Kye Lynne
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Integration of Detroit:

How Has it Been Done and How Should it be Carried out in the Future?

Protests of BlackLivesMatter in the summer of 2020 have illustrated issues of race that persist today even after the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s, yet the movement– and our society as a whole– must still decide how to progress race relations. The city of Detroit is 77.9% African American as of July 2022 (U.S. Census Bureau), and its suburbs are 64% white as of 2021 (Census Profile). This colossal racial divide after decades of the supposed "end to segregation" with Brown v. Board and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 contradicts the notion that our society has completely moved beyond issues of racial prejudice and segregation. If the process of desegregation and integration in the 60s and 70s left Detroit more divided than ever, then what is the answer for improved race relations beyond what the '60s advocated for? It is the sustained segregation of Detroit that implores me to explore the following questions through the course of this essay: How does the conflict between desegregation and integration surface today with Downtown's recent developments, and can gentrification be considered a vessel for integration? Through all of these methods of creating diversity, which can best be used to create a racially and economically diverse Detroit that incorporates the city as it is defined now and its suburbs?

To fully understand the depth of these questions, the history of Detroit's demographic needs to be established. Detroit played a central role in the world's development of mass-production technology key to capitalist industrialism, and Peter F. Drucker notes that Detroit was "the [early] twentieth century's 'industry of industries'" (Fishman, 1). This was due to the

creation and continued residency of massive automotive industries like Ford and GM, thus nicknaming Detroit the "Motor City." In the 1960s with American culture's emphasis on the luxury of the suburbs combined with racial tensions in the inner cities (like the Detroit Rebellion in 1967) as well as the motor industries' desires to expand beyond both the city's and the nation's borders for lower cost labor and taxes, there was a mass flight of white Detroiters to the suburbs (Kickert, 192). "Between 1970 and 1980 alone, more than 310,000 white city residents fled for the suburbs, and the percentage of blacks in Detroit rose from 43.7 to 67.1" (Thompson, 163). Paired with this racial flight, there was a mass economic drop in the investments of the city to the point where 20% of Detroit's black population lived below the poverty line (Thompson, 163). This systemic pattern of economic disinvestment and poverty continues today and 31.8% of all Detroiters live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau).

What is described in the above paragraph is a story of Detroit that seems to be commonly shared in furthering the image of Detroit being the perfect example of a failed post-industrial city that suffered from white flight. However, the historical reasoning for furthered segregation and the many failings of the court cases and laws that would supposedly promote integration is a crucial missing piece to the narrative of Destroit's primarily Black demographic as well as most other major cities in the United States. Even though there is almost no legal segregation in America, most Americans live in segregated neighborhoods (Verdun, 151). Our society has progressed to the point where most people are consciously aware that racial segregation is bad, however, we consider the "forcing of individuals to forego any personal liberty for the sake of integration and equity as unfair and illegal" which thus coins Verdun's labeling of this paradox in the way Americans view segregation as the "Big Disconnect" (152). This contrast between belief in the evils of segregation and the resistance to tangibly change our

ways of life in order to act in accordance with desegregation results in many desegregation laws being struck null and void in impact. For example, local school districts often resist desegregation even when forced by the federal government by simply disinvesting in public schools to then invest heavily in private schools that were shielded from prosecution by their privatized status (Verdun, 159). Additionally, these landmark cases and legislation that work actively against segregation only define segregation and racism as something that is blatantly shown, which neglects to put a real end to implicit racism that continues to run rampant and thus be the strongest force against the continuation of desegregation efforts today (Verdun, 154-155). The desegregation laws' inability to sufficiently tackle segregation in both the private sphere and in our implicit consciousness highlights the failings of early attempts at desegregation.

While this research is applied to the segregation of most major cities, "[i]n Michigan, the percentage of Black students attending highly segregated schools is the second highest in the country, exceeded only by Washington, DC, and tied with Mississippi" (Ayscue, 52). The segregation in Michigan is so drastic in part because of the mass resistance to desegregation by cities, but also because of Detroit's unique set of economic circumstances with the relocation of the auto industries that had employed thousands that then furthered the mass exodus of its white citizens (Kickert, 192). The racial divide between Detroit and its suburbs is exasperated further by a geographical divide due to the suburb's refusal to commit to a regional transit system (Gifford) making it both logistically and socially difficult to truly integrate the two. Michigan's acceptance of Detroit's segregation from its suburbs is emphasized even now by public figures like Betsy DeVos, who have championed the privatization and thus continued resistance to the integration of Michigan schools (Ayscue, 48).

With this presented evidence, it is clear that historical efforts to desegregate have failed. Desegregation is simply defined as the end of segregation, while integration–the goal of much Civil Rights Activism to end segregation–is defined as the action or process of successfully joining or mixing with a different group of people. If desegregation efforts have, for the most part, failed, then it is inconceivable to consider the goal of integration has been truly achieved.

During the seventies, there was an emphasis on people of color being agents of integration, especially Black people, by moving into white neighborhoods. Though often done out of economic necessity and improved access to opportunities, it came at a great cost of stress and alienation. Even though "black 'pioneers' were often better off than many of their white neighbors," (Sugrue, 216) in the fifties and early sixties they faced an immense amount of violence, harassment, and alienation. "White Detroiters instigated over two hundred incidents against blacks moving into formerly all-white neighborhoods, including harassment, mass demonstrations, picketing, effigy burning, window breaking, arson, vandalism, and physical attacks" (Sugrue, 233). White neighborhoods did this out of fear that their neighborhoods would change from predominately white to black like they saw happen in other places (Sugrue, 216). While the integration of people of color into white suburbs and neighborhoods is not as violent as it once was, the memories of this treatment run deep. According to a poll conducted by Detroit News/WDIV, contrary to national polls "52 percent of [B]lacks [in Detroit] said segregation is sometimes, usually or always a very good idea" (Upton and Trowbridge) as of 2020. This has to do with pessimism about the way Detroit has continued to desegregate at glacial paces and that Black Detroiters "are more likely to fear discrimination and harassment" than their white counterparts (Upton and Trowbridge). What if there is another way to integrate that relieves pressure on people of color to adapt to a completely new environment?

Following the continued decline in Detroit's population, especially of white communities, there has been a surprising and rapid shift in the last couple of decades that marks an interesting change in Detroit's patterns of segregation: gentrification. This phenomenon could pose a new way to integrate Detroit and its suburbs. Starting in the 1990s, billionaires Mike Illitch (CEO of Little Caesars), and Dan Gilbert (CEO of Quicken Loans) bought up a sea of vacant or decrepit lots in the downtown Detroit area and have since transformed the land into sports arenas and highrises, respectively (Biles and Rose, 9 and 14). This has greatly contributed to a mass influx of white and aspirational "youngsters" (Moskowitz) in the heart of Detroit. Before their intervention downtown, the idea of bike shops and tours existing on mass in the area was laughable (Moskowitz). 54% of the residents in the downtown area are white compared to 12% total in the city (U.S. Census Bureau). The recent pattern of younger, white millennials moving into the heart of cities around the nation may also be "contributed to the increased entry into [B]lack neighborhoods are the dramatic decline in crime coupled decreasing antipathy toward [Black spaces" (Freeman, 309). The demographics of Detroit have the potential to change into a truly egalitarian metropolis with the reverse white flight happening in the city as an antithesis of the white flight that happened decades prior. According to a study conducted by Gibbons, "gentrification is independently related to some forms of long-lasting racial/ethnic integration between Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics, as well as preserving already mixed-White neighborhoods" (226).

However, gentrification unstructured will only continue to have negative consequences for long-time Detroiters and be a surface-level kind of integration where the Downtown area functions like an "island, or perhaps more accurately a city-state within the city" (Moskowitz) because simply achieving balanced racial demographic does not mean that integration is

successful. McGhee notes that while gentrification often is more than likely due to opportunistic reasons and not malicious, “there is an evident convergence of interests around gentrification among 1) urban developers, 2) construction unions (to the extent they are used by residential developers), 3) middle-class gentrifiers, 4) politicians attempting to entice corporations to cities, 5) the need to increase urban tax bases, 6) charter school advocates and 7) and school choice policies” that makes it difficult to ignore the motivations of all these actors in seeing that their benefits are felt over the original residents of the places they inhabit (McGhee and Anderson, 188). This is seen in the way that gentrifiers often neglect to acknowledge the needs of the people who had lived in their neighborhood before them, which is an extension of them imposing their standards and views of a “good” neighborhood considering the access to new resources their presence provides is often only extended to them and their opinions (Gibbons, 226).

If we look at the effect of gentrification on school systems, oftentimes the policies that promote diversity with market strategies to attract middle-class and white families then push working-class and poor parents to the sidelines by both the gentrifiers and the school administrators (McGhee and Anderson, 187). If the gentrification of Detroit were to bleed out into the surrounding residential areas where it would affect long-time Detroit residents, this effect on school systems would likely be felt. This contributes to the many “reports and qualitative accounts have also described being ‘pushed out’ in a figurative sense among [those] experiencing white invasion” (Freeman, 315) that other marginalized neighborhoods in cities have felt. These feelings of alienation could lead to blacks leaving or avoiding these neighborhoods (Freeman, 315), which is quite the opposite of what integration is intended to do. An example of gentrification in Detroit that happened recently is the building on Griswold Street that used to house low-income seniors; it was bought up in 2013 and all its previous residents

were evicted, “[n]ow the building houses mostly white millennials” (Moskowitz). While they were not many residents in the downtown area before this mass change (Moskowitz), it highlights the aggressive nature of gentrification in Detroit and the lack of hesitation it will have in the physical, not just cultural displacement, of Detroiters if allowed to continue as is.

Though gentrification, as it functions now, continues to take opportunities and resources away from communities that need the city’s investments in more than just the downtown area with the danger of expanding its victims, it also provides a window into new means of integration beyond people of color shouldering the burden there are also counterweights to prevent much of the harm that comes with unrestricted gentrification. Pierce argues that though it is apparent that there are “serious injustices associated with gentrification as it has unfolded, the trend holds some promise for a more equitable approach to integration provided that it can be uncoupled from its role in initiating processes that lead to the displacement and exclusion of long-term residents” (Pierce). This is further emphasized by Posey Maddox, who writes that “[c]reating racially and economically integrated schools is thus not simply about providing students with the opportunity to socialize and learn from peers from different racial and economic backgrounds; it is about demolishing entrenched patterns of advantage and disadvantage in public education” (McGhee and Anderson, 187). While this is written specifically about the education system, its implications can be applied to Detroit in the ways that intervention and specific policies must be created to change pre-existing inequalities that lead to segregation and truly foster integration. Gentrification alone can be the true shepherd of integration in Detroit; “more should be done to ensure integration from gentrification benefits all residents within a neighborhood” (Gibbons, 226).

Though it is clear that previous methods of integration have harmed people of color greatly and that this burden must be shifted, this issue of cultural displacement along with gentrification is unavoidable and wrought with tension. For one thing, the integration of a predominately Black city, with few cities of anything remotely like it, could mean a loss of vital culture. According to Baldwin, a resident in Detroit, "most people want to stay where they feel comfortable" which explains the poll that found 52% of Black Detroiters felt at least somewhat favorable about segregation (Uptown and Trowbridge). The poet and musician, Marsha Music, says something about this in her piece "Just Say Hi! (The Gentrification Blues):

> Now some deny they gentrify in devastated D,
> they move to empty spaces – no displacement they can see
> and think that since the building stock was emptied long ago,
> no one's displaced from this old place, so no one's had to go
> But don't forget our memories are carved deep into our souls
> We lived, and worked, took care of biz, then time for us to roll
> They pushed us, moved us, crime'd us out, then time did take its toll
> those barren places all stood guard; we drove by, walked past old facades,
> then decades hence, we were replaced – just took long years to fill the space,
> It matters not how long it takes; oh yes, we've still been gentrified.

Memories of discrimination, violence, and pain are so lasting, that it becomes hard to keep sight of the fact that "segregation stunts house price appreciation (and, consequently, wealth accumulation among Black and Brown homeowners), undermines children's educational attainment, limits employment opportunities and earnings, and damages the health of children and adults" (Turner and Greene). How can the valid concerns of loss of culture from Detroit's

integration be answered while economic and opportunistic restrictions will continue without a true end to segregation?

Much of the answer to this question lies in integration meaning more than just a mixing of people socially in the same physical spaces, but being able to acknowledge and respect each other culturally. Most of the solutions to gentrification consuming both the people and culture that already existed lie in government intervention. One such strategy the local government could use is building a cultural equity plan; "According to Americans for the Arts 'cultural planning is a public process in which representatives of a community undertake a comprehensive community assessment and create a plan of implementation for future cultural programming'" (Building a Cultural Equity Plan). This would involve communicating with community members and surveys to grasp the extent of culture both physically in the spaces they inhabit and in the people who bring their cultures with them to truly acknowledge and appreciate everyone in the community (Building a Cultural Equity Plan). The implementation of this method could do a lot for the people in Detroit in allowing them to feel seen and a part of the new communities being built around them.

When thinking about ways to promote economic equity in addition to cultural equity, government intervention will addditionally be key in transforming current patterns of gentrification in Detroit into integration. Rachel D. Godsel outlines that it will take legislation that will monitor signs of gentrification ("increased rents and home-purchase prices and a shift in the income level of residents") and when it becomes apparent that intervention is needed, creating a kind of voucher for the businesses and residencies that had existed in that area before the massive rent increases to ensure that they are not forced to move without adequate support. These legal practices would provide safeguards against the aligning of multiple actors' interests

in reaping the benefits of gentrification which often leads to a blatant disregard for the wishes of previous residents as McGhee noted in their research. This kind of government intervention would take work to implement, especially in a city that has been so historically disinvested that it has liberally taken the investments of those who offer for fear there will be no other funding. It will be important to emphasize that these legal safeguards should not be seen as a resistance to economic growth, but instead, as insurance that this growth benefits *all* Detroiters and not just the ones who moved Downtown in the last decade.

To conclude, it becomes clear through historical analysis that previous methods to desegregate after landmark Civil Rights cases in the 60s have failed, and much of this is at the fault of the legislation leaving much of implicit racism beyond its sphere as well as the loophole of private institutions being beyond the reach of much reform. Additionally, the effort to integrate neighborhoods has historically been placed as the responsibility of the few, well-off Black middle-class families who often had to suffer intense alienation and mistreatment in the name of receiving economic benefits. While gentrification unrestricted will only lead to the continued suffering of Detroiters being ignored, if the government takes the initiative to ensure both cultural and economic equity with proper legislation then there is much potential for achieving true integration that could benefit all Detroiters by putting an end to intense residential segregation that still plagues the city and its suburbs.

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