



A Reflection on “Bad Neighborhoods”

By Nick DiRago, Newark, '14

This reflection was written by current JV in Newark, New Jersey, Nick DiRago, and first published in the JV monthly newsletter, In the Field in March 2015.

From the Covenant of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps: *I will strive to be just in my thoughts, language and actions so that my work for justice will have credibility; I will seek to know the truth of situations, rather than relying on prejudices, assumptions, rumor, and incomplete information.*

It is conventional wisdom that there are good neighborhoods and bad neighborhoods, and as we become better rooted as JVs in our cities, many of us are developing a sense of which are which. But is there such a thing as a bad neighborhood? I don't think the term is merely a misnomer: it is the result of and fuel for capitalism and white supremacy.

What makes a neighborhood *bad*? Usually the speaker means to say that she or he perceives that she or he would be in danger there. Already, then, there is cause for concern.

Cities' “bad neighborhoods” are usually populated disproportionately by communities of color. These black and brown residents are far more likely to be perceived as dangerous, violent, criminal, or animalistic. “Bad neighborhood” is often code designed to sanitize the repugnant truth: that a “seedy area” is one in which people of color live and thus one in which members of the dominant racial group feel unsafe.

It's not only outsiders who identify areas as “sketchy” or “bad;” it's also low-income communities and oppressed people of color, referring to others' neighborhoods or even to their own. This is a reflection of the lived experience of those who live with compromised senses of physical security and of pride in their neighborhoods. Our commitment to solidarity requires us to acknowledge and to respect individuals' experiences and word choice.

Solidarity does not mean, however, that we have a license to write ourselves into that narrative or to use such terms ourselves. Even if we live in what many would consider a “dangerous” area, it would be farcical to adopt a label as condemnatory as “bad neighborhood” after living in a new place for half a year. At the end of the day, the streets and neighborhoods that we presently occupy are not ours to define or label. We simply have the privilege of living in them for a while.

The entire logic of capitalism and imperialism—America's founding myths—is *extraction* from the lower classes for the benefit of the ruling class. If privileged people take the liberty to define neighborhoods that are not theirs—ones that they otherwise do all they can to *avoid*—a poor community's identity becomes another thing that is taken from it.

Perhaps the darkest aspect of this language choice is that when we contribute to the image of certain neighborhoods as “bad,” we contribute to the justification of oppressive systems there. Any capitalist economy needs a sizeable exploited underclass, enforced spatially through geographical segregation and reinforced by the belief that one should not venture into particular areas.

Meanwhile, it is only logical to subject communities to brutal policing and incarceration if it is a foregone conclusion that they present a danger to those around them. When the Millennial generation decides to move back into cities, we have easy targets: the “bad neighborhoods.”

Post-gentrification sanctimonious liberals champion the “revitalization” or “economic development” of what used to be “one of the worst parts of town.” It’s all code, facilitated by the discourse of “nice” and “bad” neighborhoods. The powerful erase what they don’t want and replace it.

It’s not just bodegas and derelict buildings that fall victim to this erasure. Privileged people tend to enter cities with a monolithic, un-nuanced understanding of low-income neighborhoods: they are bad. This understanding erases the obvious truth that, despite carrying mind-boggling burdens every day, people live *beautiful lives* in “bad neighborhoods.” The poor shouldn’t be romanticized but the joy and value in their experience should be recognized, rather than added to the list of things that are stripped from them.

In order to live out our call to radical living, JVs should be intentional about language. Ridding ourselves of facile terms such as “bad neighborhoods” will free us to describe people and places less oppressively and more holistically. At very least, we must learn to speak from our own experience. For example, rather than saying, “That’s a bad neighborhood,” we could say, “I feel uncomfortable in that neighborhood.” We might be surprised at what we learn about ourselves.

We also must think critically about where we spend our time and money. Do we flock to the “good neighborhoods” after work and on weekends? Do we spend free time in the parts of town that match our pre-existing preferences? Even if our limited stipend means that we do it less than we would otherwise, we’re not living *radically*. It’s not sufficient to do something *less*; we must do something *else*. Do we seek out events in the “bad neighborhoods?” Do we plug into social networks other than ones dominated by young professionals?

We have the privilege of getting to know various parts of our cities and count on the support of our JV communities to ensure that we do so respectfully and safely. We shouldn’t put ourselves in danger or unthinkingly invade others’ spaces, but I suspect that the physical risk is much more exaggerated and that communities are much more welcoming than we are led to believe.

To an extent, that’s probably my white and male privilege talking. I do believe, however, that a reflective and welcoming engagement with all neighborhoods is part of our calling this year. There is much injustice in American cities, but I don’t think there are any bad neighborhoods. Let’s go for a walk.