Structural Violence in The Baltimore Sun's Coverage of 1910 McCulloh Street

David G. Gil, a professor emeritus of social policy at Brandeis University, defines structural violence as "violence between individuals, social groups, social classes, and entire peoples…which tends to thwart human needs and to interfere with spontaneous, healthy development" (29). In his 1999 article, "Understanding and Overcoming Social-Structural Violence," he explains that these human needs can be separated into distinct categories, such as social-psychological needs or security needs. Gil theorizes that the failure to meet these needs results in "under-development and waste of innate human capacities, and in diverse physical, emotional, and social ills and problems" (26). In the United States, racial segregation left many individuals subject to structural violence as needs and potential went unmet alongside Jim Crow norms. The Jim Crow era may be defined as the period between 1896, when the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* legalized "separate but equal" racial segregation, and 1954, the year that *Brown v. Board of Education* outlawed this segregation in the nation's schools ("Jim Crow"). Under Jim Crow norms, African American individuals were expected to stay separate from white individuals in public sectors such as schools, transportation, and neighborhoods. Although *Plessy v. Ferguson* deemed this divide would be "separate but equal," the reality was anything but equal. Regarding housing, black homeowners were far fewer than white homeowners and their homes had much greater variation in utilities such as running water, electricity, indoor plumbing and insulation than the well-furnished white homes (Powdermaker 131). In Baltimore, as the Great Migration began and African Americans started migrating north for industrial jobs, these conditions only worsened as populations grew and housing availability declined (Benson et al. 658). In 1910, the city's popular periodical *The Baltimore Sun* published a series of articles regarding public sentiments surrounding the so-called negro invasion, when African Americans

began moving into the white city neighborhoods of northwestern McCulloh Street. The articles covered white neighbors' reactions to their new black neighbors and documented their frantic efforts to segregate neighborhoods. In its series of 1910 articles regarding African American families moving to McCulloh Street, *The Baltimore Sun* demonstrates and perpetuates the structurally violent housing segregation in Jim Crow era Baltimore by using indicting and othering language and focusing on white property value over black security and social-psychological needs.

At the turn of the century, many African Americans were forced to live in slums like southwestern "Pigtown," which were unsanitary, crowded, and undesirable places (Power 290). As the city's population increased, African Americans who could afford to move out of slums found homes scattered throughout Baltimore, sometimes buying nicer, second-hand homes in northwestern neighborhoods (291). In September of 1910, a prominent lawyer named W. Ashbie Hawkins bought 1834 McCulloh Street, a rowhouse in a white west Baltimore neighborhood known as Druid Heights (Pietila 15-17). Normally, there were very few streets where black and white people neighbored one another. In the case of Hawkins, houses on McCulloh Street had been vacated by white families and not kept up with over time, so white people no longer wanted to live in them and the owner, a white woman named Margaret Brewer, sold the rowhouse to Hawkins (16). In his book *Not in My Neighborhood: How Bigotry Shaped a Great American City*, author and former *Sun* employee Antero Pietila explains that these sales happened because "an offer from a black [is] better than no offer at all" (16). After Hawkins moved in, the *Sun* published reports saying that black presence in neighborhoods decreased property values for whites, claiming that Hawkins had paid an amount $1,000 less than he had actually paid for the home and sparking financial fear in white homeowners throughout the city (18). This fear led to

the tension and violence toward African Americans in Baltimore that subsequent *Sun* articles showcase.

The *Sun* uses indicting and othering language to describe black people in its 1910 coverage of incoming McCulloh Street residents, ultimately blocking fulfillment of the new African American residents' social and emotional needs. Gil defines these social and emotional needs as ones including "a sense of belonging to a community, involving mutual respect," as well as acceptance (26). An article entitled "WHITE RESIDENT ANGRY" detailed an interaction between a white neighbor, M. J. Hammen, and the first black McCulloh Street resident, Hawkins. The *Sun* covers the events that took place when Hammen approached Hawkins to interrogate him on his reasons for entering the neighborhood, ultimately provoking an argument between the two. The article uses terms such as "curt reply" and "rejoinder" to frame Hawkins as a threatening presence, while the rest of the article centers on Hammen as an innocent victim, using phrases like "distress" and "prominent" to describe his behavior and further inflate the image of Hawkins as a harmful, unwanted presence. Similar language follows throughout the series of *Sun* articles, with phrasing like "encroachment by the negroes" and "invasion" constantly villainizing African Americans and deeming them as unaccepted company in the neighborhood ("ORDINANCE TO BAR NEGROES"). The appearance of such language in the prominent *Sun* newspaper ensured that anti-African American sentiment would spread throughout the city and deny them a sense of belonging to the neighborhood community. Clearly, the African American families and individuals were neither accepted nor respected in Druid Heights.

The news articles also denied African Americans the social and emotional need for mutual respect by implying that they were incapable of belonging to well-off, respected parts of

the city, or even neighborhoods that once were well-off. One article stated that McCulloh Street was a "fashionable" district with many residents who were "prominent families," implying that the black families moving in could not attain these white standards ("WHITE RESIDENT ANGRY"). Another article claimed that "they are beginning to get into the best section of the city" in its argument against black families moving into white neighborhoods ("ORDINANCE TO BAR NEGROES"). To say that black individuals should not be allowed to live in these "best" parts of the city is to say that skin color is an immediate disqualifier for individuals combatting the city's racist social, economic, and political norms. Like Hawkins, who was a successful lawyer and one of the 0.1% of real estate-owning black individuals in Baltimore, black residents in these neighborhoods were well-off enough to afford homes and often held distinguished jobs but were still discouraged, even threatened, when they sought to live in certain neighborhoods due to the color of their skin (Pietila 17). A black resident could have the same level of education and profession as a white resident and still not receive mutual respect and recognition, a sign not only of persistent racism but of white Baltimore's effort to keep black families from acquiring wealth and assets in the form of property. In fact, black residents stated that even though they did not want to live in an unwelcoming white neighborhood, their desire for "a better house to live in" forced them to endure social repercussions in pursuit of upward mobility and the American Dream ("URGES A NEGRO COLONY"). Thus, African Americans, including Hawkins, met their needs for a safe and sanitary home at the price of fulfilling social-psychological needs for respect and community in their neighborhood.

The *Sun* articles continued their isolation of black homeowners by prioritizing white people's property rights over black people's security needs. In his theory of structural violence, Gil defines security needs as those that encompass "a sense of trust and security emerging from

the experience of steady fulfillment of biological-material, social-psychological, and productive-creative needs" (27). In other words, an individual feels safe when his or her most basic needs, such as sleep, food, community and respect are met. Since white prejudice, evident not only in verbal attacks, but in physical violence against African Americans, prevented them from fulfilling their social and emotional needs for community and respect, this sense of security was obviated. In the article "NEGRO HOMES STONED," this lack of security becomes clear when the content of the article focuses on the property value of the neighborhood dropping, rather than the danger African American families met as their homes were stoned and property was damaged by angry white children. The article immediately follows the heading "Windows and Vestibules Damaged on McCulloh Street" with "WHITE RESIDENTS WORRIED" to deflect attention from the lack of safety African Americans were experiencing and direct public concern back to white residents' concerns over their property values. Another article also urges that, unless the city of Baltimore takes legislative action, "the negroes will continue to move in, and our daughters will be obliged to pass through the streets lined with negroes on their way to the Western High School" ("RESIDENTS ARE AROUSED"). Again, the contrast between what may happen to white daughters and the actual physical violence black families faced when their homes were stoned, where lynching was often threatened as a quick and just solution to any alleged accusation faced by a black individual, biasedly favors the security needs of white people over black people.

The popular sentiments that the *Sun*'s articles display in regards to housing for African Americans created structural violence that also extended beyond African American populations. Gil notes that everyone, including the oppressor and the oppressed, suffer in systems of social-structural violence (33). While African Americans were most directly targeted and truncated by

the language the *Sun* and its readers used to describe them, the white homeowners and real estate agents who sold homes in white neighborhoods to black residents also faced structural violence. In the September 22nd, 1910 article "HOUSE OF OWNERS BLAMED," one broker stated, "I told him my reputation was worth something and I would have nothing to do with the sale" when he was asked to sell a home to a black individual. A following article urges "there was never a reputable man who would willingly sell property in a white neighborhood to a negro buyer" because it would "allow their civic pride to be eclipsed by their apparent gain" ("EXCHANGE REGRETS IT"). Thus, those white homeowners or real estate dealers who were accused of selling white homes to black buyers were stripped of their reputation and reliable representation in the white community, distancing them from the social-psychological needs for a sense of belonging, mutual respect, and acceptance within their race.

The Baltimore Sun's villainizing portrayal of African-Americans living in Baltimore in 1910, supplemented by the prioritization of white needs and popular sentiments, displays the structurally violent attitudes that surrounded housing during the Jim Crow era. Black residents were portrayed as angry, threatening presences to disable their social-psychological needs for belonging to community and respect. This was furthered when the *Sun* highlighted white Baltimoreans' concerns regarding low property values over black Baltimoreans' security needs. Finally, the *Sun* furthered social-structural violence by attacking the reputation and community of white individuals selling homes in white neighborhoods to black buyers. The structural violence surrounding race and housing was not limited to Baltimore, nor was it limited to the Jim Crow period. The controversy sparked by black residents moving into rowhouses on McCulloh street would go on to inspire the Baltimore Ordinance 692, the first city law to legalize housing segregation (Power 289). Redlining and blockbusting practices, refusing loans on the basis of

racially-motivated financial risk, and using scare tactics to buy cheap homes from whites and sell back at a higher price to blacks would then continue structural violence against African Americans throughout the Jim Crow period (Pietila 16-18). Despite all this, many historians, scholars, and authors today have created a voice for those who face structural violence through their focus on urban studies and publishing of books that articulate the seriousness of housing issues. One such author and urban studies scholar, William Julius Wilson, focuses on the different issues that stem from and intersect with housing in the hopes of finding solutions. He writes, “My aim, therefore, is to galvanize and rally concerned Americans to fight back with the same degree of force and dedication displayed by those who have moved us backward, rather than forward, in combating social inequality” (209). Although structural violence is incessant in past and present systems, there are also tenacious individuals and peoples who continue to defy and redefine these systems.

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