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# Gentrifried: the Foodways of Neoliberal Urban Redevelopment in St. Louis

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College Writing

30 April 2018

**Gentrified: the Foodways of Neoliberal Urban Redevelopment in St. Louis**

Settler-invader colonialism is a type of colonization in which the colonizer displaces those indigenous to the region and then settles in the area, claiming it as their own. In their paper on settler-invader colonies, Johnston and Lawson argue:

A key element in settler postcolonial theory is an examination of the processes by which emigrant European settlers ‘displaced’ the indigenous occupants. This displacement took many different forms. It was physical, geographical, spiritual, cultural, and symbolic. Indigenous peoples were characteristically moved from their traditional lands onto less desirable tracts of country...the displacement was, almost as importantly, cultural and symbolic as well as physical... Increasingly, the white settlers referred to themselves and their culture as indigenous; they cultivated native attributes and skills...and in this way cemented their legitimacy, their own increasingly secure sense of moral, spiritual, and cultural belonging in the place they commonly described as ‘new’ (Johnston and Lawson 363).

Usurping the cultural traditions of the colonized, the settler-invader colonists displaced indigenous communities both physically and symbolically. The settler-invaders seize the culture of the colonized to legitimize their invasion, but in doing so they represent themselves as native thus erasing the indigenous population. This notion of invasion and displacement is not unique to settler-invader colonies. In fact, America has a long tradition of displacement and usurpation; from genocide of Native Americans to today’s modes of urban revitalization there is one thing more American than the star-spangled banner: race motivated invasion. A country built on the backs of an indigenous population and the enslavement of Africans has been unable to escape this pattern. Today, even those who pride themselves as being liberal thinkers continue the invasion under the guise of urban redevelopment. Like settler-invader colonialism, neoliberal urban redevelopment uproots an original, often African American, population. As seen through the types of restaurants in these invaded areas, the gentrifiers, like settler-invaders, “go native”—opening relabeled restaurants in the traditions of the displaced community. In St. Louis, Missouri neoliberal urban redevelopment strategies displace African American communities. The restaurants in these neighborhoods reflect this reality. Soul and Southern restaurants in St. Louis

fall on red-lines, as both neoliberal urban redevelopment and Southern food restaurants usurp, exploit, and then entirely deny the existence of African Americans.

Neoliberal urban redevelopment, a proposed solution to the urban crisis, offers privatized corporations as effective tools in the revitalization of an urban landscape. Neoliberal ideology is an economic doctrine upon which the United States largely operates. It critiques social welfare programs and redistribution of wealth, proposing a solution to economic disparity within the logic of the free market. So, they argue private corporations should offer social services (Chandra). Neoliberal urban redevelopment is a capitalistic solution to urban blight. Instead of government programs to better urban decay, neoliberal urban redevelopment offers the partnership between the government and private corporations as a solution to the urban crisis. These private companies include those in high-end retail, restaurants, entertainment, housing complexes, and leisure (Mele 598-599).

These urban redevelopment projects occur within St. Louis, specifically in Tax Increment Financing projects. Tax Increment Financing (TIF) projects grant tax incentives to corporations to attract them to blighted neighborhoods. In St. Louis, TIF designated developments do not pay property tax on their developments for twenty-three years. Furthermore, the city places 50% of local taxes in a fund that it awards to the developer (“Tax Increment Financing”). St. Louis TIF projects historically target areas that do not fit the urban blight model. Recently the city awarded TIF status to a development in the Central West End, an extremely affluent neighborhood. Located on Euclid Avenue less than a mile from Washington University’s Medical Center, City Walk on Euclid, LLC, proposed the construction of an apartment building and a Whole Foods (City Walk on Euclid, LLC 3). TIF contributed ten million dollars to the project claiming the area would be unattractive to developers without a tax break (City Walk on Euclid, LLC 16).

The city argues public-private partnerships, such as that between the city and City Wal on Euclid, LLC, solve the urban crisis. This is just one of many examples of neoliberal urban development in St. Louis.

Neoliberal urban redevelopment ideology rests upon a color-blind racial discourse.

According to Christopher Mele, “color-blind racial formulation...ignores the persistence of structural racism for differential levels of economic privilege and political power and denies the existence of other” (Mele 601). A view of the civil rights movement as having eradicated systemic and structural racism creates the color blind post-racial discourse. This allows any sort of racist act to become an individual's choice and not a product of societal issues. Because this discourse renders societal structures equal in treatment of all individuals, a person's perceived place in society is a result of their choices and not systemic issues. Furthermore, because it defines race as a vestige of the past, this discourse denies the existence of other. This racial discourse is absolutely vital to the logic of neoliberal urban redevelopment. The neoliberal state views capitalism as a solution to inequity, and:

The color-blind premise that holds that race no longer matters socially is amenable to the policy objectives of neoliberal urbanism. Increasingly, policies put forth by state and local governments are narrowly focused on incentives for capital investment, economic growth and security, while longstanding concerns pertaining to racial inequality—poverty alleviation, troubled labor markets, and inadequate low-income housing—increasingly fall outside the purview of neoliberal state action” (Mele 601).

Post racial discourse, rendering systemic and structural racism a relic, allows the state to propose capitalist ventures as solutions to urban blight. These programs are supposedly beneficial to all people. By ignoring systemic problems and proposing privatized solutions to said problems, neoliberal urban development exacerbates structural racism. Because it rests on a color-blind

racial ideology it can ignore the existence of these systems and the problems they create along with the existence of those of other races.

The same color blind racial discourse of neoliberal urban revitalization surrounds the foodways of African American people, especially concerning fried chicken, as Whites usurped fried chicken, a historically African American food. Before the emancipation proclamation, the poultry trade provided agency for enslaved Blacks. During their enslavement, Blacks stole and purchased chickens from merchants to control the poultry trade. Then they sold the chickens at a higher price. Eventually, Blacks held a monopoly over the poultry market (Williams-Forson 140). Buying and selling chicken resulted in blacks being able to make money and exert some semblance of economic control over a largely uncontrollable existence. Fried chicken comes to symbolize a source of agency for enslaved Blacks. Because of fried chicken became a symbol of agency White felt a need to reclaim it to cement their domination. Post-Civil War:

this notion of Black inferiority provided a safeguard from White America during a time when their racial, economic, and political balance was perceived as threatened. From this, it seems that a distinct historical narrative developed and continues to evolve around Black folks' consumption of fried chicken (Williams-Forson 143).

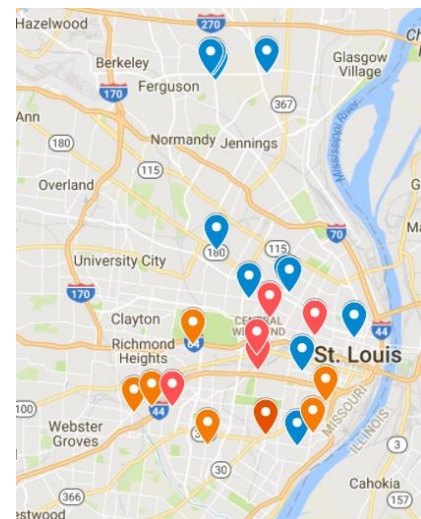
This narrative both distances Black people from fried chicken, labelling it a Southern Food, and maligns them for their consumption of the dish. Because fried chicken is a symbol of agency, the appropriation of the food is a total denial of agency. The result was the construction of Southern Food, White, versus Soul Food, Black. The label, Southern, encodes food involved in the nationalist narrative of White Southern culture. It entirely omits the fact that while White Southerners ate fried chicken pre-civil war, Black slaves prepared it. In doing so, these labels follow a color-blind racial discourse that constantly usurps the culture of other while simultaneously undermining it and then erasing completely. The choice of the word "southern"

to signify whiteness symbolically expels Blacks from the region. By encoding whiteness with southernness, this discourse denies Blacks temporal space, again working within a color-blind discourse to deny the existence of blackness. Hence, the labels of Soul versus Southern food operate on a racial discourse, suppressing the other.

The intersection of the color-blind racial discourse surrounding foodways and neoliberal urban redevelopment is observable in St. Louis. The locations of St. Louis restaurants advertising themselves as Southern versus Soul fall on largely gentrified lines, showing that foodways reflect racist urban redevelopment. This paper studies twenty-two fried chicken restaurants in the St. Louis area. Of these five explicitly identify themselves as Southern Food Restaurants; however, only three of these remain in business today. Six of the fried chicken restaurants do not explicitly align themselves with either category. The remaining eight restaurants advertise as explicitly Soul Food Restaurants. Mapping the locations of these establishments reveals that Southern

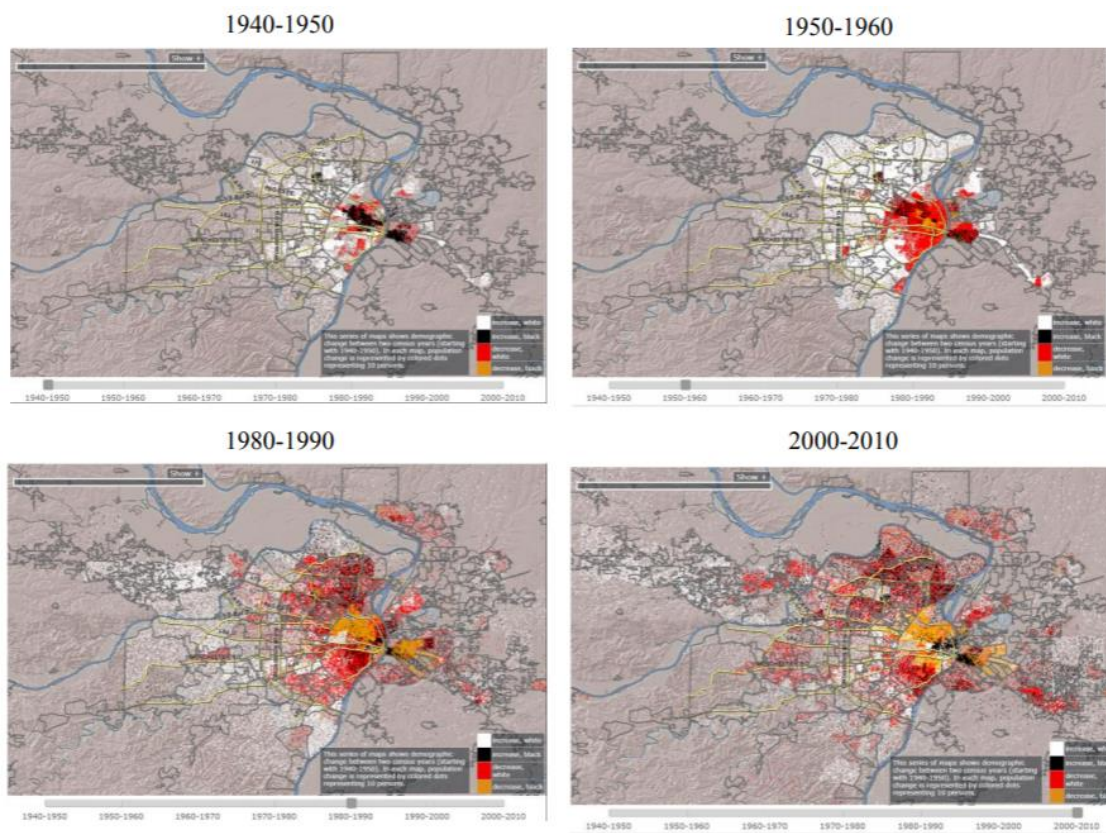
Food restaurants are located in largely gentrified neighborhoods whereas Soul restaurants are in African American neighborhoods.

Restaurants resisting the two categories are in the central corridor of St. Louis, however tend to be confined to St. Louis County more so than Southern or Soul Food restaurants. In the map shown to the right Southern restaurants are shown in red, unidentified fried chicken restaurants are shown in orange, and Soul restaurants are shown in blue. Notably, the Southern Food



restaurants tend to be located in the central corridor, especially in areas such as the Central West End, Midtown and South City. Soul Food restaurants are in North County and North City with few exceptions. This map bears uncanny resemblance to that of white flight in St. Louis.

St. Louis City experienced extreme white flight, resulting in continued racist disinvestment in neighborhoods today. Colin Gordon's project, Mapping Decline, maps white flight in St. Louis from the 1950s to modern day. On the maps red stands for a decrease in white population and white stands for an increase in white population. Orange symbolizes a decrease in Black population and black stands for an increase in Black population. Gordon's map of the 1940-1950 decade shows the distribution of the White and Black population in St. Louis prior to massive white flight. In this decade the central corridor saw an increase in its Black population.



The decade immediately following this increase in the African American population of St. Louis City, white people flocked to St. Louis County at astounding rates. In Gordon's map of this decade, 1950-1960, almost all of St. Louis City is shown in red, denoting a decrease in the White population, whereas the county is completely covered in white. All of St. Louis County, including areas that are now mostly Black, such as North County, saw an increase in White



people at this time. Between 1960-1980 a similar pattern occurred, but Blacks began to move to North County. By the 1980s and 1990s Blacks continued to move to North County as they had done in the previous decades. As Blacks moved to North County whites left. In this decade, especially, whites begin to move back into the central corridor. This is coupled with Blacks leaving this part of the city. The same pattern is observable in South City. This most recent map from 2000-2010 shows a hallowing out of the central corridor. Blacks continue to flee the city as Whites push into the central corridor.

Today, the location of Southern and Soul restaurants reflects this movement of populations. This paper looks at the physical locations and surroundings of two specific restaurants, Juniper and London's Wing House. Juniper, a Southern restaurant located in the Central West End and London's Wing House, a Soul Food restaurant in Wellston, are a mere four miles from each other. Yet, the urban landscapes of the two establishments appear to be eons apart. London's Wing House, originally called London and Son's, opened on Cass Avenue in 1963, but today it is in Wellston. London's original location on Cass Avenue is the site of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA), a project to which the city awarded TIF status. The NGA project resulted in the demolition of one hundred buildings, effectively destroying the neighborhood (Barker). The NGA project created another project under its dominion, Project Connect, which is a partnership between the public and private sector to preserve and grow the surrounding area ("Project Connect in North St. Louis"). The NGA project and Project Connect epitomize neoliberal urban development, as the NGA project completely displaced people of color and then offered a capitalistic solution. The fact that the original location of London's Wing House is now the site of the NGA project perfectly exemplifies the utterly racist ramifications of the neoliberal urban redevelopment in St. Louis.

Today London's Wing House is in Wellston, which was originally a Jewish neighborhood. However, following in the patterns of white flight, Wellston's Jewish population flocked to the suburbs, resulting in the continued pattern of disinvestment seen in the neighborhood today. Now many of the store fronts are abandoned, and vacant lots line Wellston's streets.



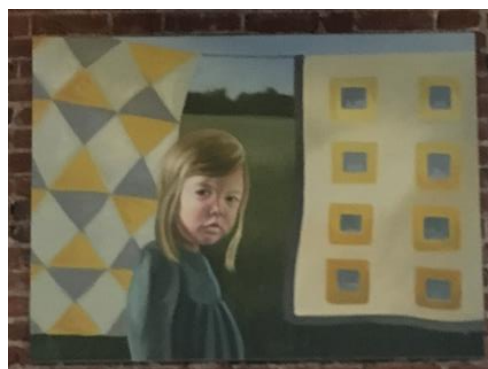
The above are images of the streets surrounding London's Wing House. Wellston fits the model for urban blight, as many of the lots are abandoned and vacant.

A few miles South and across the de-militarized zone, or the Delmar divide, sits Juniper. Located in a mostly residential area, dogwood trees line the streets of Juniper's neighborhood, shown on the right. The Central West End was a historically wealthy neighborhood, but as seen in the Colin's maps of white flight, Whites fled the area in the 1960s. However, slowly Whites began to repopulate the neighborhood, displacing the



current population. Today, the Central West End is an extremely affluent neighborhood, benefitting from anchor institutions such as Washington University's Medical School. Despite this, areas in the neighborhood are continuously awarded TIF status.

Juniper's menu and interior design reflect the racist discourses upon which they are founded. Juniper advertises themselves as "a southern table and bar...rooted in the traditional dishes and spirits of the region" (Juniper). Among the traditional dishes of the region which Juniper offers are fried chicken, mac 'n cheese, and collard greens. All of these dishes are categorized as Soul foods, yet Juniper presents them as Southern foods. In doing so, this menu erases African Americans from both the foodways and temporal space of the South. Furthermore, the restaurant owners chose to decorate the restaurant with paintings of white, blonde-hair, blue-eyed children, including the image shown on the right. Not a single painting depicts a person of color. This erasure of people of color in the restaurant's décor coupled with the menu furthers the complete denial of other vital to the usurpation of Soul Food and neoliberal urban redevelopment.



Much like Juniper, Southern is a Southern restaurant located in Midtown. Southern claims to have the best fried chicken in St. Louis. Yet, as the name suggests, this fried chicken is a Southern, not Soul dish. Southern's menu and website design reflect the continued usurpation of Black foodways. Like Juniper, Southern serves traditional Soul foods including fried chicken, mac 'n cheese, and cat fish. They also advertise these foods as native to the region of the South. While this may be true, they fail to recognize that slavery gave rise to these foods. Beyond the racist implications of Southern's menu, their website design incorporates color-blind racial imagery. The image (shown on page 11) is on the home page of Southern's website (Southern). The image of a White woman flying around on a piece of fried chicken implicates fried chicken as a White food. Hence, in every opportunity Southern may have to at the very least

acknowledge the historiography of fried chicken they fail to do so. This failure is not a mistake. Rather, it is a purposeful omission caused by a color-blind racial discourse that erases other.



The correlation of Southern restaurants and neoliberal urban development is no coincidence. While clearly color-blind foodways and color-blind urban revitalization of gentrified areas seem to have parallel discourses, it is not that these discourses parallel each other; rather they are the same discourse. Color-blind racial ideology is so potent that it infects the foodways of the area in which it is implemented. People in positions of power have a vested interest in the disappearance of the other because it allows their action to be morally defensible. If gentrification does not marginalize a population then the process of urban revitalization becomes not just defensible but also admirable. This is why self-described Southern restaurants are generally confined to gentrified areas.

The color-blind racial discourse, which entirely denies the existence of other, is fundamental to neoliberal urban redevelopment. This discourse is so pervasive that it manipulates the patterns of consumption in gentrified areas, as seen in the locations of Southern and Soul restaurants in St. Louis. But beyond the color-blind conception of race's effect on urban development and foodways, it abolishes other—it promotes the theft of their culture, the invasion

of their spaces, and the censorship of their words until all that is left in a sea of whiteness. This abolition makes the racial discourse, itself, nearly impossible to dismantle. This paper, itself falls into the same traps of marginalization and erasure of other. The approach of its argument has been largely through the lens of the gentrifier, resulting in an extreme lack of representation of the gentrified. The fact that they lack a voice in a paper written about racial discourses' work to silence them shows the pervasiveness of these discourses. The few academic sources on gentrification in St. Louis failed to represent the gentrified. If anything, they offered insight into those who replaced the gentrified. Furthermore, according to urban historian, Sulieman Osman, gentrification is a topic yet to be examined by urban historians. This is because there are great difficulties in the study of gentrification. It is extremely difficult to measure displacement and to track why these individuals leave and where they go. Other reasons for the lack of studying gentrification within disciplines outside of sociology and urban studies include the fact that many members of academia are participants in gentrification (Osman). For example, one of the few papers on gentrification in St. Louis that was found argued that most St. Louis neighborhoods, including the Central West End, did not fit the gentrification model (Webber). The author of this paper, a distinguished professor at Washington University's Brown School of Social Work, is a Central West End resident. Webber also developed a partnership between the public and private sector to bring technology firms into St. Louis City ("Henry S. Webber"). Clearly, Webber, a respected academic, is steeped in the tradition of color-blind racial imagery. Hence, the voices of the gentrified remain silenced under the crushing weight of a color-blind discourse. More needs to be done to provide a voice to the voiceless and uproot this pervasive discourse. This paper may be a start, but the reader must recognize its failures if the other is ever to be represented. Representation of this other would uproot the color-blind racial discourse because its main goal

to deny the existence of this other. If the marginalized can be brought to the forefront the discourse will be uprooted and with it, justification for neoliberal urban redevelopment.

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In his article "Neoliberalism, Race and the Redefining of Urban Redevelopment,"

Christopher Mele argues that neoliberal urban redevelopment requires a color-blind racial ideology for its implementation, as neoliberal urban policy denies the existence of structural racism, offering capitalism as a solution for the urban crisis. Mele, specifically, analyzes Chester Pennsylvania, however his argument on neoliberal urban redevelopment and racial discourse is closely related to the manner in which foodways of gentrified areas parallel the same racist pattern of gentrification itself.

Interpreting the civil rights movement as having eradicated systemic and structural racism results in a color-blind post-racial discourse. This allows any sort of racist act to become an individual's choice and not a product of societal issues. Because this discourse justifies the belief that all social structures treat people of all races equally, an individual's perceived place in society is a result of their own individual choices and not systemic issues. Hence, the "color-blind racial formulation...ignores the persistence of structural racism for differential levels of economic privilege and political power and denies the existence of other" (Mele 601).

The neoliberal urban redevelopment movement does not need to account for these systemic issues because the discourse alleges these along with societal structures of races have been long abolished. Instead, "neoliberal urban redevelopment is constructed as entrepreneurial, market oriented economic development beneficial to all social groups. By promoting free-market and hence socially inclusive solutions to urban redevelopment, neoliberalism eviscerates charges of unresolved racism and racial inequalities" (Mele 601). Post racial discourse that renders systemic and structural racism a fragment of the past allows the state to propose capitalist ventures as solutions to urban blight. These programs are supposedly beneficial to all people. However, the result in race motivated gentrification and displacement.

Because the neoliberal urban development, observable throughout St. Louis, rests upon a discourse that denies the existence of other, usurpation of the foodways of African American people becomes a natural product of color-blind racial discourse. Neoliberal urban redevelopment causes race to be seen as irrelevant, hence it abolishes any claim African Americans laid to soul food. This food, along with the very existence of race in society, is white-washed



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