

Towards a Whiter Woodlawn: Racism and the University of Chicago's Employer-Assisted Housing Program

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Abstract

This article investigates the racism inherent in the purportedly race-neutral University of Chicago's Employer-Assisted Housing Program (EAHP) and its drive to encourage employee homeownership in the Woodlawn neighborhood. The paper demonstrates that the program's eligibility requirements means it is most accessible to White people. It further shows that the EAHP marketing works to sell Woodlawn in specific ways in order to attract White homeowners despite the current racial makeup of a neighborhood that is majority-Black. Finally, in light of the University's longstanding efforts to expand its physical sphere of influence through the creation of whiter, wealthier spaces in neighboring communities, it outlines how staff, students, faculty, and broader community members might organize around the issue and put pressure on top administrators to alter such programs.

Four houses at the northern edge of Chicago's Woodlawn neighborhood, a block from the University of Chicago and several blocks from the site of the proposed Obama Presidential Center (OPC), recently sold for upwards of \$700,000, a record for the area. The homes are two-story, black and white framed homes with floor-to-ceiling windows. Their upscale design and high market price set them apart from the rest of the neighborhood (Rodkin, 2019). Woodlawn is adjacent to Jackson Park, which in 2016 was named the site of the OPC. Median home values rose 16% in 2017-

2018 (Cleaver, 2018) and the neighborhood has experienced rising rents (Smith, Lane & Butler, 2018; Whitely, 2017). The median household income in Woodlawn, however, is only \$25,000 and 77% of residents are now renters and 84% are Black (Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, 2018). In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, Woodlawn saw many housing foreclosures (Gamino, 2015), part of what Keeanga-Yahmatta Taylor (2018) called the “culmination of a long period of predatory inclusion of African Americans in the housing market” through subprime lending (p. 23). Given the economic conditions in the neighborhood now, who can afford the rising prices in Woodlawn? A University of Chicago employee with an incentive to move to Woodlawn is one possibility.

The University of Chicago's Employer-Assisted Housing Program

The University of Chicago's Employer-Assisted Housing Program (EAHP) provides up to \$10,000 in down-payment assistance to full-time benefits-eligible employees who buy a home in one of nine nearby communities. According to the EAHP webpage, the program “strengthens [the University] connections to surrounding neighborhoods, retains valuable employees, and helps staff to optimize their work-life balance.” In 2014, the University created a tiered system, with neighborhoods eligible for varied amounts of assistance, ranging from \$2,500 to \$10,000. It also created the “Woodlawn Focus Area,” spanning west from Stony Island to Cottage Grove Avenue and south from 61st to 67th Street. Those buying a home in the Woodlawn Focus Area get the most down-payment assistance: \$10,000. No other neighborhoods qualify for this amount. Homeowners in the other neighborhoods may buy a second home with assistance in just one area—the Woodlawn Focus Area (Coward, 2015). During a panel discussion on The Future of Woodlawn, Susana Vasquez of the Office of Civic Engagement said the varying amounts of down payment assistance are based on “demographic changes” and “where we think it's important for folks to live.” Clearly, the University thinks it is most important for employees to live in the

Woodlawn Focus Area. In this paper, I investigate the racism of the EAHP's drive to encourage employee homeownership in the Woodlawn Focus Area, as well its implications. The ostensibly race-neutral program fits into Bobo, Smith and Jones's (1997) concept of "laissez-faire racism," a type of racism that "relies on the market and informal racial bias to re-create, and in some instances sharply worsen, structured racial inequality" (p. 17). More recently, Ewing (2018), in turn, underscores that racism "lives not in individuals, but in systems" and "our society follows a pattern, churning out different outcomes for different people in ways linked to race" (p.12). When understood in the context of the eligibility requirements, the marketing of Woodlawn to homebuyers, and the University's history in the city's South Side, we recognize the racism embedded in the EAHP. The program fits into the University's longstanding tradition of promoting a Whiter South Side of Chicago.

"The University of Chicago Agreement to Get Rid of Negroes"

Until the 1890s, Woodlawn was a small community of Dutch farmers. The 1893 World's Fair in Jackson Park brought 20,000 new residents to Woodlawn. While Black people made up a mere two percent of Woodlawn's population in 1915 (Moore and Williams, 2011), by 1920, the Great Migration swelled Chicago's Black population to 110,000. Although approximately 85% of the Black population was concentrated into an area from 22nd to 55th streets (i.e., the "Black Belt"), some middle-class African-American families moved to Woodlawn (Hirsch, 1998; Seligman, 2005). White property owners attempted to bar and intimidate Black homebuyers through racially restrictive covenants and racial violence directed at Blacks as well as the real estate agents and mortgage lenders willing to work with them. The neighborhood had become a popular place for University faculty to settle and in 1928, the Woodlawn Property Owners Association, with covert legal and financial support from the University (Plotkin, 2001), organized a restrictive covenant in the northwestern portion of Woodlawn to prevent the sale of property

to Black households (Kamp, 1987). A 1937 Chicago Defender editorial referred to the restrictive covenants as “The University of Chicago Agreement to get rid of Negroes” (Moore and Williams, 2011).

To better understand the University’s role, one might look at the “Security Map” of Woodlawn associated with the discriminatory real estate practice of “redlining.” The map, created by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) between 1935 and 1940 (fig. 1), laid out color-coded areas according to credit worthiness. Those in red were seen as high risk or “Hazardous” while areas highlighted in yellow were “Zones in Transition,” or “Definitely Declining” (Nelson, Winling, & Connolly, 2018).

Most of the majority-Black West Woodlawn was graded as “Hazardous.” The mixed White and Black East Woodlawn, closer to campus, was seen as a “Zone in Transition.” By the 1960s and the end of redlining, the racial character of the entire neighborhood had transitioned, with Black people making up the majority of Woodlawn residents (Seligman, 2005). The overlaid black box in Figure 1 shows the current Woodlawn Focus Area. Figure 2 is a map of the Woodlawn Focus Area from an EAHP brochure. The Woodlawn Focus Area is nearly identical in geography to the yellow-coded area on the “Security Maps” from the era of redlining. Through the provision of the highest amount of down-payment assistance, the University is incentivizing University-affiliated homeownership in this majority-Black area, attempting to transition it back from one that is majority Black and low-income to one that is increasingly whiter and wealthier.

According to Derek Douglas, the University’s Vice President for Civic Engagement, the tiered system is meant to “spur some sort of critical mass rather than having new residents and faculty scattered all over.” He says the program was created to “encourage a collection of people, a group to move into a certain area” because “one or two people in every neighborhood [which] wasn’t making that big of a difference because it was too spread out” (Semuels, 2015). The University’s desire to create a strong presence and influence in the

Woodlawn Focus Area is intended, indeed, to change the composition of the area.

"It's Open to All University Employees..."

In early 2019, in an effort to better understand the characteristics of this "critical mass," I spoke with an EAHP staff person and asked if they could provide me with the racial breakdown of EAHP participants. They declined my request and followed up by stating, "it's open to all University employees, so whoever applies for it." This is technically accurate. With no race-based eligibility criteria, the program is race-neutral. By looking closely at her use of the term "all," however, we better understand who "all" includes, and equally important, who it excludes. Restricted to full-time benefits-eligible University employees (with sufficient wealth to purchase a home), it is most accessible to White people. According to the University of Chicago's 2016 Climate Survey, Black employees comprise 3% of faculty and 17% of staff, while White employees comprise 61% of faculty and 60% of staff. Racial makeup alone means more White employees have access to the EAHP. Black workers are also much less likely to receive benefits than White workers (Sullivan, Meschede, Dietrich & Shapiro, 2015). The University's move towards privatization means that all of the cleaners, food service workers, and security guards are contract workers without access to the EAHP. More broadly, Black Chicago households have a much lower median income than that of White Chicago households: roughly \$71,000 for White and \$30,000 for Black (Marksjarvis, 2017). Wealth, however, is a better measure of the ability to buy a home than income due to the capital needed for homeownership. In 2013, the median net wealth of Black families nationwide was a mere \$11,000, compared with \$142,000 for White families. It is not surprising that in 2017, 66% of first-time homebuyers were White, and 9% were Black (Rieger, Spader & Veal, 2019). Wealth is "more often used to create opportunities" (Shapiro, 2004, p. 34). This includes the opportunity for homeownership in Woodlawn. Thus, a more accurate description of EAHP is that rather than open to all

who are eligible, it is open to a majority of White employees and a much smaller proportion of Black who are full-time, benefits eligible, and receive a good salary. Since there is no data on the racial makeup of program participants it is possible that employees of color utilize the EAHP in the Woodlawn Focus Area at a higher rate than White employees. However, the racial patterns of University employment and the racial income and wealth gap point to this program's likely outcome of a Whiter, wealthier Woodlawn. In other words, the market-driven, "laissez-faire racism" of a program like EAHP thus helps to facilitate the eventual displacement of Woodlawn's lower-income, Black residents while remaining "race-neutral."

"We've Hoped that It Will Spark Interest in Marketing this Neighborhood in a Different Way"

The above quotation is from an Atlantic article that highlights the EAHP (Semuels, 2015). In the article, Joanna Trotter, former Office of Civic Engagement staff person, identifies the program as a catalyst for a "different way" of marketing Woodlawn. Trotter's statement evinces the University's goal in attracting a different type of consumer to purchase a home in Woodlawn. A look at the EAHP's marketing brochure sheds light on who the University aims to attract. The brochure features section titles like, "Join the neighborhood" and "Live here." It includes a neighborhood map, a list of local resources, images and neighborhood history. The portrait of Woodlawn leaves out the majority-Black, lower-income residents who actually live there and constructs a whitewashed (literally) version of history. According to the pamphlet, Woodlawn is a place rich in White history alone. The Neighborhood section emphasizes periods when White residents primarily lived in the neighborhood (Seligman, 2005). In addition to featuring Hugh Hefner's time in Woodlawn, the profile does highlight two famous Black residents: playwright Lorraine Hansberry and anthropologist Allison Davis. The University chose to exclude most of Woodlawn's Black history—the influx of the Black population, popular jazz clubs, the residents' rights group, The Woodlawn Organization, and the famous street gang, the Blackstone Rangers (Moore &

Williams, 2011). As David Harvey (1996) writes, “Places do not come with some memories attached as if by nature but rather they are the contested terrain of competing definitions” (p. 309), and by centering what I call Woodlawn’s “White origin story,” the brochure erases Black history.

The whole of Woodlawn is marketed as a University neighborhood. Although the University occupies just a small portion of Woodlawn, it claims the entire area in its brochure: “Site of the University of Chicago’s south campus, Woodlawn is the second most popular community in the Mid-South Side for University of Chicago employees to call home.” By inference, it is also promoted as a White space. Many universities, based on statistics alone, are, “visibly White spaces, whether one considers the student body, faculty or administration” (Tusmith & Reddy, 2002, p.2). While Black people often view these “White spaces” as “off limits,” White people experience these spaces as “unremarkable ... normal, taken-for-granted reflections of civil society” (Anderson, 2014, p. 10). White students form a plurality of undergraduate students, and as previously discussed, White people make up a majority of faculty and staff (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). The EAHP marketing aims to attract White homeowners who will feel comfortable in the projected White space of Woodlawn, regardless of the current racial makeup. The images in the Woodlawn profile thus appear selected to attract White employees. The images are the Statue of the Republic, the facade of the Museum of Science and Industry, and the Osaka Japanese Garden.

These structures were constructed for the 1893 World’s Fair Columbian Exposition and are located in Jackson Park, which spans Hyde Park, Woodlawn, and South Shore. Including only these images is a telling choice for several reasons. First, as the brochure acknowledges, Jackson Park itself is, “located on Woodlawn’s eastern border,” rather than in the community’s center. Second, the images of elegant structures and landscapes represent an idealized, inauthentic order, in contrast to the poverty and disinvestment that is a current

reality in much of Woodlawn. Finally, the World's Fair symbolized both the "ascendancy of the United States among the world powers" and the discrimination against and exclusion of Blacks. As historians Rudwick and Meier (1965) detail, African Americans "found themselves excluded from prestigious positions on the Exposition Committee ... and practically unrepresented in the exhibits" (p. 354). This racism spurred Ida B. Wells and Frederick Douglass to print a booklet, "The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition: The Afro-American's contribution to Columbian literature" to explain why they had been "kept out of representation in any official capacity and given menial places" (Wells, 1893; Rudwick & Meier, 1965). To center the structures of the World's Fair is to center the history of White presence in Woodlawn.

"Levi Is Forcing His Way into Our Community, Wanted or Unwanted, Invited or Uninvited"

The University established the South East Chicago Commission (SECC) in 1952 in order to have a larger influence on development in the neighborhoods surrounding the University. Said University Chancellor Lawrence Kimpton about its establishment: "It is extremely important that we maintain a community in which our faculty and students desire to live ... to combat the forces of uncertainty, and deterioration at work in the neighborhood, the University had taken the initiative in the organization of the South East Chicago Commission" (Fish, 1973, p. 15). The SECC designed the Hyde Park Kenwood urban renewal program, which displaced thousands of African Americans. Its subsequent targeting of Woodlawn for urban renewal generated fears of a "Negro removal' redux" (Moore and Williams, 2011, p. 15).

In response, residents formed The Woodlawn Organization (TWO) to combat University encroachment (Fish, 1973; Moore & Williams, 2011; Todd-Breland, 2015). In December 1960, a TWO delegation appeared at a Chicago Planning Commission meeting to protest an ordinance proposed by Julian Levi, SECC Executive Director (and

brother of future Provost Edward Levi) that would have allowed the University and SECC to expedite their urban renewal plans. TWO leader Reverend Farrell told the Commission, “you are being used by Levi and the University of Chicago. Levi is forcing his way into our community, wanted or unwanted, invited or uninvited” (Fish, 1973, p. 15). TWO claimed victory when, in the office of Mayor Daley, a deal was struck that stopped University southward expansion at 60th Street (Fish, 1973; Moore & Williams, 2011).

While the University has kept its agreement, its influence in Woodlawn is growing. A 2011 article on the University’s Facilities webpage discusses the University’s “plans for growth along the south side of campus” and its “ongoing projects which are revitalizing the campus south of Midway Plaisance, creating a sense of place and destination and stronger ties to the neighboring Woodlawn community” (The University of Chicago, 2011). Developments in Woodlawn have included the South Campus Residence Hall (2011), the Logan Center for the Arts (2012), the Keller Center (2019), and the soon-to-be opened Woodlawn Residential Commons. When the Woodlawn Residential Commons dormitory opens, more undergraduates will live in Woodlawn than in Hyde Park for the first time (Cholke, 2018). The EAHP fits into this broader framework of University expansion south into Woodlawn, rooted in its first bid to expand south in the 1960s. Borrowing the words of Reverend Farrell, the University wants to expand its influence to the Woodlawn Focus Area, “wanted or unwanted, invited or uninvited.” The EAHP is one mechanism for University expansion south.

Conclusion

The EAHP, and its particular focus on Woodlawn, represents a contemporary manifestation of University-backed efforts to promote a Whiter Southside. Taking into account the realities of disparate access to the seemingly “race-neutral” EAHP, the marketing of the program, and the University’s history, we can understand University

expansionist efforts and the EAHP itself as inherently racist. The program produces varied outcomes linked to race. By subsidizing the move of wealthier White residents into the Woodlawn Focus Area, the University generates increased home and property values and rising rents, and hence the displacement of current residents. The negative impacts of such displacement include the fracturing of social networks, disruption in school and employment, mental health issues related to housing instability, and cultural displacement when “behaviors and values of the new resident cohort dominate and prevail over the tastes and preferences of long-term residents” (Hyra, 2015, p. 1754). It is highly unlikely that top University administrators, as architects of the program, will take steps to address the racism and racial implications of the EAHP. It is thus contingent on staff, students, faculty, and broader community members to organize around the issue and put pressure on top administrators to address the racism and racial implications of the program. As with many racist policies and programs, there is a question of reform versus abolition: is it possible to reform the EAHP in order that it is a program with a foundation of racial equity or is it better to abolish the program altogether? It is critical to center the voices, experiences, and opinions of people harmed by, or excluded from, the program in order to come to a collective response to this question and a path forward. In terms of reform, possible routes may include doing away with the locational requirement attached to the program, the inclusion of the lower-paid, and likely more racially diverse, workforce of contract workers, and investigating ways to both target and provide additional support to non-White employees seeking homeownership opportunities. Outside of the bounds of the EAHP, the University could use its resources to expand homeownership for longtime community members through programs like the Preservation of Affordable Housing’s Renew Woodlawn. However, with the historical and current reality of University-backed efforts related to housing and development as a guide, any reformed or new efforts must be approached with great care and caution to ensure anti-racism and racial equity are at the forefront.

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