

Dialogic ethics and the revitalization of Seattle's Central District

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The Central District, or CD as it is commonly referred, is a neighborhood in Seattle that has been traditionally the only black neighborhood in the city, however, today, the CD is almost 60% non-Hispanic white, and the African American population has dwindled to less than 20%. This racial makeup has not always been the case, in fact, in the 1960's if you were an African American living in Seattle, you most likely lived in the Central District, one of the few neighborhoods that allowed African Americans to purchase housing. Most other Seattle neighborhoods were still affected by the practice of redlining or keeping areas free of non-Caucasian races (Guy, 2016). In the early 1960's and 1970's, the CD was a thriving African American community with locally owned businesses, lawyers, and newspaper. In the 1980's when crime rates, unemployment, and drug use began to rise sharply in the CD, the neighborhood changed from a once thriving community to one marred with many of the plights of inner-city neighborhoods throughout the US (Beason, 2017).

In the past few years, as the tech boom hit Seattle, causing home prices to rise, many young Caucasian tech workers, who could not afford homes in much pricier neighborhoods started buying cheaper homes in the CD, a practice that continues to this day (Guy, 2016). This practice is known as gentrification. Gentrification is "the process of renewal and rebuilding accompanying the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas that often displaces poorer residents" (Gentrification, 2017). As the renovation of the CD continues, many of its long-term residents are being displaced as property values, rent, and taxes all rise at a rate that is not tenable for many of the lower income African and African American residents.

The gentrification and revitalization of neighborhoods like the CD are often complex issues. On the one hand, the influx of new income and development can bring revitalization, new

and expanded housing, lowered crime rates, and vibrancy to the neighborhood. On the other hand, the influx of new income and development often changes the racial makeup of the neighborhood and can price out long-term residents who cannot afford to live, shop, eat, and survive in what was once an affordable neighborhood.

### **Dialogic ethics in the gentrification of the CD**

We live in a time where multiple ethics compete in trying to establish what is the “good” and for whom. These competing ethics raises the necessity for a dialogic ethics as a pragmatic necessity for this moment. In a time when there is no unified ethics theory from which to make decisions and offer guidance, a dialogic ethic offers a response to contrary and contrasting senses of the “good” (Arnett, Fritz, & Bell, 2008)

The gentrification of the CD has not occurred all at once. It has taken place over ten to fifteen years in a series of events. As the CD continues to change, there have been instances where several participants have worked in an attempt to come up with solutions that benefit everyone. Dialogic ethics appear to be present in some of the discussions over what is good and for whom, but perhaps not all. There have also been instances where dialogic ethics did not happen in the CD. It would be easy for the City of Seattle to allow property owners to sell to developers who can then build high-end housing to accommodate the new influx of wealthier residents. This, after all, would speak to what the developer would see as the good: nicer housing, upscale shops, a more desirable and safer neighborhood, and profits for the developers. This definition of the good, however, isn't the same definition that long-term residents would see as the good, which would include not being displaced, affordable housing for current residents, lack of fear surrounding rent increases and condo conversions, and stability for their quality of life (Kelety, 2017). There is not one common good at work here, and thus learning about the

Other is required for a dialogic ethic to take place. As Arnett, Fritz, & Bell (2008) write, “Learning is the anchor in an era that rebels against universalistic foundations” (p. 81). As much of the revitalization of the CD has taken place over the course of years, I'd like to explore one specific project, wherein one facet dialogic ethic did, to some degree at least, take place and another facet where dialogue did not take place.

The Red Apple grocery store was a staple in the CD community for many years. It was not only a place to shop for items one couldn't get at a Safeway or QFC, but it was also a community hub, hosting barbeques, back to school drives, Easter egg hunts and more. The Red Apple was the grocery store in the CD that catered to the lives, needs, and wants of the African American community. In 2016, Vulcan Enterprises purchased the property where the Red Apple sits, and immediately announced plans for a 532-unit mixed-use apartment complex (Bernard, 2017). Vulcan appears to engage in a dialogic with the community surrounding the plans for closing the Red Apple in favor of new apartments, but perhaps there was not a real listening and learning, going on, but rather a monologue or technical dialogue. Vulcan's pitch was that the neighborhood could be so much more, one where up to 1,000 people could live and enjoy one another's company. This position does not take into account the residents who already live and work in the neighborhood. A representative for Vulcan states, “Creating a great place for people is gonna create a great real estate project. I think one of the keys in thinking about this 23rd and Jackson project is that the tide is gonna lift all ships” (McNichols, 2016). This posture taken by Vulcan ignores the wants, desires, and needs of the neighborhood. Vulcan being the influential new owners ignores the needs of current residents and engages in a monologue about what is good for the neighborhood. Arnett et al. would say that dialogue between Vulcan and the current residents might not be possible given the difference in power dynamics that exist between a

billion-dollar organization and working-class African American residents, workers, and business owners (Arnett, Fritz, & Bell, 2008).

Part of Vulcan's revitalization of the CD includes new housing. There was a conversation between Vulcan, city planners, the Black Community Impact Alliance, The Action Community Team, and the Mayor to listen and discuss the impact that rising rents would have on the CD. After listening to members of the Black Community Impact Alliance and the Action Community Team, Vulcan has agreed to make 10% of new housing to be rent restricted at a variety of levels, but most range between 30 and 60 percent area median income, which would allow for current residents of the CD to be able to remain in the neighborhood (Kelety, 2017). This solution finds a way to address the "good" for the community while attending to the "good" of the real estate developers. It also gives the chance to help what is the "good" for the future of the CD. This solution wouldn't have presented itself without a Vulcan engaging dialogue that stopped forcing its own narrative that didn't have support from the residents (Arnett, Fritz, & Bell, 2008)

### **Impact of dialogic ethics in the revitalization of the CD**

As one looks at the revitalization of the CD, the impact or lack thereof in some instances becomes clear. In regard to the Red Apple, Vulcan Enterprises did not engage in a dialogue that allowed the Other an opportunity to articulate the impact of losing the Red Apple in a way that could shape the communication ethic (Arnett, Fritz, & Bell, 2008). The direct impact of this non-dialogical discourse was the closing of a community hub. Not only did the CD lose a community hub, but people also lost their jobs, and the community lost part of what made it unique. The CD lost a business that reflected the community and in turn, gave up a black-owned business. The men and women who wanted Vulcan to hear their side of the Red Apple story were negatively impacted and reminded that their voices don't matter. "Lois Martin is a long-time business owner

in the Central District. She said the neighborhood is dominated by small, scrappy businesses, most of them owned by African-Americans. ‘When I first heard that they were buying it, that was a big concern for me,’ Martin said. ‘That it was going to totally change the face of our neighborhood’” (McNichols, 2016). Arnett et al. (2008) state, "Dialogic ethics *listens* to what is before one, *attends* to the historical moment, and seeks to *negotiate* new possibilities" (p. 95 emphasizes theirs). In the case of the Red Apple, Vulcan missed the opportunity to attend to the "good" of the neighborhood, the employees, and owner of the Red Apple.

The impact of Vulcan listening to community groups and residents of the CD and coming up with a solution for housing that is affordable for lower-income residents had a positive impact on the CD community. Neighbors and long-time residents of the CD are not anti-revitalization of the neighborhood. In fact, most of them have pleaded not to be ignored (Kelety, 2017). The difficulty becomes when revitalization ignores and even displaces those live in the neighborhood. With Vulcan listening to community members and groups around the issue of affordable housing and coming up with a solution that could benefit current residents, Vulcan showed that dialogic negotiation was possible (Arnett, Fritz, & Bell, 2008). This negotiation allows the CD to retain some of its current racial makeup and what some residents would term its soul (Kelety, 2017). In the words of Lois Martin, chair of the Community Day Center for Children in the Central District. “The whole thing is to make the Central Area accessible not only to those families that have been displaced,” Martin added. “We are hopeful that having the density around those nodes with affordable units, will make it a place that is affordable for past, current, and future resident” (Kelety, 2017, para 14).

### **Evaluating the dialogic ethics in the revitalization of the CD**

When evaluating the dialogic ethics in the CD, the first question that comes to mind is whether enough was done? Did Vulcan give enough opportunity for the Other (the residents, workers, and business owners in the CD) to shape the communication dialogue, or did they simply make concessions to placate residents in the neighborhood? Did Vulcan use communication ethics as a “learning model based upon self-reflective accountability” (Arnett, Fritz, & Bell, 2008, p. 94). According to some in the CD, the answer to these questions is no, Vulcan did not do enough. “I don’t think it’s enough,” says Evelyn Allen, head of the Black Community Impact Alliance, a coalition of organizations advocating for black community interests in Western Washington and member of a city-convened team of Central District community members who provided input on the up-zone proposal. “‘Sufficient’ is not a word that I will use” (Kelety, 2017, para 4).

Another question that arises from is whether Vulcan is sincere. This is what one local business owner is asking herself, and she has this question for Vulcan: “Are you really open to hearing the voice of the community? Or is it lip service” (McNichols, 2017, para 40)? Dialogic ethic begins with knowledge of your own understanding of the "good, " and it is accompanied by the desire to learn from the Other through an engagement of difference (Arnett, Fritz, & Bell, 2008). If Vulcan is not engaging in a desire to learn through an engagement of difference, then they are indeed simply paying lip service and not engaging in a dialogic ethic. “Dialogic ethics assumes the importance of the meeting of communicative ground that gives rise to a particular sense of good and is simultaneously open to learning and emergent insight that belongs to an ontological reality between persons, not to any one person in a conversation” (Arnett, Fritz, & Bell, 2008, p. 80-81). If Vulcan did not engage in authentic dialogue in this manner, then you

could say that their work with the community was not about finding a new sense of the “good” rather simply sip service as Vulcan forged onward caring more about profit than people.

Urban revitalization, which sometimes comes disguised as gentrification often presents a difficult ethic for those involved. I think that the Vulcan purchase of 23<sup>rd</sup> and Jackson shows how a dialogic ethic can be applied to work for a new common good. The project, in the case of the Red Apple, also shows what can happen when a dialogic ethic is not used. There will always be questions of what is right and good for a neighborhood in need of revitalization and its residents. Through the use of a dialogic ethic, it is possible to find a new sense of the “good” or a third way that benefits most of those involved.



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