

# The Hypocrisy of Revitalization: Universities in Black Communities

The University of Chicago wants to revamp the city's Hyde Park neighborhood to benefit students. But that could change the area's local vibe—at the expense of the people of color who live there.

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President Barack Obama with his advisor Valerie Jarrett in the Hyde Park Neighborhood of Chicago (Jason Reed/Reuters)

My stint with higher education began at a massive public institution—the University of Illinois—where I joined a black population that comprised just 5.8 percent of the 40,000-member student body. That percentage fell dramatically over the course of my four years there.

U of I was no bastion of cultural sensitivity, but my peers gave little indication that my black body and *blackish* identity were disturbing their daily lives. Whether in my [schlubby](#) all-sweats freshman garb or my equally schlubby attire of the hungover senior, I folded in neatly with the overwhelmingly white student body into which I had been invited. I was as good as invisible.

Call it yuppie kismet. Blending in had been a foregone conclusion from the moment I began kindergarten in my childhood suburb—a community with [far less racial diversity](#) than the campuses on which I later set foot. Or perhaps I just failed to notice if—or when—I was deemed amiss amidst the masses, my suburban upbringing serving as the perfect anesthetic to any detectable prejudice. Maybe I was "New Black" long before [Pharrell reinvigorated](#) the late 19th-century phraseology for upwardly mobile African American folk.

I thought race mattered less than other factors such as geographical proximity, socioeconomic privilege, and educational affiliation—that my classmates and I had enough in common to overshadow our areas of difference. [Social scientists](#) would say this is symptomatic known as [homophily](#), which in part believes that like-minded people stick together and usually share enough characteristics to overshadow their differences.

I didn't expect my grad school experience as a doctoral student at the University of Chicago to be any exception. After all, the surrounding neighborhood, [Hyde Park](#), has long been lauded as one of the city's most racially diverse areas. As of 2000, Hyde Park boasted a very small difference in the numbers of white and black residents: The groups made up about 44 percent and 38 percent of the community's population, respectively. Meanwhile, approximately 11 percent of the neighborhood was Asian and 4 percent was Latino. As Peter Slevin wrote in 2008, a month before the neighborhood's most famous resident, Barack Obama, was elected president, "Hyde Park is all about the mix."

When a college promises to "revitalize" the neighborhood, it's encouraging students to feel even more on edge around local residents.

Academia, however, can have a way of bringing about that cold-water moment to sober the soul. (Though, funny enough, my recovery from my blissful undergrad naiveté and the blunt return to racial hypersensitivity happened most significantly outside of the classroom.)

As I headed to the gym those first few mornings, wearing my sweats, I watched soon-to-be familiar faces stiffen as I rounded a corner, flirting with the edge of the sidewalk and hastily shoving iPhones or wallets into their pockets as we crossed paths. Hours later, when I returned to campus in the attire of a graduate student, this odd behavior shifted to something close to what my late-adolescent self might have considered normal.

I've since turned this into a bit of an experiment. When I fashion myself in the typical middle-class suburban ensemble—my personal favorite is a North Face jacket, Lululemon leggings, and matching neon Nike running shoes—my peers seem to remain relaxed. Adding a CamelBak water bottle—with its customized university insignia facing outward—appears to reinforce their assurance that I am one of them.

But when I wear the clothes of "my people," public acceptance isn't such a given. In fact, even boarding a campus bus, headed to a school destination, there's a shift to something more like public repugnance. Sweatpants, hooded sweatshirts, Timberland boots, high-top sneakers: Attire that's otherwise the currency of "cool" for white youth everywhere somehow transforms me into a source of wariness and skepticism. *Your presence offends me*, my seatmate indicates as she

makes a hasty retreat away from my body. Sideways scowls reflect what's likely going through the minds of other students on the bus: *You don't belong*.

Some days I want my invisibility—or, at least, the cushy belief in it—back.

Over the past half-century, U of C has expanded its presence throughout the Hyde Park neighborhood. This, we are told, is a good thing.

Last year, Justin Pope speculated in *The Atlantic* that a wealthy private institution like the University of Chicago [might have made a difference](#) for Detroit, which went bankrupt last year. He argued that the city's overcommitment to working-class labor had left it vulnerable to the rise and fall of industry and concluded that it wasn't too late to bring in elite academics to provide the resources necessary for restoration. As he pointed out dryly, "Affordable real estate would not be a problem for somebody starting a university in Detroit." More recently, in *Politico*, John Marchese [praised](#) Drexel University President John Fry for his gentrification efforts in the "sketchy" Philadelphia neighborhood of Mantua.

Only, with all due respect to my academic home, gentrification isn't exactly the appropriate word to describe what has happened in Hyde Park.

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"Gentrification carries this connotation that the neighborhood needed to be fixed up, spruced up, and that's not what happened," says writer and activist Mikki Kendall, a fifth-generation Chicagoan, and fourth-generation resident of Hyde Park. "A lot of the stuff [the University] is 'bringing back' to the neighborhood is stuff that existed to be pushed out in the past."

Kendall cites the neighborhood's short-lived Borders Books and Music. U of C championed a proposal to bring the chain to Hyde Park as part of its ongoing goal to "support revitalization" of the area. But as Kendall points out, Hyde Park was already home to a number of smaller, independent bookstores. Those stores continued to thrive, despite the Borders' convenient location and nationally recognized brand.

"When *The Chicago Maroon* [reported](#) in January 2011 that the Borders had shut its doors, an online commenter posted the following observation: "Replacing a great outdoor space for chess and board games with a closed commercial building was a big mistake. Hitching the economic future of the community to a failed chain store with no tangible benefits accruing to local community (for we already have several good book stores) was a bigger mistake."

The ill-fated Borders was not the first attempt to bring a college-friendly atmosphere into the urban Hyde Park neighborhood. A diner popular with Northwestern and DePaul university students in the much-whiter areas of Lincoln Park and Evanston, Clarke's has struggled to gain traction with the U of C student population since opening in 2012. Akira, a fashion retail store that moved into the Hyde Park neighborhood that same year, remains conspicuously empty most days when I walk past. Such efforts raise questions about what kind of "rejuvenation" the

university has in mind. What's the message when such projects involve massive chains and the recognizable symbols of suburbia—like the NorthFace jacket that replaced my hooded sweatshirt?

"Is this really gentrification?" Kendall asks, or do such urban projects seek "to find a way to create [a] college town in the middle of the city?"

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The problem is that the efforts advocated by Pope or Marchese rarely take into account the communities' existing cultures—the tastes and comfort zones of people of color whose presence in these neighborhoods will long outlast that of the students and most university appointees. When a college promises to "revitalize" a surrounding neighborhood, it sends messages that encourage students to feel even more on edge around local residents. "[My husband and I] get the purse clutch," Kendall says. "We get the skittish, giggly walk away ... A girl walked in the grass for four blocks while me and my husband walked home at night. Because apparently two black people walking down [the] street, she couldn't even be on the sidewalk with us."

As a new student and suburban transplant, I've often heard the brand of city wisdom university students receive. Always be alert. Keep your phone in your pocket. Avoid public transit late at night (if you *must*, only take this route or that route and *never* past this stop). These neighborhoods are safe and *those* ones are sketchy. Don't venture too far [insert cardinal direction here]. If you see a [insert business name here], you're definitely in "the 'hood."

And that really is the crux of the problem. The Conrad-esque rhetoric of the scary urban jungle forgets who the real guests are. "Think about the fact that you are essentially a guest in the neighborhood ... as you argue for this place to cater to you," Kendall writes. Efforts to change the local vibe, or carve out a roomier campus within urban neighborhoods, often lead to spaces uncomfortable for people of color—including those within the campus community.

But self-preservation—maintaining the original fabric of a community for the sake of individuals within it—alone is not suitable cause for retaining a neighborhood's existing personality, because it's not about us. It's about the neighborhood as a whole, a real community composed of far more than ourselves.

Instead of trying to reinvent historic urban neighborhoods into suburban meccas, universities should work to build a sense of security with respect. Surely that's not too great a feat for the country's brightest thinkers.