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Disrupting the order of things: Public housing tenant organizing for material, political and epistemological justice

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ABSTRACT

Since the advent of public housing in the U.S., tenants have played an integral role in both fostering environments where they can flourish, and, when needed, organizing to hold public housing authorities and government officials accountable for providing the material resources necessary to maintain and enhance residents' quality of life. In the current era of public housing demolition and redevelopment as mixed-income communities, these organizing efforts have not only centered on minimizing forced displacement, but also for the right to participate as meaningful stakeholders in governing the transformation of the places they call home. While these material and political dimensions of tenant organizing have been the focus of many studies, relatively little research has focused on the epistemological work that organizing performs in challenging and disrupting abstract representations commonly deployed in spatial policy discourse that marginalizes public housing residents as being both victims and causal agents of concentrated and intergenerational poverty. We examine these themes through an analysis of tenant organizing in Nashville, Tennessee's largest public housing development that is slated for demolition and redevelopment. Our study finds that the material and political achievements of tenant organizing were predicated on the epistemological work that residents engaged.

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1. Introduction

Since the advent of widespread public housing during the 1930s, tenant groups have been both active participants in working with housing authorities to create spaces where residents could flourish, and, when needed, engaged in organizing to make demands of the same agencies to improve the physical and social conditions of their communities. Not surprisingly, accounts of tenant organizing underscore the difficulties with attaining everything residents hope to achieve, but they also demonstrate that the act of being political itself can be transformative for individuals, families and the neighborhoods in which they live (Bloom, Umbach, & Vale, 2015). That is, in order to make material claims, residents must gain access to the political processes where decisions about their homes and neighborhoods are made. Furthermore, to be considered legitimate stakeholders in the governance of public housing developments and redevelopment, residents invariably engage in a type of epistemological work that has been given little emphasis in the literature on tenant organizing in public housing. In short, we contend that effective tenant organizing hinges not only on the delineating clear demands and gaining access to political decision-making circles, but as importantly, in the capacity of these groups to challenge the

territorial stigmatization of living in public housing (see, Wacquant, 2008). In this paper we address all three of these (material, political, representational/epistemological) domains with focus on how they impact each other. Our main arguments are that: 1) tenant organizing may produce impactful results in each domain, and that solely focusing on the material outcomes as a barometer of success neglects the myriad of residents' experiences of empowerment; and, 2) the epistemological work that tenant organizing engages – challenging and disrupting the given order of things that partitions public housing residents as the other of normal society – is properly political in a qualitatively different way than simply petitioning the state for resources.

To explore the ways that tenant organizing can be materially, politically and epistemically generative, we offer a case study of Cayce United, a community organizing effort in response to the planned demolition and redevelopment of the largest public housing project in Nashville, Tennessee. Drawing on geographic thought that explicitly connects race and space, and the notion of epistemic resistance, we focus our attention on the efforts of public housing residents to gain authorship of the redevelopment process by strategically moving toward a narrative of *a present that could be otherwise*, which is imagined to include housing and meaningful employment for the residents of Cayce Homes and public housing tenants across the city. We begin by providing a brief review of tenant organizing, and then situate the need for broadening the analytic lens applied to these efforts.

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2. Space, race and tenant organizing

From the onset of public housing, tenant organizations participated in the everyday governance of community relations. Williams (2005) notes, “as early as 1933, across the nation, black and white tenants who lived in subsidized housing took advantage of participatory spaces opened by the government” (p. 46). In particular, African-American groups organized for public housing as a means to alleviate displacement due to urban renewal efforts, “emphasizing the centrality of the home for family, citizenship, and democracy” (Argersinger, 2010, p. 801). During the 1960s, federal funding allocated for public housing failed to rise with the need for maintenance (Schwartz, 2013), and tenant groups around the country organized for capital improvements to dilapidated buildings by petitioning the state for remedy (Baranski, 2007; Feldman & Stall, 2004; Karp, 2014; Matsumaru, 2011; Wolfinger, 2009). While these struggles were often protracted, requiring vigilance on the part of public housing tenants (Maslow-Armand, 1986) in many cases, tenant organizing efforts effectively garnered concessions at the local level and also resulted in federal policy changes (for an excellent review, see Williams, 2005). However, by the mid-1980s, the Reagan administration again cut federal spending for assisted housing programs, this time by over 70%, resulting in dire consequences (Hall & Hula, 1997). During that time and up through today, federal legislation has not only permitted, but encouraged, local housing authorities to raze public housing developments and replace them with subsidized units in newly built mixed-income communities (Goetz, 2012).

While housing demolition has been opposed by tenant organizations in many cities, organizing against it has proved to be a complex and largely unsuccessful undertaking in the context of neoliberal urbanism (Arena, 2012; Bennett, Smith, & Wright, 2006; Howard, 2014). The dismantling of public housing has been constitutive of a broad trend to commoditize urban space by allowing state-owned assets to be leveraged for private sector investment. As neighborhoods surrounding these sites are targeted for revitalization, real estate interests, including city officials, see public housing as an obstacle to real estate-based economic development.

Neoliberal policies relying on a strong interventionist state that supports market mechanisms to dismantle public housing, such as HOPE VI and the Rental Demonstration Program (RAD), need to be understood not only for their political economic underpinnings, but also for the ways in which they reinforce epistemologies of black poverty that perpetuate raced and classed hierarchies. Representations of largely black public housing developments as socially unhealthy, unruly, chaotic, and obsolete are often deployed using the seemingly benign language of ‘concentrated poverty.’ This argument suggests that these sites are detrimental to the residents who reside in them, yet, subtly implies that residents are to blame for the challenges in their communities. This ideological construct has been transformed into scientific fact by sociologists who measure the more benign poverty rate and correlate it with a host of indicators that invariably measure the existence of social problems. Indeed, a veritable cottage industry has formed for the purpose of using some quite sophisticated modeling generating results that are reported as ‘threshold effects’, or in layperson’s terms, the point at which people in poverty living in the same place leads to bad stuff. Politicians, armed with this corpus of scientific knowledge, can then make a case that public housing developments, which by design have high rates of poverty, need to be transformed into mixed-income neighborhoods (DeFilippis & Fraser, 2010; Goetz, 2013).

It is not the intent of this paper to cover the scholarly literature on the merits of razing public housing developments and the creation of mixed-income neighborhoods in their place, as there are already analyses of the elusive benefits of mixed-income housing for those socioeconomically disadvantaged (Fraser, Chaskin, & Bazuin, 2013; Levy, McDade, & Bertumen, 2011; Popkin, 2010). Rather, we suggest that the concentrated poverty thesis is ideological. It is rarely applied to

groups other than very low-income, black populations residing in urban neighborhoods and public housing developments, and is commonly deployed by academics and politicians alike to give explanation for black ‘intergenerational poverty.’ Together these terms imply a softer, gentler more covert form of the ‘culture of poverty’ argument suggesting that there is something dysfunctional or lacking in, for example, public housing residents. In this way, the spatial policy discourse used to justify interventions like public housing demolition pivots on the subjectification of tenants as being outside the bounds of normal society whether they are cast, first and foremost, as victims or perpetrators of concentrated poverty.

Concentrated and intergenerational poverty, when forwarded as abstract representations of life in public housing, render the everyday lives of tenants in an overdetermined manner: residents are seen in terms of totalizing discourses while their actual lived experience remains concealed. Such representations constitute epistemic injustices. As Fricker writes, “the negative prejudices about a particular group circulating in a culture can denigrate the epistemic character of a group, affecting how they are perceived ...” (Fricker, 2007, p. 58). Public portrayals of public housing position residents as the *other* of society through a series of images and tropes that center on themes of deviance and aberrant behavior (Henderson, 1995) create a *credibility deficit* (Fricker, 2007) wherein public housing residents’ testimony about their experiences and aspirations is discounted, ignored, or suppressed.

Tenant activism aims to open political discourse to reveal the social relations of power that shape their everyday lives, including the relations that produce pejorative representations of public housing. In this sense, tenant organizing is an active form of resistance to the epistemic injustices that too often render public housing residents unknowing and unknowable.

Through practices of organizing, public housing residents enact a democratic politics of the part-taking of those with no part (drawing on Rancière, Bowlby, & Panagia, 2001), claiming dignity and equality even when society tries to silence histories of racial dispossession caused by federal public housing policies and their local implementation. Disrupting a social order wherein residents of public housing are partitioned as a constitutive *other* of the community of equals is certainly no easy task, but it is vital to recognize and experience the embryonic moments when tenant organizing gestures toward this political project. Certainly, “powerful forces limit or suppress what seems possible, constituting it in terms of current conditions and presenting what is beyond them as unrealistic and utopian in the derogatory sense” (drawing from Lefebvre, Pinder, 2013, p. 34). Yet some conceptions of utopianism, whereby people’s desires for making a better world are fastened to hope connected to finding the agency capable of transforming the current situation, provides a motivation for imagining how current conditions could be otherwise (Levitas, 2010). This interplay of the imaginative and real-life actualization requires a focus on the everyday utopias that constitute the desires and actions of individuals whose visions emerge *through the experience of organizing*.

In this neoliberal era of public housing demolition and welfare retrenchment, protesting, petitioning, and appealing to the state with demands for fairness and justice in shelter, healthy environmental conditions, and sustenance are critical. Yet when tenant organizing is reduced to making demands of the state for securing better housing, for example, then we misrecognize the moments wherein their strategies are also staking epistemic claims: the rights to speak, to be seen as knowers, to imagine, and thus, to be seen as fully human (Fricker, 2007). We are not supplanting concern for one type of justice for another. Given Medina’s contention that social injustices and epistemic injustices “are two kinds of the same coin, always going together, being mutually supportive and reinforcing each other” (Medina, 2012, p. 27), we suggest that the measure of tenant organizing must jointly attend to the material *and* epistemic dimensions of oppression. Likewise, analyses must also speak to the ways in which these facets of tenant organizing matter.

3. Case study methods

Undertaken by a team of researchers working in collaboration with Cayce United, we draw from a longitudinal study that began in October 2013 and is ongoing as of April 2015. We spent between 5 and 20 h each week participating in all levels of Cayce United activities, outreach and organizing efforts. [Authors] had served as a consultant to the local housing authority in the past, completing evaluations of their four HOPE VI redevelopments. Both researchers attended public planning meetings related to the redevelopment process. Conducting fieldwork over fifteen months allowed us to build rapport with participants and to identify critical areas of thematic salience. Data for this paper draws primarily from interviews with residents, observations of public meetings, and media reports.

During biweekly research team conferences, researchers discussed emergent themes and constructed a natural history of the redevelopment planning and tenant organizing processes as they unfolded. As the researchers began writing, material was read aloud and discussed with Cayce United members, who offered additional insights, corrections, and corroborations. The robust use of member checking sought to ensure the credibility of reporting to Cayce United members. As demonstrated by these methods, this research explicitly seeks to explore the distinct standpoint (Harding, 1992) of Cayce United members organizing in the context of the planned demolition and redevelopment of their communities. It is not intending to represent the experiences and intentions of the local housing authority.

4. Context: James Cayce Homes

James Cayce public housing development (Cayce Homes), located in East Nashville, Tennessee, was built in 1941 for whites only. Inspired by the Garden City movement and comprised of 96 rectangular two-story buildings separated by greenways wide enough for sidewalks and clothes-drying lines, Cayce Homes covers an expanse of 64 acres. Modest in size for the 1940s, the apartments remain structurally unchanged to this day, each equipped with small windows, cement floors, and rooms that appear small by today's standards. Annual reports published by the Nashville Housing Authority (NHA)¹ from the first decade of public housing attest to high resident involvement in tenant associations and showcase social support structures enviable by today's standards, such as well-child clinics, libraries, and a myriad of civic organizations on site (Nashville Housing Authority, 1952, Year 1943). Through the 1950s, the NHA portrayed resident involvement as positively shaping life at Cayce Homes, and supported tenant efforts at building neighborhood community as a mechanism to enhance the environmental conditions in which they lived.

During the 1950s–60s, the demographic make-up of Cayce Homes was transformed by a range of federal policies that enhanced opportunities for whites to move out of the city to the suburbs. At the same time public housing management engaged in strict enforcement of upper income limits for its tenants. Both of these dynamics resulted in East Nashville and Cayce Homes becoming increasingly black and poor. And while NHA's annual reports continued to tout the role of public housing as a site for building good citizens, it became increasingly apparent that urban renewal and highway construction projects were displacing black families from their neighborhoods and filtering them into government housing that was rapidly losing popular, political and economic support. In other words, at the same time Cayce Homes became predominantly black, it was beginning to physically decline. Tellingly, in a 1967 speech to Nashville Chamber of Commerce, a local advocate chastised polices that had forced black families into public housing where they were relegated to being "consumers of the slum rather than producers thereof" (as cited in Houston, 2012, p. 202).

¹ The Nashville Public Housing Authority changed its name from "Nashville Housing Authority" to "Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency" in 1972.

This sentiment was further confirmed by leadership of the Nashville Tenants Organization, which reported that the housing authority repeatedly disregarded tenants' claims to participate in the decision making around the use of funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to modernize public housing developments across the city (Houston, 2006). Yet, in many cases public housing was the only option for the urban poor (Freeman, 2004).

The intersecting dynamics of physical decay, economic and racial segregation, and NHA's increasingly paternalistic orientation toward tenant involvement in shaping the future of Cayce Homes resulted in the deterioration of the public housing development and simultaneously fostered the impression that problem tenants were to blame for the decline of Cayce Homes. At this time, rents were not able to cover the maintenance upkeep of the buildings, and to this day there have not been any major structural renovations made to Cayce's seventy-five year-old buildings. Currently, residents assert that the units are now undersized, unsafe, and poorly maintained. The housing authority claims that they are unable to finance the needed capital improvements due to lagging federal support, which has forced authorities to maintain the same number of units with continually decreasing funds (Dolbeare, Saraf, & Crowley, 2004). Meanwhile, evolving political-economic conditions have reconstituted East Nashville from a place marked by real estate disinvestment throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, to a rapidly gentrifying urban area. According to the 2000 Decennial Census (2000 Decennial Census, Summary File 3) and 2013 ACS Five Year estimates, between 2000 and 2010, the median income of the neighborhood just two blocks outside Cayce Homes rose more than 47%. While 87% of Cayce residents are African-American (Metropolitan Development Housing Agency, 2015), the neighborhood two blocks away is now 76% white, and the African-American population has decreased by nearly 40% in the last 10 years (2000 and 2010 Decennial Census, Summary File 1). The results of these demographic and market changes are threefold: Cayce residents are increasingly racially and economically marginalized in the place they call home, the new neighborhood residents are keenly interested in the demolition and redevelopment of Cayce Homes, and the housing authority is now managing 64 acres of valuable and highly sought after land that is located adjacent to the downtown business district.

In February 2013, the Metropolitan Housing and Development Agency (MDHA; formerly known as the Nashville Housing Authority) launched *Envision Cayce*. Publicized as a one-year community-supported planning process, the goal of this initiative has been to garner stakeholder buy-in for the demolition of Cayce Homes and the creation of a mixed-income development that would triple the population density by adding three market-rate rental units for every two public housing or low-income units (EJP Consulting, 2013).² Shortly thereafter, a group of residents formed the first recorded tenant-initiated organizing effort at Cayce Homes, Cayce United, and began demanding strong tenant involvement in planned redevelopment of their homes.

5. Advancing material goals: "the plan they got is good, but is it for us"

Convinced that residents needed to be involved in the proposed redevelopment of their community, in the summer of 2013 a small group of residents met with a local community organizer who offered to help them organize. For several weeks, Cayce United leaders walked the neighborhood daily, listening to their neighbors. They learned that given chronic problems with mold, mice, overcrowding, and under-maintained buildings, most residents were in favor of the

² MDHA launched the "Envision Cayce" planning process without a funding mechanism in place. After completing the planning, MDHA applied for and was granted permission to convert Nashville's entire portfolio of public housing to place based section 8 through the Rental Assistance Demonstration project (RAD), allowing the agency to borrow against the land value of Cayce Homes to move the redevelopment plan forward.

redevelopment, and looked forward to safe and sanitary housing for their families. But residents also had many unanswered questions:

Ms. Audrey: ... The plan they got is good. But is it for us? That's the main thing.

Ms. Mae: - Or, is it just for them?

Ms. Audrey: - You know this property is worth some paper, some good money. We right in the heart of town. You stand in Ms. Lynne's window you can see all downtown. We right there. You see what I'm saying? But what about when they get ready to do what they gonna do? Are we gonna be included?

Residents' concerns of exclusion and displacement were rooted in lived experience. Nashville's four HOPE VI initiatives replaced public housing with mixed-income developments and significantly cut the number of subsidized units available, following a national trend that has displaced thousands of families (Popkin, 2004). In Nashville, HOPE VI resulted in the demolition of 1808 units of public housing with only 801 of them rebuilt as part of mixed-income housing developments, and of the original residents who were all guaranteed the right to return, less than 10% did (Fraser, Defilippis, & Bazuin, 2012). While HUD mandated tenant participation in the HOPE VI program, residents lacked decision-making authority and had little input in program implementation (Fraser, Defilippis, & Bazuin, 2012). This history fresh on their minds, many Cayce residents were deeply concerned about their neighbors, particularly the elderly, the frail, and the young. Reflecting on her increasing anxiety, Ms. Ella shared, "Sometimes I just lie in bed awake thinking, where are all these people going to go? What are they going to go?" Cayce United formed, in part, to prevent the HOPE VI displacements from happening again.

But Cayce United learned residents were not only concerned about displacement. Given that 64% of residents are unemployed, and many more remain underemployed, residents advocated for robust job training and targeted employment opportunities for residents during the redevelopment process (which is federally mandated, though rarely enforced, through HUD's Section 3 Policy). Furthermore, many residents expressed specific infrastructural and service needs – such as a bus line running through the neighborhood and expanded preschool offerings – they wanted to see addressed in the redevelopment.

In response, Cayce United developed a three-prong platform: guarantees against forced resident displacement and phased redevelopment in order to keep residents on site, job training and employment opportunities for Cayce residents during the redevelopment, and the inclusion of needed infrastructure and social supports in the new neighborhood. For the first few months of organizing, Cayce United leaders walked the neighborhood daily, listening to their neighbors and encouraging them to get and stay involved. As Ms. Mae explains, Cayce United worked "to let everybody know ... you have a voice, if you don't like the redevelopment plans – say so. If you do like it, say so. But let's have a voice." The message took hold and Cayce United's ranks began to swell. Yet, leaders soon found that they faced two obstacles to advancing their material demands: 1) gaining access to the political processes where decisions about their homes and neighborhoods were being made and 2) contesting the stigmatization of public housing and the people who call Cayce home.

6. Gaining access to the political process: "let's have a voice"

The ability to effectively participate in public planning processes is typically allocated to groups that already possess power and status in society (Swyngedouw, 2005, p. 19–20). Throughout the planning phase of Envision Cayce the MDHA has remained unwilling to meet with Cayce United, claiming: "it is against HUD rules for us to meet

with a separate group as representatives of Cayce residents – we have to meet with the Cayce Homes Resident Association." This assertion is problematic on two accounts. While HUD rules do clearly state that housing authorities may not "recognize a competing resident council once a duly elected resident council has been established" (964.18), nowhere does HUD policy prohibit the MDHA from *meeting* with Cayce United leaders. Furthermore, Cayce United maintains that they have not had a duly elected council for years. Residents state that they cannot remember the last time the association had the HUD-required minimum of five elected officials, and further contend that the president has failed to uphold a number of his duties as outlined by the MDHA. Under the current president's eight-year tenure, his acrimonious approach has discouraged resident participation and deflated residents' expectations of the resident council actually representing their interests. Cayce United tried to gain control of the housing association, without success, and then formally requested – first in writing, and then in person at an MDHA Board meeting – that the MDHA enact their rights to dissolve the resident association. The MDHA did not respond to this request.

This situation is marked by complexity as the MDHA has solicited resident involvement in the Envision Cayce planning process. When the planning phase launched in 2013, the MDHA committed to engaging Cayce resident participation by conducting a comprehensive resident survey, developing an interactive website for project information, appointing at least one resident on the Cayce Community Advisory Group, and making sure that project meetings were accessible to residents. In practice, these efforts have been largely symbolic and scripted in a way as to minimize their actual influence on the process. This was made evident during the final Envision Cayce public planning session when an MDHA Board member informed residents that they "don't have decision-making authority" and that their role was merely advisory.

Undeterred by the MDHA's failure to recognize Cayce United, refusal to establish a functioning resident association, and limiting of resident participation in the planning process, Cayce United continued to make demands to the MDHA to provide them information necessary for their strategic planning. In June 2014, Cayce United sent a request to the MDHA to respond to specific questions about the redevelopment timeline, to which the MDHA Director responded (emphasis in the original):

For clarity, MDHA has no plans to move anyone. We have no plans to build Envision Cayce. We have no authority from the Federal Government to build Envision Cayce. We have no money to build Envision Cayce. Any questions relating to a hypothetical move are speculative. We will not speculate on a hypothetical situation. To reiterate, we have no plans to move anyone at Cayce Homes. **If** Congress acts, **if** HUD approves our RAD application, **then**, MDHA will begin planning to determine **if** the Envision Cayce concept can be accomplished.

Yet on the same day, the *Nashville Post* newspaper ran an article stating "The Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency published Monday a request for proposal for those companies that will bid to undertake the design-build for Cayce Place replacement housing" (EJP Consulting, 2013). In fact, the MDHA was actively pursuing financing plans for the redevelopment, and had begun acquiring property surrounding Cayce Homes for the Envision Cayce development footprint.

In early 2015, residents learned that HUD had approved the MDHA's application to convert all public housing in Nashville to place-based section eight housing through the Rental Assistance Demonstration project (RAD). Cayce United leaders attended the following MDHA Board meeting to ask questions about RAD. The Director refused to provide direct answers, saying, "We were conditionally approved [for RAD] contingent on Congress authorizing the RAD expansion, and Congress authorized the expansion in December, but we are not yet officially approved." However, Cayce United learned that the MDHA had already requested bids from contractors to participate in the redevelopment of Cayce Homes. Remarking on the board meeting described above, Ms. Ella of

Cayce United remarked, “Something doesn't seem right about this, it just doesn't seem right. I feel like we are rats in a maze, just scrambling around trying to figure all this out. And they're just waiting for the first big mistake and they're gonna snatch it all away.” Given multiple experiences of less than forthright answers to their inquiries, Cayce United leaders now operate with the assumption that the MDHA is strategically deceiving residents while moving forward with redevelopment plans.

This situation of mistrust between Cayce United and the MDHA culminated during a public meeting where tenant organizers confronted the MDHA around the issue of receiving mixed-messages about the redevelopment plans. A seemingly exasperated MDHA board commissioner responded that residents should simply trust the MDHA because the agency had “the tenants' best interests in mind.” Members of Cayce United were suspicious of this claim as they were well aware that the MDHA was responsible for the displacement of thousands of tenants during the HOPE VI years in Nashville. In response to Cayce United's vigilance to ensure that the MDHA operated transparently, heard the concerns and desires of tenants, and, most significantly, shared decision-making authority with them, the MDHA reiterated that public housing residents would not be granted any decision-making authority concerning the redevelopment of their homes and neighborhood.

Paradoxically, this very declaration of the MDHA's sovereignty indicated that Cayce United's claims on the MDHA were not only heard, but also threatening the ostensible sovereignty of that organization. Throughout the planning phase of the redevelopment, Cayce United made significant inroads to affecting the governance of the initiative by: participating in, and critiquing, the Envision Cayce public participation process; making themselves visible at MDHA public meetings; and, engaging MDHA officials through written inquiries and informally when officials and Cayce United members happened to see each other at events. Yet, throughout the planning phase of the redevelopment of Cayce Homes, Cayce United was faced with a broader challenge of legitimacy that undergirded their ability to effectively insert themselves into the political process and be heard.

7. Contesting stigmatization and achieving results: “I have something to say about what I've been living every day”

In addition to advocating for material goals and agitating for a seat at the table, Cayce United leaders also found themselves battling against the popular sentiment that public housing residents lack the cultural context to develop normatively appropriate modes of existence to contribute to their own flourishing or society. Since the 1960s, the media, social scientists and policymakers have strategically deployed variegated forms of this ‘culture of poverty’ ideology not only to offer an explanation for the persistence of black poverty in American cities, but also to legitimate urban redevelopment projects – such as the dismantling of public housing – through the language of poverty deconcentration (Goetz, 2003, 2014).

This orientation, which pivots on the subjectification of public housing residents as both victims and perpetrators of problems instead of being valued for their knowledge leadership, is one that Cayce United has had to directly confront. For example, one news article entitled, “Solving the Cayce Place Conundrum” (Laurence, 2013), frames Cayce Homes as an isolated ‘hood’ that needs to be integrated into the broader geography of East Nashville. Another media account refers to Cayce Homes as “a cordoned-off borough of concentrated poverty” that exists within a broader environment of urban renaissance (Laurence, 2013). Likewise, a group largely comprised of affluent, white residents in the neighborhood adjacent to Cayce Homes formed the Cayce Place Revitalization Foundation (CPRF) articulating its mission to “break the cycle of intergenerational poverty by creating and funding a safe, sustainable mixed-income community where families thrive” (Cayce Place Revitalization Foundation, 2015). In one interview, the president of

the CPRF suggests, “in the new mixed-use development scenario, a third generation Cayce resident could wind up living next door to a college graduate for the first time in his or her life. That starts them thinking possibilities they may have never considered before” (Laurence, 2013, p. 4). The language of CPRF's mission statement and this comment reflect a *culture of poverty* orientation toward public housing residents, suggesting that intergenerational poverty can be solved through changing the values Cayce residents have by altering the demographics of Cayce Homes.

With the emergence of CPRF as a stakeholder in Envision Cayce, media representations contrasted Cayce United and CPRF in ways that characterized Cayce residents as backwards, uneducated and lacking aspirations beyond their daily needs while their more affluent neighbors across the street from Cayce Homes were depicted as civilized or advanced because they imagine a broader future:

“The two groups with a keen interest in the redevelopment of Cayce Place, Cayce United and the Cayce Place Revitalization Foundation, are working together, but have a distinct make-up and focus. Cayce United is mainly made up of housing project residents mostly concerned with meeting the immediate needs of residents The Cayce Place Revitalization Foundation consists mostly of East Nashville community members taking a broader look at how a holistic approach to mixed-income redevelopment will work here” (Laurence, 2014, p. 17).

The narrative that somehow residents cannot contribute to a “broader look” and “holistic approach” because they are only focused on “immediate needs” can be understood as a form of epistemic violence, wherein public housing residents are paternalistically precluded from contributing place-based knowledge and expertise about the needs in their community.

As the media, outside stakeholder groups such as CPRF reproduced damage-based and deficit-centered narratives about Cayce residents, Cayce United worked to legitimize Cayce residents as stakeholders with relevant knowledge and expertise about their community. By the end of their first year, the core team of six to eight Cayce United leaders organized a base of 200 resident members. They mobilized residents to attend Envision Cayce public meetings, organizing transportation and childcare as needed. Cayce United raised \$42,000 to support a part-time organizer, and hired residents as interns, outreach workers and caterers. In the summer of 2014, Cayce United employed eight youth residents of Cayce Homes through a federally funded job-training program. Concurrent to these efforts to inform and mobilize residents of Cayce, Cayce United educated the broader community about what was happening in their neighborhood. They conducted interviews with the press, spoke to neighborhood churches, community groups, and college classes, and joined a coalition of forty faith, labor, and community organizations under the name of Nashville Organized for Action and Hope (NOAH).

These efforts countered stigmatizing representations of Cayce residents. In addition to changing the public narrative about public housing and influencing some of the MDHA's actions, many Cayce United leaders believe that they are amassing power by transforming the way residents see themselves and their community. Ms. Mae reflected that participating in Cayce United, “has made me see that I can do things that I didn't know I could do ... I never thought I could get up in front of people and speak, I never thought I could do any of those things it has impacted me to show me that, hey – you can do this! Just do it!” For many of the seminal leaders, participation in Cayce United was an expression of an existing ethic of community engagement and a strong sense of dignity and self-worth. Yet for almost everyone involved, Cayce United also provided an opportunity for residents to come together and build new identities. Ms. Monique, who early in her involvement with Cayce United independently crafted a letter to President Obama calling for enhanced employment opportunities for people with criminal records,

reflected to Cayce United leaders, “You all made me feel like I have experience that mattered, like I have something to say about what I’ve been living every day.”

During weekly meetings, members shared the difficulties of getting by on low wages and fixed incomes, while considering the possibilities for collective power when 716 households realize that together they invest more than 1.2 million dollars annually in the MDHA. Residents talked about the pain of living with toothaches and bunions when you can’t afford dental and medical care, the exhaustion of working nights when you have a toddler who wants to play all day, and they celebrated the many ways residents care for, protect, and nurture one another. These experiences suggest that Cayce United has built residents’ power to resist the stigmatization of living in public housing, and to forge a new collective identity as public housing residents, one rooted in strengths rather than deviance, and resistance rather than despair.

This representational work was central to Cayce United’s efforts to make demands of the MDHA to provide tenants with access to jobs that will be created during the redevelopment of Cayce Homes. From the start, Cayce United has been clear that without a commitment from the MDHA to collaborate on job training and employment opportunities for residents, the redevelopment will not have a positive impact on the socioeconomic well-being of residents. To strengthen the case for robust workforce development component of the redevelopment, Cayce United partnered with faculty and graduate students at Vanderbilt University and Fisk University on an action research project, “The Working Neighborhood Assessment.” Together, residents and academic partners conducted a secondary analysis of MDHA’s comprehensive resident survey and discovered that the MDHA had grossly understated the number of residents interested in gaining employment. The MDHA reported that 56% of the respondents were not interested in future employment, while, in actuality, only 24% of the respondents indicated this was true. The erroneous data, presented to Cayce residents and the broader community, reinforced dominant narratives of public housing residents as culturally deviant. As Ms. Monique explained, “it makes residents look bad – like we don’t want to do anything to help ourselves – that’s not true. That’s false.”

In addition to correcting this error, Cayce United created a new survey to identify specific dimensions of resident’s skills and capacities that were not captured in MDHA’s survey design. They concluded that between 41% and 66% of people living in Cayce Homes – some 300–500 people – want and are able to work. Cayce United used this data to bolster their demand that the MDHA follow HUD’s Section 3 mandate, which requires that housing authority’s “to the greatest extent possible, provide job training, employment, and contract opportunities for low- or very-low income residents” (hud.gov) on HUD funded projects. When Cayce United first raised questions about Section 3 implementation, the MDHA Director was unclear of the regulation. Some months later, the board chair of the MDHA stated, “We won’t be providing large-scale job training.” Yet after a year of sustained attention on the need and desire for work among Cayce residents, and the demonstration that residents knew and would hold the MDHA accountable to implementing HUD Section 3, the MDHA recently announced a resident hiring plan.

While the MDHA’s eventual willingness to publicly commit to opening up employment opportunities for the residents of Cayce Homes was certainly based upon a variety of factors, Cayce United effectively challenged media accounts and public discourse that reduced the lived experiences of public housing tenants to being victims of their own culture of poverty. Instead, they provided an accounting of the actual obstacles residents face when seeking to enter the formal workforce, and highlighted their desire to navigate these to make a better future for themselves and their families. Likewise, by unsettling the myth that living in public housing is some kind of trap that reproduces intergenerational poverty, Cayce United has brought to the public’s attention that the place so many people are excited to tear down and rebuild are other people’s homes. Toward that end, after persistent

pressure from Cayce United to minimize even temporary displacement of residents during reconstruction, the MDHA publicly agreed to phase redevelopment.

8. Conclusion: “I can see it in my mind, Cayce United helping people all over the world”

Cayce United’s objectives began with a set of material demands. Advancing these demands required simultaneous efforts to challenge political processes that constrained resident’s participation, and to contest stigmatizing representations that strip residents of epistemic agency. Similar to other studies on tenant organizing, Cayce residents, given the chance to aspire, do (Feldman & Stall, 2004; Williams, 2005). Drawing from knowledge of previous displacements and the needs in their community, Cayce United developed a robust platform of demands of the state, and won important concessions in the pre-redevelopment phase of the project. Despite the MDHA’s refusal to acknowledge Cayce United as a legitimate tenant organization, residents fought to access the political processes where decisions about their homes and neighborhoods are made and they have become a member of Nashville’s largest city-wide organizing and advocacy group, Nashville Organized for Action and Hope. Central to these material and political achievements is the representational work Cayce United has engaged. In response to media accounts and public discourses deployed to make the redevelopment of Cayce Homes appear as if it would provide uplift for a community trapped in a pernicious cycle of intergenerational poverty, Cayce United engaged in strategies to advance alternative representations of both resident’s lives and the diverse perspectives they held about their future at Cayce, thus disrupting the order of things that renders public housing residents as knowable through the discourse of concentrated poverty.

Regardless if Cayce United achieves all of their stated material goals, their organizing continues to make a difference, demonstrating the significance of political process and representational goals. It is a properly political act to relentlessly demand to be heard as a part that has a part, refusing abstract representations of public housing projects and the people that call them home. By examining the spatial practices that constitute tenant organizing, we may be alerted to the ways in which residents’ practices constitute an emancipatory politics by dislodging “our assumption that what is given is necessary” (Young, 1990, p. 256), and “reconfiguring the perceptual sights and sounds by those who are excluded from the fields of the visible and of the sayable” (Panagia, 2010, p. 22). Cayce United is certainly in its infancy, and the future of Envision Cayce – and Cayce United – is not known. Yet in the current era of state-led demolition, commodification, and privatization of public housing into mixed-income developments, tenant-based organizing in Cayce Homes is a reminder of the possibility for a present that is otherwise. In the words of Mr. Johnson, a resident leader: “My vision,” he began, “I see it in my mind. Like that what we starting in Cayce United, what we starting in Cayce, it grows. That we aren’t just helping our neighbors but eventually we’re helping other people in the city, in the county, in the world, like in some tribe or village somewhere. I can see it in my mind, Cayce United helping people all over the world.” Tenant organizing not only centers around the material goals that residents seek, but also opens up the possibility for a politics that can counter epistemological injustices, and imagine a present that could be otherwise.

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