Mango Fufu Kimchi Yucca: The Depoliticization of “Diversity” in Washington, D.C. Discourse

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Abstract

The rise of the commodified city has encouraged new attention to the symbolic systems that structure our understandings of difference and inequality in urban areas. This paper analyzes one of those systems, namely discourse. I examine how the term diversity has developed multiple meanings over the past 10 years in Mt. Pleasant, a gentrifying neighborhood in Washington, DC, and I trace these developments and their connections with changes in the local economy, politics, and demographics. In the mid-1990s, diversity indexed community discourses about social justice and equal opportunity. Later, diversity began to signify a commodified resource. As real estate prices drastically rose, the term’s meaning became associated with the “lifestylization” of urban space: Diversity has come to reference stimulating cultural experience, and is used to promote commercial investment in the neighborhood and sell upmarket real estate. Analyzing such shifts in discourse illuminates the micro-mechanics of how local visions of multicultural urban spaces can lose their focus on justice and equality. [Key words: discourse, diversity, gentrification, urban space, symbolic economy, Washington DC].

“Mount Pleasant is diverse.” This was the text printed on multi-colored buttons lining the Mt. Pleasant Multicultural Coalition’s information table at the 1993 Celebrate Mount Pleasant Day, a community festival in Washington DC’s multi-ethnic, gentrifying Mount Pleasant neighborhood. By offering these buttons to their fellow community members, the Multicultural Coalition hoped to promote their vision of living in a diverse urban neighborhood. In 1993, with the specter of a metro station coming to the neighborhood and landlords of group houses starting to kick their tenants out to remodel the buildings into period-correct Victorian single-family homes, the members of the Multicultural Coalition – African Americans,
Whites, and Latina/os from across the neighborhood’s economic spectrum – organized around preserving the economic and cultural diversity of the neighborhood, which for them meant working against development that was likely to drive poorer residents – who were disproportionately African American and Latina/o – out of the neighborhood. As they explained in their description of the organization:

We are neighbors, people living in Mt. Pleasant, representing different cultures and points of view. The Multicultural Coalition has a mission to maintain the diversity of Mt. Pleasant, and to make it possible for people to build better lives here. We are concerned about the prospect of rising real estate values pushing people out. We are concerned about conditions of poverty and crime making it impossible for people to stay. We are determined to help a diverse population find and use its different voices to create a stronger community.

For the Multicultural Coalition, these buttons promoted a certain Discourse of Diversity. This discourse was about equal rights; access to affordable housing, decent education, and safe streets; and power sharing among the neighborhood’s ethno-racial groups in shaping neighborhood development. But if someone were to stroll down Mount Pleasant Street today sporting one of these buttons, an artifact of a different time and place, it is not at all clear what it would mean to passers-by.

Mt. Pleasant is a multi-ethnic, multi-class neighborhood twenty blocks north of the White House. It’s home to day laborers and labor lawyers, hair braiders and blue-haired punk rockers, crack cocaine users and historic preservationists, Africans, African Americans, Euro-Americans, Latina/os, Caribbeans, Vietnamese, tenement dwellers and owners of houses on the National historic register. And over the past ten or so years, it’s undergone some of the most intensive gentrification in the city. This paper examines the development of new meanings of the term “diversity” over a decade in Mt. Pleasant discourse, thereby illuminating the micro-mechanics of changes in community members’ sentiments towards each other and the urban landscape. This type of discourse analysis, which attends closely to the details of language-in-use, can provide insights into larger-level social processes such as the commodification of multi-ethnic urban spaces and the weakening of urban planning efforts that focus on the rights, needs, and wishes of the denizens of those spaces.

While up until the mid-nineties Mount Pleasant’s population was evenly split between African Americans, Latina/os, and Whites (with significant Vietnamese and Caribbean populations), the neighborhood started to become more White, and more wealthy, as the gentrification that had begun in the 1970s started to speed up.

During the neighborhood’s most intensive period of gentrification, from 1994 to 2006, constituents of Mount Pleasant mobilized discourses of diversity for different agendas. I argue that changes in “diversity’s”
meaning parallel local demographic shifts, and that the causality of the demographic shifts and the linguistic changes is bi-directional. Recent residents brought with them a different understanding of diversity. At the same time, changing uses of the term – both among previous neighborhood residents and at a larger societal level – have paved the way for a gentrification that attracted people who conceptualize diversity in ways that differ radically from earlier local meanings.

What is key to the power of this shift is that it happens under the radar. We tend to think of “diversity” as having a referential or fixed meaning. However, “diversity” works like an index, a word like “here” or “you” whose specific meaning in a given instance is always shaped by its particular linguistic and social contexts. Since we think of words like “diversity” as referential, their shifting nature goes unnoticed. In many contexts, “diversity” has maintained its veneer of concern for social justice, but picked up new meanings associated with hipness, as it’s used in new contexts that have nothing to do with inclusion, power sharing, or social justice. The trajectory of change also evidences a shift from a communal conception of diversity – focused on equality across a community, and diversity as a benefit on the communal level – to an individual approach – diversity as a commodity for the benefit of individuals. This shift constitutes a depoliticization of diversity, one which enables people to gain the moral image associated with the term’s social justice meaning and the cachet of the hipness meaning, while paying no heed to the issues of inequality that the term originally indexed. The success of this under-the-radar depoliticization can be seen by people’s ability to use the term in a depoliticized way without any problems in communication. The term’s use does not seem out-of-the-ordinary, incongruous, or difficult to understand. In fact, in my data the only instance where someone commented explicitly on a neighbor’s use of the term was to contest a usage that was about social justice.

The data for this study derive mainly from discussions invoking diversity that played out on Mount Pleasant’s neighborhood listserv from 1993 to 2006, supported by comments made by residents in ethnographic interviews during this time, and more recent advertisements and websites for new real estate projects in the neighborhood and national advertisements touting the neighborhood as a tourist destination. My discussion of the shifts in meaning of diversity in Mount Pleasant and its implications rests on four premises:

1. In order to understand how discourse affects the social world, we need to analyze the micro-level details of discourse as they occur in socially situated interactions. I therefore use methods and theories of sociolinguistically-based discourse analysis (what linguists refer to as “little d” discourse analysis) to analyze my data. Since this is not the approach most urban theorists use in analyzing discourse, I will explain this
approach and how it differs from more common approaches to discourse in urban studies.

2. In using discourse to promote or contest change in the urban environment, residents of Mount Pleasant are not alone. Discourse is a powerful tool in promoting (or, in limited cases, hindering) urban development and gentrification initiatives. To understand the Mount Pleasant case in light of larger trends in US urban discourse, I will discuss previous research on how people use discourse to legitimate or call into question spatial projects.

3. Likewise, Mount Pleasant residents’ uses of “diversity” in their conversations about the community and neighborhood space echo uses of the term by others in discussions of US urban space, as well as other domains of social life, particularly business and communication. To contextualize the Mount Pleasant case as part of a larger phenomenon, I will discuss scholarship on how conceptions of diversity have shifted in these other domains.

4. Although these shifts in the meanings of “diversity” are linked to the larger sociopolitical arena, they were able to occur because of the linguistic properties of the term, particularly its status as an abstract noun and its ability to function as what I call a “stealth index” (similar to Urciuoli’s (2003) “strategically deployable index”). Rather than being tied to a stable meaning, the term’s meaning is shaped to a greater degree than we either expect or realize by the social and linguistic contexts in which it is embedded. I provide an in depth explanation of how this linguistic process occurs.

Although the first three premises are related and act in tandem to lay the groundwork for the shifts in diversity that take place in Mount Pleasant, they are separate. Therefore, I discuss them in discrete sections. I then give a description of Mount Pleasant itself, before moving on to the data and analysis. I conclude with some thoughts on the implications of new definitions of “diversity” for the future of heterogeneous and democratic urban spaces.

Analyzing discourse

My approach to analyzing discourse is grounded in the fields of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, which define “discourse” in a narrower and somewhat more technical sense than is often the case in other social science areas. This discourse
analysis is concerned with patterns of linguistic structure and organization in specific stretches of talk or writing, and the relation of linguistic structure to social context. Discourse analysts often refer to this type of analysis as “little d discourse” (Gee 1990).

At its most basic, discourse from a linguistic perspective is language above the utterance level. Language is a system of smaller units that combine to make larger units: sounds (phonemes) combine to make meaning units (morphemes, such as “unit” and “s”) which combine to make words. Words combine to make utterances, which finally combine to make discourse. Discourse is not just a collection of random utterances, however. To qualify as discourse, a set of utterances must have some relation to each other. In other words, any given utterance in a chunk of discourse exists within a wider linguistic context. Thus, as Deborah Schiffrin (1994) notes, the meaning of a given utterance derives from its position in a sequence of other utterances and from its grammatical structure. At the same time, that utterance also shapes the meaning context for following and previous utterances. The same goes for individual words within utterances: individual words help shape the overall meaning of the sentences they are in, and of the larger scope of discourse. At the same time, and crucial for this paper, the meanings of individual words are also shaped by the linguistic and social contexts within which they are located. In analyzing words and utterances in their linguistic contexts, analysts trained in this tradition pay close attention to both form and content.

Sociolinguistically-oriented discourse analysts also attend to utterances’ social contextedness. Sometimes utterances hang together because of specific linguistic structures (Hasan and Halliday (1976) call this “cohesion”), such as pronouns that refer back to previously uttered nouns. However, in all but the most banal cases of language use, situational or world knowledge is critical for understanding the “coherence” among utterances. This means that any chunk of discourse both gains its meaning from and shapes the meaning of the larger social context within which it is situated. The utility of this approach is that it can reveal how particular structures and uses of language highlight or promote certain facts, while obscuring others. For example, the passive voice in English (e.g. “a child was shot”) obscures the agent of an action, while an active voice construction needs to include that agent in order to be grammatical. In English, one cannot say, “shot a child”, but must rather say, “a teenager shot a child”, or “a police officer shot a child.”

“Big D” approaches (see Gee 1990), more familiar to non-linguistically-oriented social scientists, tend to define discourse as generalized ways of using language, specifically language use as it promotes or contests ideology. “Big D” approaches help to get at macro-level effects of discourse outside the sphere of the specific interactions of the discourse, effects which the micro-level focus of “little d” approaches
may not always address. However, “big D” approaches generally focus on linguistic content and pay little attention to linguistic structure or the ways that meaning emerges from the relationships among the elements within a linguistic structure. (Saussure [1959] calls this “syntagmatic” relationships.) “Little d” approaches are useful because it is often the subtle aspects of discourse that bring about social effects. “Little d” approaches can get at subtleties that “big D” approaches may gloss over because they do not attend to details. For this paper, a “little d” approach can help to get at how “diversity” comes to mean different things through its relation with other words and topics in the utterances and texts where it occurs.

It is important to note that this distinction between “big D” and “little d” approaches is not the same one that Lees (2004) identifies in discourse research in urban geography. Lees distinguishes first, Marxist- and Gramscian-influenced approaches that use discourse analysis as a tool to reveal underlying ideologies that “serve certain vested interests” (ibid:102), and to analyze how discourse works as a hegemonic process to conceal power. She notes that this approach comes from a more empirically grounded methodological tradition, which attends to contexts of discourse production and reception. Lees identifies the second type of discourse analysis as a poststructuralist, Foucauldian approach that is concerned with the how discourse constructs (rather than reflects) the social world and power relations. Lees remarks that this approach tends to be less empirically grounded, and less concerned with analyzing the specifics of actual texts.

Although the first, more empirically grounded approach has a methodological bent that is closer to “little d” approaches, this tradition still includes little focus on linguistic structural relations. From a linguistically oriented perspective, both of these approaches would be “big D,” because they deal mainly with content and focus on ideologies (or “regimes of truth” in Lees’ characterization of the Foucauldian approach), even though they define ideology somewhat differently. In terms of theoretical orientation, both of Lees’ categories fall under “big D.” In terms of methodological orientation, however, the split is similar to the distinction that linguists make.

In this paper I take a “little d” approach, coupled with a “big D” concern with ideology, to understand how ideologies about diversity are built up through everyday interactions in which people give voice to discourses of diversity. By “discourses of diversity”, I mean talk or writing that includes use of the terms “diversity” or “diverse,” and talk or writing about the concept of diversity that may not explicitly use the term.

Specifically, I examine how the term’s meanings are shaped by the different ways it is used and the contexts where it occurs and how these meanings promote ideologies about living in a heterogeneous community like Mount Pleasant. Attending to connections between micro-level features of language and macro-level ideologies about
urban life promoted by various parties provides insight into how people’s linguistic practices shape and reflect material developments in urban communities.

The discursive construction of urban space

Through its role in promoting and encoding points of view and value systems, discourse has material consequences in shaping urban spaces. As Henri Lefebvre (1991) noted, the discourse of urban planners gets encapsulated in dominant “representations of space” as city redevelopment and building planning documents are implemented in redevelopment projects. Similarly, Beauregard (1993) analyzes how popular and professional discourses about the “decline” of American cities have shaped US urban planning initiatives. The powerful role that media voices can have in guiding redevelopment policy is reflected in McCann’s analysis (2004) of the Lexington, Kentucky Chamber of Commerce’s ostensibly participatory visioning planning process. McCann explains that the project focused the ostensibly participatory shaping of planning goals around the criteria that Money Magazine used to determine its “Best Cities” listings. McCann observes that a prime example of the influence of this media discourse is one of the goals that the visioning participants came up with, “become one of the top five places of similar population size in the US in terms of earnings per job by 2015” (ibid:1918). Not only is the idea based on the Money Magazine criteria, but the language draws directly from the distinctive discourse style of the magazine’s “Best Cities” listings.

Researchers have illustrated the powerful role discourse can play in gentrification initiatives and fights against those initiatives. Mele (2000), in an analysis of changes in New York’s Lower East Side throughout the 20th century, shows how real estate developers, the state, and local residents used in their discourse themes of the neighborhood as ethnically diverse, avantgarde, poor, politically active, and dangerous to alternately sell the neighborhood to middle-class prospective residents, legitimate evictions, or argue against private and public redevelopment initiatives. Similarly, Smith (1992; 1986) shows how Lower East Side developers’ metaphors of the Frontier and Wild West rendered residents of the area invisible, while offering to gentrifiers an identity as cultural trailblazers. In one of the few cases to show that discursive resistance to gentrification can be effective, Wilson, Wouters, and Grammenos (2004) found that residents of Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood successfully discouraged developers from buying up property by organizing community organizations and invoking a discourse of developers as immoral vultures, and residents as aggressive protectors of a tight knit and caring community, willing to demonstrate against developers and tell new potential residents to get out of their neighborhood.
These studies demonstrate the importance of studying discourse of the urban environment because of the general power of language-in-use to shape sociopolitical action. Urban discourse is also important to study because of the increasing role of symbolic production in urban economies. Harvey (1989) explains, that as the US has shifted away from an industrial economy, “producers have... begun to explore the realms of differentiated tastes and aesthetic preferences in ways that were not so necessary under a Fordist regime of standardized accumulation through mass production.” Harvey and others (Flowerdew 2004; Ley 2003; Lloyd 2004; Zukin 1995; 1998) have demonstrated how cities, when they find themselves in harsh competition with each other for economic capital, have mobilized Bourdieu’s notion (1984) of symbolic capital to create landscapes of consumption. In these landscapes, urban life is commodified through symbolic systems such as discourse, architecture, and graphic design to produce landscapes that provide a distinctive urban experience that endows the experiencer with symbolic capital and attracts corporate investment, tourist dollars, and residents with upscale incomes. As symbolic systems have become a key element in the motor of urban capitalism, it becomes increasingly important to study those symbolic systems, including discourses. In order to understand these contemporary urban spaces, we need to understand the dynamics of discourse.

Defining diversity

Returning to the Mount Pleasant Multicultural Coalition’s buttons, the way that this group used the term diversity is predicated on what has often been referred to as “strong multiculturalism” (Fish 1997). As Newfield and Gordon (1996) explain, this form of multiculturalism in the US developed in the 1970s, most notably in educational institutions, to promote cultural pluralism and a respect for ethno-racial diversity, linking such diversity with struggles against racism, and for equal rights and access to resources. Multiculturalism gained prominence in education and business circles because it was originally linked to legal protections for historically discriminated groups in these domains of social life. Multicultural discourses in these domains have consequently influenced such discourses elsewhere.

Multiculturalist projects have certainly had a historical connection to civil rights struggles over issues of spatial equity like fair housing laws, locations of decent schools and recreational sites for children, or mortgage lending practices. However, in the 1980s spatialized diversity issues were not widely discussed in public discourse and the popular press. Rather, it was multiculturalism at universities and in the corporate world that gained public attention. In the 1990s, a backlash against the vocal struggles for equal access and visibility led to a new kind of
multiculturalism in which diversity came to be sometimes celebrated, sometimes managed, but in any case divorced from the struggle for equitable distribution of power and resources among ethno-racial groups (Lowe 1996; Steinberg 1995; Wieviorka 1998).

Because it was actions in education and business that propelled public discourse on the themes of multiculturalism and diversity, it is instructive to examine scholarship addressing the shift from rights- to celebration-based multiculturalism. Urciuoli’s (2003) analysis of “diversity” and “multiculturalism” in higher education publicity materials implies that the move away from rights and access in educational and other arenas went hand in hand with a shift in the discourse, namely from discourses of multiculturalism to discourses of diversity. She observes that until the late 1990s, multiculturalism was generally invoked in US university discourse in reference to creating equal access to higher education and an inclusive intellectual and social climate for members of subjugated minorities (Newfield and Gordon 1996). Since around 2000, “multiculturalism” has started to be replaced by the more flexible “diversity,” which Urciuoli notes is more able to be detached from subjugated groups and struggles for social justice:

> Not only does *diverse/diversity* replace many of the older uses of *multicultural/ism*, it has picked up non-race uses (even beyond gender) for which *multicultural* appears ineligible. *Diversity* has for some years been the preferred term in corporate discourse, where it is a property of individuals, not groups – thus allowing social history to disappear and the organization and its good to become central.” (2003:398)

Key here is the subtleness of the shift from “multiculturalism” to “diversity”. The shift keeps firmly in place the multicultural value of “We are all different and we should celebrate those differences.” Because discourses of diversity keep that value alive, institutions do not invoke the kind of ire that they otherwise might if they were seen to be going back on their promises of equity and inclusion. But the problem of the newer discourses of diversity is that they promote the celebration of diversity while they fail to address the social, economic, and political conditions that led to the inequity that multiculturalism initiatives originally sought to redress. This is a larger societal trend. Davis illustrates this phenomenon in the case of diversity initiatives in the business world:

> “Diversity management” assumes that a racially, ethnically, and culturally heterogeneous workforce needs to be managed or controlled in ways that contain and suppress conflict. This process is precisely a means of preserving and fortifying power relations based on class, gender, and race. (1996:41)

In contrast to invoking diversity the way that the Mount Pleasant Multicultural Coalition did, the more recent trend across US institutions
from education to business to mayors' offices is to use diversity simply to promote a positive image, thereby serving an institution’s own interests rather than those whom they have historically excluded. One striking example of this is the university recruiters who Urciuoli talked with, who believe that smart white students will chose a place with, as they put it, “a lot of diversity” because that reflects how they see themselves as good citizens. . . It is something the school can sell. (2003:400)

This use of diversity to sell an image has spread from education and business where they started, and is now a prevalent strategy of US municipal urban planning offices to seek a competitive edge in attracting investment, as Maskovsky (2006) found in Philadelphia, and Lees (2003) in Portland, Maine.

The utility and the danger of the term diversity lie in the flexibility noted by Urciuoli. Lees notes that, “while [a] wide range of uses threatens to make the term incoherent, it is also key to the appeal and power of diversity. . . . Like motherhood and apple pie, diversity is difficult to disagree with. Janus-like, it promises different things to different people” (2003:622). Urciuoli identifies diversity as what she calls a “strategically deployable index”—a word that, rather than having a fixed semantic meaning, gains its meaning largely through its context. (Linguists call this “indexical” meaning.) McConnell-Ginet (2002) notes in her study of contestations over the words “queer,” “gay,” and “lesbian,” that word meaning does not exist in a vacuum, but emerges through language use. She remarks that “words are associated with families of discourse practices that give them their real force” (ibid:153; see also Silverstein 1976). Similarly I found that Jewish speakers in Washington, DC, used the racial term “White” in contradictory ways, with different underlying definitions. This partially explained speakers’ divergent self-identifications as White, not-quite-White, or non-White, even though they had very similar ideas about what it meant to be Jewish in the US (Modan 2001).

Such fluidity of meaning is a common property of abstract nouns. Gal and Kligman (2000) identify a similar phenomenon among social institutions in post-Socialist East Central Europe, noting that the terms “feminism,” “democracy” and “civil society” changed in meaning, importance, and consequences when used in different historical, institutional, and sociopolitical contexts. But— and herein lies the crux of things—abstract nouns like “democracy” or “diversity” are not routinely considered to have indexical rather than semantic meanings. Speakers generally think of them as having fixed, stable meanings. This is why they are, in Urciuoli’s (2003) terms, “strategically deployable” as indexes. In fact, they work as what I call “stealth indexes.” Since we think of words like “diversity” as referential rather than indexical, their slipperiness often
goes unnoticed. When such a term is used in particular contexts over time, it picks up new meanings from those contexts and can then be used in further interactions to convey those new meanings. But, crucially, because we consider these words’ meanings to be stable, the meaning shift occurs under the radar. This means that a word can carry the veneer of an old meaning (for “diversity,” a positive morality) while the lost aspects of its content (here a focus on justice and rights) go unnoticed. Gal and Kligman explain that such practices “can produce gaps, slippages, and difference between ideas that purport to be the same” (2000:93).

Such slippages can be seen in Lees’ analysis (2003) of the term “diversity” in urban planning discourse in Portland, Maine. Lees found that “diversity” alternately referred to heterogeneity in zoning, the labor market, architecture, ethnicity of the population, and retail offerings. “Diversity’s” flexibility enabled it to be used in the discourse of urban planning initiatives that extolled diversity as a virtue to be fostered in downtown development, while concurrently seeking to limit uses of public space in age-exclusive ways that promoted the criminalization of youth activities and even youth presence in downtown Portland. As in Lees’ Portland, in Mount Pleasant the contradictions inherent in different meanings and uses of “diversity” are linked to conflicts about what constitutes the public good and appropriate uses of space. I argue that developments in diversity discourse in Mount Pleasant are connected to larger trends of urban commodification in US cities, and to intensifying gentrification of the neighborhood over the last six years and the consequent changes that this intensification has effected in the neighborhood’s demographic makeup.

Mount Pleasant

Mount Pleasant is a 12-square block neighborhood about 20 blocks north of the White House that, in the mid-1990s, had about an even split between Whites, African Americans, and Latina/os, with significant Vietnamese and Caribbean populations. (Today it is about 40 percent White, 40 percent Latina/o, and 20 percent African American). It had been a majority-White neighborhood, segregated by force of restricted housing covenants, until the mid-1950s, when the African American population started to increase, as it did in the city as a whole. It became a majority-African American neighborhood after the 1968 riots and the ensuing middle-class (White and African American) flight to the suburbs. Gentrification in the neighborhood started in the early 1970s, when young, college-educated people, mostly White and to a lesser extent African American, started to move in. As Williams (1988) and Gale (1976) have documented, many new residents identified with the counter-culture. The neighborhood was replete with cooperative group houses and Marxist reading
groups, and there was a disproportionate representation of artists, social workers, students, and community activists. In the mid-1980s Central Americans fleeing civil war came to Mount Pleasant, and since then the Mount Pleasant area has been the center of the DC Latina/o community. It is the most predominantly Salvadoran community in the country. Although more Salvadorans live in Los Angeles than in DC, Salvadorans comprise a larger percentage of Latina/os in DC. The late 1980s saw the formation of a small Vietnamese community. (For more on Mount Pleasant see Cadaval 1998; Modan 2007; Schaller and Modan 2005; Williams 1988.)

Williams (1988) explains that a buyer's housing market and rising interest rates kept gentrification at a slow pace through the 1970s and 1980s. Only in the mid-1990s did gentrification start to speed up. The turning point came around the turn of the new century, due to several factors. First, the neighborhood was gaining increasing cultural cachet as a “hip” place to live. The neighborhood’s inclusion in the Utne Reader’s 1997 issue on hip and soon-to-be-hip US urban neighborhoods underscores this status:

Up the hill from U Street, another multicultural scene is gelling in the middle of a Latin barrio. Mt. Pleasant can’t support a full menu of hip commerce yet, but politically progressive kids are starting to frequent its Salvadoran restaurants and old-time dive bars. (Walljasper and Kraker 1997:59)

A newly opened metro station made the neighborhood even more desirable.

Also, the Washington region was experiencing an economic upturn and increase of white-collar jobs due to the growth of the new high tech and “homeland security” sectors.

These factors occurred at a time when, as Smith (2002) explains, gentrification was shifting from a “scattered, private market” phenomenon to a large-scale, state-supported urban redevelopment project. In DC, this project was helped along by the policies put in place under Anthony Williams, former CFO of the Congressionally-appointed Federal Control Board that in 1995 took control over most of the city government, and replaced Marion Barry as mayor in 1999.

Soon after the start of Williams’ first term, the city’s only public hospital was closed, the number of public-private partnerships such as Business Improvement Districts increased, and an unprecedented building spree of luxury condominiums occurred. In the Mount Pleasant area, few residents thought it a coincidence that thirty-two apartment buildings condemned by the city were near the brand-new metro station, an area that the Williams government had slated for massive market-oriented redevelopment, including four luxury condominium buildings (albeit with some set-asides for affordable housing, pushed by the local councilmember and activists) and the city’s first Target store.
This development was in line with the Williams government’s overall redevelopment approach, encapsulated in the Main Streets program that the city initiated in 2002. This program is based on the Main Streets model of the National Trust for Historic Preservation—the model responsible for, among other things, the ubiquitous street banners hanging from lampposts proclaiming the uniqueness of cities across the USA. DC Main Streets, one of the city’s main urban planning initiatives, competitively chose ten neighborhoods, including Mount Pleasant, to implement initiatives to “support retail investment in the District through the retention and expansion of existing businesses and the recruitment of new businesses” (ReSTORE DC 2006). Main Streets is indicative of the current government’s emphasis within the urban planning agenda on initiatives to attract new businesses and consumers to the District.

With these changes came skyrocketing real estate prices across the city. In Mount Pleasant, wealthy white professionals who would not have set foot in the neighborhood ten years earlier were moving in. These new residents had different motivations for moving to the neighborhood. Some appreciated its central location, others liked the cultural cachet, and a large group simply moved to the neighborhood because it was the westernmost neighborhood they could afford, as neighborhoods in the Whiter and richer areas became prohibitively expensive even for wealthier members of the middle class. One of these new residents explained,

Mt. P has a loyal following, though, frankly, I am not among the followers. I neither love it nor my new condo, but I had been searching to buy a place for a whole year and ended up compromising, given the incredible seller’s market. Under the circumstances, I’m glad I did. (2004)

Many new residents to the neighborhood were White, and well-educated, with white-collar jobs. White residents of the community are more likely to live in the rowhouses west of Mount Pleasant Street, and compared to other ethnic groups have higher incomes and higher rates of home and automobile ownership. Latina/os have the lowest incomes and rates of home and automobile ownership of all ethnic groups in the neighborhood. They tend to live in the apartment buildings on or to the east of Mount Pleasant Street, and are more likely than members of other ethnic groups to live in overcrowded conditions. African Americans fall between these two groups (US Census 1995; US Census 2000).

Mount Pleasant Street is virtually unique in the city for the variety of commercial establishments in a five-block stretch: groceries, take-out and sit-down restaurants (Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Chinese, Korean, rotisserie chicken, upscale diner, or pizza), bars (providing, alternately,
Central American or Belgian beers), convenience stores (such as 7–11), coffee houses, barber shops and salons, hardware store, bakery, dentists, business services (fax/photocopying/printing/internet) day spa, adult and children’s clothing, accountants, variety stores, dry cleaners, tailor, video store, gym, realtor, antique store, banks, credit union, and international money wiring. People use the street for activities like shopping, socializing, and drinking, and gather in the nearby churches and library for meetings of community groups. Although there are a range of groups, those that focus on neighborhood issues have a predominantly White, middle-class, and home-owning membership (Modan 2007).

Tracking a changing “diversity”—The Mount Pleasant Forum

To get a sense of changes in local diversity discourse, I analyze messages on the neighborhood listserv (called the Mount Pleasant Forum) between 1997 and 2006. Earlier postings are no longer available, and in 2006 the Forum switched over to a yahoogroups format, after which the listserv developed into more of an announcement site than a discussion forum. Although this analysis is based on ten years of ethnographic fieldwork and residence in Mount Pleasant, I focus on the Forum listserv because, during the time period in question, it was one of the most important public sites where diversity was discussed, and, although limited in its demographics, the public discourse site with the widest participation and diversity of voices in the neighborhood. A comparatively large portion of the community subscribed to the Forum (2000 of the neighborhood’s 12,000 residents by the late 1990s). Many of the participants were involved in other local activities and organizations, and many know each other outside the virtual world. The Forum served an important function in the community because ideas propounded in discussions often found their way into sites where policy decisions are made or promoted, including town hall meetings, police department rationales for new policies, articles about neighborhood issues in neighborhood newspapers and the Washington Post. Community listservs like the Forum are increasingly becoming the new town squares, as many people choose them as their primary sites of civic participation.

To gain a picture of how Mount Pleasant residents used the term “diversity” over time, I located every instance of “diverse” and “diversity” on the listserv over the time period in question, as well as discussions about inclusivity. I then identified the different categories of meaning that these tokens invoked by analyzing how each token related to the topics. I focus not on the relative frequencies of each category, but rather on the logical connection between categories, and the
development of new categories over time and the fading out of others. I reproduce a representative selection to illustrate the various meanings that diversity takes on. To connect what was happening on the Forum with other discursive sites in the neighborhood, I include excerpts from ethnographic interviews with residents active in community issues and on the Forum, organization descriptions from the two community groups who mention diversity in their promotional literature, a grant proposal written by a coalition of community organizations, and real estate and tourism advertisements that mention diversity.

Although it is impossible to know the exact demographics of the list membership, among the posters who I can identify, the majority are White, with smaller numbers of African Americans, Latinos and members of other ethnic groups. Having the time and easy computer/internet access to participate on listservs suggests a certain income level, as do the ubiquitous want ads for nannies, house cleaners, and carpenters for historically accurate home repairs. In addition, many postings make reference to Latina/os and to poor residents in ways that indicate that their authors do not consider themselves members of those groups. It is important to note that, although the population of the neighborhood is ethnically diverse, in the time frame in question, the neighborhood’s public discourse was dominated by civic organization members, elected officials, and residents who were predominantly White.

The diversity of “diversity”

Despite this ethnic homogeneity, community members participating in public discourse have promoted different discourses of diversity over the past decade. Briefly, these are: diversity as social justice; as communal resource; as commodity in the form of resource, product, or experience; and as marketing tool. While some community members have used these discourses to promote equity for all the neighborhood’s constituents, others have used them to argue for their own particular interests, often at the expense of others. On the Forum as in other public discourse venues, the discourses that serve narrower interests are frequently contested. However, such contestation has become less common in the last two or three years. Since 2000, diversity discourses that promote the interests of the wealthier residents have become more prevalent, particularly the discourse of diversity as commodified experience. This discourse’s increasing presence in Mount Pleasant mirrors its popularity in other spheres of society.

In keeping with the symbolic economy, commodified experience has become a ubiquitous trope in US marketing discourse, whether it is marketing of clothing, of food, or of city neighborhoods (see Gottdiener
1997). As articulated by the co-founder of Martin and Osa, the clothing store that pipes in the scent of chopped wood and sets its lighting to look like passing cloud formations, “[our customer] does not need a T-shirt. She needs an experience” (Barbaro 2006:C1). This phenomenon can be seen in the slogan of a coffee house three blocks from Mount Pleasant Street, “Mayorga, an authentic coffee experience” and in the city’s Office of Tourism’s slogan, “Washington, DC: The American Experience.” As Lees (2004) and Maskovsky (2006) have illustrated, diversity has become a prevalent component in the branding of cities as commodities to “experience.” In Mount Pleasant, this is bolstered by residents in their own everyday discourse. This use of “diversity” constitutes a systematic depoliticization of ethnicity/race and class, such that issues of inequality are displaced from the public discourse.

Diversity as social justice

While many who moved to Mt. Pleasant in the 1970s and 1980s were attracted to Mt. Pleasant’s bohemian atmosphere, making a home there was often equally a political statement and a commitment to integration. As two residents from this era stated in interviews in 1997,

Being in a diverse neighborhood, I think, um, is a statement. It’s a way of saying that you know you are challenging sort of the, segregation, the natural segregation of our society.

And,

I come from a family of civil rights activists. My mother was a civil rights activist, her mother was a civil rights activist, her family were on the underground railroad . . . So obviously I come from, wanting to live in an, integrated neighborhood.

These individuals’ model of diversity is rooted in a politics of social justice. In Mount Pleasant in the early nineties, struggles around social justice focused on equal access to city services (including in Spanish), affordable and decent housing, good schools, and equal sharing of power in decisions about the neighborhood. This was and continues to be particularly an issue because the vast majority of civic organizations are led and peopled by White, highly educated community members, who have preferential access to government offices through their networks and knowledge of the local bureaucracy. It has been White individuals who were instrumental in activities like planning the redesign of a neighborhood park (including backless benches, because, as one
community member said, “Latina/os sit on the backs of benches with their feet on the seats”), or instigating a zero-tolerance loitering policy in which people hanging out on the street were arrested. Because those organizing planning forums for these projects virtually never conducted any substantive outreach activities to Latina/os, African Americans, or Vietnamese, these community members had few opportunities to find out about, let alone participate in such processes. Such exclusionary politics led some residents to form the Multicultural Coalition. Their “Mount Pleasant is Diverse” buttons promoted a politics of inclusion and equity, one which focused on the issues outlined in the group’s 1993 vision statement:

1. An intentional multi-cultural neighborhood that ensures the sharing of political power by people from each ethnic group and economic strata by setting agendas, determining priorities, working on projects and reporting results in a manner which reflects the interests and participation of all.

2. An economically stable neighborhood for all income levels, where low and moderate income people are not displaced and can afford to live.

Making a stand for diversity for the Multicultural coalition meant collective action. This was a stance that promoted being part of a community and fighting for the interests of all its members, not only their own interests. Critically, this is a conception of diversity which attends to both ethnic and economic diversity, where community members struggle for equal access— from decision making to housing— across ethnic and class groups. Thus, the “social justice” discourse of diversity is a communal discourse.

Community members on the Forum in a discussion of police harassment in 1998 used similar conceptions of diversity:

I would like to discuss ways that we can help the police protect our property AND our diversity, enforce the criminal code AND civil liberties. I am certain that no one joins the police force with the intention of perpetuating racism and classism. How can we help the police resist these evil and powerful forces?

In framing diversity as a characteristic of the community-at large, and as beneficial for the community, this discourse of diversity lays the groundwork for the next discourses of diversity, namely that of diversity as communal, commodified, and individual resources, respectively.
Diversity as communal resource

While the previous discourse is about a certain attitude towards diversity, the “diversity as communal resource” discourse objectifies diversity such that the focus is on the concept itself. Here, diversity is not simply a characteristic of the community. Rather, it gains value as a tool and resource that can contribute to the community. One example of this discourse is the promotion of diversity by the community organization Stand for Our Neighbors, who organized in 1997 to promote a community response to the effects of immigration and welfare reform laws that were taking a toll on immigrants in Mt. Pleasant. The group acted to protest social services cutbacks, deportations, police harassment, and discrimination, and to improve the provision of social services. They also took a stand on diversity (described in their informational materials):

We will celebrate our diverse neighborhood by organizing cultural events in the community. We would like to demonstrate to the immigrant community by our words and actions that there are many persons in our neighborhood who welcome them and are willing to take a stand for all the persons in our neighborhood regardless of their cultural background, legal status, or economic situation.

A similar perspective on diversity was expressed around the same time in a grant proposal by a coalition of community groups applying for project funding:

One of our neighborhood’s most important strengths is our celebration of diversity, not just tolerance. This diversity and activism gives us a much richer economic and cultural life, with a wide variety of products and services available for sale and cultural events to experience. It gives us a wider perspective from which to understand problems and recognize opportunities.

In these examples, the neighborhood’s diversity is characterized as a resource, a tool to be used to achieve a communal good. Specifically, diversity here is framed as something that can contribute to community building and support of immigrants by drawing on the skills, networks, perspectives and solidarity of differently positioned community members for mutual benefit. This neighborhood resource model is oriented towards public amenities and civic participation, and ideally shared across classes and ethno-racial groups. But the second excerpt also contains another diversity as resource discourse, namely diversity as commodified resource.
Diversity as commodified resource

With the above community group coalition utterance, “this diversity and activism gives us a much richer economic and cultural life, with a wide variety of products and services available for sale and cultural events to experience”, diversity is framed as an object; an entity that can be bought and sold. This commodified diversity still works as a communal resource. It is a resource because it is framed as a means to an end, providing “a wider perspective from which to understand problems and recognize opportunities”. It is communal because it is framed as providing this perspective to the community as a whole, as the writer explains, to “us.”

The process of commodification can lead to a shift from diversity as a communal tool to diversity as a final product (rather than a means to achieve something else), as illustrated in this posting to the Forum from a community organization in 1999:

Support the Latin American Youth Center this holiday season through the purchase of Year 2000 bilingual calendars. This beautiful calendar features the diverse children of our community....A set of ten notecards and envelopes, blank inside, have beautiful photographs of our community’s children and youth. Calendars and notecards make great gifts and stocking stuffers! They each sell for $15.00.

Here commodified diversity is still working in the interests of the community at-large, as the materials in question are being sold to raise funds for youth programs. But often commodification frames diversity as a benefit for an individual, rather than the community at-large. An excerpt of an advertisement for a local nursery school, illustrates this phenomenon; here, diversity is cast as an educational benefit for prospective students:

Greer* Preschool Now Enrolling for Fall

GPS . . . is a unique school, located park side on the first floor of a Victorian townhouse. The staff is bilingual and the students are diverse. The program emphasizes basic independence, creative play, group work, conflict resolution and the excitement of a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural world.

This shift from communal to individual benefactor enables diversity to be marketed as a characteristic of products, from food to condominiums, as a comment from a 1998 interview attests:

I like being able to buy Central American stuff on the sidewalk. You know like, a full coconut or, or buying a tamal d’elote in
front of the, you know that woman sells outside the, supermar-
ket, you know it’s just kind of, where else would I eat, a tamal
d’elote on the sidewalk? And where else would I, you know, be
able to buy fish sauce, a few blocks away.

Here, diversity takes the form of Salvadoran and Vietnamese food
items, and they are items that are framed as valued in and of themselves.
Furthermore, the benefits of these items are characterized as accruing to
an individual. In the previous examples speakers referred to “us”, “our
neighborhood,” and “the interests and participation of all.” But where
diversity is framed as a commodity as such, it tends to be discussed in
terms of its relationship with one person, namely the speaker. In the
current example, the speaker mentions only her own likes and actions:
“I like being able to buy Central American stuff”, “Where else would I
eat tamal d’elote?” In the Mt. Pleasant version of this individualized
conception, markers of ethnic diversity are focused on, rather than of
class diversity. This enables issues of class diversity to fall by the wayside
in subsequent discourses.

Diversity for the Haves, at the expense of the Have-nots

In the mid-to-late 1990s, the discourses of diversity as social justice,
diversity as resource, and diversity as commodity existed side by side.
Starting around 2000 a new way of talking about diversity emerged
and this new discourse went hand-in-hand with the shift in neighbor-
hood demographics caused by the increasing gentrification in the neigh-
borhood and city. People bought properties and then flipped them,
landlords evicted group house tenants to turn their properties into
single-family units. Some tenants, often Latina/o, moved into more
crowded quarters in Mount Pleasant’s apartment buildings, while others
joined residents of all ethnicities who moved east or to the suburbs
because they could no longer afford to live in Mount Pleasant. These
ex-residents made way for wealthier and Whiter replacements who
could afford the higher rents and house prices.

In addition to new discourses of diversity, at this time the social
justice model promoting inclusion was turned on its head. In the origi-
nal incarnation of the social justice model, inclusion was framed as an
issue of creating access for community members who had been system-
atically marginalized. Now, in community meetings and neighborhood
listservs, some newer residents (joined by a few longtime residents)
began articulating characterizations of inclusion and diversity that
served the interests of middle- and upper-middle class residents who
were frustrated that the stores on Mount Pleasant Street did not meet
their consumer desires, and who were uncomfortable with Latino men hanging out on the street and using public space to socialize. On the listserv, discomfort with local Latina/o aesthetics and cultural practices was often articulated through criticisms of Mount Pleasant shopping, all of which cater to some extent to a Latina/o clientele, as well as complaints about people hanging out on the street. It is worth reiterating here that Mount Pleasant boasts one of the most comprehensive commercial corridors in the city. Such notes include:

For the last few months I haven’t had a car, so I’ve tried my best to shop in Mt. Pleasant. I have had good experiences and not so good experiences. My critiques are below:

- Little or no gourmet goods: [e.g.] Dijon mustard not made by Richfoods; appetizing meats.

- Almost all these little supermarket/beer stores sell the same thing. There must be at least 3 on the Mt. Pleasant strip (and I’m being conservative). I’ve waited five years for a shakeout to occur, but to no avail. Why can’t one of these stores turn itself into a gourmet wine/beer/food store? (2002)

And,

Anne pointed out some real aesthetic challenges that some businesses face in Mt. Pleasant. I agree with Anne. I would love to support these businesses, but when making a choice between traveling a further distance to a place that is clean, and does not offend my sense of smell vs. shopping in a place that is closer but is aesthetically unappealing I believe I will always select the former. I am a firm believer in competition and in order to compete for the business of customers one has to understand what attracts customers and what repels them and in my opinion some of the businesses in Mt Pleasant has [sic] not done enough to attract customers who are poised with a fairly significant amount of disposable income. (2003)

And,

About the groups of men who hang all day on the fence5, . . . they like to stare threateningly at white males who walk by, and of course, they make disgusting comments to any woman who walks by. I imagine most women reading this would feel way safer on any Georgetown street than on Mount Pleasant Street. In Georgetown, they (meaning residents and businesses) do not tolerate drunken loiterers harassing pedestrians. This is
not a racist or cultural attack but a discussion about making our street safe for us and our children. (2000)

Relevant for our purposes here is how some residents articulate their perspectives via a discourse of diversity and inclusion:

I would hope all of us agree that our schools should be better, our crime rate should be lower and our main street business should be more diverse and appeal to a broader cross section of residents. (2004)

And,

I think that if these folks were rehabilitated or locked up often enough, our core Mt. Pleasant St. would become a much more inclusive neighborhood block allowing more of us to stroll and shop. (2001)

That these arguments are locally resonant as arguments about class and diversity can be seen in the rejoinders that other residents commonly respond with. In such responses, individuals point out that many residents (especially those living on or close to Mount Pleasant Street, who are more likely Latina/o and African American, and less wealthy) find the street convenient and homey.

Some of the arguments in MtP Forum on this topic are problematic and highly offensive, to be polite. They are classist and I submit that they are culturally insensitive as well. (2003)

And,

Mount Pleasant is a culturally rich neighborhood with a higher standard of living than much of the world. . . The stores are unique and the Latino-owned and operated stores, to which you presumably refer, such as the grocers, are a rare treasure. They are filled with items you cannot get anywhere else in the city—that is the point. And they are there to serve people exactly as intended. I have never once been distracted by “loitering,” “filth” or “smells” and I think those that have been enough to not shop there should think about evaluating the insularity of their world. (2003)

And,

Why is it loitering when people hang out in front of Mt P’s 7-Eleven, but not loitering when they hang out in front of
Barnes & Noble in Bethesda or in front of Urban Outfitters in Georgetown? Personally, I like it when I see lots of people on the street; it makes me feel like I am part of a vibrant community, not a genteel declining enclave. (2003)

Similarly, a resident of Mount Pleasant Street explained in an interview (1998),

People are very friendly in this neighborhood. You can talk to anyone on the street here, I guess that’s the reason why I like it. Whenever I went to the grocery store and I had like four heavy bags in my hands you know bringing home, um, like one of those fellows that will drink a lot on the corner there . . . they offered to carry my bags home . . . When they ask to carry my bags I feel really grateful about that, I appreciate it. It makes you appreciate everyone.

Those listserv posters who decry that Mount Pleasant Street is not inclusive because it clashes with their gourmet tastes and aesthetics invoke a discourse of diversity that promotes the interests of the neighborhood’s moneyed classes. But this flipping of the social equity discourse of diversity does not go uncontested. Those who disagree do so by making explicit that those messages serve the limited class-based interests of the economically privileged segment of the population.

**Semantic bleaching: Diversity void of content**

Another occasional discourse of diversity in the early part of this decade illustrates what linguists call “semantic bleaching” (Aitchison and Lewis 2003). In this linguistic process a word becomes emptied of its original content and only conveys a positive or negative evaluation, like the slang use of the term “sweet” as positive evaluation, as in, “that car is sweet!” In the bleaching of “diversity” in local discourse, the word is used to promote some unspecified social good and is divorced from the notion of variation or heterogeneity canonically associated with diversity. The semantically bleached discourse of diversity often works explicitly against the interests of less affluent community members. An example is a posting to the listserv in 2003, in which a resident proposes to lobby the municipal transportation department to re-route all busses on Mount Pleasant Street in order to improve air and noise quality.

. . . Moving the busses off of Mt. Pleasant St. is a contentious issue as many of us use them, but the proposed route will improve the quality of life with very little inconvenience to the
ridership. Let’s make use of Columbia Heights metro station bus terminals and keep our neighborhood special, diverse, and clean!

This posting received fifteen responses, all of them negative, and all of them pointing out how changing the bus route would negatively impact certain groups in the neighborhood:

As a person with a disability, blindness, and a seeing-eye-dog user, it is most useful to have Metrobus lines criss-cross the neighborhood, making it possible for all users to board these buses en route to many points in the City without the need to transfer. Those who oppose the availability of Metrobus service to all areas of Mount Pleasant are also opposing the independent travel and movement of those who do not drive for reasons of disability, age, or other personal conditions. Let us think community, inclusiveness, sharing, justice, and convenience for all rather than the seemingly selfish approach presented by the writer of the article here alluded to.

And,

I am not sure how often you use the 42, but as someone who counts on it for my in-town transportation, I am truly upset with your proposal. . . . When I travel the 42 in the evenings I see a lot of people who have to work the late shifts use the bus and get on and off at every stop. During the day I see people who shop at Safeway use the bus, people with children and people with difficulties walking the few blocks get on at one stop and then off just a few stops away. The 42 bus is the main source of transportation for most of our neighbors of all sorts of income levels. It is a great bonus that Mt. Pleasant has.

And,

Many people who have been forced out of Mt. Pleasant by rising rents use this bus to travel from upper Georgia Ave and Brookland to return to the affordable ethnic markets and social services on our street. Poor people who depend on transportation subsidies to go to medical appointments, job hunting, or take their kids to school can receive tokens and coupons to pay for bus fare, but there are no equivalent subsidies for metro train fares. It is very important that our bus lines be preserved. “Back in the day” the 42 bus went all the way to Union Station and DC General Hospital. The curtailing of that line was costly and inconvenient for many neighborhood residents. Let’s not make it worse.
By disarticulating diversity from the struggle for access to public transportation, long considered an issue of ethno-racial and economic justice for many Mount Pleasant residents, and rearticulating it to what is at best an aesthetic “quality of life” politics, the woman who proposes moving the buses to make the neighborhood “diverse” depoliticizes the notion of the diversity. But neighbors repoliticize diversity discourse, drawing out class and disability issues, by pointing to the diverse variety of people who would be negatively impacted by the proposed transportation change.

Diversity as experience

Since 2000, depoliticized diversity discourses have become more prevalent in the neighborhood’s public discourse sites. However, as noted above, there is still contestation in public discourse over what diversity means or should mean for the neighborhood. As evidenced by the discussion of shopping on Mount Pleasant Street, these contestations frequently take place around discourses that commodify diversity. We have seen diversity commodified as resource and product. Diversity is also commodified through framing it as experience. In the following listserv discussion from 2004, a longtime community member who is also an elected official of the neighborhood council voices his views on local diversity issues from the social justice perspective:

Escalating property values, and rental rates, and the conversion of rentals to condos, are changing the neighborhood. Many of the people who contribute cultural and economic diversity to Mount Pleasant are being forced out, no longer able to afford this neighborhood. Heck, I couldn’t afford to buy my own house at today’s prices.

He is answered by a self-described new resident who conceptualizes diversity in a much different way, namely as an exciting experience:

What’s economic diversity? A “poor person” can be as annoying as a “rich person” and a rich person can be as culturally exciting and dynamic as a not-so-rich person. . . . and a person in the 13% tax bracket can be more boring than someone in the 38% bracket.

Here the adjectives “annoying,” “exciting,” and “boring” imply what is called a grammatical “experiencer” role: the states of being annoying, exciting or boring cannot exist in the abstract, but rather must come into being through an experiencer who feels annoyed, excited, or bored. Thus economic diversity is not constructed as something in the interests of the “poor person” and the “person in the 13% tax bracket.”
Rather, economic diversity becomes something intended to benefit the writer of the message, to provide him with cultural excitement and keep him from getting annoyed or bored.

Mount Pleasant residents are not the only actors to give voice to this particular discourse of diversity. Real estate developers and the city also use it. This discourse, where diversity is synonymous with cultural excitement and dynamism and economic justice is irrelevant, is indicative of the politics in which diversity is a marketing tool in redevelopment projects. Before examining such uses, it is useful to discuss the logic that enables the progression of diversity meanings from social justice to commodity to urban lifestyle marketing tool.

From commodification to identity

Ley (1996) argues that gentrification in many urban neighborhoods in North America has its roots not just in the left-leaning politics, but also in the aesthetics of the college-educated counter-culture kids who chose run-down but vibrant city neighborhoods over the suburbs which they disdained as homogeneous, sanitized, and soul-killing. City neighborhoods like Mt. Pleasant with elegant but dilapidated Victorian housing stock and an ethnically and economically diverse population held a certain cachet, and that cachet could rub off on residents, even if one had moved to such an area for largely political reasons. It was a way to claim a certain kind of identity, an identity that mixes politics with hipness and multicultural aesthetics. As Lloyd argues about aspiring artists or artist wannabes in Chicago’s artsy Wicker Park, “living in a district like Wicker Park . . . meets important identity needs” (2004:365).

Ideology and identity are intertwined. It is a short leap from holding and acting on certain politics, to being recognized as the kind of person who has a certain kind of politics. Many theorists (Harvey 1994; Smith 1987; Sack 1988; Bourdieu 1984) have noted that the shift from modernist to postmodernist production and aesthetics introduced new forms of consumption, where consumption of increasingly differentiated products and spaces became central in constructions of identities. As Knox explains,

...consumption is...epigrammatic, having as a major role the transfer of meaning from the object to the consumer. It is, moreover, not only the material objects themselves that are epigrammatic, but also the settings in which they are purchased.” (1991:184)

With spatial commodification, this process could be accomplished without actual purchase of objects, by living or spending time in a place that was commonly seen to have a particular identity. These identity...
markers are frequently ethno-racially marked (see Bell and Valentine 1997; Halter 2000; Ley 1996). As economic and cultural capital flows through space, diverse neighborhoods, ethnically marked food, world music get linked to left-leaning ideologies, and a habitus develops whereby such predilections for diversity can index on the one hand an ideology of justice and equal access to resources, and on the other hand an identity as an open-minded and progressive person (Florida 2002). Thus, a predilection for diversity becomes a matter of aesthetics and a marker of distinction. This is what makes it possible to use diversity to sell upmarket urban amenities to affluent, privileged consumers, often at the expense of those who have been systematically denied access to those and more basic amenities and resources.

Diversity as marketing tool

The commodified discourses of diversity in Mount Pleasant are bolstered by other local and non-local institutions with the economic resources and access to public discourse that enable them to promote this view of Mount Pleasant to a much wider audience of visitors and (prospective) residents. For instance, a special advertising section of USAirways’ inflight magazine from October 2006 exhorts visitors not to miss DC’s “interesting, diverse neighborhoods, such as the historic Mount Pleasant district.” Locally, the DC Office of Tourism similarly touts Mount Pleasant as one of the city’s “colorful and diverse neighborhoods.”

The city’s Main Streets initiative links diversity with shopping opportunities in its Mount Pleasant publicity blurb by describing the neighborhood as “a vibrant multi-cultural, multi-lingual urban community . . . [where] the local shops reflect this diversity through the unique goods and services they offer to the public.” And two blocks from Mount Pleasant Street, diversity is a key feature of upmarket condo advertising. The website for the Kenyon Square condominiums being built across from the relatively new metro station plays groovy but soothing instrumental music, the kind one might hear in the lobby of a boutique hotel. In the upper left of the homepage is a multiethnic gathering of twenty to thirty-year-olds in stylish clothing laughing and drinking wine against a backdrop of intimately lit chic minimalist furniture. Underneath, a caption reads, “a vibrant community . . . a diverse culture . . . an inspired urban renaissance.” If the graphics of the website were not enough to convince a reader that diversity here is being used to sell market-rate urban style, Kenyon Square’s pricelist drives that point home: $488,500 for a 947 square-foot loft, with a condo fee of $415/month. Across the street from the future Kenyon Square condominiums lies an empty lot, the former site of mom-and-pop stores, the future home of Target. Around the construction site is a fence:
The terms for international foods and the carefully stylized graffiti-like lettering invoke the diversity of the local populace and by extension of urban life. But the diversity of mango fufu kimchi yucca is a diversity divorced from the people who introduced these foods to the menu of exotica on offer to the cosmopolitan urban palette. This diversity serves market interests rather than the interests of the majority of people in DC where, for example, the average resident can afford fewer than 20 percent of the city’s residential properties and the number of affordable rental units is at an all-time low (Turner et al. 2005); where 7000 condo units were built from 2001–2006, but almost 5000 federally assisted units are under threat of disappearing (Tatian and Kingsley 2006).

This is not to say that the social justice ideas that the term “diversity” conveyed in the mid-1990s have completely disappeared. Mayoral Candidate Adrian Fenty campaigned on the politics of social justice and inclusion; his discourse of diversity harkens back to the politically and rights-oriented discourse more prevalent in Mt. Pleasant in the mid-1990s, as can be seen from a sampling of the text on his campaign website under the heading “Ensuring a Vibrant, Diverse Community:”

A Fenty administration will improve access to services for members of the Latino community and ensure issues directly impacting their community are addressed. . . . It is more important than ever to empower women and girls in our community. . . . A Fenty administration will work to ensure that the GLBT community continues to be totally integrated into the fabric of our society and enjoy all of the rights and privileges afforded to every other District resident by this City and by our nation, including the right to marry.
What is striking about this discourse is that Fenty did not use the term “diversity” in some unspecified way to create an image for the city, but rather linked diversity explicitly with the material and sociopolitical conditions of actual people in the city. That Fenty’s approach spoke to the city’s people can be seen in his winning of every precinct in the 2006 mayoral primary and the subsequent election, an unheard-of feat.

Conclusion

The analysis of Mount Pleasant diversity discourse provides insight into how people navigate larger-level societal discourses on the ground, in actual interactions – and how people alternately contest such discourses or help to solidify them. While it is not possible to locate the causal arrow, in Mount Pleasant commodified discourses of diversity started to pick up speed at the same time as they began to emerge in the larger local linguistic arena, promoted by the city government and residential and commercial real estate developers, and concurrent with an influx of newer, wealthier residents whose motivations for moving to the neighborhood were often vastly different from those of their predecessors.

The examination of uses of “diversity” over time, in everyday interactions, makes visible the processes by which depoliticized discourses of diversity have started to become naturalized and commonsensical in the neighborhood. The naturalization of these discourses allows for the playing up of a commodified ethnic diversity, which many residents find attractive, and a concurrent downplaying of class diversity and the situations of the neighborhood’s poor residents, whom many on the higher end of the economic spectrum view as problematic. The naturalization of these depoliticized discourses supports and paves the way for projects, such as the Kenyon Square condominiums, which work against the interests of maintaining equitable diverse communities.

In examining how diversity comes to mean different things in different contexts, I have argued that the move from “diversity as communal resource” to “diversity as commodity” (in the form of resource, product, and experience) is key in the process of depoliticizing the concept that the word “diversity” represents. Community members frequently use discourses of “diversity” as commodity in order to argue for individual rather than communal interests and they use the linguistic veneer of the term diversity to promote ideas that undermine actual “diversity”.

The construction of diversity as individual good leads to a casting of diversity as an experience and an identity marker, which makes the term “diversity” a useful marketing tool in an era when manufacturers, developers, and cities alike are focused on packaging and selling urban identity. Because “diversity”, like many abstract nouns, has a great semantic flexibility, it is susceptible to slippages in meaning that happen under the
radar. This makes it vulnerable to co-optation, serving the interests of the privileged and of capital at the expense of those of subjugated groups.

Although competing discourses have become less prevalent in Mount Pleasant, the shifting political tide in the city government may change that. At this writing, it still remains to be seen whether the diversity perspectives articulated in Mayor Fenty’s campaign literature will find their way into government policy and ripple out into neighborhoods, or whether depoliticized versions of diversity will prevail in public discourse and public policy, exacerbating conditions of urban inequality.

Notes

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Functional linguists who study actually-occurring language use the term “utterance” to highlight the primacy of spoken or signed language over writing, and in recognition of the fact that much that is said or signed does not follow the abstract conventions of an idealized, well-formed sentence. Use of the term thus distinguishes this data-collection approach from research which either posits the existence of an abstract, ideal speaker in a homogeneous speech community, and/or which tends to build theory based on introspection or grammaticality judgements, rather than on an analysis of actual language use.

My thanks to Jenny Leeman for highlighting this fact.

It is worth noting that many residents who move to the neighborhood for economic reasons come to appreciate the communal values that are still a part of Mt. Pleasant life. For example, when I asked this informant if I could use her quote in this paper, she responded, “I’d like to qualify the quote with one word, which is to add the word ‘staunch’ before the word ‘followers’ in the first sentence, i.e., ‘Mt. P has a loyal following, though, frankly, I am not among the staunch followers.’ I guess that’s because it’s grown on me a bit, as I’ve seen the value of its neighborliness, yet I still maintain my general feeling that the place isn’t where I fit in best and that it lacks some characteristics that I value in other neighborhoods.”

A pseudonym.

Although the writer constructs these men as anonymous and a menacing and threatening presence in the neighborhood, in point of fact, the young men who hung out at this fence at the time this was written were a group of friends who met daily to socialize, generally did not drink, and were often quite polite to women, making comments, such as “Hola Señora, que le vaya bien” (“Hello Ma’am, Have a nice day”), using the formal grammar form. Whereas there are certainly men on the street who are drunk or who make more vulgar remarks, these particular men cannot be counted in that group.

A wealthy, predominantly White neighborhood.

A wealthy Maryland suburb.

My thanks to Wendy Helgemo for drawing my attention to these ads.
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