UNIVERSITY CITY OR LITTLE MANAGUA?

STUDENTIFICATION AND HOUSING RENEWAL IN SWEETWATER, FLORIDA.

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ABSTRACT

The “University City project” is a public-private partnership between Florida International University (FIU), the City of Sweetwater, and private investors. The project focuses on redeveloping certain areas of Sweetwater near FIU with the goal of enticing members of the university community to become residents. Building on previous research findings regarding how redevelopment prospects in the City of Sweetwater are affecting residents of the Li’l Abner Mobile Home Park, I examine how these changes are affecting residents in the immediate vicinity of the University.

Using a combination of semi-structured interviews and participant observation, I seek to answer the following questions: How do Sweetwater residents feel about development projects in the community of Sweetwater? In what ways do these changes affect their lives? How powerful or powerless do they feel in the face of these changes, or how much say do they believe they have in their implementation? This research will add depth and context to the emerging interdisciplinary study of the “studentification” phenomenon, a form of gentrification that is centered on students, which has received little attention in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

I became interested in the city of Sweetwater, and the Lil Abner Mobile Home Park in particular, through spending a large portion of my time there and growing an affection and interest for the park as well as the entire city. My engagement with participatory research in the City of Sweetwater began the previous academic year, with my enrollment in a Community Based Participatory Research course focused exclusively on Sweetwater. This course was part of the Honors College curriculum and served the
purpose of strengthening ties between the Honors College and Sweetwater, which have a partnership aimed toward strengthening town and gown relationships. In this applied study, I examined the existence and nature of social support networks within the Li'l Abner Mobile Home Park in the city of Sweetwater through a participatory, community-based approach. In my fieldwork and interviews during this study, the theme of redevelopment in Li'l Abner and Sweetwater in general emerged.

As indicated by South Florida Jobs with Justice and The Research Institute on Social and Economic Policy, Lil’ Abner is among many Mobile Home Parks in Miami currently under threat of redevelopment (South Florida Jobs with Justice and The Research Institute on Social and Economic Policy 2010). I initially found this information useful for my study because redevelopment could threaten any existing social support networks, leaving residents vulnerable to precarious conditions.

As I conducted field research, however, I realized that redevelopment was also a source of emergent social support for many Mobile Home Park residents. After years and even decades of providing little to no maintenance to the park, the park administration had begun to implement changes and enforce rules that they had never bothered enforcing before. This strained residents economically as well as physically, as they had to remove additions, paint, and fix their trailers regardless of lack of skill, economic resources, etc. Residents were also forced to tear down trees and other plants, eliminating a source of shade that helped with overheated trailers, and a source of fruit which provided nutrients and extra income. Residents got through this by helping each other. People united over their shared problems and grievances as well as seeing each other outside doing work on their trailers and giving each other a hand.
Many residents said they had a feeling that the park owner would sell or destroy the park eventually, and that this feeling became more certain when the plan 8 housing was completed. Some residents were told by park administrators, in meetings most residents do not attend or are unable to attend, that the mobile home park would indeed be destroyed. According to administrators this would most likely occur in 5 to 10 years. Because of this, residents are reasonably upset. Residents felt that they were wasting their money making the changes demanded of them, particularly when their mobile homes will be torn down in a few years. This demonstrated to me that residents were acutely aware of the ways in which they may be threatened by redevelopment, and were able to assess those threats even when such information has not been divulged to them. Because of this, I set toward gaining an understanding of the same knowledge within the context of the University City redevelopment area.

With this purpose in mind, I chose to conduct ethnographic research and interviews, since they allowed me to better understand this knowledge without making pre-fixed assumptions that obscured people’s experiences. The previous study also demonstrated the limitations of participatory research through surveys. A truly participatory research form must be ethnographic, where the experiences and voices of those living the situation under study must be the focus. This is crucial for an action project that seeks to find solutions centered on residents and their needs.

The emergent theme of redevelopment in this previous study may be tied to the larger context of redevelopment in the city of Sweetwater as a whole. This redevelopment is being led by a partnership of private investors, the city government, as well as Florida International University in the form of the University City Prosperity
Project (Jessell and Rishe, 2013), although developments outside of the scope of the project but related to it may be included. Indeed, the mayor of Sweetwater has claimed that the city will be unrecognizable in 10 years, and many residents fear (as has been implied by the mayor and others involved in the project in several encounters I have had with them) that this will include a change of Sweetwater residents.

In light of these changes and the consequences these may have for Lil’ Abner residents, as well as all low-income Sweetwater residents, I found it important to change the focus of my research. Future consequences of possible gentrification led by a partnership between Florida International University, Sweetwater City Government and private investors (University City Project) and ties to current issues needed to be investigated further.

Because of this, I decided to turn my attention toward the University City project and the areas undergoing immediate and direct redevelopment as the result of this project. By focusing on how residents within these areas were being affected by redevelopment, I believed I would be able to understand more holistically the way redevelopment is affecting Sweetwater residents in both differing and similar ways, what is going to happen as redevelopment spread to other areas of the City such as the Li'l Abner Mobile Home Park, and how to mitigate those aspects of redevelopment that affect Sweetwater residents negatively.

The purpose of this research is to understand how the research questions affect diverse sectors of the resident population. This information would be used to assess which steps should be taken to ensure the best outcomes for community members in light of recent and upcoming changes in the area. Carrying out this research is crucial in
the context of public-private partnerships that result in gentrification and displacement while claiming to benefit the community or the public in general.
Map 1. Source: 2013 UniversityCity TIGER Proposal and Award Documents
In order to contextualize the findings of this study I will present a brief overview of the history and demographic characteristics of the city.

The City of Sweetwater is located in the Western side of Miami Dade County, Florida, immediately to the north of Florida International University’s Modesto Maidique Campus. The original plot of land that was to become the City of Sweetwater was initially purchased by the Miami-Pittsburg Land Company during the 1920’s (City of Sweetwater, 2013a). The plans for development were crushed by a real estate bust and a Hurricane. It was not until 1938 that a person named Clyde Andrews acquired most of this land for development (City of Sweetwater, 2013a). Among the founding members of the Sweetwater community was a troupe of Russian dwarves who decided to retire there (City of Sweetwater, 2013a). Their manager was elected as first mayor of Sweetwater when the city was incorporated into Miami-Dade County in 1941 (City of Sweetwater, 2013a). During the 1970s major local changes caused a boom in Sweetwater which doubled its population. Florida International University, two mayor expressways and its discovery by the Hispanic community were some of the main causes of this (City of Sweetwater, 2013a). In 2010, the city of Sweetwater annexed a large amount of land to its North, which included Dolphin Mall, one of Miami-Dade’s major tourist shopping destinations. Currently, with the support of FIU, the city is trying to annex more land. This proposed annexation would include FIU’s engineering center (City of Sweetwater, 2013).

According to the 2010 U.S census, which was pre-annexation, the city of Sweetwater’s total population is 13,499. This is a slight decrease from the year 2000’s
population of 14,226. The 2012 US census population estimate, which would be post-annexation is 20,566. The median age of the population is 41.6 years, which is an increase from the median age of 36.3 in the year 2000.

In the 2010 census, 97.9% of the population categorized themselves as single race, with 92.4% defining themselves as white, 1.8% as Black or African American, 0.2% as Native American or Alaska Natives, and 0.5% as Asian. 95.5% of the population as of 2010 is classified as Hispanic, which is an increase from the 93.2% of 2000. At 56.8% of the population, Cubans compose the largest ethnic group in the City (an increase from the 49.9% of the year 2000). Sweetwater also contains the largest concentration of Nicaraguan descent in the United States, with persons of Nicaraguan ancestry composing 16.63% of the population (Anonymous 2013a)

The median household income for 2007-2011 is $32,315, with 3.33 persons per household. 24.9% of the population living is below the poverty level. The homeownership rate as of 2007-2011 is 44.9%, with 4,195 households and a median value of homeowner occupied units of $144,200. 65.5% of the population 25 years old and up has graduated from high school, and 17.8% has a bachelor’s degree or higher. Sweetwater’s crime-rate, at 505.4, is considered average. In 2011 there was 1 murder, 0 reported rapes, 26 robberies, 31 assaults, 70 burglaries, 916 thefts and 81 auto thefts.
Map 2. Source: 2013 UniversityCity TIGER Proposal and Award Documents
The “University City” Alliance involves a public-private partnership between Florida International University (FIU), the City of Sweetwater, private developers as well as other public and private actors:

“Attempting to transform the FIU/City of Sweetwater relationship from one of friendly neighbors to a truly unique and collaborative relationship that will create a growing and innovative community with greater connectivity to the rest of Miami-Dade County and beyond, through viable yet innovative transportation options and best design practices.” (Florida International University Office of Governmental Relations, http://government.fiu.edu/urban-solutions/university-city/)

The main boundaries of areas for redevelopment are located from 8th to 5th street and from 109th to 107th avenue. This project focuses on that area, specifically the portion within 109th avenue, which has been affected the most thus far due to the construction of two student housing complexes, one which has already been completed and occupied, the other which has been under construction for the duration of this research. There will be another student housing complex built on 107th, but this construction has not begun yet.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studentification is a relatively recent term that appears sparsely in the literature. Although, through an analysis of the literature, it appears that the phenomenon and concept has had considerable media attention in Great Britain, it remains largely unknown within the US. Few empirical studies have been conducted in the US, while most of the literature in the field seems to be hailing from Britain. This may have something to do with the way traditional Higher Education in the US has been largely concentrated in “college towns”, many of which have been centered on the University for a long time, or have become cities because of the University.
However, this is a subject that should receive more attention in the US due to the existence of major universities in major metropolitan areas within the US. Some of these have been reputable and established residential campuses for a long time. Others are trying to further establish themselves through the creation of residential student life that provides a “college experience”, which means doing away with labels like “commuter school” (see Wetli 2014 and Roman 2013 for Northeastern Illinois University and Florida International University cases respectively). Regardless of location, demand for student housing that the University cannot fulfill seems to be placing a high strain on local housing markets and/or leading to redevelopment and studentification, even in established college towns (See Pickren 2012 for University of Georgia Athens case). In the following pages I will be discussing the literature regarding my research question in the areas of gentrification, urban renewal/development, studentification and community responses/resistance.

According to Neil Smith (1979), previous discussions of gentrification were centered on a narrative that saw gentrification as produced by individual consumer’s choices to move out of the suburbs and “back into the city.” Smith contested this “consumer sovereignty” analysis in his 1979 study centered on Philadelphia’s Society Hills urban renewal plan. Additionally, Smith (1979) challenges the simplistic cultural and economic explanations for gentrification. He argues that these explanations ignore historical processes, focusing merely on the effects of gentrification while marginalizing and oversimplifying its causes, which, whether cultural or economic, are still seen as being largely led by consumer preferences. His landmark contribution to the study of gentrification in this study is the concept of “ground rent” (Smith 1979), which is crucial to this largely economic and historical explanation for gentrification, and which
describes the difference between the current amount of rent that can be attained from a property and its potential rent value (achievable through renovation).

Smith (1979) observes that finance capital investment moved from the inner cities and into the suburbs, resulting in disinvestment, decline and even inner city slums. The progression of decline and disinvestment results in an increasingly widening rent gap, which would ultimately make such locations attractive for investors to renew in order to make a profit on the difference between the current and potential value of the property (Smith 1979). This is part of a larger cycle in which finance capital produces disinvested spaces to later be reconquered, providing themselves with ever-existing spaces to expand and invest when the limits of urban expansion to the peripheries of the cities have been reached or limited. Of particular relevance to my study is Smith’s argument that, as the most profitable (i.e, most disinvested areas) are renewed, investors move on to less profitable areas where decline had yet to go as far.

Although Smith (1979) contests consumer sovereignty explanations for gentrification, he argues that its complete opposite is equally simplistic and problematic. Instead, he acknowledges the agency of gentrifiers as people who make choices without which gentrification would be possible. However, he makes it clear that gentrifier’s decisions do not occur in isolation but are influenced by institutional actors such as the state, developers, and financial institutions (among others), which encourage gentrification by providing investment capital, infrastructure, and creating desire for gentrified spaces through advertisement (Smith 1979). As we will see, what is occurring in Sweetwater/University City project furthers this claim for studentification.
Darren Smith (2004: 75) developed a concept of studentification parallel to that of gentrification and its four dimensions. House in Multiple Occupation here will be referred to as HMO, Higher Education will be referred to as HE:

Economic: studentification involves the revalorisation and inflation of property prices, which is tied to the recommodification of single-family housing or a repackaging of private rented housing to supply HMO for HE students. This restructuring of the housing stock gives rise to a tenure profile which is dominated by private rented, and decreasing levels of owner-occupation.

Social: the replacement or displacement of a group of established permanent residents with a transient, generally young and single, middleclass social grouping; entailing new patterns of social concentration and segregation.

Cultural: the gathering together of young persons with a putatively shared culture and lifestyle, and consumption practices linked to certain types of retail and service infrastructure.

Physical: associated with an initial upgrading of the external physical environment as properties are converted to HMO. This can subsequently lead to a downgrading of the physical environment, depending on the local context.

Smith (2004) argues that studentifiers, like first-wave traditional gentrifiers such as artists, have little economic yet large reserves of cultural capital while being ground-breakers. This is because many students may start moving into an area before finance capital comes in and more widespread gentrification takes place. Like traditional gentrification, studentification is tied to identity and consumption patterns, which leads Smith (2004) to argue that studentified spaces may provide a training ground for studentifiers to become gentrifiers in the future, once they graduate and become the middle-class urban professionals who wish to continue living a more evolved version of their student lifestyle. This idea creates a continuum between studentification and gentrification, which fit well within the Sweetwater mayor’s goals of making Sweetwater an attractive place for middle class professional FIU graduates.
Like traditional gentrification, studentification is a capital-led process. The difference, according to Smith (2004) is that students have less capital than traditional early wave gentrifiers who are owner-occupants, so they do not take on the renovations themselves or purchase the property they live on. Because of this, studentification is led by developers producing “pre-packaged housing” for students, which makes studentifiers similar to later-wave gentrifiers (Smith 2004: 77). According to Smith (2004), what sets apart studentification from later waves of gentrification is that the former is far less capital intensive than the later.

However, I believe more recent literature on studentification as well as the case of Sweetwater prove that this is not always as has been described by Smith (2004). More recent literature and examples of studentification (Wetli 2014 and Roman 2013) may show that the process of studentification has evolved from its previous forms, which were dominated by the conversion of large, single family homes into HMOs, into a more capital intensive process dominated by “luxury student housing” that still contains multiple occupants.

This evolution from unappealing student ghettos into luxury student housing is discussed by Graham Pickren (2012) in his empirical case study of a gated student housing development in Athens, Georgia, catering to University of Georgia Athens students. In his study, Pickren (2012) argues that Not In My Back Yard politics, ‘environmentalist’-led limits to continued urban expansion, deficient regulation of the Athens housing market, inadequate provision of both affordable housing and on-campus student housing, and other factors contributed to one undesirable (in the housing market at least) and relatively politically powerless sector of the population
(young students) displacing the only group more politically powerless and limited in resources than themselves: residents of a mobile home park. Pickren (2012) argues that student led redevelopment could only occur in areas where the existing population is just as powerless as students or less, and that studentification leads to deterioration of neighborhoods because of their transient nature and lack of interaction with local population.

Pickren (2012) further argues that the student ghettoization associated with housing value depreciation and physical deterioration of neighborhoods is being replaced with student-led gentrification and ‘urban renewal’ which is driving housing prices up and forcing out both affordable housing and the residents which are dependent on it in towns like Athens. I would argue further that, at least in the case of Sweetwater, this obscures the way developers and real estate investors can also exploit students financially. To residents, students become the symbol of gentrification, and imagined to be benefitting from their displacement and marginalization. This is because students are visible in the neighborhood while the developers profiting from student’s need for housing and the displacement of residents are not. Tensions and divisions between students and residents, then, only become sharper. Possibilities of unity against those who profit from this situation, and for redevelopment that benefits everyone, are foreclosed.

Claims about gentrification and studentification adding diversity to neighborhoods and countering segregation are contradicted by Boersma, Langen and Smets (2013) in their study of the gentrification of a disadvantaged neighborhood in East Amsterdam. This study echoes the claims made throughout the literature on the
adverse effects of studentification toward neighborhood cohesion, where there is little interaction between students and local residents are alienated by student-led spaces, even in instances where student spaces claim to serve the wider community (Boersma, Langen and Smets 2013). This problematizes the discourses surrounding studentification as a bridging between town and gown, where the University and surrounding community come closer together. As argued by Boersma, Langen and Smets (2013: 48), location does not necessarily create community, and exclusion can persevere even when there is such close co-habitation and claims of inclusion:

Those low income neighborhood residents aimed to be included tend to be excluded by in reality. In other words, attempts to develop bonding capital among similar people became dominant over bridging different people. The idea of creating a home for many turned into creating a home for a selective group. The home created by the students is more suited to the norms and values of the middle classes and is hardly, if at all, suited to the low-income groups of non-Western origin in the neighborhood who primarily belong to the lower-class echelon.

In the case studied by Boersma, Langen and Smets (2013) consumption patterns and aesthetics played a large role in the exclusion of the non-student residents. This is explored further in Pow’s (2009) study on the exclusionary role of aesthetics in the production of middle class enclaves in post-socialist Shanghai through the case of a gated community. Pow (2009) argues that urban segregation is achieved through an exclusionary aestheticization which co-produces middle-class landscapes and identities. This, in turn, de-politicizes class relationships by reducing inequality to “taste”. The creation of middle-class spaces by developers, universities, etc. can then be depoliticized and masked under “community revitalization” and given a veneer of inclusion because the exclusionary practices are merely reduced to matters of taste.
Boersma, Langen and Smets (2013) and Pow (2009) findings can be applied to my research in ways that counter the University City Prosperity Project’s and the FIU/Sweetwater partnership’s claims of bridging town and gown relations through urban renewal projects. The former demonstrates that simply placing students into a neighborhood will not unite the students or the university with that neighborhood. Both studies also demonstrate that, in fact, these attempts can further exclude residents through the prioritizing of aesthetically other spaces –particularly spaces that the residents cannot afford to be in.

However, residents of gentrified and studentified neighborhoods are not completely powerless and doomed to be forced out of their homes. Hodkinson’s (2011) case study of “private finance initiative” (PFI) in England illustrates the ways in which contradictions and holes within neo-liberal “urban regeneration” can be exploited toward the purpose of resistance against gentrification. Hodkinson (2011) argues that analyzing the urban regeneration project in England through a “strong theory” perspective leads to a disempowering and reductionist analysis of the revitalization project as a neo-liberal straitjacket dooming the neighborhood to the process of gentrification. However, if a “weak theory” analysis is applied to the case, empowering possibilities for resistance to the neo-liberal project emerge.

A similar argument is made by Hart (2004), who proposes a different way of doing research and ethnography, in their critique of the geographical body of work on global development and capitalism. The author goes over the multiple micro- debates surrounding grand-absolutist-narratives versus particularism, abstract versus concrete, and how this can be overcome through certain forms of research and analysis. Hart
(2004) uses Foucault’s concept of governmentality in order to deconstruct state-centric absolutist narratives by arguing that government is a mode of thinking/acting that can be constituted through non-state institutions and beyond. Hart (2004) then criticizes interpretations of Marx and economistic/capital-centric approaches to global development, including what the author terms ‘impact models’ which construct people as passive receivers of capitalist development. Lastly, Hart (2007) argues for a critical ethnography, which would be a process that advances ‘from the abstract to the concrete’ (p.97) in order to situate development and development knowledge in its specific contexts. Following this analysis, my study will be based on the same specificity and groundedness exemplified by Hart’s (2007) “critical ethnography”, which bridges meaning and practice in specific contexts as opposed to grand-narratives based on ‘laws’ and abstractions that are ultimately both obscuring and disempowering.

Providing further critiques and solutions to the “strait-jacket” narrative, Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2008) talk about two different directions the debate in economic geography, particularly in the study of neo-liberalism and diverse economies, is taking on. The debates discussed and the points made are very similar in theme to Hart’s, yet more specifically geared toward academics (2004). On the one hand, academics are making absolutist and all-encompassing statements about capitalism that, in a similar vein to conspiracy theories, lead them to ignore alternatives or ways out, as well as current exceptions and complex causalities. On the other hand, academics are recognizing their role in co-producing realities and alternatives. They are also doing away with doomming and absolute diagnoses, exchanging them for ways of seeing the world that acknowledge multiple worlds, realities, and economies. They term the former “strong theory” and the latter “weak theory” (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Advocating for
academics to embrace the latter of these two directions, Gibson-Graham (2008) argue that academics should see their roles as producers and encouragers of alternatives whose futures are yet to be known or doomed.

Another problem encountered in discourses, both academic and otherwise, surrounding gentrification is unraveled by Chris Allen (2008) in his book Housing Market Renewal and Social Class. Here Allen critiques the ways in which housing has and has not been theorized and written about in relation to the working class, particularly within the context of housing market renewal. The author tries to understand how working class people, specifically those not looking toward upward mobility and disassociation with working class status, relate to and think about their housing situation. He argues that institutional actors looking to redevelop working class neighborhood are using false and misleading rhetoric about benefiting the working class, while academics are uncritically supportive of this. Allen (2008) believes this is because of a systematic ignoring of both power relationships and the way working class people relate to and think about housing, in order to violently impose middle class symbolic ideas of housing consumption. These middle class understanding’s serve as a justification of housing regeneration schemes that serve to profit financers while claiming to benefit a working class that will be displaced because of it (Allen 2008).

While agreeing with the broader literature on gentrification that questions the emphasis on consumption patterns, Allen (2008) adds that focusing on consumption excludes those who relate to housing in a more utilitarian way (mostly the working class) and focuses their attention on those dedicated to consumption (middle classes). Allen (2008) also agrees with the literature on how Private Finance Initiative schemes,
and urban renewal in general, serve to displace the working class while financers profit, adding that the logic and rhetoric of gentrification and regeneration serve to violently impose middle class ways of relating to housing while marginalizing the working classes’ ontological relationship to housing. However, he believes the literature reproduces this narrative by only viewing working class people in relation to the middle class when speaking of them as being displaced by the incoming gentrifiers (Allen 2008).

Allen (2008) also provides a model similar to the critical ethnography proposed by Hart (2007) in the second research project from which he pulled his data. Allen (2008) used participant observation in order to study the compulsory purchase of housing in Kensington and other inner-urban areas of Liverpool. His use of this study shows that, not only can ethnographic methods be utilized as a way to study gentrification, but this method can also undo absolutist grand narratives while pushing for an analysis grounded on concreteness and specificity, as Hart (2007) and Gibson-Graham (2008) propose.

The imperfections and issues with the neo-liberal schemes in urban regeneration have been pointed to, weakening the all-powerful narrative surrounding both positive conceptions and critiques of neo-liberalism, as well as the claims made by neo-liberalism’s proponents within the arena of housing. Another discussion encountered in the literature is that concerning an emphasis on consumption versus other models in order to explain and study housing and gentrification. This leads to the discussions of different ways of seeing and being in the world that several authors (Allen, 2008; Hart, 20087; Gibson-Graham, 2008) are trying to bring into discussions of urban regeneration/development, where there are different ontological relationships those in
power, and those without power, have to housing and this in turn serves to maintain and reinforce those power relationships (here Allen 2008 is particularly useful). Many authors (Allen, 2008; Gibson-Graham, 2008) are critiquing the ways in which academics can be complicit in reproducing power relationships through their writing, which echoes these views and absolutist ways of seeing power in the world in general.

I believe some of the sources generally did not critically engage with non-neoliberal forms of capitalism that preceded neo-liberalism or/and that currently exist. Broadly speaking, literature on the subject of gentrification, urban regeneration, public-private partnerships and studentification seems to be too focused on neo-liberalism as the main issue (Smith 1979 being one notable exception). There was an implicit and sometimes explicit view in the literature that, even when neo-liberalism is not seen as an all-encompassing straitjacket, it is still the main cause of ills in the world and in current housing problems affecting the working class in particular. Again, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, the literature seemed to suggest that public housing and the welfare state in general as existing before neo-liberal takeover was generally “good.” Even Gibson-Graham’s (2008) article on diverse economies and academic action viewed uncritically such “community actors” as businesses/business owners, so long as they were not corporate and neo-liberal. Although there is strength in an argument that takes a non-dogmatic inclusiveness of such actors, it is important to keep a critical view of all power relationships that exist beyond neo-liberalism, and a critical view of capitalist relationships that aren’t neo-liberal as well as the state. A closer look at how this plays out in Sweetwater was beyond the scope of this project, but clarifying this beforehand so as to not mislead readers
This very idea of “community” as a bounded and homogenous item ignores power relationships, and allows those in power to include whomever serves their interests as “community members” and “stake-holders.” This idea of community has been shown to be utilized in gentrification and studentification discourses by developers, city governments and universities (see Jesse and Rishe, 2013 for Florida International University City case). The term is especially abused in “public-private partnerships” that claim to serve the “community” while displacing the elements of it they deem undesirable and amplifying the power of those elements they deem desirable. The boundaries of what constitutes the community, and who does and does not belong are often drawn by development interests in order to fit their own needs. As Eric Wolf (1982: 6) famously stated: “By turning names into things we create false models of reality. By endowing nations, societies, or cultures with the qualities of internally homogeneous and externally distinctive and bounded objects, we create a model of the world as a global pool hall in which the entities spin off each other like so many hard and round billiard balls”. By turning the “Sweetwater community” into a thing, the institutions involved in the University City project are turning the concrete into an abstraction befitting to their world-view and interests, and marginalizing the world-views, ways of relating to their urban environment/housing, and interests of community members while asserting their power over them.

In my research, I will be exploring how the public-private partnership between Florida International University, the City of Sweetwater and private developers aimed at creating a “University City” is affecting current members of the Sweetwater community. In this example, we can see how the current US wave of capital intensive, luxury student housing, public-private partnerships and exclusion of current residents through both
lack of interaction and aesthetics are at play in creating the University City envisioned by University officials, Sweetwater City Government, and finance capital/developers.

While the case of public-private partnerships has been addressed in the research, the literature does not address studentification or gentrification purposefully led by an institution of Higher Education in partnership with a city/private developers. In particular, I will explore the development project’s claims of community inclusion and how residents of Sweetwater are being included/excluded by these projects through aesthetics as well as other processes outlined in the literature. I also seek to address the role of the discourses about public/private partnerships, and “the community” in masking exclusion and disenfranchisement brought about by the university, particularly through the claims of representation through the city government, as the role of official discourses has not been explored sufficiently in the literature on studentification. On the initial findings, I will then explore ways in which the “neoliberal straitjacket” (Hodkinson 2011) can be unstitched in this particular scenario, if this is not being done already, in a way that goes beyond absolutist criticisms of neo-liberalism that ignore the problems with economic systems and forms of governance before neo-liberal interventions. This would be done through a form of ethnographic fieldwork as proposed by Hart (2007) and carried out by Allen (2008) in the hopes of a postructuralist participatory action research that questions “the local” as proposed by Cameron and Gibson (2005).

**METHODODOLOGY**

My research methods consisted of ethnographic fieldwork carried out over approximately 4 months. Specifically, I utilized participant observation and
unstructured interviews. I lived within the research area, at the edge of the main redevelopment boundaries of University City, for the entire duration of the research as well as over a year prior to the initiation of the research. I also conducted intensive background research on the University City project, mostly through documents pertaining to the project, websites related to the project, or news articles. Additionally, I researched similar studentification projects occurring elsewhere within the United States.

I decided to interview a diverse set of people who may be experiencing the University City redevelopment project, or changes relating to it, from different perspectives. This included residents living within and near the main University City research area in Sweetwater, business owners and workers operating in 109th avenue within the main University City redevelopment boundaries, FIU students living in 109 tower (the only completed and operating student housing building thus far), and FIU students living in other parts of Sweetwater who walk or bike to the FIU Modesto Maidique campus, as well as one lifetime Sweetwater resident and FIU student who had just recently moved out, but those family continued living in Sweetwater. I recruited the participants on the street, in their businesses, or in school by asking other students if they knew anyone who lived in Sweetwater. The study also included one person who was previously known to me and who volunteered to participate.

A total of 12 participants were interviewed. These interviews took place at sites agreed upon by participants, which included their homes, businesses, and FIU’s Modesto Maidique campus. Interviewees were informed that they could stop the interview at any time, and that the length of the interview depended on their time
availability and comfort. Interviews lasted anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour, with most interviews lasting about forty minutes. In order to allow those issues that were important to participants to surface, and in order to avoid making assumptions that would obscure the particular perspectives of participants, I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews. The level of structure in the interview depended on the particular participant and their level of initiative during the interview. This also allowed me to gather unsuspected talking points that could be mentioned in future interviews.

Although most interviews were one-on-ones between myself and the interviewees, there were two salient exceptions. One interview was conducted with two participants inside their home. Another interview was conducted in a hair salon, and included most of the people present at the salon. This particular interview was conducted while I sat in the salon for an elongated period of time, and although I asked questions, it was both an interview and a conversation among the people in the salon. One participant in this interview was recruited by the salon workers themselves, who knew of a regular customer that lived near the 109 towers and was very opinionated on the subject. This participant received a call from a salon worker during our interview and came within 5 minutes in order to participate. Other participants were customers who walked in later and were interested in participating upon hearing the topic of conversation. All of the participants fit within the target population criteria and provided full informed consent.

Interview guides varied depending on the participants particular position (student, worker, business owner, resident, etc.). The following questions guided my interviews with students:

1. Where are you from/ how long have you been at FIU/major/etc.
2. What do you call this area?
3. How long have you lived in this area?
4. Why did you choose to live here?
5. What do you like or dislike about it?
6. What is the extent of your interactions with local residents?
   What are these interactions like?
   Do you go to local businesses or do you go to FIU/outside of Sweetwater?
7. Have you ever heard this area being referred to as “University City”?
8. Do you know about the University City project?
   How? What?
9. How has it affected you?
10. How do you assess the changes associated with the project?
11. How do you see this project changing things in the future?

I used the same guide for resident, business owners and workers, with some additional questions pertaining exclusively to one or the other:

1. Do you live around here?
   For how long?
   Why did you choose to live around here (or not to)
2. How long have you had this business/worked here for?
   Why did you choose to put it here?
3. What do you like or dislike about this area?
4. Have you ever heard this area being referred to as “University City”?
5. Do you know about the University City project?
   How? What?
6. Did the city/FIU/developers ever approach you?
7. How has it affected you?
8. How do you assess the changes associated with the project?
9. How do you see this project changing things in the future?
10. What do you think can be done to change/make this better/prevent this?

RESULTS

We are sitting in 109 Burger Joint, waiting for our food when we notice a man wearing a cap that reads “security” standing outside. 109 Burger Joint is the only place in the in-progress “University City” area. Until recently, it was called A&G Burger Joint. A&G Burger Joint had replaced an unusual restaurant called Tipi Tapas that, regardless, was (relatively) more typical of what you would expect to find in Sweetwater. The owner of A&G, a passionate and inventive chef, took over this place from his wife’s family, Sweetwater people, and turned it into a “cool” college Burger Joint. It was—and still is—the only restaurant I have been to in Sweetwater where you can buy craft beer, and they even tried serving brunch for a while. The brunch thing didn’t really take off, perhaps because it was too soon after the joint had first opened. Perhaps it would have been a success had 109 Towers—a luxury, private student housing building—been finished and running at the time. In spite of being in the middle of an older working class Nicaraguan and Cuban neighborhood without a student housing complex across the street, A&G was a huge success, bringing people from in all over West Miami. Sadly, the owners split up, and the restaurant was retaken by the in-laws, who kept the same atmosphere and continued serving similar burgers under a different chef. They even expanded the tap selection of craft beers. The restaurant was renamed 109 Burger Joint, mirroring the 109
Towers across the street, which had opened for the fall semester and was immediately filled with an ideal college-going clientele.

Despite keeping the same concept and decor as A&G, 109 Burger Joint feels very different. Walking into 109 Burger Joint is like walking into a restaurant next to the university in Gainesville, Florida, a proper college town if there ever was one. All the servers are young, nearly all students, many living across the street in “the towers”, and you certainly see that crowd more often than you would at A&G. On the restaurant’s Instagram profile, their location is listed as “646 SW 109th ave. Sweetwater (University City), FL.” The intentions of the owners are clear, as this is the first time I see Sweetwater formally being referred to as “University City” outside of plans for the University City Prosperity Project. Unlike in the plans, however here Sweetwater and University City are implied to be synonymous. 109 Burger Joint even fulfilled a college-town restaurant stereotype, naming one of their burgers “The Panther” after the FIU mascot. This is perhaps the only time FIU, a commuter campus in the middle of suburbs that grew faster than the University, has had the honor of having a restaurant name a dish after their mascot in it’s 60 year history.

Signs that we are in Sweetwater and not a college town, however, appear even as we sit inside the joint, as locals pass by and stare inside with curiosity, going on with their daily lives just as they did before. The older man with the security hat catches my attention, since I had never seen any security anywhere in the neighborhood, and I am aware that there has been conflict over parking in this shopping center due to students taking up spaces (Piccardo, 2014). I walk outside and he immediately greets me with a smile, asking me if he can help me with anything. I explain that I am doing research,
and ask him what he is doing there. He tells me that the owner of the shopping strip sent him, and that he is making sure that nobody parks in the shopping strip parking lot and then leaves to go somewhere else.

Our talk was interrupted when a woman, clearly upset, approaches him to ask what he is doing. She begins telling him (in Spanish) that she can sue him, that she only went to get coffee, and that she spoke to the lady at the pharmacy. She kept talking about the pharmacy, coffee and suing him. After she left I was able to clarify what had happened: she went to the pharmacy (which is in this same shopping center) and parked at the shopping center’s private parking lot. Because her medicine was not ready yet, she walked out of the shopping center to get coffee nearby. Apparently the man called to get her car towed because of this. A few minutes later, the woman came back with a lady who either works for or owns the pharmacy, she (also upset) proceeded to explain to the man that what the woman was saying was true, that he had no right to tow her car, and so on. The man was not interested in talking to them, but an argument inevitably ensued.

Throughout this event, he kept telling me to ignore them and to continue talking with him as they argued with him. In the middle of this incident, a manager of the Burger Joint came outside to see what was going on. He came in and out a couple of times, the last time being when he informed us all to please go somewhere else, since they were arguing in front of the restaurant. I walked back inside the burger joint at that point, right on time for my food, and the man and the woman walked away.

As I was walking back home, the owner of the beauty salon was outside with customers. They seemed to have some sort of issue with parking and were trying to
show her. Their car was simply parked at the parking lot, and the owner told them it was fine. I gathered that apparently something else happened and they were trying to explain this to her. I could not gather what the problem was exactly, but it sounded like the security guard had also told them something. I said hi to the salon owner and walked back home.

During our interrupted conversation, the security guard informed me that the city used to tow in the parking spaces in front of the shopping center, which belongs to the city instead of the owner of the building. However, they have stopped towing since 109 Towers was built. As I have gathered from nearly all of my informants, news sources, and simple observation, students have been parking in the shopping center parking lot, as well as other parts of the city—including private residential parking lots and people’s homes (Piccardo, 2015). This is in spite of the condition the city placed on the 109 tower requiring FIU students living there to park across the street in FIU, making an exception to the rule that there must be one parking space per bed (Piccardo, 2015b). The city, he informed me, may place metered parking there. In the meantime, he has to make sure people do not park in the small private parking lots that are at both sides of the shopping center. Despite walking past the shopping center every day on my way to school, and occasionally visiting the burger joint for dinner, I only saw the man one other time. Soon afterward, signs setting a time limit for parking in front of the shopping paza were placed, which the city hopes to place all along 109th avenue (Piccardo, 2015).

Just a few weeks before, the women in the hair salon had also suggested placing meters in the public parking area in front of the shopping center. I was told that that
they, as well as other residents and business owners, saw trouble coming the moment they noticed there was a tall building under construction (see Piccardo, 2015a). When they found out the city was not going to include parking, the signs of trouble increased a hundred fold. Apparently, someone even put together a petition, which everyone in the shopping center signed (see Piccardo, 2015a). The salon owner could not tell me who started this petition, but what she did know was that nobody in city hall cared about it. In fact, they did not even know a building was going to be under construction until it started, and they only found out about the parking arrangements later through word of mouth. This was echoed by all of the business owners and residents that I interviewed.

109 Tower residents confirmed these issues with parking. One student was sympathetic to her fellow 109 tower resident’s need to park near the building sometimes, as well as their frustration with getting towed. Both 109 Tower residents blamed the tower for this issue; although one resident did not understand why residents of the townhouses across the street did not let them park there, since, according to her, their parking lot is always empty. The other 109 tower resident informed me that she realized what was happening when, on move-in day, she realized that nobody in the houses neighboring the tower had been informed about the move-in. The student was outraged at the fact that none of the responsible parties informed these Sweetwater residents that over 500 people would be moving in to their neighborhood that day. She also invited me to her apartment’s balcony, which looks down toward houses on the block, and pointed to the trash that was laid all over the neighbor’s roof and yard, trash that had been thrown out from 109 Tower residents’ balconies.
Some have mentioned that they view positives in the studentification and urban renewal process. This included some students, one of which saw it as wholly positive and necessary. One salon worker, the youngest of them, also thought turning Sweetwater into a College Town was a positive thing. However, residents, business owners and workers who saw positives in the urban renewal process overwhelmingly referred to others, and not themselves or most current Sweetwater residents, as the beneficiaries of the project. These beneficiaries would be young people, students, those who own real estate and developers. Those who noticed rent increasing in the area tended to see only wealthy outsiders, and not young people or students in general, as being the only beneficiaries. Some assumed all students to be wealthy, considering they seemed to be able to afford the steep rent increases.

For example, one pair of residents only mentioned their own rent increasing once, and for causes that they saw as unrelated to the studentification and redevelopment. These residents saw changes geared toward students as positive, partly because they value education in spite of not having received higher education themselves (something which I have observed is common among Sweetwater residents). These residents did mention that they do not really communicate with their neighbors, so they were not aware of what other people were experiencing in terms of rent increase and other issues. They mentioned students parking in their street and in front of their house, but they were not bothered by this. The only issue they found was that, suddenly, trash had been appearing in front of their house, which they thought might be related to the students parking in their street.
On the other hand, the women at the salon, both Sweetwater residents and workers, discussed that many people have been moving out of the neighborhood because they cannot afford the rent increases. Some of these, they mentioned, have been old people who were part of the community. Sweetwater has been a good place for senior citizens, with its walkability and public infrastructure geared toward seniors, especially in relation to other affordable parts of Miami. Here seniors often know each other and are part of a vibrant community. They can be seen congregating in public spaces all over Sweetwater and riding the free trolley while talking with each other. Losing that community and independence at their age, I was told, is very damaging. For example, the women mentioned a customer and friend had to move to Kendall to live with her son and his family, where she is lonely due to a lack of connections and freedom to move about. This concern was echoed by a student who has lived in Sweetwater all her life, mentioning how everyone in Sweetwater knew her grandmother and hundreds attended her funeral in Sweetwater. This student was also concerned about the violence that would come about if residents tried to do something about this, since the Sweetwater police has recently obtained a tank and other military equipment.

One resident and salon customer, who was very passionate about the subject, started looking for somewhere else to live. She was living next to the 109 towers, and repeated the same issues with trash, parking and noise mentioned by 109 tower residents. She said this was the first time she was unable to find rent anywhere, which she believed was due to wealthy Venezuelans and students making it impossible for the poor and working class people who currently live there to do so. The poor, she explained, can’t compete with the newcomers. She imagined they would all be kicked
out in order to turn Sweetwater into an upscale College Town, while everyone else will have to move to Kendall. In response to the question of whether the city or anyone ever asked for the opinion of the residents of her block, she answered that the city (and the entire country) does not care for the opinion of the poor; the city just wants their cut and they do not care about what happens to the people. The people in her block only found out about the building because they saw the construction, and because the developers tried to buy from their block - but people refused to sell. This resident had lived in Sweetwater for 21 years, and was described by others half-jokingly as a “fixture of the community.” The last time I saw her, chatting outside of the salon, she told me that she successfully found a new place for her family in Fontainebleau.

Many residents like her have animosity toward students in general, because they see them as being mostly wealthy and spoiled people who are disrespecting and displacing residents. However, with a few exceptions, nearly all of the participants agreed that some people were profiting off of both students and residents, and that most working class students and residents were suffering because of this. When certain aspects of the plan for the project were mentioned; such as a bridge, better walkability and transport infrastructure, interviewees (including residents and business owners) tended to view these as positive. However, the problem lies with who will be benefitting from these changes. The University City Prosperity Project and their partners make ample use of the term “community”, using how the project will benefit “the community” of Sweetwater, in addition to the University Community, as a selling point for the project (Jessell and Rishe, 2013) (See also Cancio, 2015). It is mentioned, briefly, that the project will provide affordable housing for both students and non-students, yet even
a hint as to why or how this project would achieve this is not provided (Jessell and Rishe, 2013).

Such claims are even more perplexing when contrasted with the project’s assertion that it will create an increase in real-estate values, from which Sweetwater property owners will surely benefit. And benefitting they are. The actual renewal process, where the sidewalks are enlarged, a bridge is built, and public transport enhanced, has not even begun as of today, and yet we are already seeing prices in Sweetwater soar (Jessell and Rishe, 2013). Not only have people’s rents increased, but real estate values are already rising rapidly. The cramped and dilapidated 2 bedroom, one and a half bathroom townhouse I share with two other people rents for 1300 dollars a month. The initial offer was 1200 dollars, but there was so much competition in order to get the place that we had to offer 100 dollars extra, especially when we were competing against student whose parents were being placed as primaries on the lease. When we moved to this town house in August 2013, the owners had just bought the town house at about 90,000 dollars. A year later, after making no improvements whatsoever except for adding –hesitantly- a new air conditioning unit and placing a stove and a refrigerator in the kitchen, they resold the house for about 120,000 dollars. When the initial purchase was made, not that much was known about the plans for Sweetwater. The second purchase occurred after the 109 towers were built, standing as a model of what Sweetwater is going to become, and how much more profit there is to be made out of it (see also Joseph, 2014).

The way the city has been implementing/allowing to implement the project so far is also criticized, especially allowing for the towers to be built without parking. People
believe that the city must have known, just like everyone else (who tried to warn them) that the lack of parking would create problems (Piccardo 2015a). What this means to residents is that the city does not care for how residents are affected, but prefers accommodate the developers instead. The women at the salon also informed me that the city wanted to tear down the mechanic shop and fritanga in 109th in order to make room for parking. I was already aware of this at the time, since the use of this space for parking is stated clearly in the University City Prosperity Project plans (labeled in Map 3 as CHIPPS site) as if there was nothing there already (Jessell and Rishe, 2013).

However, the women told me the government had been harassing the owners and giving them trouble, which they suspected was meant to drive them away. Losing the shop and fritanga, they said, would hurt the owners immensely, particularly because they are old and it would be too late for them to re-start elsewhere. The fritanga building is also the oldest building in Sweetwater.

DISCUSSION

As my findings suggest, residents have been left out of the decision making process regarding University City, to the point of receiving minimal to no outreach from the part of the city or other partners in the project. Zoning changes and the permitting of a high-rise building without on-site parking were done by the City without consulting residents or even considering how they would be affected. This has left many residents rightfully believing that the city and the university are only interested in getting them out of the way in order to make room for a different kind of city.

In spite of the fact that residents and local business owners have not been actively reached by the project partners, different levels of knowledge about the project exist
among residents. A lot of information has been spread by word of mouth. Hence, many residents are up-to-date, as long as they are publicly social and active in Sweetwater life. This demonstrates a lot of concern on the part of residents for the changes occurring in their city.

The increased student presence is already affecting local residents and businesses, mainly due to parking issues, but also due to noise and even trash being thrown by students from the towers. This is creating some degree of animosity toward students. Whether this animosity exists the other way around remains to be determined. However, it appears that students living in 109 Towers don’t often frequent local businesses or socialize with residents, making the divide sharper, and proving further that simply putting students in a neighborhood will not create interaction or unity.

Rent increases are the biggest threat the project poses to residents so far, which also increases animosity. In addition, residents and business owners are fearful of becoming the victims of eminent domain or pressure to sell. Official University City documents mention affordable housing options as part of the project, but how this will be achieved is never specified further. In contradiction to this, Sweetwater government officials, and these very same documents, implied that the economic redevelopment would bring about a raise in property values and gentrification. Again, how this is to be done while providing affordable housing is never mentioned (Jessell and Rishe, 2013). Thus far, the project seems to only present expensive housing options, while creating rent increases in previously existing housing. The process of displacement of the local population has already begun.
My findings seem to contradict the main discourse surrounding the entire University City project; namely that the project will bridge the gap between “the community” and “the University” while creating improvements for “the community” and students. Instead, it seems like the beneficiaries may be developers instead of students and/or residents. While I have already enumerated the myriad of ways in which residents are being affected, students are also being taken advantage of economically for the profit of developers and real estate investors. My particular experience with housing in Sweetwater is an example of that, but students in 109 towers also confirm that this new housing is also prohibitively expensive. With little housing options in or around FIU, students find themselves obligated to pay steep prices. Although some students have parents who can pay, many (including myself) are only able to incur the cost of this off campus housing through loans. The new housing being provided is even more expensive than housing options like mine, which are increasingly difficult to come by in Sweetwater.

Sweetwater residents, however, do not have student loans. Unlike the parents of students who pay for their offspring’s student housing, they are working class people who are unable to cope with increasing rent, and who often live in even more cramped conditions than students. However, the developers and others who profit from this situation are not visible to either students or residents. This prevents the two groups from joining together in order to fight for our common interests. The creation of a University District for the profit of developers and a City Government that is only eager to change up their tax base will not benefit students or residents. The only hope for something that will is through creating unity between the two groups.
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