

“Belonging”: Relocators Describe Their Motivations, Goals, and Experiences of Christian  
Community Development

By

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Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER IN SCIENCE

in

Community Research and Action

May 2017

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would not have been possible without the financial support of George Fox University's Richter Fellowship in 2010. I am especially thankful for the support of Dr. Mark Hall, who encouraged me to apply for the Richter Fellowship, which began my independent research trajectory. I am indebted to Dr. Lisa Graham McMinn, who advised the original project and has been a faithful supporter, teacher, friend, inspiration, and co-laborer in the world, and remains a source of grounding and direction in my life and work.

At my current institution, I am grateful to fellow colleagues that have supported, challenged, and invested in me, especially all those in the Sara Safransky's Critical Methodologies course of 2016. Dear friends and supporters—Amie Thurber, Leah Roberts-- have engaged my work and been a foundational part of the process. Mentors in and beyond my home department, including Dr. Doug Perkins, Dr. Sara Safransky, and Dr. Melissa Snarr, have been pivotal in helping me to develop this research and consider its importance. I am so grateful for their willingness to read, strengthen, and participate in this project.

The participants who engaged this work and made it possible are profoundly important to me and I am deeply grateful for their willingness to share their lives with me. My friends and family, who have loved and cared for me through many years of academia, are enduring sources of grace. Finally, I could not be here without TJPE, who believes in me when all else fails and provides strength to keep going.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2008, the Fosters, a young, white, middle-class couple, relocated to a large apartment complex in a low-income neighborhood in East Portland because, as they explained, it was their calling. The Fosters' aspirations to live in partnership with the poor and invest in areas experiencing economic decline were motivated by their Christian faith and sense of conviction to respond to issues of poverty and residential segregation. The Fosters represent a number of like-minded individuals who have relocated to economically marginalized areas in an effort to support disadvantaged neighborhoods. The Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) refers to this endeavor as *relocation*, defining it as the process of establishing personal stake in a neighborhood by “transforming ‘you, them, and theirs’ to ‘we, us, and ours’” (Perkins, 1995:22). Relocation has two broad objectives: first, to bring new resources to the neighborhood in order to interrupt cycles of poverty (benefitting long-term residents); and second, to understand inequality through lived experience and transformative relationships with diverse people (benefitting relocators). Despite the public literature that suggests relocation is a widespread trend, little scholarship exists on this phenomenon. The implications of relocation for low-income neighborhoods, both materially and non-materially, is under-examined and current studies fail to consider the perspective of local residents or trouble the assumptions of the method. In order to address these gaps, this study centers a group of ten geographically dispersed relocators in order to scrutinize the theoretical underpinnings and implications of relocation, considering how the motivations, goals, and experiences of this population perpetuate or interrupt class and race-based advantages. This project explicitly draws on a critical lens—fantasies of redemptive identification (Roman 1997)—to examine how practices and discourses of relocation operate as forces of marginalization, rather than transformation.

## POVERTY, SEGREGATION, AND CHRISTIAN RESPONSES: THE EMERGENCE OF RELOCATORS

Sociologists have long examined issues of poverty and residential segregation, noting how issues of race and class are key factors of housing opportunities and economic mobility. W.E.B. Du Bois' (1899) seminal work on the experience of blacks in Philadelphia demonstrated that race-based social inequality was experienced at every level of life, including but not limited to housing access and neighborhood racial make up. Early studies of poverty and segregation directed attention to the geographical concentration of poverty, such as Wilson's (1987, 1996) assessment of deindustrialization and joblessness, Massey and Denton's (1993) examination of residential segregation and limited opportunities, and Rosenbaum's (1996) analysis of racial disparities within quality of housing. These studies revealed the strong connection between residential segregation and economic inequality. More recently, the 2005 special issue of *Social Problems* considered residential segregation with new data, examining multiple dynamics of housing inequality, such as housing market and mortgage lending discrimination. For example, Ross and Turner (2005) argue that while some dynamics of housing discrimination, such as societal attitudes and real estate practices, have changed or even declined, other dynamics of discrimination, such as racial steering practices by real estate agents to guide potential buyers to particular neighborhoods, remain salient and disparate access persists. Other recent studies consider how class is a determinant of neighborhood segregation, suggesting that the interaction between race and class is increasingly powerful (Massey, Rothwell, and Domina 2009). Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino (2012) demonstrate that concentrated poverty remains a critical issue in the United States, noting that new patterns of economic isolation emerged from the recession in the late 2000s and from Hurricane Katrina. The authors find that growing rates of poverty are found

in suburban and rural locations and that concentrated poverty is increasing, but remains most prevalent among racial minorities (Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino 2012).

### Religious Responses

As the realities of social inequity and residential segregation became more prominent in public attention, religious organizations responded through social service provision, such as providing shelter and emergency care, and social action, such as political activism and civic participation. The role of religion in addressing issues of systemic disparities has been well attended by sociologists, who note that churches and religious congregations have long played a role in providing social services and promoting social action, such as shelter provision and political advocacy (Barnes 2004; Cavendish 2000; Chaves 1999; Chaves and Higgins 1992). For example, Jane Addams' Hull House and other settlement houses in the 1800s emerged with the Social Gospel movement to provide housing within areas of extreme poverty. Religiously-driven social services are still common in the U.S. today. For example, George W. Bush's creation of the White House Office for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in 2001 secured federal funding for religious organizations (Kemper and Adkins 2005). Scholars also suggest that the degree and type of service/action varies by denomination, religious tradition, congregational activity, and racial/ethnic demographics of the congregation (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006); for example, black congregations are more likely to participate in civil rights activities than their white counterparts (Chaves and Higgins 1992). Finally, studies have also shown that religiosity has a strong influence on volunteering (Park and Smith 2000). While it is clear that churches and religious organizations play a prominent role in social services and social action, further research is needed to examine whether this work is actually disrupting systems of inequality and what practices may allow this to happen.

## The Christian Community Development Association

The Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) was co-founded in 1989 by John M. Perkins (an African American pastor in Jackson, MS) and Wayne Gordon (a white pastor in Chicago, Illinois) (CCDA *About*). Based in Chicago, CCDA is national network of churches, organizations, and individuals dedicated to alleviating poverty through grassroots and church-based efforts (Perkins 1995). Formed in the aftermath of post-WWII white flight and in the context of highly segregated cities, the CCDA attempted to counteract these trends by explicitly investing in physical locations that were experiencing economic decline. Grounded in Christian theology and personal experiences, the organization articulates eight key tenets of Christian Community Development (CCD): 1) Relocation, 2) Reconciliation, 3) Redistribution, 4) Leadership Development, 5) Listening to the Community, 6) Church-Based, 7) Wholistic, and 8) Empowerment (CCDA *About*). The co-founder of CCDA, John M. Perkins, is often referred to as a prophetic voice to the American evangelical church and embodies the *Three Rs* (relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution) of the CCDA (Slade, Marsh, and Hetzel 2013). Perkins fled to California as a teenager in the wake of his brother's murder by a white sheriff, but returned to Jackson, Mississippi, as an adult to re-invest in the community (relocation). His ministry included political activism, day care provision, and leadership training (redistribution). Consistently emphasizing the role of love and forgiveness, Perkins co-wrote a book with former Klansman Thomas Tarrants (Perkins, Tarrants, and Wimbish 1994), describing his process of choosing to forgive the whites who had violently attacked him and his family (reconciliation). The CCDA draws on these stories to ground their work, explaining that they seek the transformation of both social structures of injustice *and* the internalized injustice that manifests as hatred and violence between people.

As a network organization, CCDA primarily provides training and opportunities to connect with others who share the vision, philosophy and mission of the association. For example, CCDA sponsors annual national conferences; develops literature and training on CCD philosophy, church collaborations, and Christian leadership; coordinates city-based discussions and networking events; and engages in policy advocacy on issues of immigration, mass incarceration, and education reform (CCDA *Events* and *Get Involved*). CCDA has over 3000 individual members and 500 organizational/church members who participate in trainings and networking events, attend the conference, or do some type of community development in their church, organization, or neighborhood (CCDA *About*). While leaders of the organization have been writing for public audiences for decades (Bakke 1987; Castellanos 2015; Elliott 2006; Gordon, 2010; Gordon and Perkins 1995, 2013; Lupton 1989, 1993, 2005, 2012; Perkins 1993, 1995; Sider, Perkins, Gordon, Tizon 2008), only a few scholars have examined the theory and method of CCD. These scholars broadly suggest that the CCD philosophy provides a comprehensive and theologically-based approach to supporting disadvantaged communities on both micro and macro levels (Essenburg 2000; Fernando 2006; Marsh 2005; Tan 2009).

### Relocation

While CCDA articulates eight core tenets, it is perhaps best known for the first tenet: relocation. The CCDA describes three types of relocators: “relocators,” who are not born in the neighborhood but move to it; “returners,” who are born in the neighborhood, leave, and then return later; and “remainers,” those who are born in the neighborhood and stay there, in spite of opportunities to leave (CCDA *Relocation*). This paper focuses on the first type, “relocators,” as there is very little literature or data on “returners” or “remainers.” Relocation is seen as a critical method to interrupt and resist societal patterns of injustice such as white flight and residential

segregation. Additionally, it is meant to be a transformational reorientation of lifestyle for the relocator that explicitly counters upward mobility. Furthermore, relocation challenges methods used by other service organizations that, according to Perkins, are inherently paternalistic and fail to contextualize their service to the community. He contends that organizations and service providers located outside of the community are unable to foster respect and mutuality with recipients of their service. By refusing to become geographically attached to the areas experiencing decline, according to the CCDA, the organizations remain disconnected from the community and demonstrate that they are not willing to truly partner with the residents they claim to serve. Perkins claims that taking residence has dramatic impact on politics; “Relocation was about where you get up in the morning” (Marsh 2005:175). He further says, “Relocation is personal. It involves putting ourselves in threatening situations, coming into areas that others have long since abandoned, or merely planting our feet in neighborhoods that ‘smart’ people are leaving” (1995:36). The emphasis on local and spatial politics is critical to CCD and has been a compelling message to service providers, activists, and organizers. Relocators are found across all corners of the nation, including: Jackson, Mississippi; Baltimore, Maryland; New York City, New York, Oakland, California; Boston, Maryland; Charlottesville, Virginia; Atlanta, Georgia; New Orleans, Louisiana; the Bronx, New York; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Marsh 2005). However, there is limited data on the demographics or trends of relocators, or any way of estimating how many people are doing relocation or where they are located.

Literature on relocators, primarily written by leaders of the movement for a popular audience, typically relies on narrative or reflective accounts of relocators about their personal processes and rationales for living in the neighborhoods they do, without analytic attention to the meaning or impact of these narratives. These accounts are framed as heroic, sacrificial, and

missional, in which relocators invest in an abandoned area and model a Christian lifestyle (Elliott 2006; Marsh 2005; Pizzi 2006; Sherman 2002). In one of the few empirical studies on the topic, geographers Hankins and Walter (2012) examine a nonprofit in Atlanta that refers to relocation as “gentrification with justice” (pp. 1507), suggesting that *strategic neighbors* (relocators) use place-making to interrupt cycles of poverty. Their findings demonstrate that strategic neighbors intentionally focus on the relationship between place and people, (re)making the places through relationships and transformation. Specifically, the authors suggest that this approach contextualizes both poverty and the poor, enabling a unique attempt to address systemic issues of poverty. However, no empirical assessments of the direct impact of relocation—both in terms of poverty alleviation and economic development—exists to demonstrate the effectiveness of the method.

Importantly, few studies have examined the implications of relocation in the current American context of gentrification and the white return to the city. While the CCDA and relocation emerged in response to stark issues of racial segregation and concentrated poverty, which remain critical issues of societal inequality today, migration patterns in the US are shifting and the politics of the city include issues of displacement and revitalization (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008; Lepofsky and Fraser 2003; Smith 1996). Given the important shifts in migration patterns and the subsequent impacts of gentrification on poor and racial minority residents in the city, relocation must be reexamined. Contemporary trends in geographical inequity may suggest that the potential of relocation to alleviate poverty and disrupt segregation has diminished. For example, Bielo (2011) suggests that *re-urbanized white evangelicals*, who have migrated to cities in a rejection of suburban megachurch culture and seeking racial reconciliation, will necessarily confront—if not perpetuate—issues of gentrification. Moreover, current studies of relocation fail

to scrutinize how issues of power and difference, specifically in terms of race and class, manifest in relocation. While proponents of relocation attest to its transformative ability to foster racial and economic reconciliation, few studies have critically examined the theoretical underpinnings and large-scale implications of the model. Attention to the ways in which racism and classism are perpetuated, even through well-meaning attempts to alleviate these very issues, requires interrogation of the assumptions that undergird relocation and the associated actions.

### SITUATING RELOCATION IN CRITICAL THEORIES

Critical race and whiteness theorists examine the ways that race, racism, and power are embedded within the foundations and components of social life. Scholars note that race is a social construction that is made real through the material and psychic advantages of one race over another. For example, large social structures—such as education, law, housing, media, and economics—are designed to protect and advance the interests of white people over the interests of people of color (Delgado and Stefancic 2006; Lipsitz 2006). Additionally, scholars note that the minority status given to people of color intersects with and is compounded by other marginalized positions, such as those of gender, ability, sexual orientation, class, and age, creating unique experiences of intersecting oppressions (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991). Scholars also examine the properties of whiteness, including the material advantages and possessive investments in whiteness (Lipsitz 2006), contending that whiteness is a position of structural advantage that is shaped and reinforced by cultural practices and experiences, including geography (Frankenberg 1993). Finally, scholars also note that in the context of United States post-Civil Rights era, racialized advantages are often unacknowledged by whites, as well as subtly and strategically justified (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Yancy 2016).

### Fantasies of Redemptive Identification

Leslie Roman (1997), in an essay directed toward critical and liberal humanist scholars, suggests that an important way that racialized advantage is overlooked by whites is through *fantasies of redemptive identification*, discursive strategies in which whites position themselves as one with racialized others by bridging accessible differences. Roman (1997) contends that redemptive identification fantasies perpetuate racial inequity in a number of ways. First, by collapsing difference between racial groups, whites unquestioningly assume the ability to know and to represent racialized others. In so doing, whites also appropriate the experiences of marginalized others. Additionally, the identification component of the fantasy suggests a common, universal experience that is implicitly normed off whites. Second, by positioning whites as overcoming the racial divide, these fantasies are based on a “benevolent white redeemer” (Roman 1997:275) who heroically recovers racialized others and returns them to active participation in society. Finally, fantasies of redemptive identification avoid dealing with systemic complicity in racial inequality and allow for absolution. Roman (1997) explains:

Redemption discourses claim that loving identification with, and caring for, the ‘racial other’ partially overcomes and appropriates what the racial privileged are *not* able to know (consciously) from their own *direct experiences*— that is, the concrete effects of racism. By considering such inequalities to be merely problems of translation/miscommunication across propertied “cross-cultural” divides, a kind of *premature* and *underserved absolution* is accomplished (pp. 274, italics in original text).

Roman (1997) contends that fantasies of redemptive identification are common in US society and perpetuate the continued investment in racial inequality. Roman (1997) also notes that the opposite of identification fantasies—the celebration of essentialized differences—are not her proposed alternative. Rather, she calls for careful scrutiny of the political consequences of

redemptive narratives, particularly as they are presented to be interruptions of racial inequality. She states,

For example, while discourses of redemption may allow the racially privileged some insight (however partial and interested) into the dehumanizing effects of racism and imperialism on particular individuals and groups and, thus, have certain counterhegemonic or progressive effects, they also create/support notions of racial, national, and imperial normativity in which certain forms of white ethnicity and nationality (e.g., the United States as a nation in the larger Western empire) are rendered unquestionable (Roman 1997:276).

Roman's (1997) concept of fantasies of redemptive identification therefore calls into question the ability of redemptive narratives to challenge racial injustice, a trope that remains largely uncritiqued in the literature on relocators.

#### Current Study

As noted in the above sections, the empirical literature on relocators is limited; thus more scholarship is needed to understand this phenomenon in the current United States context. In particular, only limited studies have investigated the motivations and strategies of relocators, and none have analyzed the method from a critical perspective that attends to issues of power and racial justice.

This study begins to fill these literature gaps by exploring the perspectives of relocators in three U.S. cities. In this research, I ask: (1) How do relocators describe their role? (2) What are their reasons and goals for relocating? (3) What do they do as relocators? (4) In what ways do relocators' motivations and actions contribute to or disrupt racial injustice? I analyze the data through a critical race theoretical framework to explore the assumptions that undergird relocation. More specifically, I examine how relocators resist and/or engage in fantasies of

redemptive identification (Roman 1997). I seek to understand how relocators perceive themselves and how they attend to differences between themselves and others by probing how they describe their motivations, goals, and experiences.

### Positionality

Relocation is a complex and sensitive topic because of its connection to power— that is, it engages issues of religion, race, and class, among others. Critical race scholars have examined the tendency of whites to employ strategies of ignorance and avoidance to escape acknowledging their responsibility and advantages in an unjust system (Yancy 2016). Additionally, Christian hegemony (which has a complex history that includes colonization and violence in the world) intersects in various ways with racism, which tends to compound marginalization (Beaman 2003; Blumenfeld 2006). Finally, decolonial theorists critique the exploitive and objectifying processes and effects of research (Smith 1999).

As a white, mainline Protestant researcher , I am embedded into each of these sites of power. My intersecting positions impact every stage of the research project: awareness of the topic, theoretical perspectives, access to participants and field sites, data interpretation, and reporting (Al-Hardin 2013; Borland 1991; Fine 2004; Harraway 1998). I place myself within and between the various locations of this project (academic audience, faith community, and research participants), in order to respect and include the strengths of each into this project. In this way, I am both an insider and outsider to the community, connected through faith and distanced through scholarship. As such, my Evangelical, Quaker, and Episcopalian religious formation allows me to recognize and appreciate religious narratives within relocation and to nuance the function of theology. Meanwhile, my scholarly formation as a social scientist prompts me to scrutinize the role of religion in relocation, building from sociological theory to contribute to empirical

understandings. Holding these capacities in tension, I engage these data as a gift from real, living people and seek to treat them with respect and care. My ultimate goals are to (1) conduct rigorous and relevant research that contributes to academic literature; and (2) use my scholarship to partner with the Christian community in taking steps toward just and sustainable responses to structural inequity and racial injustice.

## METHODS

This project began in the summer of 2010, when qualitative data were collected via a convenience sample of 10 relocators in Portland, Oregon; Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Chicago, Illinois.<sup>1</sup> These cities reflected the geographical location of the sample—that is, participants were recruited, not cities. In order to briefly situate the participants in their geographic context, data from the 2010 Census on the race and poverty statistics is included in the table below (neighborhood names are pseudonyms).<sup>2</sup> Statistics for the three primary races/ethnicities mentioned by the participants (African American, Hispanic/Latino, White) are included *alone*, meaning not in combination with another race. While this table does not include the full range of racial or ethnic identities in these areas and is thus obviously partial and limited, it is included for purposes of initial comparisons between neighborhoods.

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<sup>1</sup> This project was funded and approved by the George Fox University Richter Scholar Program, which provides funding for undergraduate research. For more information: <http://www.georgefox.edu/academics/richter/>

<sup>2</sup> These statistics are based off the American Community Survey 5-year Estimates (<http://censusreporter.org/>) and reflect the census tract in which the participants' addresses were located. Margin of error is at least 10% of total value.

Table 1: Neighborhood Demographics based on 2010 Census data.

<i>City Neighborhood</i>	<i>% African American</i>	<i>% Hispanic or Latino</i>	<i>% White</i>	<i>% below poverty line</i>
Chicago Oakwood	32.9% 94%	28.9% 3%	45.0% 2%	22.7% 44.6%
Chicago Pinewood	32.9% 24%	28.9% 6%	45.0% 54%	22.7% 23.4%
Milwaukee Maplewood	40% 90%	28.9% 2%	48.8% 7%	29.4% 48.9%
Portland Birchwood	1.8% 10%	11.7% 31%	83.6% 51%	15.4% 31.8%
Portland Cherrywood	1.8% 16%	11.7% 8%	83.6% 54%	15.4% 13.5%

### Sampling

Participants were recruited via personal email. Most participants were individually recommended to me by family or friends. I recruited four participants individually after I learned of their connection to CCDA and contact info through the CCDA website and handbook; all those recruited agreed to be interviewed. To qualify in the study participants needed to be at least 18 years old and self-disclose as relocating intentionally to a low-income neighborhood for community development (such as community partnership, growth, or revitalization). All participants were aware and familiar with CCDA, but were not necessarily members of the organization. Sample size was limited to ten participants due to time and funding constraints. With one exception, all participants were interviewed one-on-one in their home or neighborhood; one participant was interviewed over the phone. Spousal participants were interviewed together. All but one of the participants lived in neighborhoods with other known relocators. All participants were white and held either Bachelor's Degree or Master's Degree. Details about the participants are included in the table below. In order to preserve anonymity of the small sample,

participants are not given pseudonyms; additionally, quotes are not given identifying markers (such as gender or age) and are distinguished only by the participant's city.

Table 2: Participant Demographics

<i>City</i>	<i>Neighborhood</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Time as relocater</i>	<i>Family Status</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Education Level</i>
Chicago	Oakwood	White	40-50	12 years	Married with children	Male	Masters
Chicago	Oakwood	White	40-50	12 years	Married with children	Female	Masters
Chicago	Oakwood	White	20-30	2 years	Single	Female	Bachelors
Chicago	Oakwood	White	30-40	5 years	Married	Male	Masters
Chicago	Pinewood	White	30-40	1 year	Married with children	Female	Bachelors
Milwaukee	Maplewood	White	30-40	3 years	Married with children	Male	Masters
Milwaukee	Maplewood	White	30-40	3 years	Married with children	Female	Masters
Portland	Birchwood	White	20-30	2 years	Married	Male	Bachelors
Portland	Birchwood	White	20-30	1 year	Married	Female	Bachelors
Portland	Cherrywood	White	20-30	1 year	Engaged	Female	Masters

#### Data Collection

The interviews were semi-structured, following an interview guide while also allowing freedom for follow up and probing (Bernard 2011), and generally lasted two hours. Because each individual's story is unique and the nature of this project is exploratory, employing a semi-structured interview allowed me to include individualized nuances in the data and to pursue unexpected topics. The interview guide was organized to prompt relocators to reflect on their intentions and self-perceived role in the neighborhood. Interview questions included the following: How do you define relocation? What is successful relocation? How did you come to

live in this neighborhood? What are the challenges of relocation? What kinds of activities do you do in the neighborhood? The interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

### Approach to Qualitative Analysis

I employed a combined inductive and deductive approach to content analysis (Bernard 2011). By allowing for both deductive and inductive approaches, I was able to better capture nuances that emerged in the data (Cummings and Norwood 2012). Due to time and funding constraints, I began transcription by listening to the audio recording and noting which sections of the interview addressed my research questions: motivations, goals, and experiences. I then selectively transcribed these sections of the audio. After completing transcription of the relevant sections, I began a recurring coding cycle, as described by Saldaña (2009), to establish categories, subcategories, codes, subcodes, and themes. As Bernard (2011) suggests, I particularly looked for themes from the literature, repetition, and unusual use of terms. Building from the literature and my research questions, in the first cycle I identified primary categories in a deductive process: motivations, goals, experiences, and redemptive fantasies (Roman 1997); this stage revealed how redemptive fantasies overlapped with the other primary categories. I then inductively developed subcategories and codes within each primary category, identifying for example, how each participant described the role of religion in their choice to relocate, and then gathered representative quotes for each code. After completing subcategories and codes, I re-listened to the audio recording to ensure that applicable data were not overlooked. Any new data that were relevant to the emerging analysis were transcribed and coded. Finally, I employed an inductive process to review the codes and data for points of contradiction and divergence. The themes, point of contradiction, and uses of redemptive identification fantasies (Roman 1997) are discussed in the following sections.

## RESULTS: MOTIVATIONS, GOALS, AND EXPERIENCES

In general, the ten relocators in this study had three points of similarity: (1), participants cited a faith conviction for relocation; (2), participants referenced belonging as a goal of relocation; and (3), participants experienced relocation as both a risk and a benefit. Participants varied in three ways: (1) the form of their faith motivation (partnership with the oppressed and marginalized, personal responses to social inequality, and personal transformation); (2) the structure of relocation (with an organization or as an individual) and (3) the strategy of relocation (participating or facilitating). Furthermore, participants negotiated between multiple positions and perspectives, demonstrating a complex and at times contradictory understanding of themselves, their role in the neighborhood, and the neighborhood itself. These discursive maneuvers reveal how relocators both resisted and engaged components of fantasies of redemptive identification (Roman 1997). Most notably, participants tended to explicitly resist claiming a redemptive role. However, they often implicitly positioned themselves as redeemers and as norming models. Participants also tended to engage ideas of identification, especially in describing their goals to belong in the community. Lastly, while participants occasionally acknowledged systemic inequity, they focused on individual-level interventions and had virtually no references to macro-level change.

### Motivations: A Faith Conviction to Relocate

The first point of similarity among the participants was the role of religion. Every participant described their *faith* as a compelling reason for participating in relocation. For example, participants explained that relocating was “just God’s calling” and that they “were redeemed for partnering with God in the restoration of things.” While the degree of religious reference varied, it was present throughout every conversation. Some participants presented their

faith as a given, briefly mentioning the church they attend or an influential Christian leader; others explicitly stated that their faith was a driving motivator. For example, one Milwaukee participant explained,

Our lives were redeemed for something greater than personal salvation; we were redeemed for partnering with God in the restoration of things, not just the espousing to an idea called the gospel, but to actually understand the reality of the gospel and to see our lives wrapped in that reality is why we're here. Because our lives were written for a narrative, and it's outside of us, and God is doing it.

By drawing on theological narratives of redemption in the present and material reality, this participant emphasizes that relocation is a method by which they can personally engage in an unfolding story of God's movement in the world.

However, the implications and expressions of participants' faith conviction varied considerably. Three broad categories of faith expression emerged from the discussion: 1) partnership with the oppressed and marginalized; 2) personal responses to inequality; and 3) personal transformation. A few discussions focused on one particular expression of faith, but most participants navigated between multiple components of faith to explain their motivation.

*Partnership with the oppressed and marginalized:* participants emphasized caring for the poor and saw relocation as being in solidarity with those who suffer. Drawing on religious narratives of God's care for the poor and Christ's incarnation, participants explained that relocation provided a way to know and partner with people and places that experience injustice. As a Chicago resident stated, "God cares for the city. God cares for all places, but especially places that are, where people are marginalized." By living in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods and building relationship with residents, relocators sought to reject societal values

of upward mobility, and instead become companions with poor and marginalized people. As another Chicago participant explained, solidarity is key to relocation,

So relocation is the idea, born out of John Perkins...because he felt that living among the people and doing what he calls *entering into the pain of the people* was extremely important. In fact he would say in order to serve that people, you have to know that, *you have to be there with them*, you can't do it from afar, you can't do it successfully (italics mine).

Emphasizing the need for proximity and shared experience, relocation was largely understood as a theologically driven, lifestyle choice for solidarity.

*Personal responses to social inequity:* participants describing this expression of faith tended to acknowledge large-scale social issues and perceived themselves as making choices for justice. Some participants described feeling unsure about their role in society and were troubled by systemic disparities, and thus chose relocation as an answer to “this question about justice, you know this question about, about God loving all people.” For example, a Portland participant identified her embodied experience of privilege and explained that she saw her role to understand and disrupt her complicity in societal injustice. She explained,

And, I don't want to spend a lot of time apologizing for [being white], or apologizing that I wasn't born poor, or apologizing that I went on to get an education. I think that's inauthentic, I think it's insincere. But I also think that just because you don't need to apologize to somebody for being who you are, that you can take responsibility for that. You can say, 'Because I am this person, because I do have resources, I am responsible to right the wrongs that I'm aware of, and take responsibility for the wrongs that I'm not aware of, when I find them out.'

Relocation was seen as a way to personally seek justice by interrupting residential segregation and investing resources, material and nonmaterial, in locations of poverty. Participants, while acknowledging macro-level structures, contained their discussions to a micro-level focus, again demonstrating that relocation is primarily an individualized process.

*Personal transformation:* participants also explained that relocation was a personally formative experience. Participants understood their choice to relocate as part of a growing process for themselves, not only as a contribution to the neighborhood. Personal transformation, which situated relocation as a lifestyle choice in the pursuit of social justice, is distinct from previous themes because it emphasized internal change within the relocators themselves. Participants explained that personal transformation was important to them and that they saw context as a crucial component of fostering internal growth. Although no one specifically referenced sanctification, a religious term that describes the on-going process of becoming holy, the narratives suggested that participants understood relocation as part of a process of sanctification. For example, a Chicago participant explained,

I could tell that there was something that God wanted me to see or know. I didn't quite know what that was, and I'm not sure if I still do, actually. But I knew that it was only possible if I were to put myself in a context where I was not the majority, and I was not necessarily comfortable all the time. And so for me, that was a non-white context, and that was a context of poverty.

Again, this theme emphasizes the importance of the personal decision and experience of relocation, but explicitly focused on the relocators themselves.

The motivations to relocate were embedded in faith formation and understanding, demonstrating that participants rely deeply on a religious frame to undergird their process of

relocation. Although this paper is not oriented around the religious components of relocation, it is notable that this sample draws from a religious paradigm that calls for *personal action* in the pursuit of societal justice. Generally, participants offered vague explanations for how relocation specifically fosters justice, as will be shown below, but the key finding here is that participants were compelled to relocation through their faith, and their conviction that all was not right in the world and they had a personal role in the solution. Additionally, as will be troubled in more detail later, the above themes also reveal that motivations to relocate are more focused on the role of the relocator than on the impact of relocation. For example, participants' goals for solidarity provided little clarification on what solidarity actually provides for others. Moreover, while the participants expressed partial moments of self-interrogation, there was limited reflection of how their motivations centered themselves, rather than low-income communities, in the project. Expressing limited awareness of how their role as a relocator may operate to maintain their privilege or exploit the neighborhood for their own ends, participants described themselves as well intentioned. The following sections will expand on these critiques with more detail.

#### Goals: Seeking to Belong

The second point of similarity among relocators was the goal of relocation: *belonging*. All participants defined 'belonging' as becoming a vested member of the community to which they relocated. Participants primarily described accomplishing this in two ways. First, being part of the community meant sharing in neighborhood's marginalization, such as: living with limited access to resources like nearby grocery stores or cafes; being exposed to violence and crime; or experiencing neglect from the city, such as delayed police response or forgotten garbage pick up. For example, a Chicago participant explained that relocation implies "that you're willing to be

part of the great things about that neighborhood and the icky things about that neighborhood, you're willing to know people and be known by people, to risk all that that implies." Secondly, being part of the community meant being accepted as a community member by the original residents and having strong, interpersonal relationships. The same Chicago resident explained,

I would define [relocation] as having those good relationships and being able to maintain them, and being a person who both viewed as being a part of the community and feeling a part of the community. I mean if you're not from the same culture, to a degree you'll probably always not feel like a part of the community because it's foreign for you to a degree. But I do think, if your neighbors say, 'this person is a part of our neighborhood,' that says something. Huge, in fact.

Belonging in and to the community was crucial to each participant and often referenced through terms like "neighboring" or "community." As a Portland relocater (20-30 years old) explained, "we want to live in community... and we love getting to know our neighbors a little more closely than we would in like an apartment complex or even a large neighborhood." Additionally, participants stressed that belonging included commitment and ownership. A father in Milwaukee, describing his responses to a violent episode in the neighborhood, explained, "So we pray together and then the conversation turns to, 'what do we do so that this doesn't happen anymore? Because this is our neighborhood.'" Relocaters described feeling connected and embedded in their neighborhoods and expressed a sense of responsibility and contribution to the community.

However, while all participants described belonging as a broad goal, they diverged in the details and activities of that goal. Two general themes of variation emerged: first, the *structure* in which they entered the neighborhood (with the support or partnership of an organization/church

or as an individual/household); and second, the *strategies* of belonging (as a participant in the community or as a facilitator of community).

*Structure:* some participants described coming to the neighborhood with the support of, or as a member of, an already established *organization*; other participants came to the neighborhood as *individuals*. For example, some participants were employed by CCDA and moved into the local neighborhood after getting their job; other participants were heavily connected with a local church or nonprofit nearby that participated in the community activities. For example, one Portland relocater moved with the support of a local organization. He explained that he actively gathered support from local churches in order to partner with projects that were already happening:

We wanted to connect with anyone and everyone who was already doing something in [this neighborhood], because we wanted to fit in with that, we didn't want to reinvent the wheel and come in expecting that there are all these needs and we're doing to meet them, as if there aren't already people doing things.

Other participants came to the neighborhood as *individuals*. These participants often had other relationships in the area, typically with another relocater, but sometimes with local residents. For example, a Milwaukee mother explained that having other families who were also invested in the neighborhood was crucial, saying, "I don't think that we could have moved here if we didn't know that there was like a core group of other families that are here that we could connect with, just that they're healthy people, people that our kids can hang with." Only one participant specifically described relationships with local residents who were unassociated with relocation. This participant explained that she decided to relocate after building relationships with a number of children and youth in the neighborhood. No participants, either individual or

with an organization, described a process of incorporating local residents in their decision to relocate or in choosing which residence to occupy.

*Strategy:* some relocators emphasized that belonging developed through relationships and presence (*participation*), while others emphasized intervention and community building (*facilitation*). Participants who emphasized a *facilitation* component of relocation explained that they had a leadership structure and provided a variety of activities to bring the community together, such as community meals, Bible studies, and youth activities. Participants perceived their role as helping to meet needs of individuals and foster connection among strangers. For example, a Portland relocator explained that providing community-building activities increases the safety of the area:

If we were just living here, I think we would feel a lot more at risk. When doing invites I'll say, 'this meal is an opportunity for you to get to know some other people who live around you, just to make the community feel like a little bit safer place...' It's not just that we're here and they know that we're initiating a lot of that positive stuff, but even just the fact that community meals are happening, makes the community a safer place.

Participants who emphasized their role of facilitation still stressed the importance of belonging, but pursued it by seeking to foster community themselves and invite local residents to participate.

Relocators that focused on *participating*, on the other hand, often referred to themselves as “just living” in the neighborhood—participants from each city used these exact words. Emphasizing that “we didn’t come in with an agenda” and “we’re not coming here to fix the inner city,” participants explained that “[relocation] is not a project, it’s not an event, it’s not a presentation, it’s just me, living.” This phrase was used to reference humility and openness,

indicating that relocators sought to position themselves as teachable and seeking partnership. For example, a Chicago relocator (30-40 years) said,

And nobody can go into a city and have an ego about ‘This is what it’s going to take. I have the answer.’ It’s the whole, patriarchal, we-know-best that has failed and failed and failed. You have to go there with your hands open. You’re going to be a contributor as much as you are a student. And don’t expect any less than that. You do not have the answers.

However, the “just living” discourse included conflicting ideas and ultimately demonstrated that relocators struggled to fully define their role in the neighborhood. While participants described intentionally choosing to relocate to their neighborhood for a purpose, when pressed to clarify that purpose, they withdrew and emphasized what they *were not* doing. In the “just living” discourse, participants distanced themselves from an intervention, noting that “we’re not Superman,” and simply said “we just came to live and to be neighbors and we came to try to understand what that would be like.” References such as, “come in as learners,” “go there with your hands open,” and “we’re not coming to fix the inner city,” suggest that relocators are aware of and critical of redemptive/savior paradigms.

However, many “just living” participants eventually suggested that their presence was a useful contribution to the area and could function as a type of change agent. For example, a Chicago relocator said,

I hope that sometimes people see Jesus in me. I hope that they’ll see a different way of being. I hope that the kids in my neighborhood with whom I have relationship with might see a somewhat healthier example of what it’s like to be an adult. I hope that they might see that it’s possible to have a job that has dignity and makes you a decent amount of

money to live on. I hope that they will see that it's possible to not have sex with your boyfriend or girlfriend. I hope will see what its like to treat a girl well. I hope that they will see what it's like to respect somebody who is in authority over you and what its like to be respected by them.

Another Milwaukee participant explained his hopes to change the culture of the neighborhood, saying,

How do we communicate through institutions and networks, how do we make a culture where it's just not ok, it's not normal to stand out on the street and scream at each other, it's not normal to function in certain ways, it's not normal to have marriages fall apart, it's not normal... How do we as a society shape that? And that to me gets to a whole other level of what living here has really done to my thinking in terms of change.

These quotes demonstrate that the “just living” participants perceived themselves as occupying a normative role and implicitly saw themselves as a model for the neighborhood—that their presence, in and of itself, was a type of intervention. While participants initially resisted taking a redemptive or modeling role, they later implicitly referenced these roles, as the above quote demonstrates. For example, many participants stated that they saw their neighborhood as a positive place, came to learn from the community, and had no goals to fix or change anything; yet later, the same participants referenced the ways they contribute and help the neighborhood by modeling appropriate behavior and alternative lifestyles. In this contradiction, participants first affirm— and even see their role as to affirm— the neighborhood, yet later imply that the neighborhood is lacking something that they themselves can fulfill. These comments expose an assumed superiority that is embedded in relocation. References to “healthy families moving in” and “seeing Jesus in me” are other ways that relocators first positioned themselves as

allies and partners, and later positioned themselves as models, redeemers, and ‘knowers’ of what is right and normal. This discursive tandem, (outspoken humility attached to implied superiority), reveals the complexity of how relocators understand their role and access language to describe it, as well as the obscured hegemony that undergirds relocation.

Additionally, relocators’ foci on individual responses to structural issues (such as disparities in housing and residential segregation) are another expression of redemptive identification fantasies. Roman (1997) contends that fantasies of redemptive identification allow whiteness to remain unquestioned and in a dominant position, rather than dissect white complicity in racism and dismantle structures of inequality. While participants generally reported a basic awareness of systemic inequity and sought to disrupt those disparities, they all described solving these problems through individual-level activities. Some participants were explicit about this, stating that they did not come to fix educational systems, for example, but rather to simply be neighbors. Generally, participants tended to focus on addressing micro-level behavior norms, rather than alter social structures of inequity. For example, participants hoped to change how residents “stand out on the street and scream at each other” or to demonstrate that “it’s possible to have a job that has dignity and makes you a decent amount of money to live on.” The persistent focus on individual change not only fails to trouble how norms of middle-class whiteness are positioned as exemplary, but also fails to acknowledge the powerful impact of systems of inequity that are made visible in daily life. The earlier quote “it’s possible to have a job that has dignity and makes you a decent amount of money to live on,” reveals how the structural forces of economics, racism, and classism that limit formal employment opportunities are overlooked by implying that local residents simply aren’t choosing to work. It is unclear if relocators (1) perceive their individual contributions to *be a response* to large scale issues, or (2)

see large scale issues as unapproachable or insignificant and engage relocation *because* it is not a large scale movement.

### Experiences: Risks and Benefits

The final point of similarity among the participants was their experience of relocation as both *a risk/sacrifice* and a *beneficial lifestyle*. Participants described a variety of risks, such as safety issues, child rearing concerns, and unfamiliar or uncomfortable contexts. A Chicago mother explained that she felt concerns before relocation and questioned “And would I feel safe? Would I feel I could raise my kids in this neighborhood in a way that felt good, would I feel like I could take them out and go somewhere?” The positive attributes of relocation varied, and included both material gains as well as value-oriented benefits. For some, this was about a lifestyle of living and working in the same place. One Chicago participant explained, “I love the fact that my family’s involved where I work and where I go to church and it all overlaps. The simplicity of that for me, I think that’s part of how I’m wired.” Others valued the ability to leave the suburbs, living in more diverse setting, access to public transport, work opportunities, and affordability. The Chicago mother explained,

And so we thought coming here, for our family, was a good place. We knew that there was the community of people who have moved in, we knew there was [this] community, that’s African American, that [our bi-racial son] would have that experience, and what we can’t provide for him, maybe he can have from the community.

In some cases, the risks were also positioned as a benefit. References like “I want my life to be filled with adventures” and “I could tell that there was something God wanted me to see or know” suggest that participants may perceive the danger or risk of relocation to be part of what is important about it. A Milwaukee relocater described his process of coming to terms with the

risk, “And that was really, a big part of it was confronting our own fears and what are our worries, comforts that we aren’t willing to let go of.” Some participants related this understanding of risk to their faith, indicating that they felt a conviction to engage in relocation despite the insecurity. Additionally, issues of race/ethnicity were described as both a risk and benefit. For example, some participants alluded to the diversity of their neighborhoods both as cause for concern, as well as something to be celebrated. A Chicago participant voiced,

I knew that I was very interested in African American culture, and I knew that I loved Chicago, and so when the opportunity came to move into this particular neighborhood, it seemed to fit all of those things that I had been thinking.

Participants also drew on objectifying and deficit based language to describe their engagement with race. For example, a Milwaukee participant said, “Yeah, this is the house we’re gonna buy, because we can afford it, and if it happens to be in a black neighborhood, so be it. And we’re going to contribute the same way we would to any other neighborhood.” Similarly, a Chicago participant saw race as something to be overcome, saying,

I guess I’m walking through an African American inner city neighborhood, but it doesn’t feel that way when it becomes your neighborhood. You know the people out front aren’t black faces, they’re neighbors, you know? We might not know them all well, but we’ve gotten to know them in seven years, we’ve gotten to know each other and they’re safe to me and I’m safe to them.

These quotes show how participants had a contradictory, and at times objectifying, engagement with racial difference, suggesting that they saw diversity as something to be sought after, as something to be survived, as something to be ignored, and/or as something that disappears through relationships.

The simultaneous expression of risk and benefit is embedded in the belonging discourse and reveals another layer to the fantasies of redemptive identification (Roman 1997). In the previous section, I explained that the belonging discourse includes sharing in the life of the neighborhood, such as economic marginalization or violent incidents. These events are linked to the risks/benefits described by participants and reveal yet another contradictory position in which participants initially state their desire to share in communal experiences, but then distance from those experiences or appropriate them. The cost/benefit relationship that relocators have with their neighborhood manifests as another redemptive positioning: when experiencing a moment of risk, relocators are able to heroically remain, while also reaping the rewards of occupying the neighborhood.

Moreover, these discussions take for granted both the possibility and promise of shared experience. The belonging discourse emphasizes that geographic proximity allows relocators to experience and share in the risks and benefits of the neighborhood, as exemplified in the earlier quote that relocators are “willing to be part of the great things about that neighborhood and the icky things about that neighborhood.” Participants offered little description of how this shared identity develops, besides simply being in the same space “to be neighbors.” Some participants even described this as the dissolving of racial differences, as demonstrated in the colorblind rhetoric of the earlier quote, “You know the people out front aren’t black faces, they’re neighbors.” Roman’s (1997) critique interrogates the ways that whites appropriate experiences of racialized others while simultaneously minimizing the racial differences. The belonging discourse is based on unquestioned assumptions about the shared neighborhood space—that relocators could access and had a right to be in the space, and that the experiences within that space were the same for both residents and relocators—suggesting that relocation may fail to

give adequate attention to the substantial differences among people, even people who share a geographic proximity. Given the powerful influence of race, ethnicity, wealth, education, and other forms of capital in American society, there are a number of components that may distinguish relocators from local residents. Local residents— who may not have the option to move into another neighborhood; or may have long-term and deep place-attachment to their neighborhood; or may have strong, abiding relationships built over time and experience; or may have a different race, class or religion than relocators— all have particular standpoints in the neighborhood that yield distinct experiences of various events. The belonging discourse overlooks these differences and the power differentials embedded within them, insisting that by moving into the neighborhood, relocators would not only understand the local community, but also have the same experiences. Roman (1997) and other critical race scholars critique claims of shared experiences, noting that white people in particular tend to employ illusions of sameness. While relocators are not necessarily white people in neighborhoods of color, although this is true for the entirety of the sample, the underlying assumptions of relocators (such as unquestioned access to the neighborhood, presumption of inclusion in community, quick identification with community members, and use of themselves as a norming model) demonstrates the need for continued assessment of how race and ethnicity are navigated by relocators. The possibilities of shared experiences and solidarity are likely to be limited by dismissing important differences of race, ethnicity, class, religion, and background.

## DISCUSSION

The ten relocators in this study understood their faith as a call to personally respond to social injustice by taking residence in economically marginalized neighborhoods. Drawing on a discourse of *belonging*, participants sought to become vested community members through

shared experiences and neighboring relationships, emphasizing their desire for partnership and mutuality. Simultaneously, however, participants also expressed a contradictory understanding of themselves and the neighborhood, revealing that redemptive identification fantasies (Roman 1997), while renounced explicitly, are embedded in the underlying assumptions of relocation. Roman (1997) suggests that *fantasies of redemptive identification* tend to collapse differences among racial groups in an attempt to create (false) sameness among them, often resulting in the appropriation of others' experiences, an implicit norming, a redemptive and heroic positioning, and an avoidance of systemic complicity. By relying on a narrative of shared experiences through geographic proximity, emphasizing intervention through presence and example, and focusing on individual-level change, participants revealed how deeply fantasies of redemptive identification are embedded in relocation. Moreover, the colorblind rhetoric employed by participants exposes the objectifying and appropriating implications of relocation, an issue that is heightened by the noticeable absence of local residents in the participants' narratives. These findings suggest that despite explicit gestures toward partnership and solidarity, much of relocation operates to (re)center relocators, rather than local residents, as the primary beneficiaries of the method, producing little impact on social inequity.

#### Implications for Further Study: Working Definition of Relocation

Additionally while findings suggest common trends among relocators, points of difference and variance also emerged. As stated in the earlier sections, participants had different structures and strategies for belonging, as well as nuanced faith motivations. These points of similarity and difference indicate that relocators may be a diverse group without a shared language to describe their objectives. While the CCDA provides leadership, training, and terminology to describe their work, this sample did not consistently reflect the CCDA philosophy

and language. Indeed, not all of the participants used the terms *relocation* or *relocator* to describe themselves. A clear definition of relocation would help distinguish the population from other population trends, such as re-urbanized evangelicals (Bielo 2007), non-religious relocators, and gentrifiers. Drawing on the results of this study, I propose a new definition of relocation. I suggest that relocators must self-identify with the following: (1) *an intentional move to an economically marginalized neighborhood for altruistic reasons*, (2) *a faith conviction that compels this move*, and (3) *the goal of belonging to and partnering with the local community*. This definition incorporates the primary points of commonality among this sample of relocators and enables future research to distinguish relocators from other similar populations. First, this definition emphasizes an altruistic choice, distinguishing relocators from individuals who live in the area out of economic necessity or individuals who purchase low-valued property for investment purposes. Secondly, relocators are identified by a religious conviction to personally respond to issue of social injustice, distinguishing the population from nonreligious individuals. Finally, this definition also notes that relocators seek community engagement in the form of partnership and belonging, distinguishing them from individuals who do not pursue relationships with neighbors or who seek non-relational forms of community development. The three-fold emphases of relocation—geography, faith, and community—reiterate the unique approach of relocation as a lifestyle and a method of social justice.

#### Implications for Further Study: Possible Research Questions

Future research on this topic should consider the following questions: What are the demographics of a typical relocator? Are non-white individuals engaged in relocation, and how do their motivations, goals, and experiences differ from this sample? How do the motivations, goals, and experiences of relocators vary by religious formation and background, and how does

the changing landscape of religion in America interact with and influence with relocation? What are the material and economic impacts of relocation? Furthermore, given that virtually no research has examined this phenomenon from the perspectives of local residents who encounter and receive relocators, it is critical that future studies center the experience of long-term residents, asking questions such as: How is relocation perceived by local residents? What are the lived, everyday experiences of living near relocators? What interactions occur between relocators and residents, when and where do those occur, and how are issues of difference or contention navigated?

### Strengths and Limitations

This qualitative project presents new and in-depth findings of the practice of relocation, a central, yet understudied, phenomenon in the doctrine and practice of Christian Community Development. As an exploratory project, this study provides an introduction to the population and possible research topics for further study. Additionally, this study considers relocation from an explicitly critical lens in order to examine implications of the practice.

Due to the limited sample size, this study does not provide a representative analysis of relocators as a group or relocation as a phenomenon. As such, it should not be read as generalizable. Additionally, these data are seven years old and new studies may provide further nuance to the findings. Moreover, alternative theoretical frameworks may produce different results and conclusions.

Finally, it is important to note that this study has focused on describing and critiquing relocation, rather than assessing the approach for possibilities and strength. Relocation has a variety of unique components that distinguish it from other techniques of community development and it may have much to offer to academic and public communities, such as

avenues for solidarity, allyship, and meaningful partnership. A great amount of thoughtfulness, lifestyle change, and prayer has gone into the work of relocation, and I do not intend to dismiss that. Rather, I have sought to provide an initial review of this population, identify critiques, and provide direction for future studies.

### Conclusions

This study has sought to unearth and interrogate how well meaning practices of community development can serve to further oppress marginalized populations. Seeking to disrupt concentrated poverty and residential segregation, white relocators positioned themselves in roles of redemptive identification, fantasizing that racial difference can be overcome by geographic proximity. I contend that these maneuvers minimized the reality of structural oppression and limited what possibilities might exist for micro-level solidarity and partnership. In a society profoundly marked by race-based disparities and experiencing widespread gentrification, examining the assumptions that undergird relocation is an important step toward social justice. Moving forward, my hope is that scholars and practitioners are better equipped to interrogate development projects and seek avenues for change that account for systemic oppression and internalized superiority.

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