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Leaving Chicago for Iowa's “Fields of Opportunity”: Community Dispossession, Rootlessness, and the Quest for Somewhere to “Be OK”

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Abstract

In recent years, urban development and public housing demolition have posed challenges to the social and geographic rootedness of low-income African Americans in urban areas. In particular, in Chicago, widespread public housing demolition, occurring in the context of rapid gentrification, has contributed to increasing shortages of affordable low-income housing. This study uses in-depth interviews and participant observation to examine the migration experiences of men and women who have left urban neighborhoods and public housing developments in Chicago searching for affordable housing and economic opportunity in eastern Iowa. This particular analysis focuses on experiences of social and geographic “rootlessness” that emerged as a major theme in these interviews. Participants describe community dispossession in Chicago that has threatened not only the ties between individuals and their social support networks, but also connections and claims to the places in which these ties are rooted. Narratives that describe leaving Chicago in this context and then trying to get by as a stigmatized outsider in “someone else's city” speak to a process of dislocation that may disrupt critical social-support resources that are known to mitigate the consequences of structural disadvantage.

Introduction

In recent years, urban redevelopment and public housing demolition have posed challenges to the social rootedness and residential stability of low-income African Americans in urban areas. Gentrification has excluded many poor and working class families from neighborhoods that once provided ample supplies of affordable housing (Bennett 2006; Newman and Wyly 2006). Responding to concern over the concentration of urban poverty, recent federal programs have promoted the dispersal of low-income communities through relocation programs and have also funded the demolition of publicly administered low-income housing (Kling et al. 2004; Popkin 2006; Smith 2006). While relocation from public housing and high-poverty urban neighborhoods is widely presumed to be beneficial to the health and economic well-being of low-income families, empirical support for this presumption is both limited and conflicting

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(Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2004; Goetz 2002; Kling et al. 2004). Further, most of the studies that have been conducted to evaluate the effects of relocation and demolition initiatives have been limited to quantitative assessments of particular outcome measures, rather than engaging qualitatively with the voices and experiences of those who relocate in the context of gentrification and demolition.

This paper responds to this gap in the literature by presenting a qualitative analysis of the relocation narratives of 25 African Americans who have moved from urban neighborhoods and public housing developments in Chicago to eastern Iowa, often in search of affordable housing, safe neighborhoods, and economic opportunities that were perceived to be unavailable in the city. Recent urban revitalization in Chicago has led to widespread demolition of the city's public housing stock and contributed to the gentrification of neighborhoods that once housed large communities of low-income households (Bennett 2006). While several studies have examined the experiences of relocated public housing tenants within Chicago (Popkin and Cunningham 2001; Venkatesh et al. 2004), little is known about low-income Chicago residents who leave the city.

In this paper, we focus our analysis of the theme of "rootlessness" that emerged from participants' narratives of relocation. We argue that while participants describe this migration process as an agentive quest to find "something better," their narratives also convey a deep sense of "rootlessness" that occurs as ties to both people and place are disrupted. Many participants describe a process of community dispossession in Chicago that has threatened ties between individuals and their social-support networks and also undermined claims to the spaces that serve as geographic anchors for these social ties. Several participants describe Chicago as a place that is no longer their home, and the predominantly white communities of Iowa as "someone else's city" where the challenges of living as stigmatized outsiders, and without the support of a larger community, contribute to fragility and residential instability.

We suggest that the phenomenon of "rootlessness" is of critical importance as an experiential consequence of relocation that may have a significant impact on the well-being of minority populations. Despite the paucity of studies directly examining experiences of relocation, a broad literature has documented the importance of social and geographic rootedness, in particular for African Americans. For example, scholars have described how geographically anchored "homeplaces," which can provide a sense of empowerment, belonging, and rootedness, are often critical protective forces in the context of marginalization (Burton and Clark 2005; Hooks 1990; Stack 1996). A wide literature has also recognized the important role that geographically rooted social networks play in mitigating the consequences of the structural disadvantage that low-income minority communities face through the provision of psychosocial and material support (Edin and Lein 1997; Geronimus 2000; James 1993; Mullings and Wali 1999; Stack 1974). For participants in this study, the disruption of informal, place-based networks of support may increase exposure to psychosocial stress and decrease the coping capacity of individuals and communities, resulting in affronts to well-being.

While analysts have documented the ways that such networks of kin and non-kin are maintained across household, state, or national boundaries (Ho 1993;Stack 1996), others have documented the consequences of geographic uprooting. For example, several studies of displacement that occurred under urban renewal programs describe how a loss of place attachments can result in community disengagement and a destabilization of social relationships (Fried 1963;Fullilove 2004).

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Background and History of Chicago to Iowa Relocation

In Chicago, urban revitalization and the commodification of urban space have posed many challenges to the residential stability of some low-income households (Bennett 2006; Perez 2002). According to Logan and Molotch (1987), the commodification of urban space creates an inherent conflict between the "exchange values" and "use values" of place. As residents struggle to maintain place-based social networks and emotional attachments to place (use values), growth coalitions of government officials and private developers seek to maximize the exchange value of the city, marketing it to higher income "urban pioneers" and suburban tourists.

In Chicago, the particularly widespread demolition of subsidized housing occurring in the context of rising rents has exacerbated shortages of affordable housing and may have pushed some low-income households out of a gentrifying city core into inner-ring suburbs or beyond (Bennett 2006). Additionally, affordable Chicago neighborhoods that have been passed over by profit-seeking development initiatives have suffered from disinvestment and are frequently plagued by violence that has intensified in recent years (Hagedorn and Rauch 2007). Concurrently, deindustrialization and the suburbanization of employment may have led people to leave the city in search of jobs (Peck and Theodore 2001; Wilson 1996).

Iowa City and the surrounding Johnson County, located 200 miles west of Chicago, have received small but significant numbers of low-income African Americans from Chicago. The Iowa City Housing Authority (ICHA), which serves all of Johnson County, reported in 2007 that 14 percent (184) of the families that it assists through vouchers and public housing were from Illinois, and according to housing authority staff, virtually all of these families are from the Chicago area (Iowa City Housing Authority 2007). Additionally, the ICHA estimates that about one-third of the approximately 1,500 families on its rental-assistance waiting list are Chicago area families. Little is known about why families choose eastern Iowa as a destination, but speculation among ICHA officials is that the moves are motivated by shorter waiting lists for subsidized housing and the fact that Johnson County has a reputation for good schools, safe communities, and ample job opportunities.

From the perspective of a growing emphasis on poverty deconcentration in both academic and policy circles (Imbroscio 2008), leaving Chicago's high poverty neighborhoods for Iowa's white middle and working-class communities represents an idealized escape from urban poverty. However, the experiences of participants in this study speak to the challenges as well as the benefits of long distance moves to what are often referred to as "opportunity areas" (Venkatesh et al. 2004).

Little is known about the experience of Chicago families in Iowa, but preliminary evidence suggests that Chicago migrants may face many barriers to acceptance. Despite their relatively small numbers, African Americans from Chicago are visible outsiders in Iowa's predominantly white communities. In Johnson County, blacks made up only 3.9 percent of the population in 2008, an increase from 2.9 percent in 2000 and higher than the 2008 state average of 2.9 percent (United States Census Bureau). Iowa City, a college town that is home to the University of Iowa, contains considerably more ethnic diversity than many Iowa communities and is home to a small number of African-American professionals, students, and faculty. However, the arrival of low-income African Americans from Chicago is a highly contentious issue and has given rise to a divisive local discourse that is often imbued with racialized and class-based stereotypes of urban areas.

The recent migration of urban African Americans to Iowa has also occurred in a climate of uncertainty about the state's economic future (Wilson n.d.). Over the past few decades, Iowa has lost numerous sources of well-paying employment. The state has also experienced

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significant population losses, particularly among the college educated (Carr and Kefalas 2009). While college towns such as Iowa City have been somewhat protected from these demographic and economic shifts, in Johnson County, dramatic increases in free lunch program participation and growing demands for subsidized housing over the last decade indicate increasing local need (Wilson n.d.). According to documentary filmmaker Carla Wilson (n.d.), many Iowans feel that in the last few years, poor blacks from Chicago descended on the state, placing a tremendous burden on social service resources at a time when budgets are already stretched. As stated in one concerned letter from Don Sanders (personal communication, [February 3], 2004) to Iowa City's City Council, "We're turning into a mecca for out-of-state, high maintenance, welfare recipients. These often dysfunctional families are causing serious problems for our schools and police."

Research Methodology

Participants in this study are former residents of Chicago who are living in Johnson County, Iowa and have received rental assistance from either the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) or the ICHA. Initial contacts with potential study participants were made via recruitment fliers that invited participants to "tell your story" and were posted in government offices and community centers where former residents from Chicago commonly gathered. In addition, some individuals were referred by other study participants, a form of snowball sampling. During the screening process, we used theoretical sampling procedures to maximize diversity in participant experiences along two theoretically relevant axes of diversity. First, we wanted to capture the experiences of both individuals who had recently arrived in Iowa and those who had lived there longer. Approximately half of our sample lived in Iowa for more than two years. Second, we wanted to interview both individuals who had been displaced by public housing demolition and those who moved to Iowa for other reasons. Parity was not achieved in regards to this second axis of diversity. Despite adapting recruitment materials to specifically target those who had been directly affected by demolition, only nine participants fit this criterion.[i] It is possible that this latter group was underrepresented among those who relocate to Iowa because residents of demolished projects are provided with replacement housing, while other low-income families may be pushed farther down on waiting lists for rent subsidies (Ranney and Wright 2000). Another possibility is that former public housing residents were more economically disadvantaged and did not have the resources to make long-distance moves.

Twenty-five individuals participated in audiotaped semi-structured interviews lasting an average of 75 minutes each and followed by a short demographic survey. All participants identified as black or African American, 21 were women, and participants' average age was 33. Twenty-one participants received rental assistance from the ICHA, and 18 had lived in Chicago public housing at some point. Interviews were supplemented with participant observation conducted at local community organizations between June and August 2008.

The analyses presented in this paper rely primarily on the interview data. Analysis followed a grounded theory approach, starting with broad questions and formulating theory according to themes that emerged from the data (Corbin and Strauss 1998). The analytic process involved open-coding of interview transcripts, followed by focused-coding using a set of fixed codes and the analytic software ATLAS-TI.

The findings from this study are organized into three distinct sections, each introduced by an individual migration narrative thematically exemplifying the discussion that follows. The first section examines experiences of uprooting as a result of public housing demolition and urban

[i]Initially, we did not interview participants who fell into oversampled categories. Ultimately, due to time and budget constraints, we recontacted and interviewed participants who were in oversampled cells.

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redevelopment in Chicago. The second section examines the challenges of putting down roots in Iowa. The final section describes the experiences of those who have decided to leave Iowa. All names and some small details that could be used to identify an individual have been changed in order to protect the anonymity of study participants.

"We Were Like a Family": Public Housing Demolition and Community Dispossession in Chicago

Thirty-three-year-old Carol Williams lived most of her life in Chicago public housing. When her building in the Rockwell Homes development was demolished in 2002, Carol moved from apartment to apartment on the Westside of Chicago, struggling to pay the bills in a neighborhood that was becoming increasingly expensive. Finally, after living in her fourth apartment in five years, in 2007 Carol decided to leave Chicago. She chose Iowa with little knowledge of this new destination but with a strong desire to "find something better" for herself and her children. Carol describes her decision to leave Chicago as motivated by a series of material concerns related to employment, neighborhood safety, and housing affordability. However, our conversation also highlights the fact that this decision was intimately connected to the demolition of Rockwell Homes.

When Rockwell was demolished, many of Carol's friends and family were separated. Some were offered rental-assistance vouchers and found housing in the private market. Some moved to other public housing developments or doubled up with family members. Carol says that it was hard to be separated from people that "you've been with for like 25 years." Carol is also acutely aware of the contested nature of the space where the Rockwell buildings and the community they contained once stood and believes that the demolition was motivated by the city's interest in "cleaning up" the area. She is angered by what she feels is a lack of concern for the needs of residents in her mostly black, but slowly whitening, neighborhood. She says, "We feel like man, they trying to like take our neighborhood, that's how we feel. Y'all moving these white folks over here. We've been here for like 25 years and now you going to tell us we have to leave because you're moving these white folks here?"

Carol's story contains many themes that are echoed throughout the narratives of the other participants. For many, the decision to move to Iowa appears to be motivated by a desire for safe neighborhoods, jobs, affordable housing, and the "better life" that Carol refers to. However, many describe seeking out these opportunities in a context where their social networks have been fractured or strained and at a time when claims to their homes and communities have been denied.

Echoing other studies of public housing relocation (Vale 1997), several participants describe demolition as a deeply felt loss while also acknowledging the crime, violence, and decrepit material conditions that plagued their former homes. For example, Jonathan Covill, a 21-year-old former resident of Robert Taylor Homes remarks that despite the violence that made Robert Taylor a hard place for anyone to grow up in, "it's the people that you grow to love. It's like we like a family. I was heartbroken when they tore them down because you get to know people and you become like a family. They not your family, but you grow to love them."

After Robert Taylor was demolished, Jonathan relocated with his biological family and a small group of this Robert Taylor "family" to another public housing development. Much like the majority of families who relocate from demolished public housing in Chicago (Venkatesh et al. 2004), Jonathan moved to an equally disadvantaged neighborhood where he describes having to cope with the same challenges of poverty without the "family" that had looked out for him at Robert Taylor.

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Like Jonathan, Michael Roberts, a 30-year-old former resident of Henry Horner Homes, describes demolition as a tragedy that separated him from many of the people he was close to. He says, “I watched a lot of people grow up, and they had been there for years. And then for you to see the building tore down and they being separated. So I look at that as a tragedy in your own heart, in your own mind it's a tragedy, because you probably don't ever see these people again, because you being put here and here and you all was always like a family when you was there. But now, you guys can't be in a big building together, running house to house, getting butter and milk.”

In addition to the importance of the social networks and “family” that participants describe, the project buildings themselves also seem to hold significant meanings for their residents. For example, Lakia Johnson, a 38-year-old former resident of Robert Taylor, describes how residents created commemorative t-shirts with pictures of each building on them. Participants also discuss holding reunions in the empty lots where these buildings once stood. Some describe the physical spaces of the projects as critical locations for social ties. Without these geographic anchors, relationships were maintained but not in the same way. As Jonathan says, “It's not like it used to be when we were all in the same building.”

Thirty-six-year-old Marlene Edwards, whose extended family lived together in one privately owned rental building, also expresses the importance of a building as a location for social ties. Marlene describes her family as being relatively well-off in comparison to her neighbors because of the strong support network that her building contained. She says, “We kind of like, grew up with all families together, making sure nobody went without. We lived in one building where I think my mom's sister lived in the basement. My father's brother lived on the top floor…. My eight families lived in half the building. We lived there for almost 20 years. We all kept each other.”

Marlene describes how the building provided not only exchanges of mutual aid, but also protection from the neighborhood around it. When the building was torn down, Marlene's extended family “just moved. Some people moved out of the city, went to Minnesota mostly. Some people went down south to Mississippi and others went here, to Iowa.” When asked if anyone stayed in Chicago, Marlene says, “Without those older women around, we didn't have protection anymore, so it was up to our parents and elders to leave the community.”

For Marlene and many others, social ties that were rooted in geographic spaces seem to have played a key role in getting by in Chicago. Not only did they provide material and psychosocial support, but they also served as a form of protection from urban neighborhoods that have become, in some cases, increasingly dangerous places. Without these ties and without the spaces in which they existed, it seems that some families and individuals felt that Chicago was, as one respondent states, “no longer a place I could call home.”

When asked why her family's building was torn down, Marlene cites a process of urban revitalization in the surrounding neighborhood. She says, “They were doing a lot of remodeling in the neighborhood. They kind of were flushing the whole city out. I used to watch them on the Chicago network, Channel 23. Mayor Daley said he was taking the city back.”

For many residents of demolished buildings, the city was being “taken back” and their claims to a space within it were denied in the process. Vanessa Thompson, a 27-year-old who did not live in public housing, explains, “Now everyone that works in downtown Chicago wants to live in Chicago. They don't want to live where they are because they have to commute an hour and a half or two hours. So now, okay, if [the city] demolishes these buildings, where are [low-income households] going to go? They're already on a fixed income. They already can't afford the lowest of the low. So what are [city officials] going to do? They're going to make it easier

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for them to move to Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, places like this. So now the people that work downtown ain't got to commute."

Vanessa's analysis describes the marginalization of low-income residents from space that has become an increasingly valued commodity. For Carol, this process has reduced her own claim to space in Chicago. She says, "They just think about money, nothing but money. If we tear down Rockwell and build some condos right here, we gonna get some money. That's all they think about. They don't think about the people up in there."

In Chicago, this dispossession has been contested by many public housing tenants (Wright 2006). One participant, 27-year-old Dennis Owens, describes marching with 5,000 other residents of the Cabrini Green development to protest its impending demolition. He says, "In my head, it wasn't ever going to happen. I really felt that we controlled that area and they couldn't do it unless we allowed them to. It was a sense of this is *our* neighborhood, not my neighborhood. And can't nobody touch *our* neighborhood." Thus for Dennis, the demolition of Cabrini Green was not only a loss of home, but also an affront to his ability to advocate for the collective rights of his community.

"Someone Else's City": Social and Geographic Rootedness in Iowa

Twenty-seven-year-old Danielle Martin moved to Iowa City in 2007. Danielle has an associate's degree and held a steady job in Chicago. Despite her income and despite the support of a large and close-knit family, Danielle says, "It got to the point where it was like, the phone bill or the paper bill, the daycare or the gym shoes for my son. And it really got to the point where things were not meeting." Several of Danielle's friends, facing similar challenges, also left Chicago for Atlanta, Kansas, and Iowa.

In Iowa City, Danielle lives next door to one of her close friends from Chicago, and through this neighbor has met a small handful of other associates. This small support circle often exchanges childcare, meals, and rides to Chicago, which for Danielle are frequent given that her family still resides there. Danielle, through her friends in Iowa and family in Chicago, has access to many sources of material and psychosocial support that social networks are known to provide. The fact that she was able to 'transplant' some social ties and remain connected to a relatively intact social network in Chicago seems to give Danielle considerable advantage in getting by in Iowa in comparison to other Chicago movers.

However, Danielle does not see herself as socially rooted in the larger community of Iowa City or even in her immediate neighborhood. Nor does she have intentions of putting down roots in Iowa through the establishment of social ties. She says, "The people that I know, that I'm living with, that visit with me, that's enough for me. So, I don't have any intentions on, you know, exposing myself or trying to conjure up a new group of people or anything like that. There really isn't a reason because my purpose for coming here is solely to do what I need to do financially to take care of me and my children." She also describes "keeping to myself" as a deliberate strategy employed to mitigate the vulnerability that she faces as a stigmatized outsider in "someone else's city." Danielle's story highlights both the importance of social ties described by other participants, and also the challenges that many participants face in establishing social rootedness in Iowa.

Like Danielle, many participants are able to transplant some of their Chicago-based social networks to Iowa or have themselves followed friends and family westward. Such friends and family members often provide advice on finding a job, a place to live, and on negotiating Iowa's social landscape. Not only does the presence of a friend or family member seem to help ease the transition from Chicago to Iowa, but some moves are themselves motivated by a desire to maintain networks of reciprocal exchange. For example, 20-year-old Alicia Young left Chicago

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shortly after the birth of her daughter. While she describes a variety of push factors (lack of affordability and neighborhood safety, for example), she was also drawn to Iowa because her mother (who had moved there a few years prior) can look after her daughter while she attends a local community college. Likewise, 33-year-old Anita Mann convinced her mother, a Chicago homeowner, to follow her to Iowa. She says, "I dragged her down here after nine months. I'm like, 'You don't want strangers watching your grandkids and I've got to get a job, so what's it going to be?' Sell your house and come down here."

While social networks are often vital resources in the context of scarcity, the reciprocal obligations that they entail can occasionally be sources of strain (Dominguez and Watkins 2003; Fitchen 1995; Stack 1996). For example, 37-year-old Gina Wilson describes her decision to move to Iowa as primarily motivated by a desire to escape burdensome kin obligations. When a friend told her about Iowa, she recalls thinking, "That's where I need to go. Peace and quiet. Get away from my family. They always depend on me. I raised my sister's three kids. They don't ever give me nothin' in return." Thirty-two-year-old Tara Smith describes both the costs and benefits of kin obligations in Chicago. She moved to Iowa when her brother's family moved into the apartment that she was sharing with her mother and it became "too crowded and too stressful." She now lives in a comfortable house outside of Iowa City. However, she describes being socially isolated stating, "It's lonely out here with no family. Very, very lonely. You can't go visit your mama. You can't go visit your sister." Thus, while moving can provide a sense of relief from familial obligations, for Tara and others, it can also result in isolation and loneliness.

Twenty-nine-year-old Jocelyn Brown echoes Tara's expression of isolation and is conflicted about whether to stay in Iowa. She says that she likes Iowa's peacefulness and appreciates the numerous social-service providers who have helped her. However, she misses her family, who she talks to on the phone, "five or six times a day." In addition to the emotional costs of being separated from her kin, Jocelyn says that it is hard for her to hold a job without the childcare that her grandmother provided in Chicago. Likewise, Vanessa says that the hardest part of leaving Chicago was "the fact that I knew [my children] were leaving their fathers. And their fathers, they play such a big role in their lives. It was going to be hard for them and for me, because I'm used to being able to say, 'come and get your daughter.' And being here, you have to have more patience, because you don't have your mom, you don't have their father, and you don't have your grandma and your auntie or your cousins. You're here by yourself."

In addition to being separated from Chicago-based social networks, participants describe many obstacles to forming new ties in Iowa. Many participants describe coming to Iowa in order to better their financial situation, a goal that often involves working long hours at multiple low-wage jobs. Just as Danielle says above that she has no intentions of "exposing herself" through new social ties, other participants describe avoiding relationships that may jeopardize the financial stability that they are relentlessly pursuing. For example, Marlene says, "I get along with my coworkers. But outside the job, I don't have any friends because coming from where I come from, you didn't really want to make too many friends because they'd all be in your house and then they'd be knocking on your door saying, 'Can I borrow this? Can I borrow that?' So you pretty much stay to yourself." As Marlene articulates, the demands associated with reciprocal exchange can be risky in the context of scarcity. Additionally, choosing to avoid potentially draining social ties seems to be a form of self-protection that several participants employ in order to negotiate Iowa's unfamiliar social terrain. For example, 41-year-old Michelle Clark says, "It's not like at home, where I'll go to someone's house. I won't do that here. I don't know them that well…. I'd rather stay to myself."

Iowa is not only a place where the social terrain is unfamiliar, but a place where Chicago migrants experience a vulnerable status as stigmatized outsiders. As Danielle says, "It's

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someone else's city," a place where, according to Marlene, "we are only here because they are letting us be here." The stigmatization of Chicago migrants plays a profound role in shaping social relationships, both among fellow migrants and between Chicago migrants and Iowans. Several participants describe how Chicago is often blamed for "everything that goes wrong in Iowa City," particularly in relation to drugs and crime. According to 53-year-old Diane Field, "It's just, Chicago, Chicago, Chicago. I mean, everywhere you go they talk about us. There were drugs in Iowa long before anyone came from Chicago." This association between drugs, crime, and Chicago is also prevalent in the local media. For example, one newspaper article about a fight in southeast Iowa City drew numerous racially charged on-line comments about the problems caused by Chicago migrants, despite the fact that "Chicago" was not even referenced in the article.

While participants describe the "helpfulness" of many Iowans, they also note that some oppose their presence. Carol, for example, says she was told by a fellow bus passenger, "I'm tired of all these black folks coming and messing up our small town. I don't know why the hell y'all up in here, but y'all need to go back where you came from." While Carol explains that encounters such as these are rare, Jonathan considers this attitude to be more pervasive. He says, "They don't want us black people down here. Even though it's some black people down here like me and my family that want something better for our life. They don't understand that."

Several participants describe facing discrimination specifically because of where they are from. In this context, 33-year-old Tanya Neeld says that she has begun telling people that she is from Indiana, Michigan, or "somewhere else, not Chicago." Participants also describe attempts to differentiate themselves from those individuals who "bring Chicago to Iowa" (by getting involved with drugs, for example), by emphasizing their own desire to find a "better life" and to escape discursively condemned Chicago neighborhoods. Additionally, in order to resist the label of, "just another one from Chicago," many participants also describe keeping to themselves and avoiding relationships with other Chicagoans. For example, Michelle, says, "They act like they really don't want us here. They try to make like we keep up so much trouble. I don't know what the rest of these people are doing. That's why I stay to myself."

Other participants describe avoiding, in particular, people in their immediate neighborhood who were often fellow Chicagoans. A large portion of Chicago movers live in a few housing complexes on the southeast side of Iowa City, and several participants explain that it is difficult to find landlords elsewhere who will rent to them. Michelle says, "A lot of places here don't accept Section 8 [rental assistance]. I figure it's because they don't want that type of thing in their neighborhood." These sentiments were echoed by 25-year-old Christine Frazier who says, "It sort of looks likes they section us off."[ii]

In the context of residential segregation and stigmatization, many participants also describe the challenges of forming ties with Iowans. A few explain that they actively avoid interactions with white Iowans as a form of self-protection. For example, Christine describes how when she first started working in Iowa, her coworkers, who were all white, left her out of their conversations and talked about her behind her back. She says that from this early experience, she learned to stay to herself at work. She says, "I still have my guards up. You know, it affected me when I got other jobs because I don't want to interact." Michelle describes how she has adapted to frequent encounters with racism in Iowa. She says, "I'm basically a friendly person, but I can be not friendly as well. So, that's the way I cope with it. I just act like they don't exist. I just stay in my own little world."

[ii]While the ICHA has made a deliberate effort to scatter its public housing throughout Iowa City, the fact that private landlords are under no legal obligation to accept housing vouchers seems to contribute to segregation of rent-assisted households.

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Separation from social ties in Chicago and barriers to the formation of new ties in Iowa leave many former Chicagoans socially isolated and reliant on highly individualized strategies of survival. The desire to be self-sufficient is a common theme throughout the interviews, and in the context of social isolation, some participants may be left with no alternative to relying on themselves. As Tara says, “I don't count on these people in this neighborhood. I count on myself because myself would not let my own self down.”

Without social rootedness, for many participants, Iowa is not a place to call home, just somewhere to be for a while in order to “do what you have to do.” Or, as Lakia says, “Living in Iowa is like doing a beat,” (a reference, she explains, to a prison sentence). Without social ties, and in the context of stigma and economic vulnerability, the nature of this “beat” is also extremely fragile and many participants have stories of friends and family who eventually returned to Chicago or moved on in search of somewhere else to “be OK.” As discussed in the next section, some participants were themselves considering this move.

“Just Looking for Somewhere to be OK”: Fragility and Dislocation

Anita Mann is a 33-year-old former resident of Robert Taylor Homes. When Robert Taylor was demolished in 2002, she received a Section 8 rental-assistance voucher from the CHA but had great difficulty finding a rental unit. She says, “I couldn't find any place in Chicago that was to the standards for me raising my kids. They had bugs, they had rats, and I refuse to have my kids live like that. And then, everything was just so expensive. And you have some [landlords] in Illinois that were just like, ‘Ah you've got Section 8. No, I don't want this.’ Within a year, I talked to 18 or 19 landlords. Seriously. And application fees, I was out $1,000 just to find a decent place for me and my kids to stay.”

In 2003, after deciding that living in Chicago was not a possibility, Anita decided to take her voucher to Iowa. Despite the support she receives from a handful of family members who have followed her westward, Anita says she has “struggled a lot.” She feels that life in Iowa is emotionally trying and also risky. She has already lost her housing assistance as a result of a lease infraction and feels that there are other things at stake. For example, Anita is afraid of losing her kids to “the system,” because “here, they will take your kids away with a quickness.” Additionally, in the context of “racial profiling” by the police, she feels that her “background” is at risk of being marred in a way that may limit her future options.

Anita says that after five years of living in Iowa, she has decided that it is time to leave. She says, “After all I have been through, I just want to get out of Iowa point blank, period. I can honestly say I tried to stay here, and I gave it a shot, and I did get something out of it, but I can't do this one. I'm just tired of the racial profiling. I know it's racism everywhere, but I don't want my kids to experience what is going on here. If you're feeling uncomfortable and you just don't feel right in a place, leave…. Just move on and don't look back.”

Anita says that rather than returning to Chicago, she wants to find somewhere where she can “have a clean slate.” After doing some research, she decided on Minneapolis, a city where she has never been and has only one acquaintance. While she is a little reluctant to be so far away from her now Iowa-based family, she feels that leaving is the only way to provide stability for her children. She says, “You know, how can I try to build a solid foundation for them if I don't have a solid foundation? And that's what I'm trying to get, a solid foundation. It's like here, it's not solid, you know. It's making it, but it's fragile.”

Anita's story echoes other participants' descriptions of Iowa as a site of potential risks as well as gains. For example, several discuss fears of losing their children to child protective services and feeling that the state of Iowa often acts too quickly in this respect when it comes to “young black mothers.” As Tanya says, “I don't want to risk my little children being put in the system

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because society or the people in the state of Iowa don't think I'm a good enough parent to take care of my children."

Other participants describe feeling that their rights as citizens are not protected in Iowa. Several have stories of taking legal action in the face of discrimination or injustice. While in some cases these actions are successful, some describe feeling that in Iowa it was hard to get support from "the big people that's in charge." Others describe a pronounced racial bias by the police who only listen to "one side of the story." Affronts to health are also among the risks that participants describe in Iowa. While a few describe the health benefits of leaving stressful crime ridden Chicago neighborhoods, others describe headaches, weight gain, and insomnia as a result of stress and uncertainty in Iowa.

When the risks of living in Iowa appear to outweigh the benefits, some participants, like Anita, ultimately decide to leave. For example, Tanya, whose daughter was recently involved in a school fight, says that she would rather leave Iowa before something happens that would jeopardize her daughter's future. She says, "I'm not getting the support that I need from the people that's in charge down here in the state of Iowa. It's like me fighting and complaining about my rights and the well-being of my children. So, I hate to leave Iowa because…I know that being down here, my kids will be able to have a better education. But it's just the other stuff that comes along with it. It's like I'm just to the point now that I'm tired of fighting when I know that I'm in a no-win situation. So that's what kind of led me to be looking into moving back to a part of Illinois, which that is my last resort, but I don't see no other way out."

Discussion

Participants in this study describe courageous quests for opportunity and a "better life" in Iowa. While their stories describe a process of "voluntary migration," this migration occurred in the context of community dispossession and material constraints that have threatened not only the ties between individuals and their social support networks, but also the connections and claims to the places in which these social ties reside. The challenges that participants describe as they struggle to find a stable "homeplace" (Burton and Clark 2005) in Iowa can speak to the consequences of urban revitalization, public housing demolition, and the resultant uprooting of low-income communities.

While relocation from high-poverty neighborhoods is widely assumed to be beneficial, existing evidence has not always supported this assumption. For example, the Moving to Opportunity Program, which provided volunteer public housing residents with rental assistance vouchers to move to low-poverty neighborhoods, found that relocation was associated with a mix of positive and negative outcomes.[iii] Additionally, findings from the HOPE VI program, which has funded the demolition of numerous public housing developments and resulted in the involuntary displacement of their residents, indicate that relocation has not resulted in any improvements to economic well-being and may have serious consequences for health (Manjarrez, Popkin, and Guernsey 2007;Popkin 2006).

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The lived experiences of relocation described by Chicago to Iowa movers can speak to the costs and benefits of relocation to "opportunity areas." For many participants, Iowa seems to represent a promise of hope and a "better life." Participants describe its ample jobs and affordable housing as a chance to get ahead or to at least get on their feet. Many also see Iowa,

[iii]The study's five-year follow-up (Kling et al. 2004) found that receiving a voucher was associated with statistically significant improvements in mental health among adults and reduced rates of marijuana use among adolescent girls. However, receiving a voucher was also associated with increases in hypertension among adults (although not statistically significant) and increases in alcohol and tobacco use among adolescent boys. Additionally, receiving a voucher did not result in improved earnings or employment as the program's developers had hoped.

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with its “excellent school system,” as a place where their children can excel and its “peaceful neighborhoods” as safe havens from the violence that has come to plague many Chicago neighborhoods.

However, their experiences illustrate that Iowa's opportunities come with a multitude of potential costs. First, participants' relocation narratives underscore the significance of geographically rooted social ties that can provide an important source of material exchange, emotional strength, and collective power in the context of marginalization (Geronimus 2000; Greenbaum 2008; James 1993). Additionally, the places that anchor these ties can themselves be important sources of identity and strength, and as other research has shown, the loss or absence of a stable “homeplace” is often associated with profound distress (Fullilove 2004; hooks 1990). While Chicago to Iowa movers are often able to maintain long-distance connections to social networks or transplant some social ties, others are cut off from critical sources of support. Furthermore, as participants negotiate material hardship and the fragility of their outsider status in Iowa, some are hesitant to form new ties that could impose potentially burdensome obligations. Without rootedness in a larger community, many describe experiences of profound vulnerability.

Second, their quests for opportunity in Iowa bring them to a whiter community where they confront head-on, the systems of racial exclusion that have produced the profoundly unequal geographic distribution of resources and opportunity that they seek to escape. Many participants describe how this geography itself serves as a marker of difference and how “Chicago” has become a code word for deeply rooted stereotypes of an urban “underclass” used by white neighbors to marginalize them. Participants' struggles to negotiate the stigma of race, class, and geography suggest, as many analysts have argued, that policies advocating residential mobility leave untouched deeply rooted social inequalities (Geronimus and Thompson 2004).

In sum, the experiences of Chicago to Iowa movers illustrate the hard choices that many low-income African American families must make in order to find a stable home in the context of severe structural constraints. Moves that offer opportunities may also come with serious costs as individuals become separated from geographically rooted social ties and communities of support. The experiences of study participants suggest that recent urban revitalization and public housing demolition may have exacerbated these challenges. Their experiences also suggest a great need for urban policies that are sensitive to the costs of rootlessness and displacement for low-income families.

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