussed below, their preference for rights discourse is congruent with their organization's single-issue focus and the historical legacy of African American activism in the United States. In other words, diversity discourse seems incompatible with their narrow class interests, spirit of racial solidarity, and political objectives. It does not provide them with cultural meaning relevant to their agenda, nor have they tried to redefine it toward those ends.

## DISCUSSION

So, what do these organizations and their discourse reveal about race and class politics in cities today? Beyond Rogers Park's borders, diversity has become an unthreatening and popular word over the past 30 years (Downey, 1999; Schuck, 2003). This seems especially true for white and middle-class people (Goode, 2001). The term does not inherently refer to any particular ethnoracial, gender, class, or other demographic status, much less to demographics at all. For many people, it continues to imply tolerance and acceptance of some minorities. These qualities make it a particularly useful bit of discourse in polarized conflicts over issues from urban redevelopment to school curricula to affirmative action. Findings from Rogers Park point to some broader implications of placing diversity at the center of neighborhood politics.

First, and perhaps most striking, is the contrast between discourse about diversity and discourse about rights. These discourses are distinctive, but not inherently incompatible. For example, Justice Alliance activists sometimes use both. But, when political participants frame social problems in terms of diversity, they can easily overshadow the issues that poor people care about, especially concerns about their rights. Legal rights historically have been an important mechanism through which women, minorities, and other marginalized groups have redressed discrimination. The 1960s black civil rights movement, in particular,

popularized both discourse about rights and a political strategy that seeks legal rights through the courts (Tarrow, 1998).

In the neighborhood context, legal rights are also probably the most powerful mechanism that minorities have to protect themselves in the housing market. Since the 1950s, civil rights groups have lobbied the government to address pervasive racial discrimination by the real estate and banking industries. Although policies and laws like the 1968 Fair Housing Act have failed to adequately address problems at an institutional level, they support individuals' right to file litigation and have facilitated successes in fights over public housing segregation, denial of credit for residents in black neighborhoods, and other issues (Massey and Denton, 1993). Today, tenant ordinances, like the Chicago Fair Housing Ordinance, also provide residents with clearly defined forms of legal protection against discrimination. In fact, a Chicago organization initiated a Section 8 testing program, modeled on earlier fair housing testing, to document systemic landlord discrimination against voucher holders, and some Section 8 Rights Now members attended a training. Thus, the legacy of rights discourse, combined with the availability of legal mechanisms, has shaped Section 8 Rights Now's agenda.

Diversity, in contrast, is not even a constitutionally accepted goal in neighborhood policies (Malamud, 2001).<sup>13</sup> There also are few entitlements to low-cost housing in contemporary neoliberal redevelopment policies. One notable exception is HUD's obligation to fund replacement housing for a portion of the public housing development slated for demolition across the country, although housing advocates have criticized the viability, adequacy, and restrictions of these plans. Thus, diversity discourse may not be strategically useful for low income minorities, who have more to gain from a legal and rhetorical focus on justice and the right to fair housing.

A second and related implication is that privileged groups can rhetorically use the diversity trope as a revised measure of inequality and exclusion. In Rogers Park, people often suggest that demographic mixing should be a goal—perhaps *the* goal—of gentrification or antigentrification activism. However, any given development initiative will inevitably leave out some demographic group. Organizational participants then criticize the project on the grounds that their constituents—whether minorities, working families, white people, or homeowners—were discriminated against. Exclusion from the mix serves as the standard for judging fairness. This is a very different barometer than a standard like fair housing for racial minorities. Such assertions are part of a current trend among some groups not categorically protected by government antidiscrimination policy, such as white men or Christians, who increasingly make claims that they experience reverse discrimination because of their race, gender, or class (e.g., Lynch, 1997), or they adopt the mantle of minority to protest their perceived marginalization (Skrentny, 2001). Diversity becomes an elusive, moving quota. This may not be the intention of anyone who uses the trope, but it is a pitfall of relying on it.

Third, discourse about diversity may lack political teeth for organizations concerned with a single issue. Section 8 Rights Now is a single-issue organization, unlike the numerous other neighborhood groups that endorse diversity. It focuses on an individual social program in which participants have specific entitlements and are protected as a class of people because of their source of income, because the fair implementation of the program will enable voucher holders to stay in Rogers Park. In contrast, each multi-issue organization in Rogers Park is concerned with a variety of social, political, and economic issues and works with a wide range of residents. For these groups, the grammar of diversity serves as

a discursive umbrella, a shorthand reference tool. It emphasizes the connections between the political and social issues at hand and the seemingly shared interests of the various populations involved. For example, all these multi-issue groups, unlike Section 8 Rights Now, link their agendas to abstract images of community. Diversity discourse is a useful way to do that. More research is needed to understand if this finding is generalizable to other organizations and different political issues.

Fourth, the politicians' and real estate professionals' interpretations of diversity may reflect broader shifts in certain racial perceptions among whites (Farley and Frey, 1994), as well as the pervasive classism in the housing market. Taub, Taylor, and Dunham (1984, p. 10) note that changing racial attitudes may ease interactions in heterogeneous neighborhoods, as the "broader white tolerance that focuses on class instead of race makes the whole effort more harmonious." The pro-gentrification groups' interest in economic diversity also exemplifies the persistence of classism in the United States. This customary, normative discrimination on the basis of income, wealth, and ability to pay is far more powerful than the abstract ideal of residential diversity (Schuck, 2003). Classism is especially apparent in the housing market, which represents most consumers' largest financial investment and a source of great security and emotional well being, regardless of one's race or ethnicity. Social trends and popular values may have encouraged whites to be more accepting of ethnoracial minorities, but the same cannot be said of investors' views of lower income people in the real estate market.

Yet the RP Enterprise members' understanding of diversity is still racially inflected, as evidenced in their financial, social, and rhetorical support for seemingly acceptable minorities. So, to elaborate on Taub and his colleagues' observations about white tolerance, it seems that these professionals are willing to work with, live among, or rent to minorities as long as those minorities are middle class or fit the model minority mold: hard-working and trustworthy clients, tenants, or employees. Many neighborhood residents, including the low-income African American advocates, want to live near these kinds of neighbors too. Nevertheless, the RP Enterprise members have more power—be it through bank loans, rental agreements, or hiring decisions—to influence who can reside and work in the community. These depictions of *diversity as economics* and *diversity as safe* for whites and select minorities reflect elements of neoliberal ideology: society has seemingly transcended race as a category of exclusion and prejudice and need not to struggle for racial equality.

Finally, diversity discourse is not the sole domain of urban boosters nor is it devoid of a leftist political punch, but it does lend itself to a self-conscious war of the words. The white and middle-class Justice Alliance activists appropriate the diversity trope and imbue it with progressive connotations. In order to hold on to this concept, they also must constantly spell out what it means and why they have a rightful claim to it. They end up endorsing it and discrediting it at the same time. The diversity trope works for progressive politics, but with qualifications.

Such verbal maneuvering may be a feature of engaging in contemporary neoliberal politics for groups across the ideological spectrum. Media-saturated symbolic economies are now central to many cities' economic vitality. As Zukin (1995, pp. 2–3,7) explains, "the cultural power to create an image, to frame a vision, of the city has become more important. . . . Building a city depends on how people combine the traditional economic factors of land, labor, and capital. . . [and] how they manipulate symbolic languages of exclusion and entitlement." Words are up for grabs, even ones that have seemingly liberal

connotations. Take, as an example from another context, neoconservatives' selective appropriation of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech to challenge race-based affirmative action. Such word play can throw a monkey wrench into grassroots politics. Activists of any political persuasion, such as those in justice Alliance, may need to cultivate certain analytical and rhetorical skills in order to negotiate this terrain of city politics. It is a dimension of contemporary symbolic politics that scholars to date have overlooked.

Nyden et al. (1997) have shown that "self-consciously diverse" communities develop institutional bases and provide resources for a variety of demographic groups. The authors contrast such communities with Rogers Park and similar neighborhoods, which they classify as *laissez-faire* diverse. For a community to move beyond this status of *diversity by default*, government needs to make some political and financial commitments. It must support an institutional foundation that provides different demographic groups a place at the proverbial table and resources to be equal partners. This is not to say that a master neighborhood plan is the panacea for the harms of gentrification or that demographics are easily controlled, as much political discourse implies. But, some kind of blueprint and political will is essential if policymakers want to buffer marginalized groups from gentrification's hardships and ensure that they can enjoy the improved quality of life that development usually brings. Rhetorical appeals to diversity should not be confused with resource commitments.

Urban studies can benefit from these kinds of ground-level observations of local discourse. There is a tendency among urban scholars to observe discourse from a more general, abstracted level of analysis. From that perspective, discourse appears to be a monolithic force, almost invariably serving the interests of the powerful. Michel Foucault's early observations (e.g., 1972) about the link between discourse and power are clearly important, and discourse continues to be a useful unit of analysis. Yet, it behooves social scientists to study how people actually use discourse and the contradictions in that in light of their social, political, and economic contexts. Although certain groups may have greater resources to publicize and impose their visions of the world, no one owns a word or an idea. Close observations of how people finesse language, like the use of the same trope to pursue competing ends, can reveal complexities that more general levels of analysis cannot pick up.

Words and ideas like diversity also are not contained to a single domain like a neighborhood. Communities are embedded in a broader political economy, linked to other institutions like corporations, universities, churches, and government agencies through individuals' participation, organizational cooperation, the media, and other connections. For example, some Rogers Park activists are familiar with social scientific research or have picked up sociological concepts from places such as universities and public policy reports. So, one way to locate neighborhoods in their wider political, economic, and social context is to follow tropes like diversity across institutions and organizations.<sup>14</sup>

Diversity discourse may be a rhetorical tool that elites wield at the expense of marginalized groups. It may be trope that white, middle-class people use to justify or downplay their place in a community. It also may be a prism through which activists address social problems, a medium for dramatizing power relations, or a cultural icon that people dissect and reconstruct as they politically maneuver. And, at times it may distract from concerns about justice and rights. Some symbols are more difficult to own than others. Diversity is one such symbol.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I use pseudonyms for all individuals and organizations except elected officials and the local university.

<sup>2</sup> Scholarship about the concept of diversity outside of urban studies, too, generally focuses on theoretical or macro-level questions, drawing on political theory (e.g., Hollinger, 2000) or quantitative, text, and legal analysis (e.g., Edelman, Riggs, and Mara-Drita, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Nyden, Maly, and Lukehart (1997) use census tract data and interviews to identify stable, diverse neighborhoods out of the ten largest U.S. cities and 12 mid-sized or small cities. I, too, rely on the community area designation to define Rogers Park's boundaries because local political participants generally use the same boundaries. However, these designations can differ from residents' perceptions of their neighborhood, hide demographic variation, and understate the importance of the broader urban context (Hunter, 1974; Klinenberg, 2002, p. 246, footnote 12).

<sup>4</sup> This article does not discuss service providers or quality of life groups. The conservative participants in such groups tend to have similar political agendas and use similar diversity discourse as the Alderman and advocates for gentrification; the liberal participants share more similarities with the white tenant activists.

<sup>5</sup> The tenant activists' model for analyzing social problems is self-consciously influenced by sociological concepts. At one meeting, a leader critiqued how local developers use the word diversity, referring to his analysis as "Sociology 101." This paper shares with these activists certain sociological precepts: broader structural problems shape local issues and discourse analysis can reveal how people use language to frame social problems.

<sup>6</sup> In 2000 Chicago ranked as the fourth most segregated city in terms of black and white residents, the fourth in terms of Hispanics and whites, and the fourteenth in terms of Asians and whites out of the fifty U.S. metropolitan areas with the largest respective minority populations (Lewis Mumford Center, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> The Neighborhood Diversity Index (Maly, 2000) compares the percentage of people in four ethnoracial categories (White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian) at the census tract level with the city averages for these groups. Data for Rogers Park are based on personal communication with Michael T. Maly, July 30, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> The Diversity Index (Sandoval and Li, 2004) measures the evenness of the five ethnoracial groups included in the U.S. Census (White, Black, Latino, Asian, and Other) at the block group level. In a block group with a score of 100, all ethnoracial groups are equally represented. In a block group with a score of 0, there is only one ethnoracial group.

<sup>9</sup> 1970 and 1980 data do not control for Latino origin.

<sup>10</sup> When doing fieldwork about Rogers Park politics in the 1970s and 1980s, Gerald Suttles (1990) also observed residents at community meetings talking about controversial issues in terms of income, not race or ethnicity.

<sup>11</sup> Today, the term progressive colloquially refers to a very liberal political stance. It indicates a preference for government intervention on social and economic issues, like income redistribution from rich to poor (Rempel, 1997), and protection of civil liberties. It is associated with a style of discourse that expresses “moral outrage, universal claims of justice, and visions of a better society” (Hart, 2001, p. 4).

<sup>12</sup> Although the vouchers are now technically considered Housing Choice Vouchers, people still idiomatically refer to them by their previous name, Section 8.

<sup>13</sup> According to the courts, higher education is the only place where diversity is a legally acceptable end (Malamud, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> My fieldwork about diversity discourses in a public university and a global corporation points to some of the patterns in this discourse across different institutions. For instance, when the University of Michigan was sued over its use of race in college admissions decisions, the school argued that it should be able to consider applicants’ race in order to craft a diverse student body. The lawsuits were accompanied by contentious debates in which people argued over whether diversity should refer to everyone or should emphasize certain racial minorities and their civil rights.

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