



Changing the Narrative and Playbook on Racially Concentrated Areas of Poverty¹

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Social science research on urban conditions has for several decades now focused on areas of concentrated poverty. These neighborhoods, growing in number since the 1970s, are places where economic marginalization is most widespread and deepest. Research has documented the prevalence of these areas² and their impact on life chances.³ Indeed, the “neighborhood effects” literature that has dominated urban scholarship and public policy for the past three decades is in large part a response to the existence of these neighborhoods. In this essay, we examine the efforts of community-based activists from low-wealth communities of color to respond to what they see as the problems and limitations of this dominant approach to the issue of urban and regional equity. The work of these activists attempts to achieve three separate objectives: (1) changing the narrative around economically disadvantaged communities of color from the deficiencies of those neighborhoods to the systems of racism and discrimination that produce extreme levels of spatial inequality in American urban areas; (2) redirecting policy away from mobility strategies aimed at moving people out of such communities and into ‘opportunity neighborhoods,’ to initiatives that target the social, political, and economic processes producing regional inequities; and (3) changing the way decisions are made about these communities by asserting the expertise of residents about their own lives and insisting upon the presence and participation of those residents in policymaking.

The “Opportunity” Framework

Concentrated poverty has been an explicit concern for federal urban policy since at least 1996 when then-Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Henry Cisneros called it “urban

¹ This essay appears in Mark L. Joseph and Amy T. Khare, eds., *What Works to Promote Inclusive, Equitable Mixed-Income Communities*, please visit the [volume website](#) for access to more essays.

² Paul Jargowsky, *Concentration of Poverty in the New Millennium*, The Century Foundation and Rutgers Centre for Urban Research and Education, (Washington D.C: The Century Foundation, 2013).; Daniel T. Lichter, Domenico Parisi, and Michael C. Taquino, "The Geography of Exclusion: Race, Segregation, and Concentrated Poverty," *Social Problems* 59, no.3 (August 2012): 364-388.

³ Ludwig, Jens, Greg J. Duncan, Lisa A. Gennetian, Lawrence F. Katz, Ronald C. Kessler, Jeffrey R. Kling, and Lisa Sanbonmatsu. "Neighborhood Effects on the Long-Term Well-Being of Low-Income Adults." *Science* 337, no. 6101 (2012): 1505-1510.

America's toughest challenge."⁴ The issue has dominated urban scholarship, as well, over this time period. Beginning in 1987 with William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged*, social scientists and urban planners have focused on communities of concentrated poverty.

The racialized nature of concentrated poverty—the fact that Black⁵ households in poverty are many times more likely to live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty than are poor White households—has also been a central concern of scholars and policy makers. Communities of concentrated poverty became the reference point for an entire “neighborhood effects” literature aiming to demonstrate the impacts of these neighborhoods on residents’ long-term quality of life, including health and economic mobility.⁶ In 2015, when the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) established rules⁷ for how local governments were to [affirmatively further fair housing](#) (AFFH), the agency included specific requirements to identify “racially or ethnically concentrated areas of poverty [RECAPs] within the jurisdiction and region” and to identify factors that contributed to the emergence of such areas.⁸ While the AFFH rule was ostensibly created to examine patterns of racial/ethnic segregation within regions, there was no mention by HUD in the guidelines of the necessity to analyze the segregation of Whites or the concentration of affluence.

Single-minded attention to RECAPs is illustrative of diagnostic myopia governing the approach to problems of segregation,⁹ an argument that can be made more generally about the vast literature on neighborhood effects, arguing that “the nearly exclusive analytical focus on [disadvantaged neighborhoods] has the unintentional consequence of downplaying the role that advantaged neighborhoods play” in producing and perpetuating regional inequality.

⁴ Henry Cisneros, *Regionalism: The New Geography of Opportunity*. (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1995).

⁵ Editors’ Note: We have recommended that essay authors use the term “African American” when referring specifically to descendants of enslaved people in the United States and the more inclusive term “Black” when referring broadly to members of the African diaspora, including African Americans, Caribbean Americans, and Africans. In this way, we seek to acknowledge the unique history and experience of descendants of enslaved people in the United States and also the diversity of backgrounds within the larger Black community. After considerable deliberation, we have also recommended the capitalization of Black and White. Though both are labels for socially-constructed racial categories, we join organizations like Race Forward and the Center for the Study of Social Policy in recognizing Black as a culture to be respected with capitalization and White and Whiteness as a social privilege to be called out. All references in this essay to Black/African-American, White, or Asian populations refer to non-Hispanic/Latinx individuals unless otherwise noted.

⁶ Junia Howell, “The Unstudied Reference Neighborhood: Towards a Critical Theory of Empirical Neighborhood Studies,” *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 1 (2018).

⁷ Office of the Secretary, HUD, “Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing, A Rule by the Housing and Urban Development Department,” *Federal Register* 80, no. 136 (July 16, 2015): 42271, <https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2015-17032>

⁸ Office of the Secretary, HUD, “Section 5.154 (d)(2)(ii) and (d)(3),” *Federal Register* 80, no. 136 (July 16, 2015): 42355.

⁹ Taylor Shelton, “Rethinking the RECAP: Mapping the Relational Geographies of Concentrated Poverty and Affluence in Lexington, Kentucky,” *Urban Geography* 39, no.7 (2018): 1070-1091.; Edward G. Goetz, Rashad A. Williams, Anthony Damiano, “Whiteness and Urban Planning,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 86, no. 2 (2020): 142-156.; Junia Howell, “The Truly advantaged: Examining the Effects of Privileged Places on Educational Attainment,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2019): 420-438.

A policy paradigm has emerged from this discursive focus, one that references a “geography of opportunity”¹⁰ and the need to facilitate the movement of people out of RECAPs and into such “opportunity neighborhoods.” This “opportunity paradigm” dominates much of contemporary housing and community development practice. Shifts in housing policy have come to emphasize the dispersal of subsidized housing and the mobility of low-income households out of these areas and into neighborhoods of opportunity as a means of addressing problems of concentrated poverty. Governments, prodded by fair housing advocates who disapprove of subsidized housing construction in low-income communities of color, pursue policies of dispersal and mobility. State housing finance agencies modify their qualified allocation plans¹¹ for the [Low-Income Housing Tax Credit](#) (LIHTC) program so as to increase the number of projects developed in “opportunity neighborhoods.”¹² Foundations such as MacArthur and Ford have oriented their giving to support the access of disadvantaged families to opportunity areas and to support “opportunity mapping” so that local policy stakeholders are clear about where such opportunity does and does not exist. With the emergence of various national nonprofits focused on the opportunity agenda, such as [Opportunity Insights](#), the adoption of the opportunity framework by longer-standing initiatives such as [Poverty & Race Research Action Council](#), and the national reach of continued research¹³ on the benefits of moving to opportunity, it is clear that a small industry has emerged with the objective of seeing that low-income families are able to move out of their neighborhoods and, presumably, into opportunity.

Finding Value in Their Communities

For activists in low-wealth neighborhoods and communities of color, the opportunity paradigm presents a set of interesting questions. What does the opportunity paradigm say, for example, about their communities, other than that they are places to leave? If public and philanthropic investment is channeled into opportunity neighborhoods and into mobility programs, what does this mean for investment in communities that experts feel lack opportunity? How is opportunity being conceptualized and measured, and do these practices presuppose conditions in communities of color?

¹⁰ George Galster and Sean P. Killen, “The Geography of Metropolitan Opportunity: A Reconnaissance and Conceptual Framework,” *Housing Policy Debate* 6, no.1 (1995): 7-43.

¹¹ Bryan P. Grady and Carlie J. Boos, “Qualified Allocation Plans as an Instrument of Mixed-Income Placemaking,” in *What Works to Promote Inclusive, Equitable Mixed-Income Communities*, eds. Mark L. Joseph and Amy T. Khare (San Francisco: San Francisco Federal Reserve, 2020).

¹² Carolina K. Reid, “Rethinking ‘Opportunity’ in the Siting of Affordable Housing in California: Resident Perspectives on the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit,” *Housing Policy Debate* 29, no. 4 (2019): 645-669

¹³ “Moving to Opportunity (MTO) for Fair Housing Demonstration Program,” accessed August 28, 2020, <https://www.nber.org/mtopublic/>

Activists in these communities identify the narrative around RECAPs as a deficit narrative.¹⁴ The assumption of mobility programs is that movement from these neighborhoods is widely desired by residents and should be supported through targeted subsidies. This approach to policy has the effect of stigmatizing low-wealth communities of color, branding them as deficient and problematic. By orienting our analysis and policy on RECAPs and on facilitating the escape from RECAPs, we problematize and stigmatize these communities. This discourse and associated advocacy provide a rationale both for redevelopment and displacement, and for housing policy that focuses on mobility (i.e., moving people out of RECAPs) rather than one focused on investment, neighborhood stability, and a “right to stay put.”¹⁵

Increasingly, some residents of such communities are expressing both resentment and resistance to such a narrative and are beginning to more assertively present a counter-narrative about the value of their communities and about the policy responses that they consider to further regional equity. In this paper we examine the work of community organizations in the Twin Cities region of Minneapolis-St. Paul to redefine regional equity in ways that include “building the economic, cultural, political, human and social capital of the places people of color already call home.”¹⁶

An Alternative to the Mobility/Opportunity Framework

The emerging community-based response to the opportunity framework has a discursive element, a policy element, and a political element. Discursively, the dominant narrative that identifies RECAPs as the central problem of regional equity is being challenged. In policy terms, the dominant paradigm focusing on mobility (moving people to “opportunity”) is being challenged. In political terms, residents of low-wealth communities of color are demanding a place at the table when decisions about their communities are being made.

Resistance to the opportunity framework’s negative narrative has been seen, for example, in the context of public housing redevelopment. Residents of public housing in cities across the country actively resisted the demolition and/or redevelopment of their homes and pushed back against the deficit narrative about their communities.¹⁷ These residents attempted to establish a counter-narrative about their neighborhoods as a “homeplace” where the “common project of living” is pursued in often close-knit communities.¹⁸ Attempts to assert their communities as

¹⁴ Nelima Munene Sitati, “Speaking Up on Race, Housing, and Opportunity in Minnesota,” *Shelterforce*, January 11, 2019, <https://shelterforce.org/2019/01/11/speaking-up-on-race-housing-and-opportunity-in-minnesota/>.

¹⁵ Chester Hartman, “The Right to Stay Put,” In *Land Reform, American Style*, eds. Charles Geisler and Frank Popper (Totowa: Rowman and Allanheld, 1984), 302-318.

¹⁶ Equity In Place, *Equity In Place: Investment, Access, Opportunity*. July 15, 2015. Available from author.

¹⁷ Edward G. Goetz, “The Audacity of HOPE VI: Discourse and the Dismantling of Public Housing,” *Cities* 35 (2013): 342-348.

¹⁸ Lynne C. Manzo, Rachel G. Kleit, and Dawn Couch, “Moving Three Times is Like Having Your House On Fire Once”: The Experience of Place and Impending Displacement Among Public Housing Residents,” *Urban studies* 45,

places of value and worth defending was a common theme across many cases of tenant resistance to public housing demolition.¹⁹

More recently, tenant activists in several cities across the country are fighting deficit narratives being applied to their communities. In San Francisco, for example, conflict between ostensible allies, the Yes In My Backyard (YIMBY) activists and tenant's rights activists, has erupted over housing policy decisions and definitions of equitable development. California housing activists have for years tried to reduce barriers of exclusionary zoning in order to make affordable housing more widely available. Conflicts have arisen when certain YIMBY activists and organizations have conflated the fears expressed by low-income communities of color of gentrification due to upzoning with the exclusionary NIMBYism of affluent White communities.²⁰ Rejecting the YIMBY vs. NIMBY binary, community activists have developed their own narratives about what equitable investment looks like in their communities.²¹ These tensions came to a head in 2018 when tenant activists from communities of color were shouted down by YIMBY activists for expressing concerns about a state-level zoning bill.²² In particular, the community advocates were concerned that the bill lacked sufficient protections for gentrifying communities. Rally speaker Shanti Singh, a member of the local chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), tweeted afterward:

*"What I saw today happen to Black, Latinx, and Asian activists from working-class SF communities when they tried to speak about their struggle ... was absolutely infuriating and pathetic. Shouted over by White people. Is there a more perfect encapsulation of our urban history?"*²³

no.9 (2008): 1855-1878.; Right to the City Alliance. *We Call These Projects Home: Solving the Housing Crisis From the Ground Up*. Brooklyn, NY: Right to the City Alliance, 2010.

¹⁹ John Arena, *Driven from New Orleans: How Nonprofits Betray Public Housing and Promote Privatization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).; Amy L. Howard, *More than Shelter: Activism and Community in San Francisco Public Housing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).;

Martine August, "It's All About Power and You Have None: The Marginalization of Tenant Resistance to Mixed-Income Social Housing Redevelopment in Toronto, Canada," *Cities* 57 (2016): 25-32.; Amy L. Howard and Thad Williamson, "Reframing public housing in Richmond, Virginia: Segregation, resident resistance and the future of redevelopment," *Cities* 57 (2016): 33-39.; Antonio Raciti, Katherine A. Lambert-Pennington, and Kenneth M. Reardon, "The Struggle for the Future of Public Housing in Memphis, Tennessee: Reflections on HUD's Choice Neighborhoods Planning Program," *Cities* 57 (2016): 6-13.

²⁰ Joe Fitzgerald Rodriguez, "SB 827 Rallies End with YIMBYs Shouting Down Protesters of Color," *The San Francisco Examiner*, April 5, 2018.

²¹ Florian Oppilard, "Resisting the Politics of Displacement in the San Francisco Bay Area: Anti-gentrification Activism in the Tech Boom 2.0.," *European Journal of American Studies* 10, no.3 (2015).

²² Rodriguez, "SB 827"

²³ Toshio Meronik, "YIMBYs Exposed: The Techies Hawking Free Market 'Solutions' to the Nation's Housing Crisis." *In These Times*, May/June 2018,

http://inthesetimes.com/features/yimbys_activists_san_francisco_housing_crisis.html

We also see the assertion of a counter vision of regional equity in the efforts of activists in several cities to establish “community preference” policies that would enhance the chances of residents to resist their own displacement and to remain in their communities. In New York City, community activists support the city’s policy of community preference. Rafael Cestero, President and CEO of The Community Preservation Corporation, sees community preference as a way “to recognize the claims of those who want to stay and to participate” in the redevelopment of historically marginalized communities, and to “rebuild the fabric of a neighborhood.”²⁴ Residents of low-wealth communities of color in Seattle, WA, for example, urged their city council to create a policy that gives residents priority access to subsidized housing built in their neighborhoods:

*We are of the Central District, the CID, and Rainier Valley [neighborhoods in Seattle]. These neighborhoods are our home, because we were not permitted to settle wherever we wanted to in Seattle due to redlining and covenants. We built strong communities with networks of civic institutions, houses of worship, and businesses that met our cultural needs. Our networks do not survive when our constituent base is dispersed, yet such networks are essential in an equitable city, and essential to ensuring that Seattle can become the safe and welcoming place for all that we aspire to be but aren't yet.*²⁵

Initiatives to enhance the ability of residents to stay in their communities enjoy strong support in a number of cities.²⁶ The efforts of residents to recognize the value of their communities and to preserve their place in those communities is a form of resistance to the opportunity framework. Often, it is met with paternalistic assurances that policymakers know better what is good for these communities²⁷ or the hostility of those claiming that (re)development will improve these neighborhoods²⁸ or the antagonism of fair housing advocates who see in these efforts a threat to fair housing goals of integration.²⁹

²⁴ Natalie Bicknell, “Community Resident Preference: Policy and the Fight Against Displacement in Seattle,” *The Urbanist*, July 23, 2018, <https://www.theurbanist.org/2018/07/23/community-resident-preference-policy-and-the-fight-against-displacement-in-seattle/>.

²⁵ Bicknell, “Community Resident Preference”

²⁶ Henry Grabar, “Obama Administration to San Francisco: Your Anti-Gentrification Plan Promotes Segregation,” *Slate*, August 17, 2016, <https://slate.com/business/2016/08/a-local-preference-affordable-housing-plan-in-san-francisco-might-violate-the-fair-housing-act.html>.; Phillip Jankowski, “Austin Task Force Trumpets ‘Right to Return’ Policy to Fight Gentrification,” *The Statesman*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.statesman.com/news/20181128/austin-task-force-trumpets-right-to-return-policy-to-fight-gentrification>.

²⁷ Henry Cisneros, “A New Moment for People and Cities,” In *From Despair to Hope: HOPE VI and the New Promise of Public Housing in America’s Cities*, ed. Henry G. Cisneros and Lora Engdahl (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 3-14.; Renee Glover, *AHA Lessons Learned* (blog), August 17, 2008, ahalessonslearned.blogspot.com/2009_08_01archive.html.

²⁸ Rodriguez, “SB 827”

²⁹ Catherine Hart, “Community preference in New York City,” *Seton Hall Law Review* 47 (2017): 881-912.

Asserting a Different Vision of Regional Equity in Minneapolis - Saint Paul

In the following pages we present a case example of community organizations working in low-wealth communities of color attempting to assert a vision of regional equity that does not label their own communities as problems to be fixed and that does not revolve around policies and incentives to facilitate the movement of people out of those communities. The analysis centers on the work of a coalition of place-based, housing, and advocacy groups called [Equity In Place](#) (EIP). We rely on observational analysis, participant observation, informant interviews, and public document review. One of the authors observed EIP meetings and sat in on the meetings of the region's Fair Housing Advisory Committee (FHAC) over a period of 12 months when EIP fought to get its vision of regional equity recognized by regional and federal housing officials. [The Center for Urban and Regional Affairs](#) (CURA) at the University of Minnesota, where the authors work, collaborated with EIP during the events described here.

“Equity In Place.” EIP first arose in response to the Metropolitan Council's decennial regional plan, [Thrive MSP 2040](#). [The Metropolitan Council](#) is the regional planning body of the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metropolitan area and *Thrive MSP 2040* is the Council's 30-year growth plan (which the Council creates anew every 10 years). As a prelude to *Thrive MSP 2040*, the Council conducted a Fair Housing Equity Assessment³⁰ that, in accordance with HUD's directives, placed strong emphasis on the identification of both RECAPs and “high opportunity areas.”³¹ EIP activists pushed back by offering two specific reframings, the “White Proximity Model” and the “racially concentrated area of affluence.”

The White Proximity Model. Throughout the FHAC process, EIP members were honing their message and fleshing out a discursive strategy that would challenge the opportunity framework's deficit narrative. After a Metropolitan Council meeting in 2015 in which “tipping points” were cited as a concern, the concept of the White Proximity Model was formulated by three EIP activists. The White Proximity Model attempts to summarize the practical implications of the opportunity framework and the mobility policy recommendations that flow from it. As Figure 1 depicts, opportunity was, in the eyes of the EIP activists, often implicitly synonymized with Whiteness. This implicit valorization of White places as high opportunity further stigmatizes low-income communities of color while obscuring the structural forces that perpetuate racial inequality. The graphic is an attempt to distill and amplify what EIP regarded as the paternalistic and racially based assumptions embodied in opportunity and mobility policy, and to make it visually obvious. While the problematic logic of the White proximity mindset

³⁰ Metropolitan Council of the Twin Cities, 2014. *Choice, Place, and Opportunity: An Equity Assessment of the Twin Cities Region*. Saint Paul, MN. <https://metrocouncil.org/Planning/Projects/Thrive-2040/Choice-Place-and-Opportunity.aspx>.

³¹ Interview #9.

seemed to evade the comprehension of fair housers and policymakers, its dog whistles were deafening to EIP and the constituents it represented.

Fig. 1:
WHITE PROXIMITY MODEL

Are you black or brown?
Life got you down?
Do you live in the central city?
Can't find a job?
Kids not doing well in school?
Well then do I have a solution for you!

Hi. My name is Brad. I'm white.
And where I go, opportunity follows.*
You should follow me, too.

Leave your friends behind,
the neighborhood you grew up in,
and the networks of support
you've come to trust.

*The White Proximity Model

of white people living in a place

amount of opportunity

With the introduction of the White Proximity Model into the lexicon of local planning and policymaking in the Minneapolis - Saint Paul region, EIP effected a conceptual and discursive shift that would no longer grant Whiteness invisibility in discussions of what constitutes “opportunity.”

Racially Concentrated Areas of Affluence. EIP activists also mounted an attack on the preoccupation of policymakers, both federal and local, with RECAPs. As one EIP activist indicated during the 2040 regional planning process, the group:

...highlighted the failure of systems to name racially concentrated areas of wealth as also being segregated, as these tend to be mainly affluent White communities. In identifying areas with White concentrations of wealth, we sought to dispel the myth that some areas are poor because people of the same race live together and that certain races prosper

*when they live together. The real reason why communities of color living together are poor is because of the discrimination that occurs when these communities choose to live together, and that is what needs to be solved for.*³²

Researchers at the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, one of the partner organizations in EIP, took the idea of examining areas of concentrated White affluence and produced an analysis of Racially Concentrated Area of Affluence (RCAA).³³ The study examines the prevalence and characteristics of RCAs in the 50 largest metropolitan areas of the U.S. We accepted EIP's argument that the spatial patterns of White affluence in American metropolitan areas are an equally important facet of racial/economic segregation in the U.S., and their attempt to change the public narrative about "problematic" neighborhoods in the region, to surface the privilege and advantage of White affluence in the region, and to spur investigation of spaces of White affluence and the social, political, and economic structures that create and perpetuate them.

RCAs are more than just the other end of the segregation continuum in American metropolitan areas. They also represent the economic returns to living in predominately White places, and they highlight the importance of examining wealthy White places in particular. As such, they shift the analytic gaze away from low-wealth communities of color and toward what has served as the unexamined reference neighborhood in urban politics, the White middle- and upper-middle-class community.³⁴ EIP's objective in naming RCAs as an object for analysis was to reveal widely held policy positions that assume "the normality and superiority of White middle-class space."³⁵

Figure 2 shows that the advantages of Whiteness are not equally experienced but, in fact, redound more abundantly to the wealthy than to the working class. Following Shapiro,³⁶ we argue that property wealth through homeownership in majority White space is the chief factor for the wide disparity in wealth between Whites and Blacks. The exclusivity of high-end White space is the primary driver of wealth disparities and is a system that self-perpetuates. Property wealth begets better education, it finances greater investments in human capital, and it allows for intergenerational transfer of wealth that solidifies class standing and related advantage. It is, as a result, one of the most visible mechanisms of White supremacy.

³² Nelima Sitati Munene, "Speaking Up on Race, Housing, and Opportunity in Minnesota," *Shelterforce*, January 11, 2019, <https://shelterforce.org/2019/01/11/speaking-up-on-race-housing-and-opportunity-in-minnesota/>.

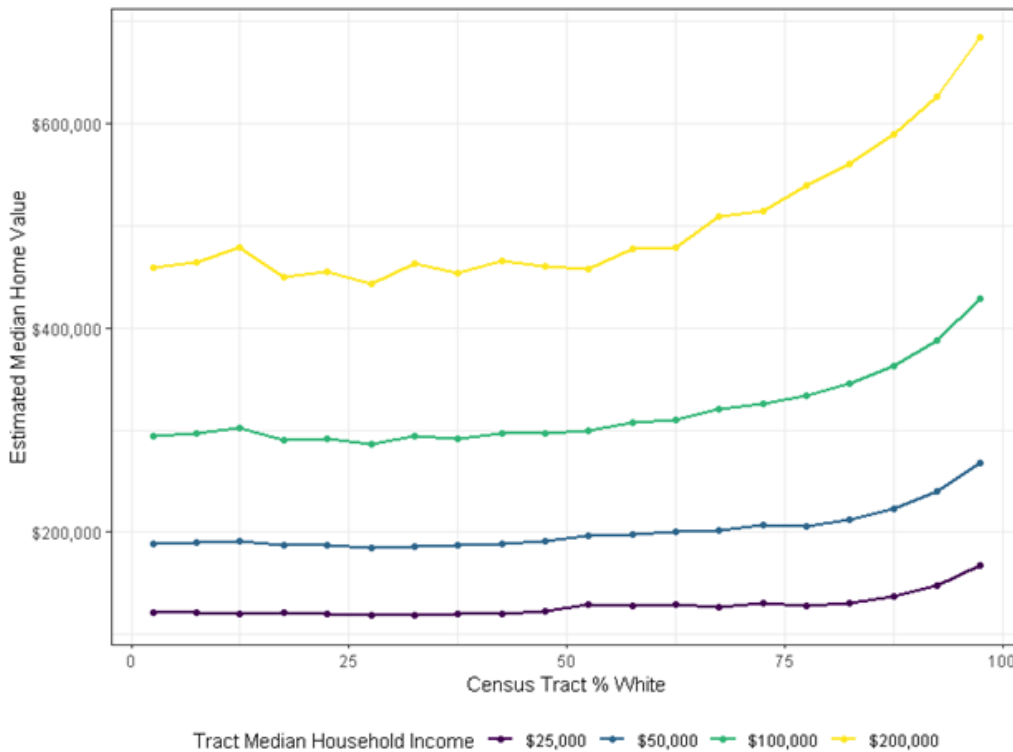
³³ Edward G. Goetz, Anthony Damiano, Rashad A. Williams, "Racially Concentrated Areas of Affluence: A Preliminary Investigation," *Cityscape* 21 no. 1 (2019): 99-123.

³⁴ Goetz, Williams, and Damiano, "Whiteness and Urban Planning"

³⁵ Junia Howell, "The Unstudied Reference Neighborhood: Towards a Critical Theory of Empirical Neighborhood Studies," *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 1 (2018).

³⁶ Thomas Shapiro, *Toxic Inequality: How America's Wealth Gap Destroys Mobility, Deepens the Racial Divide, and Threatens Our Future*, (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

**Fig. 2:
ESTIMATED MEDIAN HOME VALUES BY CENSUS TRACT PERCENTAGE WHITE
AT DIFFERENT MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME LEVELS**



The model in Figure 2 estimates the marginal effect between Whiteness and home values in the census tracts of the largest 50 metropolitan areas in the U.S. at various median household income levels after controlling for other characteristics associated with home values. Each of the lines shows that as the percentage White in census tracts increases, so does the median home value. Three things are noticeable in the graph. First, the benefits of Whiteness, though in place across the spectrum of tracts, are greatest where Whiteness is concentrated. That is, the relationship between Whiteness and property wealth is non-linear, with the positive relationship becoming steeper where percentage White is the highest. Second, this pattern is most pronounced for higher-income tracts. Finally, the point of inflection (i.e., the degree of “Whiteness” necessary to trigger exponential benefits) is lower in wealthier neighborhoods than it is in low-income neighborhoods. That is to say, the benefits of Whiteness are greater in the most affluent communities.

The hope of EIP activists is that the concept of racially concentrated areas of affluence will move scholarship on urban problems away from an exclusive concern for low-wealth communities of color and their dynamics, and toward a more holistic consideration of the entire range of communities within metropolitan areas, including the systems of structural and

institutional racism that produce concentrated poverty and concentrated wealth, Black segregation, and White segregation. An expansion of scholarship of this type could inform a different policy perspective among public officials and philanthropic funders, allowing for a wider range of approaches to solving issues of regional equity than is currently employed within the opportunity paradigm.

Politically, the concept of racially concentrated areas of affluence is an example of flipping the script. By introducing it into their advocacy work, EIP succeeded in broadening the scope of fair housing analysis in the Twin Cities, producing a situation in which a fair housing analysis had to take into account segregation at both ends of the continuum. In the case we present below, we show how fair housing analysis in the Twin Cities moved away from what EIP advocates argued was a framework that problematized low-wealth communities of color and ignored segregation among affluent Whites. The concept of racially concentrated areas of affluence became a way for advocates to assert that the forces that produced concentrations of poverty were the same that produced concentrations of wealth. As we outline below, this was instrumental in the ability of community activists to effectively argue that fair housing policy must encompass a broader range of concerns than local policymakers initially envisioned. Specifically, EIP was able to force an analysis that acknowledged both the value of existing low-wealth communities of color and the problems associated with concentrated White affluence.

Reconceptualizing Regional Equity through Fair Housing Analysis. Tensions around the idea of “opportunity” and the racial dimensions of equity implied in the RECAP formulation intensified in 2014 when a fair housing legal challenge in the Twin Cities provided a chance for EIP to build power and advance its vision of fair housing and racial equity. The case arose from a complaint brought by three Minneapolis neighborhood organizations and a regional fair housing organization centered in the Minneapolis suburbs. The complaint alleged that Minneapolis and St. Paul failed in their obligations to affirmatively further fair housing by building a disproportionate amount of affordable housing in high-poverty communities of color or RECAPs.³⁷ This challenge echoed previous cases in other parts of the country.³⁸ According to EIP, however, none of the organizations initiating the Minneapolis - Saint Paul case had a reasonable claim to speak on behalf of the communities named in the lawsuit. The neighborhood organizations, while being located in more disadvantaged neighborhoods, had boards and staff disproportionately composed of White homeowners at the time of the complaint.³⁹ In fact, the question of whether city-funded neighborhood organizations truly reflected the demographics of

³⁷ Metropolitan Interfaith Council on Affordable Housing, n.d

³⁸ See for example, *In re Adoption of 2003 Low Income Housing Tax Credit Allocation Plan*, 848 A. 2d 1, 5 (N.J. Super. Ct. App. Divi. 2004), and *Inclusive Communities Project, Inc. v. The Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs*, Complaint filed March 28, 2008, U.S. District Court, Northern District of Texas, Dallas Division. 3:08-CV-546-D, 12.

³⁹ Interview #6

their communities had been an on-going issue in Minneapolis.⁴⁰ This question of representation, especially in wealth and racial/ethnic terms, raised red flags among EIP organizers who immediately voiced concerns about the complaint. As one organizer working in low-wealth communities of color explained, “This began to raise alarm bells. It was like they were doing this over our heads, without us.”⁴¹

It was not just demographics per se that alienated many of the community-based organizations in the EIP coalition; it was also the accompanying deficit narrative around low-wealth communities of color that accompanied the complaint.⁴² As one EIP activist has written:

*The narratives about these neighborhoods usually focus on the negative: their poverty, low-performing schools, etc. Through our work and experience, however, we know that the people who live in these communities benefit from the cultural connections and social networks they create... In my community of Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center [two northern, inner-ring suburbs of Minneapolis], which have some of the fastest growing Racially Concentrated Areas of Poverty, there are many ethnic microbusinesses—immigrant-owned enterprises that provide culturally specific goods and services—that are able to thrive because of the critical mass of immigrant residents.*⁴³

Most of the conversations around the places and spaces were focused on crime, poor schools, and other social pathologies which according to many community-based organizations fail to consider the historical patterns of disinvestment that lead to racialized disadvantage in the first place. From EIP’s summary of the process: “The complaint assumed that affordable housing investments contribute to too many people of color living in poor communities. It ignored the historical and present-day institutional and structural racism that forced people of color into those communities.”⁴⁴ Moreover, EIP activists felt the fair housing complaint illustrated how low-income communities of color are sidelined in conversations around housing justice and the vulnerable status of these communities is used as a way to discredit residents and their organizers as knowledgeable about issues pertaining to their communities.

Soon after the complaint was filed, EIP members began a campaign to pressure both regional and national HUD officials for a seat at the table as the complainants who brought the suit negotiated with local officials of Minneapolis and St. Paul accused of violating fair housing law. This campaign included a combination of “inside game” and “outside game” pressure

⁴⁰ Miguel Otarola, “Minneapolis Wants to Tie Funding to Neighborhood Groups to Their Diversity,” *Minneapolis StarTribune*, January 28, 2019, <http://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-wants-to-tie-funding-of-neighborhood-groups-to-their-diversity/504949652/>.

⁴¹ Interview #6.

⁴² Interview #6.

⁴³ Munene, “Speaking Up on Race”

⁴⁴ Equity in Place, *EIP Evaluation* (unpublished, 2018).

tactics.⁴⁵ Strategies included a letter-writing campaign as well as calls and direct meeting with then HUD Secretary Julian Castro and HUD Region 5 officials. Several state elected officials had also signaled their support of the complaint. EIP took time to meet with each of those legislators and offer their view that the lawsuit was misguided. The goals of these encounters were to explain to HUD administrators and elected officials that the complainants did not represent residents who were most impacted by the lawsuit and who were not granted a seat at the decision-making table, and to advocate that officials commit to a process that included communities of color. Through this consistent pressure, EIP members were able to build relationships with HUD officials. HUD was receptive to these concerns and agreed to include EIP in the resolution of the complaint.

The parties reached a [voluntary compliance agreement](#) (VCA) in May of 2015. The parties agreed to amend the 2014 Regional Analysis of Impediments (AI, a HUD fair housing planning document) to address the concerns of the complainants. In the past, the AI process was performed solely by local government officials from the 13 entitlement districts located in the Twin Cities metro area:

Typically, [the fair housing committee] consisted of 12 White bureaucrats sitting around a table. Again, if you are thinking about this from the standpoint of, “Oh, this is something we have to do,” as opposed to, “How do we do this in a way that’s as meaningful as it can be?”... It shouldn’t be those 12 people making decisions necessarily, around how we identify barriers to fair housing.⁴⁶

Due to the concerns of EIP, as well as HUD’s interest in ensuring the viability of the process, a second advisory body was formed which was called the Fair Housing Advisory Committee (FHAC). The FHAC was a first-of-its-kind committee that would advise in writing an addendum to the 2014 AI.⁴⁷ Due to their lobbying efforts, EIP was given seats on the FHAC. The final make-up of the FHAC consisted of five members representing local governments, four representing the complainants, and four representing EIP; the remainder of participants were chosen by the facilitators from organizations not aligned with any of the above groups.⁴⁸

The VCA specified several tasks for the FHAC. These included the job of recommending a consultant to write the AI Addendum, provide input on the scope of the AI analysis, and

⁴⁵ Karen Chapple and Edward G. Goetz, “Spatial Justice through Regionalism? The Inside Game, the Outside Game, and the Quest for the Spatial Fix in the United States,” *Community Development* 42, no.4 (2011): 458-475.; David Imbroscio, "Shaming the Inside Game: A Critique of the Liberal Expansionist Approach to Addressing Urban Problems," *Urban Affairs Review* 42, no. 2 (2006): 224-248.

⁴⁶ Interview #3, local government official.

⁴⁷ HUD Case 05-15-0007-6

⁴⁸ Chip Halbach, *A New Approach to Fair Housing Community Engagement*. (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Housing Partnership, 2017), <http://www.mhponline.org/images/stories/docs/research/A-New-Approach-to-Fair-Housing-Community-Engagement.pdf>

provide recommendations about the specific strategies needed to overcome impediments to fair housing. The FHAC met for a series of 12 monthly meetings between March 2016 and May 2017.

In the background of this conversation was a heated discourse between differing visions of fair housing. The conflict between EIP and the complainants mirrors a larger debate in housing policy between the relative merits of investing in affordable housing in disadvantaged communities and using scarce resources to invest in affordable housing in wealthier, Whiter “high opportunity” communities.⁴⁹ The complainants aligned themselves with the view that their neighborhoods already had their “fair share” of affordable housing and that claimed that more subsidized housing in those neighborhoods would concentrate poverty. EIP, on the other hand, aligned themselves more closely with the view that while mobility is important, it is also important to build affordable housing in disadvantaged communities that often disproportionately suffer from poor housing conditions, disinvestment, and high housing cost burdens on the one hand and are vulnerable to gentrification and displacement on the other.

EIP had a profound impact on the process and was able to achieve several important wins during the AI Addendum planning process. First, they were able to persuade others on the committee about the problematic framing of communities of color using narrative storytelling and personal experience. As Sandercock⁵⁰ states, when there is a power imbalance between planners and disadvantaged communities, personal narrative and storytelling become important sources of knowledge and power in planning. One housing organizer from St. Paul shared with FAHC members problems that she had had with housing stability in her own life. She talked about how her family had been displaced multiple times in the past several years. She noted that she didn’t have a choice to move, but was constrained by living wherever she can afford:

Most wealthy people don’t have to think about those things. Frogtown is beautiful and the culture is vibrant and now outsiders get to choose to replace me. Talking about race and why people of color or people with low incomes feel dispossessed as if resources dictate their decisions for them is a critical aspect of the conversation.⁵¹

EIP also secured a mandatory anti-racism training for all members of the FHAC. According to the evaluation report prepared for HUD and our interviews with participants, the training was well received by stakeholders, including HUD officials. One HUD official said, “I

⁴⁹ Galster and Killen, “The Geography of Metropolitan Opportunity”; Edward G. Goetz, *The One-way Street of Integration: Fair Housing and the Pursuit of Racial Justice in American Cities* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Kirk McClure, “The Prospects for Guiding Housing Choice Voucher Households to High-Opportunity Neighborhoods,” *Cityscape* 12 no. 3 (2010): 101-122.

⁵⁰ Leonie Sandercock, “Out of the Closet: The Importance of Stories and Storytelling in Planning Practice,” *Planning Theory & Practice* 4, no. 1 (2003): 11-28.

⁵¹ EIP member, Fair Housing Advisory Committee Minutes, July 27, 2016.

went into the meeting thinking, ‘I’m hip, liberal, and open minded,’ but there were so many things I didn’t know and hadn’t thought about. There were a lot of things that pushed me a bit which was really powerful.”⁵²

In addition to centering disadvantaged communities and their history in the planning process, EIP sought to influence the outreach and engagement part of the planning process. Instead of hiring a single, outside consultant to lead the engagement process, EIP insisted instead that organizations with pre-existing ties to the community be used. EIP believed this would improve trust and the quality of engagement. EIP secured \$71,000 in micro-grants for community organizations throughout the Twin Cities metro area for community engagement, with a focus on reaching low-wealth communities of color as well as immigrant communities. Organizations participating in the FHAC that represented immigrant communities noted that many of their constituents are undocumented and that they would feel more comfortable voicing their concerns to these trusted voices rather than to an unknown outside facilitator. EIP noted in its evaluation of the process that “with more local control and less reliance on generic narratives, we could better challenge the ... narrative that segregation was the main fair housing issue in the region. Instead, we elevated the real concerns of people of color.”⁵³ To EIP organizers, gentrification and displacement were fair housing concerns, and they fought for those issues to be considered by the FAHC as fair housing issues. In the view of EIP, the original AI focused almost exclusively on concentrated poverty and neighborhood decline while ignoring how gentrification disproportionately affects communities of color and the ability of people of color to remain in their neighborhoods. It took the efforts of EIP to broaden the scope of the discussion about what issues should and should not be considered a part of fair housing. As a result, the final recommendations for the AI Addendum included specific policy goals to mitigate gentrification and displacement.

Conclusion and Impact

EIP’s work has had concrete impacts on the conversation around regional equity in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul. Discursively, EIP was able to effectively undermine the stigmatizing narrative of concentrated poverty and the unstated assumptions behind the opportunity paradigm. Both the White Proximity Model and the concept of RCAs helped to reset the regional conversation, directing policymakers away from an exclusive focus on low-wealth communities of color. Politically, EIP activists were able to get community residents to the decision-making tables for a range of policy decisions, from transportation and sustainability to housing.⁵⁴ Their work has produced policy impacts as well. The group was able to convince

⁵² EIP member, Fair Housing Advisory Committee Minutes, April 19, 2017.

⁵³ Equity in Place, *EIP Evaluation* (unpublished, 2018).

⁵⁴ Edward G. Goetz, “Transit Expansion and the Pursuit of Equity in Development and Growth in Minneapolis-St.

federal housing officials to broaden and to deepen their understanding and analysis of regional inequities, to expand notions of acceptable policy response beyond mobility and concerns about deepening pockets of concentrated poverty, and to raise more fundamental questions of discrimination and power differentials.

EIP's campaign for reframing regional equity originates in a desire to assert the value of existing low-wealth communities of color, and in response to an opportunity paradigm that too often locates the policy problem within those communities and the policy solution in the movement of households out of those communities. As such, the group is arguing for regional and racial equity approach that acknowledges existing assets within low-wealth communities of color, including local business with cultural connections to existing residents. It is, in essence, a "Right to the City" position, a demand that the integrity of the community be recognized and their place in the community be safeguarded.

The group is agnostic on the specific question of mixed-income communities—pointing out, in effect, that racially concentrated areas of affluence demonstrate that segregation *per se* should not be equated with disadvantage.⁵⁵ The disadvantages of low-wealth communities of color, they argue, are not a result of segregation but of the historic and contemporary forms of racism that exploit communities of color. Thus, the EIP position neither accepts nor denies the argument for mixed-income communities, either the fairness case or the utilitarian justification as outlined by Khare and Joseph⁵⁶ in the introductory essay of this collection. Instead, EIP's position operates within a paradigm that asserts the fundamental dignity of low-wealth communities of color and demands that dignity be acknowledged and defended by public policy and community development initiatives.

In the context of gentrification and displacement pressures, the EIP position aligns with the objective of mixed income communities in that it is meant to ensure that changes in the housing market do not result in a complete neighborhood turnover. This alignment, though, results from a desire to maintain a claim to community rather than a belief in the intrinsic utility of mixed income communities.

Implications for Action

Implications for Policy. The work of EIP and other organizations across the country suggest an approach to housing and community development policy that moves away from the

Paul, Minnesota," in *Community Livability: Issues and Approaches to Sustaining the Well-Being of People and Communities*, eds. Fritz Wagner and Roger W. Caves (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2019), 113-122.

⁵⁵ William A. Darity Jr., and A. Kirsten Mullen, *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

⁵⁶ Amy T. Khare and Mark L. Joseph, "Introduction: Prioritizing Inclusion and Equity," in *What Works to Promote Inclusive, Equitable Mixed-Income Communities*, eds. Mark L. Joseph and Amy T. Khare (San Francisco: San Francisco Federal Reserve, 2020).

“opportunity paradigm” emphasizing the integration of people of color into White space, and instead focuses on building capacity and power with communities of color. This implies greater emphasis on local, collective ownership of land and assets, such as community land trusts for housing and businesses. It implies, too, policies like “community preference” that recognize the ties residents have with their communities and allows residents preference for subsidized housing units built in their neighborhoods to offset racially disparate patterns of displacement.⁵⁷ The set of policies offered by Steil and Delgado⁵⁸ under the concept of “anti-subordination planning” are also applicable in that they are meant to center “the agonistic relations that structure democracy and questions the legitimacy of customs and policies that rationalize the social position of established groups.”⁵⁹

Implications for Research and Evaluation. The work to challenge the opportunity paradigm suggests a number of research approaches. First, it demonstrates the importance of scholarship not just on RECAPs and segregated communities of color but on White communities as well, and on the advantages and sociopolitical dynamics of exclusionary White affluence, where the returns to Whiteness are greatest. Though we have begun an examination of racially concentrated areas of affluence⁶⁰ there is much more to explore about the segregation of White affluence, including the regional differences we found in the prevalence of RCAAs, and the social, economic, and political conditions associated with these types of neighborhoods.

Investigating the potential linkages between RCAAs and RECAPs is another important avenue for research. Shelton⁶¹ examined RCAAs in Lexington, KY and found that high-poverty communities of color and areas of exclusive White affluence are linked by “flows of property ownership and rent extraction” that channel capital from the former to the latter. Similarly, Taylor⁶² noted in her history of the FHA that exclusive White suburbs and deteriorating central city neighborhoods were “dialectically connected” during the postwar period of suburbanization. National media outlets, such as City Lab, have reported on the idea as well, placing a spotlight on the need for a more comprehensive assessment of metropolitan inequities.⁶³

⁵⁷ Rafael Cestero, “An Inclusionary Tool Created by Low-Income Communities for Low-Income Communities,” in *The Dream Revisited: Contemporary Debates About Housing, Segregation, and Opportunity*, eds. Ingrid Ellen and Justin Steil (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

⁵⁸ Justin P. Steil and Laura H. Delgado, Limits of Diversity: Jane Jacobs, the Just City, and Anti-Subordination, *Cities* 91 (August 2019): 39-48.

⁵⁹ Justin Steil, Antisubordination Planning, *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 1, no. 10 (August 2018):1-10.

⁶⁰ Edward G. Goetz, Anthony Damiano, Rashad A. Williams, “Racially Concentrated Areas of Affluence: A Preliminary Investigation,” *Cityscape* 21 no. 1 (2019): 99-123.

⁶¹ Taylor Shelton, “Rethinking the RECAP: Mapping the Relational Geographies of Concentrated Poverty and Affluence in Lexington, Kentucky,” *Urban Geography* 39, no.7 (2018): 1070-1091.

⁶² Taylor, Keeanga Yamhatta. *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019.

⁶³ Alana Semuels, “Where the White People Live,” *The Atlantic*, April 10, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/04/where-the-white-people-live/390153/>.; Alexis Stephens, “How the Rich Benefit from Handouts More than the Poor,” *Next City*, April 14, 2015.

Implications for Development and Investment. EIP’s reframing of regional equity implies a development and investment strategy that does not focus on enhancing or forcing the access of low-income people of color to so-called opportunity neighborhoods. Instead, investments in affordable housing development should continue to occur in communities where households are paying large portions of their income for substandard and low-quality housing. Affordable housing investments should also be responsive to patterns of gentrification and displacement pressures, allowing for true affordability so that residents can, if they so choose, remain in neighborhoods where they have built social support networks, and where they have cultural and familial connections. Simultaneously, development and investment that challenges the economic exclusionism of White, affluent communities should also be supported.

Implications for Residents and Community Members. EIP’s work demonstrates the importance of a three-pronged approach to challenge the opportunity framework. EIP sought to change the ways in which low-wealth communities of color are talked about within policy circles, and by doing so they surfaced the unexamined role that exclusive communities of White affluence play in maintaining spatial inequalities. This work had direct implications for the policy solutions that were considered in the areas of housing, community development, and infrastructure investment in the Twin Cities. Finally, their insistence on a place at the table has established an expectation in the region that residents do possess an expertise about their lives and their communities that must be considered in policymaking.

<https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/rich-benefit-handouts-to-the-poor.>; Lawrence Lanahan, “How Do We Get White People Out of Their ‘Racially Concentrated Areas of Affluence?’” *Zocalo, Public Square*, July 31, 2019. [https://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2019/07/31/how-do-we-get-white-people-out-of-their-racially-concentrated-areas-of-affluence/ideas/essay/.](https://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2019/07/31/how-do-we-get-white-people-out-of-their-racially-concentrated-areas-of-affluence/ideas/essay/)

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Readers can view this essay, the [framing paper](#) for the volume, and all currently posted essays on NIMC's [website](#) where new pieces are being uploaded every month. Essays will be compiled and released in a final print volume, with an anticipated release in 2020.

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