



Inhabiting the impasse: Social exclusion through visible assemblage in neighborhood gentrification



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ABSTRACT

Now that gentrification has taken hold in central Cincinnati and begun to spill outward, nearby neighborhoods in the early stages of gentrification have begun to call for “inclusive redevelopment” to bring vibrancy to depressed neighborhoods without displacing long-term residents. Neighborhood leaders and city officials understand that displacement happens along racial and class lines, yet efforts to directly address this issue have not changed displacement patterns. Research shows social exclusion contributes to displacement in gentrifying neighborhoods, and tends to focus on uneven impact across social categories like race and class, but there is much less attention to how exclusion is enacted and these categories reproduced. I argue that this takes place simultaneously in the intimate space and time of everyday encounters, where proximity and relation unfold affectively through things and people to code them anew, pulling some into the momentum of redevelopment, while pushing others aside. This cognitive reversal of how categories work is important because it relocates their origin in small, interstitial, and nonhuman sites. Pairing assemblage theory and posthumanism with interviews and field notes, I demonstrate the role of nonhuman forces in shaping these encounters; how materials like cheese, pint glasses, trash, beards, and liver & onions play marked roles in producing marginalization. My findings show that things and people compose visible assemblages together, like a group of people sitting at a sidewalk table eating pizza and drinking beer. These assemblages are operative in producing and reinforcing social exclusion: they usher practiced bias through the surface aesthetics of the assorted components, enabling affective atmospheres to prescribe outcomes. These emergent, visible assemblages are thus important sites for intervention into processes of social exclusion leading to displacement.

1. Introduction

In Cincinnati, Ohio, neighborhoods are gentrifying quickly: adjacent to downtown, Over-the-Rhine (OTR) was the first, and as demand spills outward many others are following suit. Nearby neighborhoods like Walnut Hills are taking advantage of the economic benefits that come with development, but are also experiencing the often exclusionary social character of the changes. Fears about displacement in gentrifying neighborhoods like OTR and Walnut Hills are growing. While local discourses acknowledge the disproportionate impact of gentrification on residents of color and of low incomes, there are few tools for addressing the issue. In this article, I aim to expand the tool set for fighting displacement, with feminist qualitative methods and an attention to materiality. I analyze how the urban imaginary, embodied in one neighborhood (OTR), does work in another neighborhood (Walnut Hills) to shape a particular affective atmosphere and contribute to social exclusion that ultimately leads to residential displacement. I will begin in OTR, at a festival on a summer evening in the park.

If you didn't know the history, you'd love this place. Down in Washington Park in OTR¹ there's great food, live music every night, spectacular lawns and a new playground, Adirondack chairs clustered near a concession stand selling local beer on tap, and convenient connections to public transportation. Imagine a mass of people gathering now for a spectacle of music and lights in the park. Parents unfold lawn chairs and open picnic baskets while kids run through the fountain and dogs romp on the other side of the fence. As dusk nears, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra takes its place facing the great lawn, and technicians test the lights, directed at the historic Music Hall just across the streetcar tracks. People buzz about the show they're about to see, accompanied by one of the best ensembles in North America. Welcome to LumenoCity at Washington Park in OTR: not bad for a second tier city, right? This is the popular urban ideal, materialized: Washington Park is proof, to anyone who is unsure, that Cincinnati is “doing” city just right. The final product here is the yardstick against which other neighborhood improvements are measured.

A stone's throw away in Walnut Hills, on another weekend an event

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¹ I will refer to this neighborhood as both Over-the-Rhine and OTR interchangeably.

called Music off McMillan animates the bars and restaurants along the commercial strip of McMillan Avenue. Musicians busk in front of local establishments, priming the atmosphere for the bands that will play inside bars later in the evening. These bright nodes of activity punctuate a more deserted landscape of empty store fronts and parked cars. Circulation between venues is incentivized by “passports” that attendees get stamped at each site for entries in the raffle. The effusive revelry down at LumenoCity is not quite matched by this event in Walnut Hills; it is more necessary for visitors to pay attention to their surroundings here, and there are limits to where event attendees might go and where they might feel comfortable. The event is constructed and still a bit awkward: the buskers are planted on the streets like light-houses, while the passport entices people to traverse the dark street between venues. Nevertheless, it is apparent that these two events share some kind of affinity.

It's not wrong to bring people together, but when you can see the history, you know the story is more complex than that. Not long ago, Over the Rhine (OTR) had more in common with Walnut Hills. Before Washington Park's \$46 million facelift set the stage for LumenoCity, the park and surrounding neighborhood were different. Commercial occupants were humble and many store fronts were empty; there was a homeless shelter on the southwest corner of the park and an elementary school where the great lawn is now. Children's drawings hung in the windows, and you could see them as you walked past evening basketball games on your way to the laundromat. Now, the basketball courts have been replaced by a dog park and the neighborhood laundromats have all closed their doors. 'Old OTR' has been covered over and polished clean by fresh paint, new paving, ambient lighting, and planting beds.

After the LumenoCity event, the image of this place will again be polished. When everyone leaves, piles of trash will cover the lawns and sidewalks; a legion of volunteers and employees will descend upon this space to collect every piece of litter the crowds have left behind, and it will be spick and span in 45 min. Trash goes out on Sundays in OTR, so the evidence of weekend revelry is tidied before the work week begins again; but nearby in Walnut Hills, no one is there to clean up after Music on McMillan. Like in many neighborhoods, trash blows around on Monday morning in the streets up there, but down in OTR you would never know that more than 30,000 people filled the streets and bars this weekend. As they say, *it's not wrong to bring people together*, but this narrative erases the exclusions of this act and imposes a genre upon a sundry milieu.

In this article, I pry open moments of encounter that are filled with affective energy to examine the site where social inclusion and exclusion materializes within the larger moment of neighborhood transition in Walnut Hills. In these encounters, fleeting atmospheres of exclusion emerge from what I call *visible assemblages* of things and people. Social exclusion is produced aesthetically: in imminent ways through affect and materiality. Recognition of these forces is necessary for opening new pathways to fighting displacement. To proceed, I will explain the context of these two neighborhoods in Cincinnati, the theoretical underpinnings of my work, and the methods I used to collect data. In the following three sections, I will discuss (1) the mechanics of people and objects operating together to compose immanent exclusionary assemblages of urbanity, (2) the forces that induce this moment of composition, and (3) the orienting urban image that creates a hierarchy of capacity among many assemblages.

In these sections, I bring to attention the activity of forces that often go overlooked in anthropocentric discourses about neighborhood change. Focusing narrowly on these forces shows how nonhumans (like the Adirondack chairs, trash, and planting beds above) compose urban imaginaries modeled on OTR that play exclusionary roles in neighborhoods like Walnut Hills. This opens new questions about politics, discursive constructions, and how to intervene, for the many actors in Cincinnati who oppose neighborhood displacement and who struggle with how to fight it, or whose labor contributes inadvertently to this problem in its materiality.

2. Performing prosperity: Walnut Hills as the next Over-the-Rhine

As a second tier rust belt city, the urban core of Cincinnati is old by American standards and in need of redevelopment. Characterized by late 19th century row houses, narrow sidewalks, disjointed, hilly, tree-lined streets, it exudes a dilapidated elegance in need of repair. Low quality inexpensive apartments used to proliferate in inner neighborhoods, but most of the low rent housing is not subsidized or protected with rent control. As such, redevelopment threatens access to affordable housing in many neighborhoods.

Right now, rumor has it that Walnut Hills is the “next Over-the-Rhine” (Konermann, 2015; Tweh, 2014).² OTR is in the late stages of gentrification (Clay, 1979; Addie, 2008) and is important because it represents the urban imaginary against which other neighborhoods compare themselves. At the same time, changes here have drawn criticism for causing widespread displacement in aggressive pursuit of redevelopment. While a full accounting of redevelopment in OTR is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note the role that it plays in the surrounding neighborhoods. At this point in OTR, housing that was once prevalent is no longer accessible for everyone and people who might have lived there are flooding nearby areas including Walnut Hills, tightening the housing markets and changing the neighborhood character. Sudden attention to this historically important black enclave, which is also one of the most stably integrated neighborhoods in Cincinnati, has caused concern (Casey-Leininger, 1993; Casey-Leininger and Green, 2007). Leaders in the neighborhood have consequently begun to call for “inclusive” redevelopment that would revitalize neighborhood business districts without displacing current residents (Wright and Brown, 2015).

The most visible drivers of redevelopment in inner neighborhoods are community development corporations (CDCs). CDCs have a long history in Cincinnati, but have different roles now than in the past due to changes in funding. In the 1970s–1980s, they primarily built affordable housing, while their specific charge now is to catalyze economic redevelopment of business districts (CDC Executive Director, personal communication, June 25, 2015). Though some call for inclusivity in redevelopment, the central objective of their work is to spur economic activity, not to protect the population of existing residents.

While in the early 20th century, Walnut Hills was known locally as the “second downtown” for its bustling neighborhood of more than 20,000 residents, it has lost population and commerce since the 1960s, and is now home to less than 6500 people (US Census Bureau, 2016). This supports a common narrative that as Walnut Hills begins to redevelop, there is room for everyone. What I will show in this article, however, is that *physical* fit does not necessarily matter: the problem of “fitting” in transitioning neighborhoods like Walnut Hills has much more to do with affectively *matching* than with physical capacity when it comes to displacement. Emphasizing placemaking and economic development, the explicit charge of the CDCs in Walnut Hills is to jumpstart the McMillan Avenue commercial district, creating vibrancy by shaping the space and people into the right image of the city (i.e. Over-the-Rhine). Through this work, the neighborhood becomes a performance wherein the right objects, like craft beer, local wares, or arugula, are enrolled in the right activities, like the Music off McMillan event. Under this operating logic, the protected presence of a diverse population in a neighborhood could be at odds with successful redevelopment. In the following sections, I elaborate on this idea to show that for old residents to remain, this paradigm demands their interpellation into the genre of ‘city’ that the CDCs are actively cultivating.

3. Gentrification, aesthetics, affect, and nonhumans

Recent work on social realms of gentrification and affective

² In addition to several news stories alluding to this, it comes up in casual conversation.

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