

The Dignity Of Resistance: Women Residents' Activism In Chicago Public Housing

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

Amie Thurber, James Fraser *

Vanderbilt University, Peabody Box #100, 230 Appleton Place, Nashville, TN 37203, USA

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ABSTRACT

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

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1. Introduction

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

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

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

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 615 343 7638.
E-mail address: Amie.thurber@vanderbilt.edu (A. Thurber), paavement@vanderbilt.edu (J. Fraser).

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