



are designed to allow students and community members to engage Audre Lorde's words in the face of the present atmosphere in which violence against women of color is reported (or not reported) again and again on the news. Poetry teaches us that truth is reflexive and always still in the making.

There is no better way to say it than to say it:

We were never meant to survive.

Endnotes

¹ A statement by Barbara Deming, later invoked by Audre Lorde as the last words in "Need."

² Also the title of the publication that the Combahee River Collective Published "6 Women Why Did They Die?" They had to adjust the title as more and more women were killed in this short period.

³ See for example Margo Culley, ed. *A Day at A Time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1985 and Jill Radford and Diane Russell eds. *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*. New York: Twayne, 1992.

⁴ And I am sad to say that the vast majority of the students I have taught here have experienced or witnessed racist, gendered and sexualized violence on this campus.

⁵ See for example Ntozake Shange. *A Daughter's Geography*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983 and Jayne Cortez. *Mouth on Paper*. New York: Bola Press, 1977.



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Intersections: A Place to Do "the Work"

Jan Clausen, Louise Daniel, Nancy Hoch, Theo Moore, and Deborah Mutnik, Long Island University

- This conversation among five activists in Brooklyn, New York,
- explores the intersections between local anti-war organizing
- efforts and recent response to issues of gentrification,
- development, and displacement. Four of the five participants
- are university professors and members of a neighborhood
- peace group formed after 9/11; the other participant is
- an organizer for Families United for Racial and Economic
- Equality. All five live in the same diverse neighborhood. The
- central contradiction that emerges in the conversation is
- between the potential for building a more diverse movement
- around issues of gentrification and the equally great potential
- for gentrification to reproduce and deepen the very social
- divisions that have historically hampered organizing multi-
- racial movements across class lines.

I moved to Prospect Lefferts Gardens, a vibrant, racially and economically diverse area in Brooklyn, New York, in 1996. Five years later, in the wake of 9/11, a neighborhood peace group called Prospects Lefferts Voices for Peace and Justice (PLVPJ) formed in response to the rise of the Bush regime. One of dozens of groups that emerged citywide in those grim days, we have continued ever since to organize neighborhood forums, mobilize for national demonstrations, and visit area high schools to inform students about alternatives to enlisting in the military. From the outset, our aim has been to draw connections between local and global conditions, examining neo-



liberal foreign and domestic policies in light of our own neighborhood struggles over immigrant rights, police brutality, affordable housing, and adequate services.

As the following dialogue among five Prospect Lefferts residents (including me) attests, the neighborhood has been experiencing a troubling demographic shift over the past several years. The transformation of New York City from a productive to a finance-driven economy, soaring real-estate prices, and unfettered high-rise development have led to what one of us calls the “whitening” of Prospect Lefferts as young college students and urban professionals, priced out of apartments elsewhere, move from more affluent communities like Park Slope across Prospect Park to our neighborhood, often simply referred to as “the other side of the park.” In March 2008, we learned about a plan to construct a 23-story glass tower with luxury condos adjacent to our subway station and half a block from the park. This new development project has both galvanized and polarized the community as some residents, including all five of us, work to stop the developer from proceeding as planned, and others applaud what they see as a positive sign of neighborhood improvement. One upshot of the tower is the formation of a new organization called Concerned Residents of Greater Prospect Lefferts Gardens—a group all of us have related to and which recently co-sponsored a forum with PLVPJ titled “Development and Displacement.”

Because what follows is a conversation about often contentious subjects, we feel it is important to identify ourselves to the reader, providing not only customary job credentials but also information about our social class, race, and status as homeowners or renters. While these social tensions are evident throughout our discussion of our political work in Prospect Lefferts, we lack the space here to consider them in as much depth as they deserve. We nevertheless feel it is important to point out that PLVPJ, like many peace groups, has a predominantly white membership that has consciously wrestled with the need for



greater diversity—there is some—but failed so far to achieve it sufficiently. The potential to build a more diverse movement around the issue of gentrification is already evident in the organizing efforts made since plans for the 23-story tower were made public. However, we are also aware of the ideological range of this larger community, which may well hamper movement-building, and the equally great potential for the very process of gentrification, whether as residents we resist or welcome it, to reproduce and deepen the very class and racial divisions that make organizing multiracial movements across class lines so difficult.

That said, I am a middle-class, white homeowner and Professor of English at Long Island University. Jan Clausen is a middle-class, white homeowner, poet and fiction writer who teaches writing at The New School and Goddard College. Nancy Hoch is a middle-class, white homeowner and Adjunct Associate Professor of English at CUNY’s School of Professional Studies. CarolAnn Daniel is a middle-class, West Indian homeowner and Assistant Professor of Social Policy at Adelphi University. Theo Moore is a working-class, African-American renter and community organizer for Families United for Racial and Economic Equality (FUREE). All of us but Theo are founding members of PLVPJ. Here we discuss the “contentious” issues of development, gentrification, and displacement from our standpoint as activists and residents in an effort to tell a collective story about our political work in Prospect Lefferts against the Iraq War and for “peace” in our own community; to analyze the root causes of the demographic shifts in Prospect Lefferts and other forces spurring rapid, ill-considered development here and throughout the borough of Brooklyn; and to suggest through our own example that acquiring skills and knowledge in the arena of social change, in or out of school, begins with activism.

Although we do not address service learning or community literacy *per se* in our conversation, a word or two about them here is in order. Speaking from the perspective of my own involvement in oral history



projects in public schools and the neighborhood, I have learned, as Ellen Cushman argues, that sustainable service-learning projects for students require my own personal commitment to them. The rich, textured knowledge that evolves through the kind of peace and neighborhood organizing work we have been doing in Prospect Lefferts paves the way for student participation that can foster deep learning and build transferable skills while making a genuine contribution to the community. In such settings, community literacy becomes a practice at the intersections of everyday life with the potential to cut across class and racial lines as we read, resist, negotiate, and act upon contested signs of urban life in the struggle for true social and economic democracy.

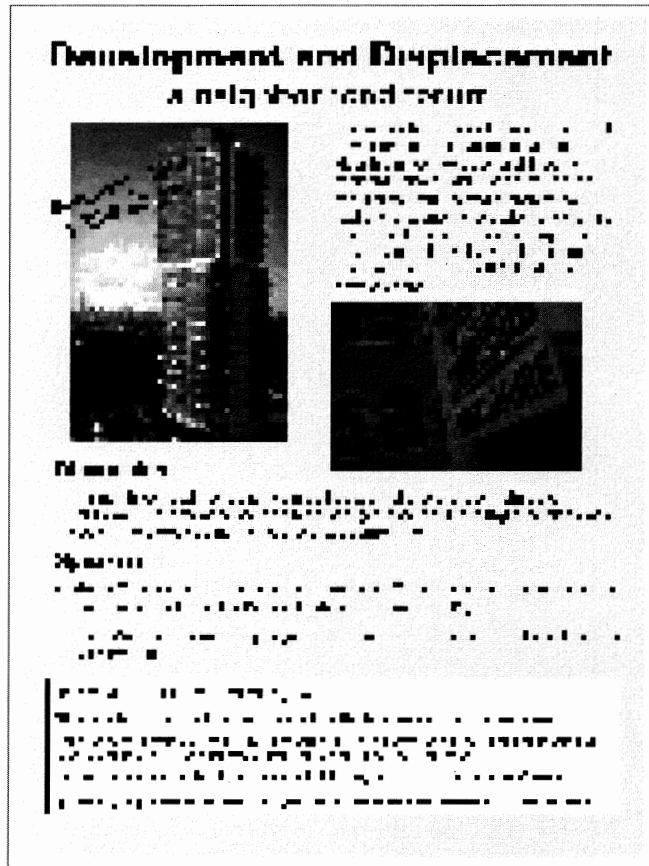
But how do these rather abstract concepts of resistance or engagement with “contested signs,” like the 23-story tower slated for construction in Prospect Lefferts, play out in actual community involvement and, for those of us who are teachers, in the classroom? Whether community members or students, how do we negotiate the complex realms of knowledge and practices necessary to understand social realities and act on them responsibly and effectively? It is these sorts of questions that Bruce Herzberg raises in his influential article on the tendency of community service learning to reinforce rather than challenge students’ assumptions about the causes of, say, poverty or homelessness, and that composition scholars like Elspeth Stuckey and Cushman pursue respectively in research on the covert violence—class biases—of literacy and what it means to be a public intellectual. On one hand, developing the capacity for critical, informed reflection on one’s experience and observations is a crucial element of both community activism and, by most standards, a liberal arts education. On the other hand, such capacities, like literacy itself, evolve over a lifetime, and students and community members alike come to a particular event or issue with a wide range of prior knowledge. In this sense, as James Paul Gee suggests of learners in general, we encounter the unknown either as true beginners or advanced beginners, depending on our exposure to



the discursive forms needed to make sense of particular kinds of texts or tasks. That is, none of us enters a new scene—whether an emerging political issue or an unfamiliar community—with full understanding of its history, dynamics, and key players. Yet, clearly, if we have some knowledge of the problem at hand, similar cases, social and political theories, and/or practical experience, we are more apt to feel able to participate in a collective response and possibly contribute to a solution.

The conversation among the five of us illustrates the complex evolution of our grasp of the problem of gentrification as it manifests in our community—the 23-story tower project combined with increasing prices, rents, evictions, and other unfair housing practices—and our thoughts about the kinds of organizing efforts needed to stop or at least mitigate that process. Each of us came to an understanding of the social relations and circumstances that shape these specific conditions through long term political activism; but no two situations are alike so we have also had to educate ourselves anew as particular events in Prospect Lefferts unfold in relation to deeper social, economic, and historical structures. Four of us are teachers and one of us is a trained community organizer, so we have all read widely and spent long hours in classrooms. But we would all contend that, as important as our academic studies have been to our analysis of the world around us, the key to our capacities as political activists is our enduring involvement in actual struggles.

It is in this respect that the fliers accompanying our dialogue offer concrete examples of community literacy in action. In addition to advertising particular events, they reflect a deliberative, collective process of thinking through how to respond to global and local conditions that directly or indirectly affected the Prospect Lefferts Gardens community over a period of one year, from June 2007 to June 2008. They also demonstrate the conceptual work of generating ideas for community organizing; the rhetorical skills of framing the



issues, timing the forums, and addressing specific audiences; and the print and electronic literacy skills of communicating information effectively with well-chosen images and as few words as possible. Almost from its inception, the group paid at least conceptual and sometimes practical attention to local issues, including participation in a weekly rally protesting the detention after 9/11 of Arab and Muslim men in Brooklyn's Sunset Park Metropolitan Detention Center, and an early effort to connect with Haitians protesting police violence. But the emergence of Concerned Residents, and PLVPJ's alliance with this



new group evidenced by our co-sponsorship of the event advertised by the "Development or Displacement" flyer, represents a more concrete, well-developed stage of that outlook. Unfortunately, the flip side of the upsurge of interest in local issues—though primarily a hopeful sign—is the quality of the political moment, in which it seems increasingly and distressingly futile to organize against U.S. military might abroad, thus making local work increasingly attractive for a negative as well as a positive reason.

The flyers thus chart the evolution of the peace group's and, to a lesser extent, Concerned Residents' consciousness as we continue to struggle, now from a wider range of perspectives, to make Prospect Lefferts Gardens a more just, peaceful community, informing young men and women about alternatives to military recruitment, bearing witness to war, and organizing for fair housing practices and against the construction of a luxury 23-story glass tower which, as one protester put it in his sign, equals "vertical apartheid." —Deborah Mutnik

Where We Live: Prospect Lefferts Gardens

How long have you lived in Prospect Lefferts Gardens and how would you characterize both its history, what you know of it, and the present moment, however you define it?

Jan: In 1993, my partner and I bought a row house in Lefferts Manor. This eight-block area, zoned for single-family homes, has a particular class relationship to the rest of the neighborhood, which has a lot of large apartment buildings and a lot of rent stabilized buildings and a more working class, renting population historically. So there's a historic class tension between owners, specifically in this more elite section of homes, and renters. My understanding is that the single-family homes were all or almost entirely white until the late '50s, and then the first African-American families started to move in. When I first moved to Brooklyn in '74, I looked at an apartment on Ocean Avenue and a white woman renting out apartments asked me to promise that if I



rented from her I wouldn't have a Black or Puerto Rican roommate. In keeping with my good white liberal upbringing, I very indignantly said, "No, I would never agree to such a thing." She chased me out of the building, yelling: "Are you from the NAACP? Are you from the NAACP?" This was around the time when PLGNA (Prospect Lefferts Gardens Neighborhood Association) had been testing the racial steering of the realtors.

Deborah: Let me say a bit about PLGNA, which I've been involved in to some extent for the last couple of years. PLGNA started in 1967, spearheaded by a white man named Bob Thomason, who joined together with a number of other white and Black people in the neighborhood to fight against the real-estate tactic of blockbusting, which had begun in the 1960s. Realtors would scare owners into selling by saying, "Your house is going to lose value because the neighborhood is becoming a Black neighborhood," and then white people would sell and the real-estate companies would make unethical, lucrative deals with Black people. Over the past 40 years, PLGNA has maintained a presence in Prospect Lefferts, despite all the obstacles to effective community organizing, helping to put a progressive stamp on the neighborhood and to ensure the preservation of its multiracial, multi-income character.

When PLGNA formed, there was no such thing as Prospect Lefferts Gardens; the association created the name. It was a little artificial—if you talk to people today, as we recently discovered in relation to some of the current development issues—in that there are people who live right on Flatbush who don't see themselves as living in Prospect Lefferts Gardens; they call it Flatbush. Some people I talk to about our neighborhood say, "Oh, that's Crown Heights." So it was also known as Crown Heights, not as Prospect Lefferts Gardens. The name was geographically derived by the area's borders on Prospect Park and the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, and the fact that it was built on land that had



once been the historic Lefferts' family farm, started in the 1660s when the family first emigrated from Holland.

Nancy: All of this land was a farm still in the 1890s. Then James Lefferts subdivided the land with the provision that it be divided into single-family homes. Eventually, the Lefferts homestead was moved into Prospect Park. All the houses in this eight-block area which we now call Lefferts Manor were built between 1897 and 1908 and consciously designed to attract a stable upper-middle-class population. At that time, these "suburban" houses were considered a retreat from Manhattan. So it was a wealthy area. In some of the houses you can still see where the maid's room was in the house.

CarolAnn: My understanding is that the white flight actually started in the 1950s. A few Black families were able to buy in the 1940s but by the late 1950s there was white flight. Dr. Martin Luther King's death in the 1960s and the riots that ensued crystallized the changes that had started in the 1950s. Among the new homeowners in the 1960s were families from the Caribbean. I have an African American neighbor who always says, "When the Caribbean families moved in, I realized what a real party was. They would have parties until seven in the morning, and it was just so loud!" Although he describes them as foreigners descending on the neighborhood, he is also quick to say, "But they kept their houses very nicely." For the middle—actually professional—class African Americans moving into the neighborhood, this was "moving up," but there was something "unbecoming" about their Caribbean neighbors. Two doors down from my house is where Alice Walker lived with her husband and where her daughter was born. A number of other famous African Americans lived here. For many Caribbean families this neighborhood was also the place to be. Eventually they would become the dominant population in this area.

Deborah: That migration had started in the '30s, not in this neighborhood, but if you read Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl*,



Brownstones, in Bedford Stuyvesant. West Indians, especially Barbadians, were moving there in the '30s, buying brownstones, and then moving on to Crown Heights. It was the move from Bed Stuy to Crown Heights, which would have been this neighborhood—right?—that was coveted. You were “moving up” in Crown Heights.

CarolAnn: Before we moved to the neighborhood eight years ago, I lived in Park Slope and before that, I lived in Manhattan. Brooklyn for me stopped at Park Slope. My husband had a roommate who got married and moved out here. We came out here to visit with her, and it was the first time I had seen the neighborhood and this part of Brooklyn. When we started thinking about moving to Brooklyn, I liked the idea that it was so racially mixed. It was really important to me, being in a biracial relationship and having biracial children, that the people where we lived reflected who our children are. So I was very attracted to this neighborhood, much, much more so than Park Slope. When we moved in 2000, we had paid the most anyone had paid for a house on our block, which seems like nothing today, but I remember the impact it had on the other neighbors. They all wanted to see who we were, and they wasted no time finding out. It seems funny now that other people have moved on to the block and paid eight times what we paid. So I really do see myself as part of the gentrifying force of the neighborhood, which makes it difficult to work on some of these issues because I have to put myself front and center right into the mix of what it means to be part of that gentrifying group.

Jan: My major political education was through the lesbian-feminist movement of the '70s and early '80s. People like Audre Lorde—I've just been teaching her work in my college classes this past semester—have always been so relevant to me, especially her concept of “the house of difference,” acknowledging both the difficulties of “contentious communities” and the inequalities of the material things about people's identities and lives—what it means, for example, that some of us are part of the gentrifying group at the same time we



oppose further gentrification—and seeking to convert those things into strengths. But how we do that?

Deborah: Yes, especially when we remain so socially segregated. Like you, CarolAnn, I was attracted to Prospect Lefferts' diversity: it is the most integrated, multiracial neighborhood that I have ever lived in, where real friendships form among people of different racial backgrounds. That's very uncommon in this society. It happens in workplaces and schools to some extent but where we live tends to be very, very segregated. Most of Brooklyn is segregated. We see different compositions of a few Black people living in Park Slope and a few white people living in Bed Stuy but those communities remain pretty segregated. And I think Prospect Lefferts' somewhat more multiracial makeup is at risk for some of the reasons we'll get to.

Jan: The whitening of the neighborhood is huge; certainly home sales and the vastly escalated real-estate market have a lot to do with it. Also a lot of the African-American and African-Caribbean families who bought in the '50s and '60s are now aging, selling, moving, retiring, dying. A couple of neighbors of mine have children who are inheriting and staying on and an adult child is living with an elderly parent. But that doesn't offset the trend. And the whitening of the apartments has been even more perceptible. When I first moved here 15 years ago, the large apartment buildings bordering the Manor seemed almost entirely Black. I mean, you never saw a white person with a guitar going into an apartment building. I also perceive that the neighborhood has a lot more biracial families or households than it did when I first moved here. My partner is from the Caribbean and when we first moved here it felt like you were supposed to be either a white household or a Black household. It wasn't universally true but it felt like that and now that's much, much different. And the commercial strip, especially on Flatbush, is an amazing rainbow or mosaic or whatever you want to call it of immigrant storekeepers from many parts of the world—Asian, Middle East, Latino, Dominican, Caribbean, African.



CarolAnn: When we first moved here, some of the neighbors who really felt they were doing well by our children warned us not to let them go near the apartment buildings on the corner of our street. These buildings were supposed to be off limits to the children; all kinds of things could happen there. So when I first moved here, I would pass by these buildings with a little dread, letting out a breath as I approached the first house on the block. Now, eight years later, I know three families in those buildings, all of whom, by the way, are white. The transformation has been so rapid it's unbelievable. When my older son went to Maple Street Nursery School, it was 60 percent kids of color. Now there are just a handful of kids of color in my younger son's class.

Nancy: I'd like to say something about what it was like to move in as a white family in 1987. We had started thinking about buying a house and we wanted to live by Prospect Park, so we started looking around the park. We had heard about this neighborhood because we knew somebody who lived here. The first day we walked down some of the streets—it was a much Blacker neighborhood at that point—people were incredibly friendly toward us. People we didn't know were saying “hello” to us on the street. We just looked at each other and said, “We've never had this experience in New York City before.” It had such a feeling of community, partly because the density is lower with the single family homes and, as Jan alluded, people tend to pass their houses on to their kids so there's a stable population in the neighborhood. When I would get out of the subway on Flatbush, I would often be the only white person.

For the first couple of weeks, I was nervous about how people would respond to me but I never had any negative comments. I always felt welcomed. After a while I stopped worrying. Since my husband and I are both teachers, we often had time to travel during the summer. White friends never accepted our invitation to stay in our house while we were away. They said they would feel uncomfortable in the neighborhood. For the longest time, the only friends who ever took us



up on the offer to live for the summer in a big house close to beautiful Prospect Park were people of color. Because Prospect Lefferts has been perceived as a Black neighborhood, despite the Manor's multiracial history, some of the forces of gentrification happening in other areas of Brooklyn have been kept at bay; up until recently, even though it's closer to Manhattan than some of the neighborhoods further out that are being gentrified on the other side of the park, many white families stayed away from the neighborhood. But a few years ago Brooklyn blogs began “discovering” our neighborhood, saying “It's safe to live in Prospect Lefferts Gardens.”

Now we're experiencing this onslaught of gentrification but we have the benefit of knowledge gathered by community groups in other neighborhoods across the city, which have been dealing with this issue for longer. We have a lot of resources and people who can give us advice and help to figure out how to organize. But I also feel amazed that now, when I get off the subway—it happens exponentially once it starts—there will be a whole lot of young professional white people exiting the station. That would not have been true even three or four years ago. It's like this wave has come over the hill and is just sort of crashing on our neighborhood; that's how it feels to me. And tensions are rising: a young white member of our peace and justice group—someone who just moved to the neighborhood a year ago—says she sometimes feels tension between herself and other residents. A Black man actually yelled at one of her white friends as she was riding her bike down the street, saying, “What are you people doing here?” And a young Black man who grew up on my block says he feels bitter.

Deborah: The fact that prices are rising so precipitously gets to some of the underlying global structures that are driving the change. If you go back and look at the root causes, they have to do with the polarization of wealth and neo-liberal policies as they're played out in other countries and here in NYC. People who have worked on Wall Street over the past ten years or so have made huge amounts of money.



You talk to people right out of college who work on Wall Street and they're making way over six figures, and that's helped drive up the prices in neighborhoods like Park Slope. When I moved here in 1996, we looked in Park Slope but we couldn't afford houses there; they were already going for \$600 and \$700 to a million. In this neighborhood, in 1996, there were a lot of places for \$175, \$225. It was a very big difference.

In the last 12 years, since I moved here, Park Slope prices have skyrocketed even higher. And a lot of the people who have moved into Park Slope used to live in Manhattan, probably work on Wall Street, make big bucks, and can afford to live here and start families; they don't want to live in the middle of Manhattan anymore and they want schools for their kids and some of the amenities that you have living in Brooklyn. So they move into Park Slope, which, in turn drives up the prices of real estate in our neighborhood. There's this chain, the next tier of people who can't afford to live in Park Slope—like me, only I couldn't afford to move here anymore—continue to look in Prospect Lefferts Gardens and consider it a very desirable neighborhood, partly because they're priced out of other communities and partly because of the larger political economic dynamics of gentrification.

I don't think there's a conspiracy, a master plan, but there are a lot of different forces that are fostering huge amounts of development in Brooklyn right now and combining to re-segregate the city. I think there will be neighborhoods in NYC that will continue to be very, very poor and have very poor services, and people will really struggle in those neighborhoods. And I think there will be some neighborhoods like Prospect Lefferts Gardens, in which, if there isn't resistance to some of the forces that are at work right now, gentrification will proceed like a steamroller. I don't think it will just be a race issue; it's also a class issue. The people who will be driven out will be poor people across racial and ethnic lines who cannot afford to pay \$1200 or higher rent,



and they will have to go to other neighborhoods that will continue to deteriorate because there won't be money invested in them.

Theo: One of the things we're ignoring is the emergence of New York City as a truly global city in the 1990s and 2000s. We saw the end of industrial New York City in the '90s, when you start to see a lot of people running back to NYC. It's partly the people who work on Wall Street and live in Manhattan, but it's also the people who work on Wall Street and live on Long Island that we're dealing with now who are saying: "There's no way that I have a longer commute than someone who makes less money and works in the same neighborhood. The person who opens the door for me when I go to work should not live closer to my job than I do, so what I will do is push the person who opens the door for me out and I will move back in." The gentrification goes along most train lines.

For example, if you just track the Q train line, you'll see it. When I was growing up—for most of my life I got off at Newkirk on the 2 line—I would get on the 2 train and I would always stand next to a white person because I knew they were getting off at Grand Army Plaza and then I would get a seat. You weren't coming any further than Grand Army Plaza. Then it's like, okay, "You just stayed. . . . This is Franklin. Lady, this is Church Avenue. You were supposed to be off at Grand Army Plaza." The further your train ride is, the poorer you're going to be except in certain parts of Brooklyn where it just gets ridiculously poor, like out in Dyker Heights. A lot of those industrial jobs that people used to have—they could make a good living, still live in the city, and not necessarily have a college degree—don't exist anymore. So now it's a city of the people who work on Wall Street, producing nothing, and the people who serve the people who work on Wall Street who produce nothing.

CarolAnn: It seems to me another force has to do, certainly starting in the '90s, with a redefinition of what it means to be wealthy. These



days, being wealthy is not only about what you have but also about your image. It's about living in a certain type of house in a certain type of neighborhood with the right number of kids in the right schools. For a lot of New Yorkers, owning a brownstone is definitely part of that; and Prospect Lefferts is probably one of the last neighborhoods where you can find a brownstone that's relatively affordable, with most of the historic details still intact. So I think that's also part of the attraction to this neighborhood.

Deborah: But up until fairly recently, certainly still in the 1990s, it was mainly middle-class people like us who moved here. We could make a down payment on a house but that didn't make us rich: we could do it because we had some modest resources. I think that what's changed now is that you have to be really rich to move into this neighborhood—either making a lot more money than I do as a university professor or having inherited wealth or being able to sell other property at inflated prices. And now another element of the story Theo's telling is the price of gas. People wanted to move back to cities anyway—this trend is happening across the country, not just in NYC—because the white flight that had taken place in the '60s and the move to the suburbs that had just been built in the '50s reversed itself with the next generation. We got tired of the suburbs, many of which were also beginning to decline because of deindustrialization, and wanted to come back to cities at a time when there was also more money being invested in cities, particularly in the culture and tourist industries. So as cities lost industries like steel and coal or car factories, they also became more culturally appealing (and homogenized).

Now the price of gas is making it too expensive to live in the suburbs anyway—even the more affluent ones and even if you have money. It's the polarization of wealth that's really driving these urban transformations. Unless you're part of the tiny fraction at the very top, you haven't done well in this economy. Even if you make a couple of \$100,000 for a family of four, which, twenty years ago would have



been great money, that's not enough to stay even. If you make \$100,000 a year—and that's putting you way above the median income—you're not saving money, you're not rich in this society. The people who have benefited from the economic policies of the last ten or twenty years are very, very rich.

Contentious Communities

What are these contentious conceptions of community? And how and why do peace or community movements pay attention to some issues while ignoring others?

Jan: Theo, during a discussion at the 5th Avenue Committee panel about contentious definitions of communities, you were saying the people who live in a community should be the people who have a say in it. Then somebody else said he thought it was too narrow to talk about simply geographical boundaries and another person gave an example of someone from Bushwick, living in a homeless shelter in the South Bronx, who still identifies with his old neighborhood. I thought you had a point and the other people also had a point. What did you think about that exchange?

Theo: When Sam from "Picture the Homeless" was talking, he was right: you have so much displacement in this city that just because people have to be in homeless shelters somewhere else doesn't mean they stop being residents of where they're from; they often still have strong ties there. The Fulton Mall, one of the areas where FUREE organizes, is a cultural hub for a lot of Black culture, a lot of Caribbean culture, so that's a global community right there. Not only the residents of Fort Greene and downtown Brooklyn have a stake in that area but also all Black people and the hip hop community. So it's really whoever cares about the area and wants to preserve its social integrity and really has put in their time. That's what the community is and it doesn't matter what you're there for, how long you've been there, how long



you've been gone from there, as long as you understand it the way that it is; that's your community.

CarolAnn: When I was growing up in the Caribbean, more than anything, community meant connectedness to the people around you. Since I moved to the U.S., I have been part of lots of different communities—diasporic, African-American, and white—but I have only felt this sense of connectedness in other Black communities. It's become clear to me that community means different things for different groups. Perfect example: There was a white woman who lived with her adult son on my block for many years. This family was not liked mostly because of the way they kept their property; their yard is always full of trash, which has become a huge point of contention on the block. A lot of people are also uncomfortable with the son. Last Sunday, the mother died in her sleep. I was unable to go to the funeral but my husband went. He said one of the most remarkable things for him at the funeral was the composition of the guests. Apparently, all of the Black neighbors and only one white family on the block went to the funeral. It really made me think about this idea of community and what it means. Nobody liked this family very much but people came out to support the son because in the end the family is part of the group—they live on the block. That this connection was so much more important to the Black neighbors is very interesting to me. It is these very different meanings of community that makes it difficult to bring people together around particular issues.

Theo: Do you think that's more of a racial issue as opposed to a class issue? I also did union organizing with SEIU (Service Employees International Union) so I would travel all around and the only thing that I've seen that resembles poor Black neighborhoods is trailer parks. That's where I felt most comfortable and at home; when I was driving around in my union car and talking to people in trailer parks, I would get the same feeling I had when I was in the South—people looked out for each other; there was more interdependence. It's almost like



the more money you have and the more self-sufficient you are, the less need for community there is. I think a lot of it is cultural, too: a lot of the Black people in New York come from the Caribbean or the South and community is very strong there—but I would say that this outlook is fundamentally based on people's economic needs.

Deborah: There are certainly historical reasons for that kind of social connectedness. For African Americans whose ancestors were brought here as slaves or in the Caribbean, too, where there was slavery, it starts with resistance; community forms because you need it to survive the onslaught of oppression that you face in your life. But I want to raise another issue about community. I think that part of the contentious conception of community has to do with the assumption that community is always a good thing, it does good things, and it brings people together. But the concept of community can be used very destructively and exclusively, as much to keep people out as to bring people together within a community. Certainly, gated communities are an obvious example of that dynamic.

I think the concept of community has to be examined very closely because sometimes you can bring forces together in an effort to bring community together that are not capable of making change. How do you make change in ways that are positive? If you're working in the peace movement, how do you stop an unjust war? If you're working on local issues, how do you stop—or affect—development to support poor people in the neighborhood? In Prospect Lefferts, as many different forces come together under the umbrella of community, we have to ask: Who are the players? What do they represent? How do we get to talking about the material realities and inequalities that underlie the community coming together? What are our ideas? Disagreements? What actions should we take? What will the end result of those actions be? How can communities—defined geographically here because we're talking about a neighborhood—actually have these kinds of conversations in ways that are politically effective?



Jan: I just want to say that living in Prospect Lefferts is the first time that I've ever identified with a geographical community. I spent my adolescence in a suburb in Washington State which I absolutely hated. It's one of the things that I hate so much about the over-sanitized theme-park feel of certain areas of New York now. Living in NY in the '80s and '90s, I identified with something like the lesbian community or a political activist community. My community was people who were struggling alongside me and making a real effort to be inclusive in terms of race, in terms of class, to some extent, but not identifying with a geographical area at all. I would never have thought of my community as Park Slope. In the fifteen years I've lived here, I've always felt the tension of living in a private house in this single-family area and the class tension as well as to some extent the racial tension of renters versus owners. One thing I'm feeling very excited about right now, coming off this very new formation of Concerned Residents, is the opportunity to come together around some common concerns across class as well as across race lines. This coming together owes something very direct to the ongoing activism of Prospect Lefferts Voices for Peace and Justice. For example, three key members of Concerned Residents first got involved with the initial meetings about changes in the neighborhood when they stopped by PLVPJ's monthly peace vigil to inquire if we were doing anything about the glass tower.

But it's very delicate; it's very tricky. CarolAnn, I feel I owe something to you and to a couple of other people in the peace group for really clearly articulating, when the issue of this glass tower first came up, how severe the issues of displacement are in the existing rental buildings. So I feel like working on that issue of displacement and rents is really a key to realizing the positive potential of community here. And I come back to the "house of difference" and the idea that what I love about this community is that there are a lot of intersections we can make very productive. But that's no guarantee that good things will happen. It simply means we have a place, an opportunity to do the work.



The 23-Story Glass Tower

What impact has the proposed 23-story glass tower had on the Prospect Lefferts and what are the implications for community organizing?

Nancy: I think one of the key questions for me in terms of community has to do with "ownership." I feel that having ownership of your own life has to do not only with the present and the past but also with conceptions of the future. Change is coming, change is happening, change is inevitable. So part of what's contentious involves what kind of change people experience together and how much can we affect that change. What seems to be galvanizing people to reach out and try to connect with each other is this symbol, this glass tower that a developer has announced he's going to build in our neighborhood. There's a very dilapidated two-story or three-story building with a large amount of property around it that's been bought up by a developer who's going to build a 24-story glass tower next to the subway station and overlooking Prospect Park. There are no buildings that tall overlooking the park.

Like a lot of these big development projects, it brings up the question of community say—who has the right to come in and create such big change, and do they have to consult the community or not? Well, it turns out legally the developer doesn't have to consult the community; he doesn't have to talk to the Community Board or anyone else because the zoning laws are such that he can build this large tower with luxury apartments and a penthouse. So it's going to be very high-priced, ritzy housing as it's planned for now. Some people think the tower is going to raise their property values and bring more stores into the neighborhood; there are certain services we have lacked as a neighborhood and they feel this influx of attention and money will address that need. Other people link it directly to what's happening in their apartment buildings across the street where rents are rising out of control and landlords are attempting to take people off rent stabilization; as soon as they can get the rents over \$2000 a month, then the apartment gets taken out of rent stabilization—it has no protection,



So right now there's an opportunity for a lot of different people in the community to come together and say: What is this community? Do we want to assert our collective ownership of it in how we conceive of ourselves as a neighborhood? How are we going to negotiate these different interests which really come down to class interests? Can we have improvements but also make sure that low-income people aren't pushed out? Can we continue to have a diverse economic community? We're at this moment in which everybody wants to talk about this together and how we go forward is very, very delicate. It's easy for us to alienate each other, to use language that alienates each other. And we're going to find that some of us will not be able to reconcile our different interests.

And that's going to be very difficult but possibly we're going to need to take a stand and say, no, actually it's more important for people to have affordable housing than it is to have a great big organic grocery store. It pains me to say that because I'm a big supporter of organic food. It's better for us and for the environment. But this is a neighborhood where people line up for hours each week just a block from me to get potatoes and onions from a little storefront church pantry, a neighborhood where churches that run these pantries are having trouble, as the economy

[illegible]



has worsened over the past few years, getting enough donations from community members to stay open. I'm not sure how to solve this. My husband says we need a food coop here so that we could bring in good food at low prices, but that would take a tremendous amount of work and time to set up—and organic food prices are often much, much higher. Do we, as a community, have the will to start a project like that and see it through? These are some of the questions I think we have to grapple with if we want to preserve an economically diverse community.

CarolAnn: As a group, how do we position ourselves to deal with that reality? I brought up the story about my neighbor and community to illustrate how an important part of community building is empathy—understanding one's position or location within a community and being able to empathize with others in different positions. I'm thinking about all the issues you talked about, the different interest groups and the challenges of coming together around this issue. We need to be able to engage in dialogue across multiple markers of differences and come to grips with how issues of class and race inform the way that other people live as well as the relational nature of our lives. The big organic store may bring some of us joy but it may also mean displacement for others. Figuring this out, I think, is really painful but necessary work. I hope you're right that in this moment we have the opportunity to really be able to look at the ways in which we're interconnected and to make some hard choices as a community about where we want to go.

Deborah: Which may lead to contention.

CarolAnn: Absolutely.

Deborah: One of the contradictions we face is the simultaneous need for development, which I think everyone would agree with, and protection of existing residents from displacement. But the contradiction is that as conditions improve, market rates are driven up



and people who have lived here for a long time risk being displaced and others who might have moved here ten years ago will not be able to afford it any longer; and I think that's a very difficult contradiction to get at.

Working for Peace Locally and Globally

In what sense might we be said to be working for peace or engaged in the overarching struggle to stop the war in Iraq and overcome violence and build harmonious neighborhoods?

Deborah: I would start by saying that sometimes working for peace and overcoming violence means taking a hard position and engaging in conversations that will lead to disagreements, taking unpopular positions, and taking a stand. We've almost been insulated in a way in the peace group. We've done the work as it's emerged and continued to be active since 2001; we go to demonstrations and we have pickets but we haven't really talked to people in the community outside those who come to our events or talk to us when we distribute flyers. There's been a certain abstract quality to it except in the counter-recruitment work which brings us into the community in a way that has been very positive.

CarolAnn: But my sense is that it's not just our group but peace groups in general. It's so much easier to think globally because people can ignore all the local issues that they don't want to worry about and have pushed under the carpet for so long. And quite frankly, I think that's part of the reason that in most of the peace groups and left movements that I've been part of, I've been one of very few people of color. I think we are afraid to deal with the problems affecting the people around us because it means we will have to deal with race and class issues. So we focus a lot on foreign policy and the struggles of other groups in other countries without any connection to the struggles of people right here—where we're living.



VOICES AGAINST THE WAR

Saturday, October 13 @ 3pm

Registration and viewing of film—don't miss it!

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- Bearing Witness: The Faces of War, a play by Edgardo Cortez, Jr. featuring actors from the United Nations, the Red Cross, and the American Red Cross
- Global Action Project, and co. film by the Global Action Project, a film about the war in Iraq and the impact on the world

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Theo: I would say based on our involvement—because we in FUREE often find ourselves in coalitions with peace groups—that a lot of peace groups who start globally and then try to work in communities don't understand that for people, especially when you're talking about the war in Iraq, it's not really a direct correlation even though you can say the statistics to the money going over there, they don't really see immediately how it affects the price of milk, Pampers, bread.



CarolAnn: I do think that the counter-recruitment work we have doing—going to high schools and actually talking to students about the military and the choices they have—has in many ways sustained our peace group. If we had just organized forums and demonstrations, which seem more removed from the immediate lives of people in the community, I don't think we would have been able to sustain ourselves for this long.

Deborah: It's what we were initially saying we would put at the center of this conversation: issues of race and racism within the anti-war movement and the historic divisions between the white left and the Black left and the white anti-war movement and the Black anti-war movement. So, there are two organizations, United for Peace & Justice and ANSWER², and all the complications of the politics of both organizations. It's another issue that in this neighborhood and in this moment, with the existing and emerging political formations, we have some chance of actually grappling with.

Nancy: Yes, one of our challenges is going to be to figure out how we can work together because I think there are going to be a lot of tensions. I know we're towards the end of our conversation but it in a certain way that's what help I'd like in going forward and maybe we can learn from other groups how they've overcome some of these problems to be able to hear each other—in terms of the kind of empathy CarolaAnn was talking about—and to identify what could be common interests.

CarolAnn: I think we also need to recognize that while we are all affected by gentrification, it affects us differently—I think that's where the need for empathy really comes in.

Nancy: There was a recent article in the *New York Times* about Portland, Oregon, which is being gentrified, that details how the Black community and other people of color are being pushed out (Yardley).



One of the people in this article, a Native American man, says, “Well, finally, you’re having a meeting to find out what we feel and what we’re experiencing but it’s almost too late and now all you’re going to get is our stories; all you want is our stories”—as if that can be commodified, too.

Jan: But it’s interesting because the article was also talking about a process in Portland that’s based on a sort of watered down Truth and Reconciliation Commission idea: let’s listen to each other, let’s have these meetings where people listen to each other. I lived in Portland for a long time; I sort of know the ethos. I feel impatient with this process; I want to say, “How about if you do some structural work while you’re listening to the stories?” That kind of touchy-feely-“I-feel-your-pain”—no wonder Black people are impatient with it.

Deborah: Yes, at the same time empathy is important, we also need to be clear about the root causes of the problems of capitalism as they materialize at home and abroad. And we need to find ways of interacting and intervening in this local struggle that are rhetorically and politically sophisticated so that that we are able to stand up to the forces—I don’t want to say of “evil”—but the forces that sustain and profit from this system.

Theo: I’ll go with “evil.”

Nancy: I think that works for me right now.

Deborah: For example, in response to those who want organic markets and espresso coffee in the neighborhood and say there is no relationship between their desires and rent increases or evictions, we need to find ways of standing up and countering that language, those ideas, in ways that are effective and move us forward, rather than lashing out, or not responding at all, or circumventing them—because they are right here in this community and they are who we will have to contend with.



CarolAnn: I would say that, even with all the challenges and issues that we need to grapple with as we go forward, I think that among people in the neighborhood, certainly on my block, our peace and justice group is known. When the gentrification meeting happened last May, two or three of my neighbors assumed that we organized it. So I think we have had an effect even though we might not always be able to see it tangibly. I think that people have come to expect a level of engagement around pressing community issues from us, and that’s good.

Endnotes

¹ Our title, “Intersections,” refers to the geographical, political, and social terrains we negotiate as activists. While it may suggest intersectionality theory (see, e.g., Kimberlé Crenshaw) to some readers, a resonance we hear as well, we would also point out the theory’s limitations in analyzing the social relations that construct the “intersections” or categories themselves.

² United for Peace & Justice (UFPJ) is a national anti-war coalition founded in October 2002; Act Now to Stop War and End Racism (ANSWER) is an organization closely allied with the Workers World Party that formed after 9/11. Both UFPJ and ANSWER have mobilized major national demonstrations against the war in Iraq, often in conflict with one another. The complicated political tensions between the two groups have often erupted around issues of race, racism, and support for Palestinians, with UFPJ accusing ANSWER of being sectarian and undemocratic and ANSWER charging UFPJ with racism and red-baiting.

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Advocating Peace Where Non-Violence Is Not a Community Value

Marsha Lee Baker, Ph.D., Western Carolina University

- Since the U.S. invaded Iraq, I see my life as usual—wanting
- to be on the "frontlines of non-violence," but not always
- knowing how to get there or what to do. In this narrative,
- I re-draw my local peace advocacy since 2003 to figure out
- the frontlines and my endeavors. Though refreshed by my
- core belief in the mutual dependence of non-violent means
- and ends, I also have identified close conflict with this
- idea. Especially where my county, campus, and classroom
- communities intersect, I live and work where non-violence is
- not everywhere a community value.

Over the past five years since the U.S. invaded Iraq, I have looked back and seen my life much as it has always been: I have always known the "frontlines of non-violence" are where I want to be, but I do not always know how to get there or what to do. I see myself trying to fulfill that life urge as I usually have—blending intuition with education, asking for permission as much as forgiveness, working up guts when confidence runs short, and hoping for truth in the maxim that small acts *do* matter. Hoping has led me to write this narrative, for in my professional and civic work, I am a drop in the sea compared to people with extraordinary brains, energy, and opportunity—people who construct theories, write books, lead organizations, shape policy, and influence others, much like oceans shift sands. Comparatively, my work comes in small, arrhythmic swells, not unlike that done by millions of others who persevere vocationally or a-