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Peace-ing Together a *Community* in Transition:
Transcending Gentrification through Resource Sharing, Environmental Action,
and Art-Making in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn

I moved to Bedford-Stuyvesant, a neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, in May 2005. As a newcomer to this primarily African-American neighborhood, I experienced some opposition and often wondered how I could overcome this awkward position. Being a renter, with limited resources, I understood the antagonism toward me. I was an 'outsider', but even as an outsider, I felt threatened by other newcomers who bought property, opened businesses, and caused previously reasonable prices to rise by way of their beautifying efforts. With each year and each new development, I grew more conflicted and tense along with the "locals." Would I also get pushed out of my new home?

More than just my personal experience, the side effects of gentrification create and exacerbate racial tensions, cause displacement and community unrest, and is often perceived as causing social inequality. As such, the most basic elements of peace, harmony, and community cannot exist. With this disconnection between neighbors, it is difficult to relate; indeed, when such issues are present, the "love thy neighbor" maxim becomes difficult to heed.

One of Bedford-Stuyvesant's great traditions is impressive painted wall murals on city buildings. Unfortunately, many of these murals memorialize those who have died; all too often victims of violence and tragedy. As a gesture of peace, Peace-ing Together a Community in Transition aims to celebrate diversity, cultivate understanding, encourage communication, and inspire lasting friendships with the participation of over 100 residents. As a practice, the goal of this project is to bring together neighbors who might not have the chance to meet otherwise by providing three basic but important elements: time, space, and opportunity. In my eyes, this is an effective, powerful, interactive, and transformative method of creative peace-making.

I believe that peace is the ultimate goal of every living being. Who *really* wants to experience stress, upset or conflict? In the case of Bedford-Stuyvesant, where violence is a common occurrence (the sound of gunshots are heard *nightly*), tensions that exist due to the increasingly apparent disparities involved with gentrification could easily lead to social unrest (be it an individual assault or other aggravations). As a new mother, I was concerned. What could help to create an environment of trust, togetherness, and peace?

Over the years, I have become very interested in *mediation* as defined by Tiffany Ansley. This practice is especially well-equipped to deal with gentrification; the process is future-oriented and it seeks out what can be done at that moment. With this in mind, I began to organize clothing swaps,¹ which I've called *swap + meet*, as social events with a few goals in mind. First, the informal setting of a community-oriented event could spark the creativity needed to come up with ideas and solutions to ameliorate the effects of gentrification. Second, it is a way to reconcile the need to be clothed with limited means and the need to dispose of textile waste. Finally, it is a way to engage the community with concepts about reuse and recycling of clothing. Most important, it is a way to mediate a conversation among disparate community members by way of a casual and shared encounter. After three years, *swap + meet* continues to provide a fun and social happening that also serves as an effective resource hub for a diverse group of people in the community.

Through a Davis Projects for Peace Fellowship, I want to take *swap + meet* a step further by inviting the wider community to participate in the creation of a community art piece from the leftover textiles that remain after the swaps. With help from local fiber artists (Gwen Lewis, Adrienne Patrick and myself); bag designer David Goforth; patternmaker Yo Smith Kwon; knitting enthusiast Lola Fow; devoted *swap + meet* participants Megan Bandle and Mandisa Turner Watkins; and most especially crafting novices of the Bedford-Stuyvesant community, this textile 'waste' will be re-purposed and pieced together into a large community mural project in the form of a

¹ A clothing swap is a social gathering where people bring their unwanted clothing. At the same time, participants are welcome to take whatever new treasures they discover. One of the few methods we have to recycle clothing, it is a great excuse to clean out your closets and keep unused clothing in the lifecycle. It is also one of the most sustainable methods of clothing acquisition.

quilt-inspired wall hanging and/or a fiber sculpture in the name of peace, solidarity, and community. To do this, I plan to organize three *swap + meet* events in three different locations within Bedford-Stuyvesant that will take place on March 12, May 21, and July 16, 2011. The purpose of the swaps is not only to continue with my own commitment to peacemaking and community-building but contributors for the peace project will be recruited from these swaps.

Over the summer, the team of textile-knowledgeable residents and I will host ten workshops for swap participants that will contribute to the Peace-ing Together a Community in Transition mural/fiber sculpture. These workshops will take place at the Brooklyn Public Library or the Brooklyn Brownstone School. For the first three workshops, we will focus on sorting, organizing and deconstructing the clothing, preparing the fabric for its final use, and working out a system of implementation. The workshops will be scheduled for three to five hours and will take place shortly after the first *swap + meet* in mid-March. The second and third workshops will follow in April and May. Because this project will require much time and effort to plan, gather materials, and strategize, it will be necessary to begin *before* the summer.

The second series of three workshops will take place during the last two weeks in June and the first week in July. Essentially, we will continue with deconstruction, but we will also focus on a construction strategy. We will determine the size of the project(s) by assessing how many textiles are available. We will begin designing a general pattern and design and will begin some preliminary sewing. Basic sewing and quilting skills will be taught to non-sewers. At the same time, we will develop our awareness of global environmental issues connected with our clothing. For example, issues such as consumption, waste production, methods of disposal, recycling, up-cycling and re-purposing will be considered. The final three workshops in July and August will continue with deconstruction. We will assess our needs for more textiles and other fibrous materials but the primary focus will be sewing and other core tasks such as setting the quilting batting, finishing techniques, and problem-shooting. Finally, the last workshop will address any remaining issues with construction and completion of the mural(s). We will determine how the piece will be mounted as well as its handling and transportation. Ideally, this will take place one or two days before the mural is revealed.

The anticipated unveiling of the final project will be August 20, 2011, at a large community event (most likely, in the form of a block party) with several Brooklyn organizations that I have previously collaborated with. These include the Shops of Lewis Avenue (SoLA), the Office of Recycling Outreach and Education (OROE), and the Macon branch of the Brooklyn Public Library. They are supportive of the community endeavor I have proposed and look forward to hearing back from me with an update. Through her association with the Brooklyn Brownstone School and Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Plaza, Mandisa Turner-Watkins has generously offered to make arrangements should the project require additional resources (e.g. equipment, space, storage, etc.). This festive event will celebrate the loving handiwork created by the diverse residents of Bedford-Stuyvesant, a beautifying project realized through unity, inclusivity, cooperation, and togetherness.

Through Peace-ing Together a Community in Transition, we hope to inspire participation in future *swap + meets*, related arts-oriented community works, and long-term interest in similar environmental, community and peace-oriented actions. Certainly finances would limit the sustainability of future art projects like the one I have proposed. However, I believe that the Peace-ing Together a Community in Transition mural/fiber sculpture project can generate on-going interest. More importantly, I believe it will inspire community leaders, local organizations, and business owners to invest in the continuation of similar undertakings that cultivate solidarity, celebrate diversity and bring value to the community by demonstrating what can be done through our collective efforts. In this way, I aim to show that such ventures are valuable because by interacting with one another through social and environmental action, especially though art-making and peace-building, an investment in this kind of a project is an investment in the community which can be seen as development from within.