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Race, Dismantling the “Ghetto,” and National Housing Mobility: Considering the Polikoff Proposal¹

Rhonda Y. Williams

On a snowy Sunday afternoon in Cleveland, I settled down after morning errands to read the *New York Times*, despite the fact that I had other more pressing things to do. High on my priority list was formulating my comments on race, dismantling the ghetto, and housing mobility for a panel at the *Gautreaux at 40: Race, Class, Housing Mobility, and Neighborhood Revitalization* conference sponsored by Northwestern University’s Law School and Institute for Policy Research. For my panel, I was to discuss a proposal by Alexander Polikoff, lead counsel for the 1976 landmark Supreme Court *Gautreaux* decision.² Polikoff proposed implementing a national race-conscious housing mobility program modeled after the Chicago-based *Gautreaux* program to attack inequality in major U.S. cities. Such a scattered-site housing program, he maintains, would not only provide low-income black people with greater housing opportunities, but also rid society of “black ghettos,” which are “a well-spring of our racial inequality evil” and have poisoned race relations.³

Well, as I read the *Times*, I came across an Op-Ed column entitled “Chicago, Upside Down” by Luis Alberto Urrea.⁴ In this column, Urrea, a fiction and non-fiction writer who teaches at the University of Illinois-Chicago, outlined how strangely upside down Chicago felt these days – what with warmer winters, for instance, and the “peculiar shift in the murder patterns in Chicagoland.”⁵ In the inner city, murder was down; in the

¹ This discussion, which is based on my “*Gautreaux at 40*” conference presentation of March 3, 2006, has been revised and expanded for publication. I would like to thank Leonard Rubinowitz and Mary Pattillo for inviting me to participate in the “*Gautreaux at 40*” conference, and the *Journal of Law and Social Policy* editors for their suggestions, flexibility, and extreme patience.

² *Hills v. Gautreaux*, 425 U.S. 284 (1976). Polikoff has been the executive director of Business and Professional People for the Public Interest (BPI) since 1971 and is currently the director of the Public Housing Initiative of BPI. He is also author of the recently published *WAITING FOR GAUTREAU: A STORY OF SEGREGATION, HOUSING, AND THE BLACK GHETTO*.

³ ALEXANDER POLIKOFF, *Chapter 7: The Most Formidable Evil*, in *WAITING FOR GAUTREAU: THE SLENDER BUT PRECIOUS HOPE FOR RACIAL EQUALITY* 3 (2005) (unpublished draft of ALEXANDER POLIKOFF, *WAITING FOR GAUTREAU: A STORY OF SEGREGATION, HOUSING, AND THE BLACK GHETTO* (2006)) (on file with author).

⁴ Luis Alberto Urrea, *Chicago, Upside Down*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 5, 2006, § 4, at 13.

⁵ *Id.*

suburbs, murder was up.⁶ “This,” Urrea asserted, “is attributed to the movement of poverty,” partially the result of “sly social engineering” of poor urban neighborhoods.⁷

Urrea continued:

Displaced members of blighted urban communities (what is a housing project but a vertical village, after all) have been shuffled off to the west and south. Never to return. Once the barrio and the ‘hood have established colonies in country-club land, aunties and nephews and homies follow. The center of the city ‘reclaims’ itself, and the untidy wave of need moves elsewhere.⁸

I decided the next day to find more information on Urrea, whose column crisply flagged issues of race, poverty, and migration that I found not only interesting, but also relevant for the impending panel on Polikoff’s proposal. My Internet search turned up another *Times* column by Urrea: “City of the Big Gaps.”⁹ This October 2005 column too captured my attention. According to Urrea, his town of Naperville, which was white all the time and not just during Christmas, enthusiastically received at least one Hurricane Katrina victim – a young black man who had tremendous football skills.¹⁰ But as Urrea recognized most poor evacuees were not so fortunate: “And that’s the larger story of the local economy: that in this era of outsourcing, housing bubbles and budget deficit pay-downs, the traditional Chicago gap between haves and have-nots has eroded into a chasm.”¹¹ He continued:

We are the city, you will recall, where just over a decade ago more than 700 people died in a heat wave. Read: poor people. Read: poor old people of color. This year, when a potentially deadly repeat was forecast, the news media started to run panicky stories about how to cool yourself down if you didn’t have air-conditioning. Think residents of the Cabrini-Green public housing complex sitting in tubs of cold water for eight hours.¹²

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Luis Alberto Urrea, *City of the Big Gaps*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 2, 2005, § 4, at 13.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

These two newspaper columns brought to light and helped me think about three issues or sets of questions that I would like to explore regarding Polikoff's national race-conscious housing mobility program proposal. The first set of questions deal with the "fear of the migrating ghetto." In particular, how will a race-conscious national housing program deal with the fears, stereotypes, and potential hostility accompanying low-income black people's mobility and the attendant problems they are seen as embodying, not just suffering? The second set of questions asks: what roles (developmental?, representational?, advisory?) will low-income people be able to play in a national program? And the last set of questions ponders: what will happen to inner city residents who stay behind?

Fear of the migrating ghetto

It seems to me that what underlies Polikoff's proposal is not just the necessary expansion of housing opportunities, but also a broader meditation on how to combat racial inequality and improve race relations.¹³ In addition to suggesting that a national housing program would provide equitable access, Polikoff argues that dismantling the inner city will help destroy attendant negative cultural beliefs and behaviors that have boded ill for racial understanding by injecting "a poison in the national groundwater that produces a thousand deformed fruits."¹⁴ Polikoff pointed out three deformed fruits in particular: a white "fear of blacks trapped in ghettos trying to 'invade' their neighborhoods;¹⁵ "a ghetto-targeted mass incarceration policy" that conflates crime and drugs with black inner city residents;¹⁶ and the "instrumental" use of the "image of the ghetto" that led to the demise of welfare.¹⁷

¹³ Elizabeth Julian describes Polikoff's proposal as "modest," particularly with regard to the expansive use of vouchers for a national housing mobility program. But the underlying implication and broader argument that Polikoff is making about the potential for significantly overhauling of urban space is quite sweeping. Elizabeth Julian, *Taking Gautreaux National: A Modest Proposal*, Comments for the "Gautreaux at 40" Conference (March 3, 2006) (on file with author).

¹⁴ Alexander Polikoff, *Racial Inequality and the Black Ghetto*, 1 Nw. J. L. & Soc. POL'Y ?? (2005). This paper is a shortened version of Polikoff's Chapter 7 in *Waiting for Gautreaux*.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 3.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 6.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 7.

What struck me most with Urrea's examples, alongside Polikoff's proposal, was not simply that "inner city poverty and disorder lacerate our civic fabric,"¹⁸ but that social ills have become "understandable" through and attributable to poor black inner cities, public housing, and their residents. Even Polikoff writes, "*predictable ghetto behavior* then intensifies whites' sense of danger, validates their color-coding, and drives their conduct."¹⁹ This relationship between place, race, black residents, and pathology has a history. In the 1930s, for instance, Baltimore reformers deemed substandard housing, poverty, and "blight as '... problem[s] of the Negro race.'"²⁰ Over three decades later, when white Baltimore public housing residents protested against desegregation, they argued that black neighbors would bring with them "perils" such as crime, murder, and rape.²¹ The conflation of black people with – as well as the inability to separate them from – disease, pathology, crime, lower property values, and poverty alongside the age-old dislike of social intimacy has discombobulated numerous white urban and suburban residents over the decades.²² The fact that numerous black residents of private and public housing in inner cities have struggled against deteriorating infrastructures, crime, poverty, and drugs – or that urban neighborhoods were not the only places where such problems existed – are often readily overlooked.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 1 (quoting Jason DeParle, *Suffering in the Cities Persists As U.S. Fights Other Battles*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 27, 1991, at A1).

¹⁹ *Id.*, at 8 (emphasis added). Unfortunately, because Polikoff does not specifically define or problematize what he means by "disorder" or "predictable ghetto behavior," he ends up reifying and naturalizing the relationship between race and danger. As researchers, scholars, advocates, and policymakers, we need to be ever vigilant and self-reflective about the role we play in constructing the ghetto and reifying problematic assumptions – whether we do it consciously or unconsciously. For a general discussion of this see ROBIN D.G. KELLEY, *Looking for the Real 'Nigga': Social Scientists Construct the Ghetto, in YO' MAMA'S DISFUNKTIONAL!: FIGHTING THE CULTURE WARS IN URBAN AMERICA* 15-42 (1997).

²⁰ RHONDA Y. WILLIAMS, *THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC HOUSING: BLACK WOMEN'S STRUGGLES AGAINST URBAN INEQUALITY* 31 (2005).

²¹ *Id.* at 129-30; see also STEPHEN GREGORY, *BLACK CORONA: RACE AND THE POLITICS OF PLACE IN AN URBAN COMMUNITY* 109-16 (1998).

²² KENNETH DURR, *BEHIND THE BACKLASH: WHITE WORKING-CLASS POLITICS IN BALTIMORE, 1940-1980* (2003); LISA MCGIRR, *SUBURBAN WARRIORS: THE ORIGINS OF THE NEW AMERICAN RIGHT* (2000); STEPHEN GRANT MEYER, *AS LONG AS THEY DON'T MOVE NEXT DOOR: SEGREGATION AND RACIAL CONFLICT IN AMERICAN NEIGHBORHOODS* (2000); Garrett Power, *Apartheid Baltimore Style: The Residential Segregation Ordinances of 1910-1913*, 42 MD. L. REV. 289 (1983); ROBERT O. SELF, *AMERICAN BABYLON: RACE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR POSTWAR OAKLAND* (2003).

White America's concern over the "black ghetto," then, while surely about the inner cities where black people lived, was equally about where inner city residents might reside in the future. In other words, fear of poor black people is expressed not simply because of the existence of a "ghetto," but because of the migratory capacity of that ghetto made possible through the bodies of poor black people viewed as pathogens. At first glance, these two fears – of a fixed localized place and of moving bodies – may seem to be in conflict with one another. But they are not. The twin fears of the inner city and of its "unstable" residents expose how urban places are viewed as not simply a spatial problem of impacted inequality and isolation, but a social problem of people. In this formulation, low-income black people do not simply inhabit the ghetto or suffer social and economic problems, but become the embodiments – and carriers – of inner cities and their attendant poisons. Because of this conflation, it seems to me, that even if a national housing mobility program could physically dismantle black inner cities, as long as poor black people are presumptive metonyms for society's problems and seen as disrupters of the social fabric, the fear of the migrating ghetto will exist. In other words, the problem of spatial racial inequality goes beyond "the existence, the fact, of the black ghetto."²³ Even if we manage to decouple major U.S. cities from spatial racial demonization, the reconstitution of that demonization, particularly as inner city residents and unmitigated poverty relocate to suburbs, is likely. Because of this assumptive pathology dynamic, exposing and consistently discussing the shifting relationship between people, place, race, class, and poverty are critical, particularly as we forge solutions to exclusion and inequality.

Understanding the persistence and operation of these cultural languages ultimately helps problematize Polikoff's underlying and optimistic presumption about the repercussions of dismantling black inner cities. However, calling attention to how such racialized and class fears operate should not be mistaken as an argument for maintaining or simply gilding urban ghettos.²⁴ Neither should this discussion of cultural concepts be

²³ POLIKOFF, *supra* note 3, at 34.

²⁴ Julian, *supra* note 3, at 2. In an email response to my pre-circulated, original written comments, Elizabeth Julian maintains that "the thoughts and concerns expressed in Williams' paper have permeated every discussion in which I have participated ... over the past 25 years." She continues: "They continue to

seen as an attempt to hijack policy with what some may consider time-wasting discursive meanderings. Nor is my discussion of the fear of the migrating ghetto an argument for accommodating racial prejudice, against establishing a national housing mobility program, or against providing enhanced opportunities to its prospective beneficiaries. Given the decades of government-sponsored contributions to the construction of hyper-segregated and extremely poverty-impacted urban centers,²⁵ new publicly funded strategies to deconstruct and transform those same cities make sense – not only as a serious option, but also as an option we ought to take seriously.²⁶ Several public housing residents whom I talked with while researching my book, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality*, took advantage of alternative residential opportunities such as rehab, scattered-site, and later HOPE VI²⁷ housing opportunities. So clearly, the fears of black inner cities, which have partially driven anti-integration campaigns, white flight, and the construction of gated communities as well as promoted racial containment and discrimination, should not be allowed to thwart the implementation of programs that provide choices to low-income people who want to live elsewhere. Nevertheless, we cannot underestimate the fact that such fears – shaped by race, poverty, place, and people's movement – have had and still have the power to structure people's options and social policy in concrete ways.

Therefore as we consider Polikoff's proposal to create more federally supported housing opportunities on a national scale for low-income black people, I would like to

resonate because we have not ever figured out how to effectively gild the ghetto." Email from Elizabeth K. Julian to Rhonda Y. Williams (February 27, 2006) (on file with author) [hereinafter Email].

²⁵ See, e.g., RONALD BAYOR, *RACE & THE SHAPING OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY ATLANTA* (1996); ARNOLD HIRSCH, *MAKING THE SECOND GHETTO: RACE AND HOUSING IN CHICAGO, 1940-1960* (1983); DOUGLAS S. MASSEY & NANCY A. DENTON, *AMERICAN APARTHEID: SEGREGATION AND THE MAKING OF THE UNDERCLASS* (1993); THOMAS J. SUGRUE, *ORIGINS OF THE URBAN CRISIS: RACE AND INEQUALITY IN POSTWAR DETROIT* (1996); WILLIAMS, *supra* note 20.

²⁶ Of course, history and contemporary policy prove that we can not assume that state intervention will automatically result in responsive and effective programs. For historical discussions on social welfare and housing policy, discrimination, and the state, see generally LINDA GORDON, *PITIED BUT NOT ENTITLED: SINGLE MOTHERS AND THE HISTORY OF WELFARE* (1994); ARNOLD HIRSCH, *MAKING THE SECOND GHETTO: RACE AND HOUSING IN CHICAGO, 1940-1960* (1983); MICHAEL B. KATZ, *THE UNDESERVING POOR: FROM THE WAR ON POVERTY TO THE WAR ON WELFARE* (1989); JILL QUADAGNO, *THE COLOR OF WELFARE: HOW RACISM UNDERMINED THE WAR ON POVERTY* (2004).

²⁷ HOPE VI housing is the result of a recommendation from the National Commission on Severely Distressed Public Housing. The Commission suggested revitalization by improving physical structures and management as well providing community and social services.

raise some questions that relate specifically to the aforementioned issues regarding the fear of the migrating ghetto. I wonder to what degree controlling the density of relocation settlement (Polikoff's 10-percent limit) will serve as a mitigating factor, especially because urban residents and their supposedly "ghetto" identity (read: poor, violent, dependent, people of color) are over-determined. In other words, the disparate lives of poor black people and the dynamics of social structure have been reduced to, and disappear behind, primarily negative labels. And it is these monolithic cultural ideas that have not only had inordinate explanatory power with regard to poverty, segregation, and inequality in U.S. society, but also have been reified in media depictions and policy debates. Both this historically ingrained fear and contemporary reticence help to reveal how migrating black people continue to operate as threats to white or middle-class communities' stability, safety, and racial prerogatives.

For instance, housing initiatives in Baltimore, which included demolishing public housing complexes in inner cities and relocation efforts that targeted nearby counties, resulted in rancorous debate and upset numerous white middle-class suburban residents. In May 1996 at a partial consent decree hearing for the *Carmen Thompson v. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development* lawsuit held in U.S. District Court in Baltimore, white residents expressed fear that crime, conflict, and lower property values would accompany the relocation of low-income, inner-city residents to their neighborhoods.²⁸ One white resident expressed his resentment of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which filed the case on behalf of public housing tenants. The white resident accused officials of ignoring homeowners' needs and concerns, and implied that low-income people's poverty resulted a priori from their own failures: "You get what you work for. Things are not equal."²⁹ Another white male resident maintained, "as a taxpaying homeowner, I am being victimized."³⁰ Addressing housing relocation advocates in the courtroom, he asked whether he would "be compensated for

²⁸ Rhonda Y. Williams, Handwritten Notes of ACLU Partial Consent Decree Hearing for *Thompson v. HUD*, No. MJG 95-309 (D. Md. May 31, 1996), (on file with author).

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*

the loss of value in my home” if subsidized housing and relocation efforts failed.³¹ This same man went on to critique public housing and the behavior of its residents, and in doing so, questioned why he and his neighbors should bear the burden of race and class housing integration efforts, saying that he “didn’t throw baby strollers down the trash chutes,” “urinate in the hallways,” or “have illegitimate babies.”³² There were and are countervailing voices to be sure. One white, 25-year resident of Baltimore County asked: how can county residents take advantage of urban benefits such as baseball and the downtown Harbor Place and then turn their backs on the problems of cities? The resident continued: “I can’t understand why 60 families a year for six years . . . is going to destroy Baltimore County economically.”³³ Even with numeric relocation limits in place and such reasonable and convincing rebuttals, negative anti-relocation presumptions – which have *truly* revealed both now and historically just how “conflicted people [are] when it comes to this idea of people of different races and incomes living together” – undoubtedly will continue to shape public perceptions and policy debates about a national housing mobility program.³⁴

In what ways, then, will those envisioning, suggesting, and carrying out a national race-conscious housing program be prepared to mitigate the potential fears and hostilities accompanying low-income black people’s mobility? I am not simply talking about focusing on the behaviors and needs of people who move into new neighborhoods, but also the attitudes of residents already in those “receiving” or “defended” neighborhoods.³⁵ What concrete programs or initiatives can be implemented to foster understanding and adaptation in both directions? How do we, can we, or should we deal with the popular assumptions alongside the persistent problem of poverty, local politics,

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*; see also GREGORY, *supra* note 21, at 113-16.

³³ Williams, *supra* note 28.

³⁴ Email, *supra* note 24.

³⁵ Exploring the historical roots of white reticence and resistance to race and class integration, Thomas J. Sugrue examines how white people in 1940s’ and 1950s’ Detroit defended their neighborhoods from potential black residents – or “undesirables” – through orderly mechanisms (neighborhood associations), violence, and flight. He focuses on mostly blue-collar, multi-ethnic communities with single-family homeowners in this analysis. THOMAS J. SUGRUE, ORIGINS OF THE URBAN CRISIS: RACE AND INEQUALITY IN POSTWAR DETROIT 234-46 (1996); see also *id.* at 209-229, for a discussion of homeowner rights and white resistance in the 1950s and 1960s.

economic opportunity, and “fitting in”? On the latter issue, some preliminary results of a housing mobility study conducted by Kathryn Edin, Susan Clampet-Lundquist, Jeffrey R. Kling, and Gregory J. Duncan suggest not just problems of acceptance, but also problems of adjustment.³⁶ What mechanisms should housing mobility programs have in place to troubleshoot problems – for instance, with residents in new neighborhoods, with teachers and classmates in new schools, with potential employers, with the law (such as disparate police surveillance) – when they arise? In other words, how can policy advocates and program administrators implement effective housing mobility programs that take the provision of bricks and mortar as well as social relationships and economic advancement into consideration?³⁷

The role of low-income people

This set of questions, which considers what role low-income people will play in a national housing mobility program, is informed by my research and social justice interests in working-class black people’s and, more specifically, low-income public housing residents’ struggles for representation, inclusion, and empowerment. A major concern that low-income black women tenant activists expressed regarding government social welfare policy was their exclusion from decision-making realms.³⁸ As a result, many of them fought to open up spaces where they felt empowered to speak as well as

³⁶ Susan Clampet-Lundquist et al., *Moving At-Risk Teenagers Out of High-Risk Neighborhoods: Why Girls Fare Better than Boys* (unpublished manuscript); Kathryn Edin & Susan Clampet-Lundquist, *Moving Youth Across Urban Space: The Effects of Neighborhood Mobility on the Lives of African American Male and Female Youth*, Presentation at the 10th Anniversary Celebration of the Center for African-American Urban Studies and the Economy, “African Americans and the Post-Industrial Age: New Challenges of Urban History and Policy-Making,” (October 1, 2005). I thank Susan and Kathy for sharing their paper and research results with me.

³⁷ Julian argues that post-move support and counseling programs are critical to creating effective mobility programs, saying “a well-run, creative, and aggressive post-move mobility program can truly add value.” Julian, *supra* note 13, at 6; Email, *supra* note 24 (“Working with families, and individuals and institutions in the community to which they have chosen to relocate, including the schools and social service agencies that are equipped to deal with their needs should be the focus of the effort. We haven’t begun to do the hard work that this question suggests, but we should, and we must.”).

³⁸ See, e.g., ROBERTA FELDMAN AND SUSAN STALL, *THE DIGNITY OF RESISTANCE: WOMEN RESIDENTS’ ACTIVISM IN CHICAGO PUBLIC HOUSING* (2004); CHRISTINA GREENE, *OUR SEPARATE WAYS: WOMEN AND THE BLACK FREEDOM MOVEMENT IN DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA* Ch. 4 (2005); PREMILLA NADASEN, *WELFARE WARRIORS: THE WELFARE RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES* (2004); NANCY A. NAPLES, *GRASSROOTS WARRIORS: ACTIVIST MOTHERING, COMMUNITY WORK, AND THE WAR ON POVERTY* (1998); ANNEISE ORLECK, *STORMING CAESARS PALACE: HOW BLACK MOTHERS FOUGHT THEIR OWN WAR ON POVERTY* (2005); WILLIAMS, *supra* note 20.

gain access to and influence public policymakers.³⁹ If a housing mobility program of national magnitude is to be developed, how will the voices, desires, and creative imaginings of inner city residents shape its development? In addition to securing individual access to a house in an area not impacted by poverty, will inner city residents be active participants in the planning and implementation processes? Who will administer this program (HUD?, Housing authorities?, Private or non-profit foundations?) and again in whose interest?

In cities across the nation, the local and federal government has played a critical role in the creation of the conditions that we are discussing dismantling. Historical research as well as successfully litigated cases, such as *Gautreaux* in Chicago, *Walker v. HUD*, in Dallas, and *Carmen Thompson. v. HUD* in Baltimore, provide proof of this reality.⁴⁰ In that sense, the government should proactively and progressively act in a way that does not re-inscribe inequalities and negative presumptions through policy. Given the current conservative political climate, however, I am left wondering whether such a program, at least one with both a progressive and transformative bent, would garner sufficient resources and political teeth. Moreover, will governments – from Democratic to Republican, from the municipal to the federal level – that have waged wars on the poor over the years as well as passed policies that deem low-income black people (and women especially) as sappers of the body politic’s energy even incorporate “the target population” in significant or substantive ways? To be sure, this is not a question that assumes that the state is completely ineffectual, that nothing should be done, or that solutions should fit comfortably inside a racialized box of “ghetto” containment. Instead this is a question driven by the pressing realities of a conservative social welfare climate and wonderment about how best to attack a seemingly class- and race-based misanthropy in contemporary society. Finally, those advocates who are sincerely interested in providing real housing opportunities, as well as combating racial inequality and poverty, must also be vigilant about not re-constituting exclusionary and hierarchal power

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Hills v. Gautreaux*, 425 U.S. 284 (1976); *Walker v. HUD*, 912 F.2d 819 (5th Cir. 1990); *Thompson v. HUD*, No. MJG 95-309 (D. Md. May 31, 1996).

relations, and that partially means incorporating low-income people in substantive ways and pressing for accountability at every level.⁴¹

Those who remain behind

The third and final set of questions relates to what happens to troubled neighborhoods and their urban low-income residents who do not want to move? If we take a holistic approach to the problem of housing choice, it seems to me that we can not simply focus on who volunteers to move out. In other words, I seriously wonder whether a national housing mobility program should have embedded within in it a vision – maybe even a concrete set of policies, programs, or even cooperative ventures with other inner-city based initiatives – to provide those who remain behind with housing and other opportunities as well. In her email response to my pre-circulated written comments, co-panelist Elizabeth Julian strongly disagreed with this proposition, arguing that a mobility program should not incorporate “a community rebuilding component” and that “for a number of very rational and logical reasons, the two approaches, while both necessary . . . are best addressed by people and institutions truly committed to them.”⁴² Is it because mobility and rebuilding programs are essentially at odds or mutually exclusive? Is it because the type of work required is just too different? Or is it because shifting accepted and entrenched policy frameworks is too daunting? Or all of them? Even so, if Gautreaux is to go national, maybe another policy relationship – one that recognizes, negotiates, and incorporates local needs – should be considered, even if in the end not adopted. After all, we are talking about major population shifts and geographical makeovers that might benefit from forethought and coordination between mobility and redevelopment advocates.

To be clear, some low-income residents’ desire to stay in inner cities does not mean that they are necessarily satisfied with their current life and economic circumstances or are comfortable with deteriorating and old public housing apartments. Social support and networks, community belonging, place familiarity, and maybe even

⁴¹ I would like to recognize and thank Xavier de Souza Briggs for raising how key accountability is to program success during the final roundtable of the conference that focused on “Where do we go from here?”

⁴² Elizabeth Julian raised this point in her written follow-up comments to my presentation. In those comments, she strongly disagreed with my suggestion of creating a holistic, linked plan that dealt with housing mobility and community revitalization and redevelopment. Julian, *supra* note 13.

their own fears about unfamiliar or hostile places might keep them anchored in inner city communities even when offered the opportunity to move. For instance, J.S. Fuerst has written that while public housing tenants believed “all Americans should have the freedom to move and live wherever they choose,” some decided not to move into Gautreaux-style scattered site housing because “they want[ed] to remain closely connected to African American neighborhoods and live near the churches, family, and community organizations on which they depend.”⁴³

In fact, far from being disinterested, many urban residents have expressed concern about government-initiated housing and redevelopment programs in late 20th- and 21st-century inner-city neighborhoods. They wonder what all these changes might mean for them and other low-income people similarly situated, for their families, and communities. Gentrification, which some inner city residents have viewed as anti-poor people, represents a real concern about race, economics, the politics of place, and housing choice. For instance, when high-rise public housing complexes were being imploded in Baltimore and Chicago, some tenants feared their removal was a way to facilitate the re-conversion or conversion of downtowns into corporate and middle-class playgrounds. In other words, they expressed fear about being pawns or victims of “sly social engineering.”⁴⁴ For instance, Dorothy Scott, a Flag House public housing resident and tenant leader in Baltimore, said at a tenant council meeting in April 1996: “They put us before Murphy Homes because we’re on prime property.”⁴⁵

Residents’ concerns about displacement are not unprecedented. As early as the 1930s, government slum clearance programs and subsequent urban renewal and redevelopment initiatives in the 1950s and 1960s displaced and relocated primarily black people. The process was popularly dubbed “Negro removal.”⁴⁶ For instance, in the

⁴³ J.S. FUERST & BRADFORD HUNT, *WHEN PUBLIC HOUSING WAS PARADISE: BUILDING COMMUNITY IN CHICAGO 197* (2003).

⁴⁴ Urrea, *supra* note 4.

⁴⁵ In fact, Flag House Courts was the last of the four traditional high-rise public housing communities to be imploded in 2001. Rhonda Y. Williams, Handwritten Notes, Dorothy Scott at a Flag House Tenant Relocation Meeting, Baltimore, Maryland, (April 18, 1996) (on file with author).

⁴⁶ See, e.g. RONALD BAYOR, *RACE & THE SHAPING OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY ATLANTA* 41, 70, 192 (1996). Depending upon the city, Latinos/as also suffered the brunt of dislocation as a result of urban renewal efforts. See WENDELL PRITCHETT, *BROWNSVILLE, BROOKLYN: BLACKS, JEWS, AND THE CHANGING FACE OF THE GHETTO* 107-8, 119-21(2002).

midst of mayoral elections in Atlanta in 1969, Julian Bond asked a series of questions, several of which directly addressed race, housing access, disparate community resources, public housing, and urban renewal. Bond asked: “Which one is going to see that public housing is dispersed throughout the city? . . . Which one is going to keep Hunter Street and Auburn Avenue in the black community as clean as upper Peachtree Street? Which one is going to stop the systematic destruction of black residential neighborhoods by halting the spread of commercial development and jerry-built apartments? Which one is going to revitalize urban renewal so it does not continue to mean ‘Negro removal’?”⁴⁷ Almost thirty years later, from the 1990s until now, the implosion of public housing complexes, residential de-densification, and mixed-income proposals have provoked similar tenant worries about displacement.⁴⁸

Before I leave this point and bring my comments to a close, I should make clear that, of course, forcible removal is different from a voluntary housing mobility program such as *Gautreaux* and Polikoff’s proposed national program. Moreover, inner cities do have real infrastructure and social problems and are in dire need of economic revitalization. But of course, researchers, reformers, and policymakers are not the only ones to have recognized these realities. Many black urban dwellers have also expressed concern about disinvestment in urban housing and education, urban poverty, the scourge of drugs, and quite frankly what some viewed as the government’s abandonment of inner cities and its residents.⁴⁹ Throughout history, black people have sought better communities (both through movement and improvement), more extensive economic options, and educational opportunities. It seems to me that Polikoff, too, is concerned not just with housing mobility, but also the future of cities and race relations. His discussion of housing choice and mobility as a self-contained goal as well as a mechanism to dismantle the ghetto implies as much.

⁴⁷ BAYOR, *supra* note 25, at 41

⁴⁸ Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh’s documentary, *DisLocation*, discusses the issues of displacement and relocation in a Chicago public housing complex in a contemporary context. *DISLOCATION* (WT-TTW broadcast Nov. 2005). Also, at the “*Gautreaux* at 40” conference, numerous public housing residents emphatically expressed concern about Chicago public housing relocation policies and the general treatment of tenants.

⁴⁹ WILLIAMS, *supra* note 20. On the scourge of drugs, see DAVID SIMON & EDWARD BURNS, *THE CORNER: A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF AN INNER CITY NEIGHBORHOOD* (1997).

In his conference paper, Polikoff wrote that transforming inner city neighborhoods will not, or should not, require too much population shifting. He argues that “with enough participation, radical change would be inevitable. Whatever the time frame, we would at last be treating a disease that has festered in the body politic for over a century.”⁵⁰ If we are to witness a “radical change” of urban space or inner-city neighborhoods, what kind of transformation will that be and for whom? Are we talking about a plan that incorporates a sufficient supply of low-income, affordable housing within urban cores for those low-income people who end up staying? Are we talking about transforming working-class and low-income people’s lived realities in ways that go beyond the physicality of housing? If we embark on a national race-conscious housing mobility program while downtown city spaces undergo rehabilitation, what will be the effects? Will those who stay become pariahs in *their own* neighborhoods if economically well-off people move next door? Will black inner-city residents be seen as disposable, as refuse that must eventually be removed? In short, how will a national housing mobility program incorporate the needs and concerns of those residents who remain behind – if at all?

⁵⁰ Polikoff, *supra* note 14.