



Rusty gardens: stigma and the making of a new place reputation in Buffalo, New York

Randolph Hohle¹

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Abstract

This article develops a conceptual framework to explain how local actors engage in grassroots reputational making activities to separate themselves, their homes, and their city from stigmas that mark places with bad reputations, and how these reputational making activities become institutionalized in urban regeneration practices. Through a case study that draws from field notes and 36 in-depth interviews in Buffalo, New York, this paper examines how ordinary residents mobilized through garden tourism to make a new place reputation in relation to the Rust Belt stigma. Residents mobilized through one of two cultural frames: reputational reframing or reputational expansion. Reputational reframing is the discourses, narratives, and social activities geared toward changing an existing place's reputation in relation to external stigmas. Reputational expansion is the discourses, narratives, and social activities geared toward diversifying or seeking inclusion into the emerging place reputation. The extent that local actors use reputational expansion was conditioned on the degree of their perceived success of reputational reframing. This study has broader implications on how place reputations matter in the debates over urban regeneration in ordinary American cities.

Keywords Stigma · Place reputation · Urban regeneration · Rust belt · Gardening · Buffalo

Buffalo, New York is home to the world's largest free open garden tour. Homeowners sign up to display their front, side, and backyard gardens for the annual garden walk held in July. The homeowners are not compensated for being on the walk. The tour is as much about civic pride as it is about the clever arrangement of perennials and annuals in postage stamp sized front yards. The annual garden tour began in 1995, when a local block club set up the first garden tour of nineteen gardens to showcase the block and inspire neighbors to take pride in the neighborhood. In

✉ Randolph Hohle
hohle@fredonia.edu

¹ Sociology, SUNY Fredonia, W 395 Thompson Hall, Fredonia, USA



2010, the success of the garden tour caught the eye of Buffalo's Visitors and Convention Bureau and like-minded gardener citizens in nearby cities. The gardeners formed a voluntary organization and worked with the Tourism and Convention Bureau to coordinate the local gardeners across the region into a single garden tour. The city-based tour grew to over 400 homes by 2019. Garden tourism also had a curious effect on like-minded gardener citizens in nearby cities. In 2012, a woman who lived in Cleveland told me, "I read the story [in the Cleveland Plain Dealer], and you know, there were 353 gardens on the Buffalo tour. I always thought of Buffalo as quote unquote the armpit of the nation. I've never actually been into Buffalo. I've driven by on the freeway, frequently. I said to my husband, Buffalo has 353 gardens on tour? I mean, it blew my mind. I said, we have to go and see this. And right from the beginning, I was aware that this article was already changing my impression of Buffalo. And I was also thinking Cleveland needs this."

This article develops a conceptual framework to explain how local actors engage in grassroots reputational making activities to separate themselves, their homes, and their city from stigmas that mark places with bad reputations, and how these reputational making activities become institutionalized in urban regeneration practices. Place reputation refers to the socially recognized and collective understandings that define a place and shape how insiders and outsiders perceive a neighborhood, city, or regional identity (Bell 2016; Brown-Saracino and Parker 2017). The literature on place reputation explains how inhabitants' experiences of living in a place do not necessarily reflect the actual place's decorated or stigmatized reputation (Sampson and Raudenbush 2004; Brown-Saracino and Parker 2017; Parker 2018; Kaufman and Kaliner 2011; Wijngaarden, Hitters, Bhansing 2019). However, less is known about how local residents mobilize to change a place's bad reputation. By incorporating insights from cultural sociology, specifically from Philip Smith's (2009) work on how the dialectical relationship between place and social action allows actors to change the meaning of places, with the concept of place reputation, this article develops a theory to explain how people are active agents that create meaningful cultural discourses and activities to make a place reputation that challenges existing stigmas.

My findings show how everyday residents – residents who are not part of the local political or economic elite – mobilized through what I define as one of two ideal type cultural frameworks: reputational reframing or reputational expansion. Reputational reframing is the discourses, narratives, and social activities geared toward changing an existing place's reputation in relation to external stigmas. Reputational expansion is the discourses, narratives, and social activities geared toward diversifying or seeking inclusion into the changing place reputation. In my study, the majority white and middle class neighborhoods mobilized to reframe Buffalo's reputation as a vibrant and safe place to live and work in relation to its stigmatized reputation as an abandoned, violent, and snow covered wasteland. In contrast, poor and working class white and segregated Black communities used reputational expansion to become part of Buffalo's changing place reputation. In practice, marginalized actors used a combination of both cultural frameworks, but their use of reputational reframing was concentrated on the neighborhood level stigma as they made claims to be included in the regional and citywide place reputation. The extent that local



actors used reputational expansion was conditioned on the degree of their perceived success of reputational reframing.

This paper uses Buffalo as a case study to draw broader implications on how place reputations matter in the debates over urban regeneration in ordinary American cities. Research on urban development overwhelmingly focuses on exceptional cities. Exceptional cities, like New York or Los Angeles, are defined by their concentrations of finance and technology, large population, as the spatial hubs of the global economy, and are key destinations for global tourism (see Sassen 1991). Exceptional cities have decorated reputations and focus on maintaining their reputations as global destinations for capital investment. In contrast, ordinary cities are urban regions that have populations between 500,000 and 3 million inhabitants, whose economic drivers include some finance and technology, but are primarily a mixture of hospitals, manufacturing, warehousing, and retail, are regional rather than global spatial hubs of the economy, and are secondary destinations for global tourism. Ordinary cities compete against exceptional cities for capital investment. Ordinary cities with stigmatized reputations, such as Cleveland (Kerr 2011) and Youngstown, Ohio, (Stafford 2009; Harrison 2017), Detroit (Hackworth 2016) and Flint, Michigan, continue to struggle with issues related to deindustrialization and find themselves in continuous cycles of urban revitalization projects. In contrast, other Rust Belt cities, including Grand Rapids, Michigan, Columbus, Ohio, Pittsburgh and Allentown, Pennsylvania (Neuman 2016; Stafford 2009) have shed some of the Rust Belt stigma from their reputations. Historically, Rust Belt civic boosters and local elites have sought to remake the image of deindustrialized cities as business friendly (Hackworth 2007) or to script marketing campaigns to declare a city has come back from a period of decline (Souther 2017). These efforts indicate how managing external perceptions of a city are a central part of elite attempts to revitalize deindustrial cities and the futility of elites' relying on marketing strategies and slogans to change the city's reputation. Thus, the different trajectories of ordinary cities in a post-industrial economy indicates that the challenges they face cannot be solved by pro-business marketing strategies to attract capital investment, but involve making new place reputations that makes an urban region a place where capital wants to invest and where people want to live.

Place stigmas

Outsiders make an urban region's decorated or stigmatized reputation. Goffman (1986) defined stigma as the gap that exists between how individuals or social groups define themselves and the perceived social identity outsiders have of them. A stigma creates an aura around a city because the stigma endures even after the city's material conditions or its economy improves. The reason why is that a stigma is rooted in "a language of relations" (Goffman 1986 p. 3) that creates a cultural framework out of select negative attributes. Stigmas are harmful because they mark places as bad or dangerous or unworthy of capital investment (Sampson and Raudenbush 2004; Sampson 2012; Pescosolido and Martin 2015; Evan and Lee 2020). Sampson and Raudenbush (2004) show how outsiders' draw from cultural stereotypes



associated with poverty and African Americans to mark neighborhoods as bad and dangerous independently from actual objective markers of urban disorder or blight. Consequently, stigmas fill in the gaps for people with incomplete or ambiguous knowledge of actual places. Even though whites rarely enter or visit a predominantly Black neighborhood, the disproportionate amount of negative media attention paid to marginalized neighborhoods reinforces the racial and class stigmas that redefine Black neighborhoods as “no go zones” (Wacquant 2008). Stigmas cause existing businesses to leave (Parker 2018) and residents to feel alienated from mainstream culture and develop oppositional cultures as means to achieve dignity and respect (Anderson 1999). A durable stigma becomes institutionalized when it becomes part of elite political discourse. The stigma attached to Buffalo and other Rust Belt regions was fashioned by the conservative movements, who used the concentration of poverty, imagery of blight, and racism to define the Rust Belt as a place unworthy of capital investment and shifted development to outlying areas in the region (Hackworth 2019).

Buffalo acquired its stigma in the 1970s as deindustrialization followed the decline of commercial traffic on the Erie Canal in the 1960s. A structural shift in global capitalism led to the closing of local factories. Its population dropped as workers left in search of jobs. The Rust Belt received no help from the federal government. Ronald Reagan’s 1981 Omnibus Budget and Reconciliation Act cut funding for urban poverty by 25% and aid to distressed Rust Belt cities by 18% (Neuman 2016 p. 80). Following the closing of the local steel mills in the early 1980s, other factories relocated to the maquilas in Mexico in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Suburbanization and urban sprawl combined with the shuttered factories and the aging and unused concrete grain mills on Lake Erie’s waterfront to create imagery of an abandoned and blighted Rust Belt city. Although the entire northeast experiences snow in the winter, the Buffalo region’s reputation is marked as a place of inclement winter weather. After a 1977 blizzard that led to twenty three deaths, late night talk show host Johnny Carson joked that the city was missing under the snow, and how Buffalo should ship their snow to drought ridden places like California. Local elites focused their efforts to rebrand the city through economic development, typically through a signature mega project similar to Baltimore’s waterfront or Boston’s Faneuil Hall (Dillaway 2006). They installed a subway line and closed off the downtown Main Street commercial district to automobile traffic to create a pedestrian mall. More businesses left and more buildings were abandoned. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a series of attempts to lure a signature retail company that would serve as an anchor tenant to develop the waterfront. No outside company was willing to take the tax credits and tax abatements to set up a mega store. It was not like there was no capital investment in the region at this time. Capital focused on suburban development and sprawl happened. But the abandoned city center symbolized the region’s stigma.

The power of the stigma weakened after the 2008 Great Recession. The question is why. The regional economic indicators tell a story of a place in a state of transition more so than a postindustrial success story. Although regional job growth, per capita income, and median housing values continue to lag behind national and New York State rates, the 2020 census revealed that the city of Buffalo’s population increased



6.5%, its first population increase since 1950, and the county's population increased 3.8% to its highest levels in twenty five years. At the county level the Buffalo region is about even with national poverty rates, but the city's 2020 poverty rate was 30%. Yet, this has not stopped housing prices from increasing 26% in the city and 24% in the county from 2010 to 2019, higher than the 8% national increase in median home value over the same period (US Census Bureau 2010, 2019, 2020). Part of the mixed economic indicators is that deindustrialization has run its course. Similar to other Rust Belt cities, the regional economy reorganized around universities and health-care. However, the restructuring of the economy is not enough to change the stigma. Another puzzling development is why firms began accepting supply side subsidies after decades of declining them. The state of New York launched its Buffalo's Billions project in 2012, which included a \$750 million subsidy to construct a solar panel factory for Solar City, which is now part of Tesla, and a new downtown medical campus anchored around the University of Buffalo's medical school. The medical campus centralized existing medical practices and displaced the poor Black residents who lived adjacent to the campus (Silverman et al. 2014). A final question is why the sudden shift in how the national media portrayed Buffalo? Throughout the deindustrial period, national media reports on the Buffalo region emphasized blight, captured in a 1982 *New York Times* byline of "New Buildings in Buffalo Can't Overshadow Blight" (Lyons 1982) and abandonment, as captured another 2000 headline in the *Times* that stated "A Fine Place to Live and Leave; Shrinking Population Shapes Buffalo's Psyche" (Eaton 2000) Since the end of the Great Recession, media outlets have avoided portrayals of the region in terms of blight, population loss, or snow. This sentiment is nicely captured in a 2018 *New York Times* article titled "36 Hours in Buffalo" that touted the region's "classic architecture, international cuisine, adventurous activities, and serious art" (Thomas 2018). The answers to these questions are found in how the region shed its stigma and replaced it with a new reputation.

Place, agency, and reputations

This section outlines a conceptual framework to explain how grassroots actors remake place reputations. The concept of reputational remaking is based on an understanding of place as giving the capacity for agency, which is found in grassroots social and civic activities, which can either change or reinforce the existing place reputation. The assumptions are that the meaning of a place's reputation is unstable, and therefore, open to modification and reinterpretation, and that place grants social actors agency through the awareness of a place's stigma *and* the capacity for social actions to debunk the place's stigmas.

The concept of place reputation emphasizes the cultural aspects of urban regeneration by focusing on how it impacts a place's socially recognized identity. Brown-Saracino and Parker defined place reputation as the "collective understanding about a place based on the stories people out in the world tell about it" (2017, p. 841). Place reputations are made by the collective action of politicians, ordinary residents, and business leaders in opposition to other places (Kaufman and Kaliner 2011;



Nelson 2015). Bell (2016) proposed the concept of reputational capital to capture how reputations are accumulated across different audiences, domains, and sectors. Thus, a city's reputation can be spoiled in the domain of real estate investment but decorated in the field of sports entertainment or cultural tourism. Reputational capital conceptually distinguishes government led investments that work through the public or private sector from cultural regeneration strategies that work through the civic sector without creating a false antimony between the two.

A place's decorated or stigmatized reputation is an unstable cultural structure, so we cannot assume a place's stigma is automatically internalized by local inhabitants or inhibits their attempts to create a new place reputation. Malpas (2018) conceptualizes the relationship between place and agency as encompassing the structure and providing the establishment that subjectivity is founded upon. He rejects the social constructionist account of place that assumes the social exists outside of or exists *a priori* to place, as well as reducing place to a psychological response to physical surroundings, in order to understand how agency always exists in a place and how place always exists in agency. Regarding how residents in ordinary cities attempt to remake a place's reputation, Malpas' work is important because it explains how place stigmas and place reputational remaking both "take place" within a place, and therefore, how inhabitants develop the capacity for place reputational remaking practices is inseparable from existing place stigmas. Although Malpas explains how place creates the possibility for agency, Smith (1999) provides a more concrete and sociological account of how agency and social actions change the meaning of places. Smith proposed that culture mediates place based interpersonal relations, and that these culturally informed actions can either reinforce a place's decorated reputation or change a place's bad reputation. While place provides the possibility for agency to exist, the meaning of place is "uneven or fractured along social cleavages, [so] the same place may embody different meanings for different social groups" (Smith 1999, p. 15). In other words, the meaning of place is always open to re-interpretation, and while we can assume that residents and outsiders have a shared awareness of the stigma, we cannot assume that local actors embrace it or seek to reproduce it. Therefore, we can conceptualize the agency of local residents to change the meaning of a place by studying the specific points at which grassroots actions challenge the place stigma because the existence of oppositional meanings – the stigma and the reputational making activities – within the same place indicates that both agency is possible and that cultural meanings are unstable and open for reinterpretation.

Methods

I used a case study design to explore how local residents mobilized through civil society to challenge Buffalo's urban stigma. My specific focus is on garden tourism. I selected the garden tours because they represented a durable social group of local activists and concerned citizens who wanted to improve the material, ecological, and symbolic image of the region. Local residents used gardening to tie the civic practices of multiple organizations into a purposive and coherent form of collective action. The garden tour was part of a network of voluntary organizations and



public-private agencies interested in local change, including neighborhood, environmental, civic, and housing justice associations that formed in the mid 1990s or early 2000s. Since the first tour in 1995, it has grown into an 8-week long event, comprising over 400 private residences in city and suburban neighborhoods.

I conceptualize gardening as a socio spatial practice that creates new meanings of place and by extension changes the perception insiders and outsiders have of that place. The actual activity of gardening is a sociological MacGuffin: it is an activity that drives collective action. It was never about the flowers. Gardening has historically been a way to signal social class and status (Veblen, 1899) and as a symbol of political power (Murkerji 1994). It is also indicative of how middle class residents' everyday discursive and social activities are a means to claim "moral ownership" and exercise symbolic power over the meaning of place, which has the effect of either preserving or changing the existing meaning of a place (Benson and Jackson 2012).

The activity of gardening created the connections between residents and between residents and place, but the civic aspects of the garden tour transformed gardening from a leisurely activity and expression of creativity to a collective practice that changed the city's reputation for insiders and outsiders alike. For the respondents in my sample, gardening and involvement with the garden tour was a social activity that blurred the boundaries between private pleasures and civic engagement. The private pleasures included how gardening was relaxing, therapeutic, and how it offered them a medium to express their creativity. Many told me they planted flowers that reminded them of loved ones who died. Additionally, they understood their involvement in the garden tour as an expression of citizenship and as a commitment to the city and the community. As Debra, a longtime resident and garden tour volunteer noted,

A lot of the reasons we are on the garden walk is because we've dug up the strip between the street and the sidewalk in a lot of places in our neighborhood. And then, I think when I started digging some of my neighbors got more interested in gardening, and then their interests kind of spread from not just from the public space but into the private space as well.

The ways that gardening blurred the boundaries between private and public made gardening a communal activity that kept costs down and connected residents to one another and the neighborhood. Residents shared and traded plants, mainly by cutting perennials, especially varieties of *Hosta*. Although there were no costs or entrance fees for placing a garden on the garden tour, to create and maintain a garden for public showing demands time and it can be expensive. Most of the time spent and financial costs were up front, e.g., new plants, mulch, hardscapes, and artwork for the garden. While the majority of people I spoke with spent between \$200 and \$300 a year, some claimed to have spent around \$1000 each year on their garden. No one complained of the time or money spent on their gardens – just the stress of the week leading up to the garden tour as they sought to create the perfect garden.

Data for this paper comes from a larger multi-city project on urban development in the Rust Belt. Data for this specific paper draws from field notes and thirty six in-depth interviews conducted between 2010 and 2018. I used purposive sampling



to select the garden tour organizations, and contacted organizational leaders who agreed to distribute an announcement via email to their members. I also approached folks who were on the tour. The in-depth interviews were residents who listed their gardens on the tour. The visitors I met overwhelmingly lived in nearby suburbs. However, I also met visitors from the Ohio River Valley, Central New York, and Southern Ontario who came to see the tour. A first round of twenty eight interviews occurred between 2010 and 2014. Eight additional interviews took place in 2018. The second sample included follow up interviews with organizational leaders after the tour expanded into two majority Black neighborhoods. All audio recordings were transcribed. I did not use any qualitative software to aid in the analysis. The analysis was theoretically driven. I constructed a code book guided by central themes in the literature on civic engagement, stigma, and collective action. The themes included the reason or rationale for their involvement, their perceived normative image of the region, the aspects of the stigma they sought to debunk, and the local urban problems. This led to the identification of three salient stigmas that local residents directed their reputational remaking strategies at: abandonment, the perception of violence, and wasteland.

Making a new place reputation

In my study, residents adopted one of two frameworks to change the city's place reputation. I define the first framework as reputational reframing: the discourses, narratives, and social activities geared toward changing an existing place's reputation in relation to the existing stigma. Thus, if a place's reputation is marked by a stigma like abandonment, local actors will use reputational reframing to redefine the place as vibrant. The second strategy was reputational expansion. I define reputational expansion as the discourses, narratives, and social activities geared toward diversifying or seeking inclusion into the changing place reputation. Reputational expansion is conditioned on the degree of success found in reputational reframing. It is a cultural framework used by marginalized residents and neighborhoods who do not want to be physically or culturally excluded due to urban regeneration.

The Buffalo garden tour groups used reputational reframing to counter three features of Buffalo's stigma. The first, abandonment, is defined by the presence of abandoned houses and empty lots that serve as the visual and material basis of the stigma. Residents used block clubs to target absentee landlords to sell their houses, preferably to someone who would live in the neighborhood. The block clubs used the garden tours to send cultural signals that they lived in a vibrant neighborhood to prospective homebuyers. The second stigma was urban violence. Urban violence captures the racialized meaning of violence in urban areas. Residents sought to deracialize urban violence by telling stories of how they were never a victim of a violent crime, and to show visitors that whites also lived in the city. The deracialized neighborhood was organized around an idealized upper middle class whiteness, defined by the physical presence of whites and elite cultural tastes, which signaled that the city was attractive and safe to likeminded outsiders. The third stigma is that the city is a wasteland. The stigma of wasteland means that the region is barren and that



there is nothing to do. Inclement winter weather accentuates rather than defines the wasteland stigma, as the snowy winters are contrasted with the relatively warm winters of the Sunbelt.

Although I conceptually divide the two reputation making frameworks into ideal types, I found that the inhabitants of marginalized neighborhoods used both. Marginalized inhabitants used reputational reframing to first debunk local neighborhood stigmas and then used reputational expansion to make the claim for inclusion into the broader new Buffalo reputation. However, whites in majority minority and working-class neighborhoods used reputational expansion differently than Blacks residents did. Both white and Black inhabitants downplayed class based stigmas. However, whites used reputational expansion to expand who counted as white in the new place reputation, while Black residents used reputational expansion to make sure they are part of the emerging place reputation of new Buffalo. The presence of dual and at times competing place reputational frameworks illustrate how cultural tensions exist at the heart of remaking place reputations.

Reputational reframing

Stigma of abandonment: from absentee landlords to homeowners

The epicenter of the garden tour was located on Buffalo's West Side. Buffalo's West Side is actually a collection of smaller neighborhoods, whose histories range from middle class bohemian strips, gay enclaves, college housing, and working class Italian and Puerto Rican neighborhoods. Their commonality is rooted in a contemporary experience of urban regeneration since 2000. The garden tours began in the mid 1990s, when many parts of the West Side still dealt with the stigma of abandonment.

Abandonment is both material and symbolic. The material aspect of abandonment refers to physically leaving an area and replacing it with nothing. The symbolic aspect of abandonment signals poverty, neglect, and that the area is not safe. Abandonment is a real problem in the Buffalo region. The percent of vacant homes in the city increased from 10.2% in 1990 to 15.7% in 2010. The city had the 9th highest vacancy rate in the United States in 2010. The city's response was to bulldoze abandoned properties (Lyons 2009). The city demolished 6,411 abandoned houses between 2000 and 2012 (Masson 2014). This compounded the problem by creating more abandoned lots, especially in its poorest neighborhoods. Combined with white flight, the issue of abandonment led to the out migration of people and businesses from neighborhoods and the city's central business district.

Residents in my sample focused on absentee landlords as the cause of abandonment. The material and symbolic aspects of abandonment were embodied by the absentee landlord. In my interviews, it was a common sentiment to break the world up into those who cared and those who did not. The people who left did not care, while the people who stayed cared. In most neighborhoods, the actual absentee landlords themselves were white, and owned multiple houses that they did not maintain. However, there was a growing number of firms and out of state landlords that owned multiple housing units and rented their units through



a local property manager who collected the rent. What made the absentee landlord a problem was that they did not care, so they rented their apartments to people who embodied the stigma or left the house unattended and open to squatters. Who embodied the stigma varied by neighborhood. In the neighborhoods located near the local colleges and universities, it was college students. College students embodied the stigma because they were noisy, partied a lot, and did not clean up or maintain the exterior of the homes. In the neighborhoods closer to the downtown corridor, it was folks with alcohol and substance abuse disorders, the mentally ill, and elderly men who lived in houses divided up into Single Room Occupancy (SRO) units. Down towards the lower West Side neighborhoods, where the neighborhoods were racially and ethnically mixed, and white residents comprised less than 40% of these neighborhoods according to the 2010 census, my respondents viewed African American and Hispanic residents as embodying the stigma because they were the visible poor. Even when my respondents were sympathetic to the need for affordable housing, they blamed absentee landlords for not being there because they did not know who was really living in their housing units or what was really going on there. The implication was that these folks were not just drug users but also drug dealers. Thus, removing the absentee landlord was akin to removing marginalized groups who embodied the stigmas associated with race and poverty or did not reflect the type of whiteness embedded in their city wide reputational remaking activities (see below).

This inference of caring versus not caring was a prominent feature on how residents in my sample reconciled differences between types of landlords. Gary, in his late 50s who lived with his longtime partner in Victorian home in an up and coming neighborhood, framed the problem of abandonment in Buffalo in historical terms via the emergence of landlords who did not care:

If everyone on the street cared, regardless of where they lived, if they cared for what they owned, then values would stay. You would attract a more, how to say this politically correct, a better quality of people. Less transient kind of people. If you have a better housing stock you can afford to charge higher rent. That in of itself, gives you a better neighborhood. A better group of people. A more responsible group of people.

Gary was blunt on how he saw the link between absentee landlords and the stigma. His note of a “better quality of people” referred to replacing poor people and college students who partied a lot with homeowners who cared. His notation of what it means to “care” refers to caring about the physical appearance of the house and the visible image of the neighborhood. The absentee landlord remained a salient theme in 2018. Another interviewee noted the problem was, “the absentee landlordism because they didn’t care because they weren’t paying attention to what was happening in the neighborhood.” And yet Robert, a retired county worker, who owned a rental unit, noted that, “I understand why people might want to have a rental, but at least live on the block and be a part of what’s going on.” The respondents were not anti-landlord or anti-rental units. The first quoted respondent, along with his partner, who wanted “better quality of people” were renters. Rather, they had a normative classification of what constituted good and bad landlords. They believed you could



develop and revitalize a city with good landlords who cared, evidenced by who they rented to and who they discriminated against.

Respondents in my sample equated removing absentee landlords to removing the cause of the stigma. The block club was the main organizing force for removing landlords who did not care while the garden tour was the main organizing force for recruiting prospective homeowners that cared. I conducted a series of interviews with residents of one particular city block. They explained how they organized through the block club to remove absentee landlords, which they viewed as the source of bringing in the marginalized and criminal aspects to their neighborhood. Linda, a local teacher, reflected on the early formation of the block club, "When we first moved here the block club met every month. We haven't had a meeting in over two years now. Things have settled down. If we had a problem, [it was] how do we get landlords to rent to decent people rather than pimps and prostitutes and druggies. And that would be a large part of our meetings in the earlier years." The main actions that the block clubs took to remove absentee landlords was to pressure them to sell their homes. As she explained to me:

We put this phone list together. We called, we not only called 911, we called the landlords. We went downtown, got records, the records by now are on the web, but at that time it was a mix of being on the web and not being on the web. We would call the owners at 2 am to say, here, listen to your tenant. Here, you want to see what is going on at your property? No, no you don't, well we're going to share with you anyhow. And that was over and over, and then we would say, why don't you sell your property?

She still had the list, handwritten on a piece of white notebook paper that was well creased and had faded to a yellow brown color on the ends, with the names and phone numbers of all the members of the block club. Their strategy was to harass the landlord into selling the home: "Because we had a plan in mind to put people in here who wanted to live here and wanted to be invested in the neighborhood, to be at a grassroots level and turn things around." This was the point that they used the garden tour to recruit and attract potential homeowners who cared, "So, putting the gardens there, I think they were, like I said, not only contagious but inspirational. They helped. They were catalysts to wanting to take care of your property. To wanting to do better."

The garden tour brought in visitors who never ventured to this neighborhood. As the block went from a single house on the garden tour to a cluster of homes, the number of visitors continued to grow. One of Linda's neighbors, Sara, indicated to me that she "started doing hash marks on a piece of paper" to count the visitors but that "in the last two years we've had more than 4000 people come through our backyard. I bought a counter. The hash marks were getting tedious." Homes that normally sold for \$15,000 to \$40,000 in 2000 sold between \$150,000 to \$200,000 in 2014. By 2019, this West Side neighborhood was gentrified (see Adelman et al. 2019).

This pattern of first using the block clubs to remove absentee landlords and then using the garden tour to recruit was a recurrent pattern in the stories told by the interviewees. Joining the garden tour was a way to show off their neighborhood to



prospective homebuyers who would purchase and fix up the abandoned properties. Reflecting on the notion of “curb appeal,” Michael, a long-time resident who works in real estate, stated,

Appraisals don’t care about it, it adds absolutely no value, no economic value to the property. But it sends a signal to people whether they think this neighborhood is OK, it’s safe, look at the outside, look at the fronts, how everybody is keeping them. Or it says to people, oh, the people that live here don’t care. And what’s wrong with the neighborhood that they won’t even make their front yard look good.

Cultural signals are ways of communicating to others who we are and who we are not without using words. In this case, the garden tours sent new Buffalo reputational signals to counter the old Buffalo stigma. Curb appeal signaled to outsiders that this neighborhood is safe and populated with home owners who care.

Stories of outsiders discovering their neighborhood or street were common, so I found someone who purchased a home because of the garden tour. In a second round of interviews in 2018, I met with a couple who decided to move to their current house because of the garden tour:

Interviewer: You guys discovered the neighborhood through the garden walk?

Barbara: That’s how we came on the street.

Joseph: That’s how we discovered the street. We never even saw the street. We didn’t even know it existed before.

They purchased their home before the Great Recession. Although Joseph said that the neighborhood “felt like a certain sense of Europe, at least I can’t say I’ve been to lots of places other than France, Italy” the house they purchased was abandoned. The previous owner, who used the house as an unlicensed rooming home, was evicted from another house he owned, and was in jeopardy of losing this house for back taxes. They returned to the street several times before making an offer of \$27,000, which the owner eagerly took. They estimated that “We’ve put in more than ten times the purchase price in this house. Just doing the utilities.” They spent the following year throwing out trash, putting bars on basement windows, and reinstalling the steps from the basement to the first floor. The stairs were removed to deter theft. Would be burglars entered the house through broken basement windows to access the first floor. A year later, they began installing gardens in the front and back yard, and soon after, joined the garden tour. Why did they put so much emotional and economic investment into the house? They were attracted to the historical architecture and becoming part of the community of others who cared: “How things look is a hugely important thing for the quality of life, and it doesn’t have to be hugely expensive, as long as it’s picked up, whether the yards looked tended, some or lots of flowers or whatever. It exhibits that people care where they live.”



Stigma of violence: deracializing the urban environment

The second aspect of the old Buffalo stigma was violence. The real or perceived presence of urban violence marks a city and a neighborhood as a dangerous place. Although neighborhoods and cities have been marked by the stigma of violence for some time (Sampson and Wilson 1995), the contemporary stigma of urban violence is associated with the impression that African Americans account for all the crime and violence in a city. Rather than combat racism, residents used reputational reframing to deracialize the city's reputation. Deracialization is the process of severing the cultural association between race and a social practice, like violence, a legal classification like citizenship, or a neighborhood (Hohle 2009). By embedding deracialization into their reputational remaking activities, residents were remaking the place's reputation around a form of whiteness that countered the class based and racial stigmas embedded in the public perception of urban violence.

The main garden tour was overwhelmingly white and middle class. During the garden tour, the homeowner played the role of host or hostess and storyteller. The role of the white story teller is to deracialize the experience of living in the city by inserting him or herself as the representation of who lives in the city:

I mean, that's one of the biggest reasons I do it, to show off the city. They get so crazy about, "oh my god, I never thought there'd be a house like this in the city of Buffalo" And that's becoming less and less as the years go on. When you talk to people who have been on this garden walk since its inception, they will tell you stories of people coming and asking "Where do you keep your gun?" and, you know, "have you had many people come back and break into your house?"

Emma, a master gardener, understood her participation in the garden tour as having a broader impact on the city's changing reputation. For her, one indication of the reputational change was visitors' disbelief that the city has nice homes and how the questions surrounding violence waned over the years. My respondents also told stories of personal safety to reframe violence as a stereotype held by outsiders that did not reflect the reality of living in the city. The stories of personal safety centered on how they were never personally a victim of violence:

So, I'd say my office is in the city they'd say "oh I can't go in the city, I'll be raped." Well, okay, I've lived in the city, I've never been raped. So, I do think it breaks, it has some potential to break certain stereotypes. Plus, because we have evolved into this gigantic garden walk, I think it's a little bit of an antidote to some of the negative parts.

Emma framed her participation on the garden tour as providing "an antidote" to "certain stereotypes." The white storytellers' tales of safety countered the racial stigma of violent city neighborhoods. Her agency and credibility are made possible because she is physically telling her stories within a place to debunk the stigmas about the place.



Residents sought to deracialize the urban environment rather than violent crime itself. The logic behind deracializing the urban environment was to communicate to outsiders that new Buffalo was a white rather than a racially and ethnically diverse urban region. As Alan, a self-described liberal in his 50s noted:

I think that when things were starting with the garden walk, I think it did help out the image of the city. And I think the people that came and were from the suburbs, the local suburbs, I think many of them were just taken by it, and maybe that there are even some white people here! As opposed to what they see on the news.

He understood the way racism worked in defining Buffalo's place reputation. The Black-white dichotomy was easily laid over a city-suburb dichotomy, and part of how whites interpret the urban environment is through the physical presence of Black residents. Other white respondents, such as Jack, an organizer and professional designer, did as well, "Because, again, the more you get people, especially white suburban people, into these neighborhoods, to say, ahh, the neighborhoods aren't that scary, oh, they're nice people." This was a nearly all white movement targeting the racism of other whites. But it was not an anti-racist movement by any means. They did not highlight the region's racial and cultural diversity. They were actively changing the city's reputation, but they were doing so on the foundation of existing racial and economic inequalities.

Stigma of wasteland: nice weather and upscale amenities

The final stigma was that the region is a wasteland. The stigma of a wasteland conjures up an image of the region as a bleak place with no present, future, or hope. No one wants to move to or live in a wasteland. The wasteland stigma is fed by a lack of amenities. The garden tour worked with local civic and business groups and the region's Tourism and Convention Bureau. Collectively, their reputational reframing efforts centered on elite cultural organizations and amenities in the area. Similar to the reputational reframing around abandonment and violence that inserted a normative ideal of whiteness into Buffalo's emerging place reputation, the emphasis on cultural elites was about aligning the place reputation with elite cultural tastes, rather than with sports or outdoor recreational activities, that signaled that a decent quality of life is possible in the region for white professionals.

My interviewees were well aware of Buffalo's stigma as a wasteland. Despite the real concerns over abandonment, Amanda felt that the wasteland stigma was undeserved, "We get a bad rap. We have a bunch of things that are jewels that people don't know about, people from other places, that the neighborhoods are wonderful. Architecture, art, music, I mean you can go down the list. Housing." Like other respondents, she wove the region's cultural "jewels" with the issue of affordable housing. This interview was conducted a few years after the 2008 recession, when housing values had plummeted in markets across the country. Buffalo, however, was left relatively unscathed because there was never a regional housing bubble to burst. She viewed housing as affordable and stable. Yet, organizers and other civic



leaders used the garden tour to highlight the region's cultural jewels, not its affordable housing.

My interviewees were also aware of how snow and inclement weather accentuated the wasteland stigma. Many of the folks I interviewed speculated that the popularity of gardening was due to the residents taking advantage of the four to six months of nice weather. However, organizers were strategic in highlighting the summer gardens and outdoor spaces in relation to snow. James, an organizational leader and long-time participant on the tours, explained how they worked with select national media to debunk the snow covered wasteland stigma:

Not to mention the publicity we got from Martha Stewart last year and all of those things. I think that people were really surprised and said Buffalo has a lot to offer and when you look around and see the architecture and the restaurants and everything that goes along with it. I think people are starting to see us in a completely different light, that we are not just snow.

The garden tours were able to reframe the city's reputation by associating it with elite cultural tastes and home design lifestyle brands, like Martha Stewart and Home and Gardening magazines, because these were the national media outlets one would least expect to find Buffalo. One expects snow and blight and chicken wings and what you see are gardens accenting Victorian and Queen Anne homes.

The garden tour organizations worked with the elite local culture industry to highlight the upscale cultural amenities. The elite local cultural industry included the Albright-Knox Art Museum, Robert Olmsted Park Conservatory, and the non-profit historic preservationist organizations that restore and manage buildings designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and Henry Hobson Richardson. These organizations are elite run non-profit organizations situated in the cultural tourism industry. On the one hand, the mobilization of residents through civil society in the Buffalo region is significant because the area did not historically have a vibrant civil society or history of urban social movements. Buffalo's urban development has historically been elite controlled, and associational life was tied to religious organizations in the white catholic and Black neighborhoods (Dillaway 2006; Goldman 2007). On the other hand, the tie between the voluntary sector and municipal organizations institutionalized a new place reputation discourse. One characteristic of Rust Belt regions that have found success in the post-industrial era are the institutional relationships between local elites and the community (Safford 2009). The Convention and Tourism Bureau coordinated the marketing of all of them, and directed out-of-town guests to these cultural sites. The garden tour organizations brought out of town members of the media, typically writers who wrote for garden magazines and the travel and leisure sections of major newspapers, to cover the tours. They paired their writings about the gardens with the local upscale amenities. What made the garden tours different from marketing a local tourism event, like the Chicken Wing Festival or a NCAA basketball tournament, was the garden tours were about changing outsider's perception of the region in hopes of triggering urban development rather than generating tax revenue for the city and county (Tables 1 and 2).

Finally, the garden tour organizations worked with the local business associations to promote local amenities, like urban shopping districts and restaurants.



Table 1 Demographics of Interviewees

Gender	Occupation
Male = 15	Education = 3
Female = 21	Non-profit sector = 3
<i>Race and Ethnicity</i>	<i>Government = 3</i>
White = 32	Secretary = 3
Black = 3	Healthcare = 5
Hispanic = 1	Public relations/journalism = 2
<i>Age</i>	<i>Warehouse = 1</i>
30s = 2	Artist = 3
40s = 10	Cook = 1
50s = 13	Professional/managerial = 3
60s = 6	Lawyer = 1
70 and over = 5	Real Estate = 1
<i>Originally from city/metro area</i>	<i>Retired = 3</i>
Yes = 17	Not presently working = 3
No = 19	

This exemplifies using reputational reframing by linking the tours with the already existing vibrant urban business districts that were revitalized, in part, by the same residents involved in the garden tours. Another organizer, Ava, a retired school teacher involved in the garden tours since its earliest days, reflected on the relationship between the garden tours, the community, and local businesses, “I think what they’ve [garden tour] done with the trolleys and parking and having a list of restaurants, you know those kinds of things. The community has done pretty good to welcome and make people from out of town feel comfortable coming here.” Working with the business associations was beneficial from the organization’s standpoint. As the garden tours grew in popularity, so too did the donations from local firms to help offset the costs of advertising. More importantly, working with the Convention and Tourism Bureau allowed the garden tour organizers to concretize reputational reframing in various organizational practices. Reputational reframing connected the blocks clubs with the garden tours and the business associations with the local cultural elite industry and government agencies interested in urban regeneration.

Reputational expansion

Residents who lived outside of Buffalo’s West Side neighborhoods wanted to be part of the city’s urban regeneration. They combined reputational reframing with a second framework of reputational expansion. One indication that the reputational reframing worked was how other city and suburban inhabitants used garden tourism as a reputational remaking activity. There were two sub forms of reputational expansion that varied primarily by the race of the residents. The first was reputational expansion and inclusion. Marginalized whites used reputational expansion to emphasize the similarity between their neighborhoods and the upscale



Table 2 Stigma and place reputational making activities

Stigma	Reputational Reframing	Reputational Expansion and Inclusion	Reputational Expansion and Diversity
Abandonment	Send cultural signals that the neighborhood is vibrant and comprised of residents who care	Target renters that send cultural signals of urban disorder	Target landlords that send cultural signals of urban disorder
Urban Violence	Deracialize image of city and recenter it on whiteness	Downplay class and cultural differences and emphasize shared whiteness	Debunk stereotypes of violence and displace whiteness
Wasteland	Emphasize the existence of upscale cultural amenities	Nostalgia for amenities geared toward “good white families”	Target continued Black displacement from neighborhoods



neighborhoods on the basis of whiteness rather than social class. This was a salient feature in whites who lived in mixed race and working class neighborhoods. The second was reputational expansion and diversity. This was a salient feature of Black residents who started their own garden tour in 2018. Although both wanted to be included in the city and region's new place reputation, marginalized whites sought a form of inclusion that continued to exclude Black residents, while Black residents sought a form of inclusion that displaced whiteness at the dominant representation of Buffalo's new reputation. Regardless of their differences, both saw how other parts of the city mobilized through gardening and hoped that they could create similar results for their neighborhoods.

Reputational expansion and inclusion

Whites who lived in neighborhoods mired in a state of economic and racial transition organized their neighborhood civic activities around reputational expansion and inclusion. These whites were caught between two images, a stigma that they did not want and a representation of whiteness they did not reflect. They used reputational expansion to create connections between them and other white neighborhoods. Laura, an organizer, secretary, and longtime resident who helped organize the first garden tour in her neighborhood, blamed the media: "The media is wrong, it's a nice place to be. I mean every neighborhood has a problem. I mean every area, I mean even the suburbs, where there's no crime. We know there's no crime in the suburbs, OK." By noting that violence was everywhere, she made the claim that her neighborhood was just like the other white neighborhoods. Although the media was often targeted as the source of spreading the stigma, the interviewees were not in denial that they lived in places with real problems. Rather, they felt like they were being singled out. They disproportionately felt the impact of the stigma, especially as other places experienced a turnaround while their neighborhoods continued to struggle with abandonment and crime.

Working class whites used reputational reframing to create neighborhood pride and then reputational expansion to align it with the place reputation of new Buffalo. What was different was how they used the garden tour to primarily stimulate civic pride among the neighbors who already lived there. One organizer, Dana, a retired long term resident who lived in a mixed raced neighborhood up town known for its college housing, explained to me, "The goal of the Garden Walk was to create pride in our individual homes and generate it to the individual communities and that's pretty much happened." The notion of "creating pride" was directed at existing residents rather than outsiders. They challenged the stigma of abandonment by getting people to care about where they lived by improving the appearance of their home. A bad house not only signaled that one did not care, it served as means of continued exclusion from the reputation of new Buffalo. We see this in how sensitive whites in these neighborhoods were to the cultural signals sent by a few bad houses. Henry, a white resident who lived on the East Side in a predominantly working class Black neighborhood, was aware of the cultural signals that the visible appearance of the neighborhood communicated to others: "I try to do it to encourage them to keep it



up, you know, that it beautifies the street. And it sends a positive message to people just driving down the street to keep it clean, and that we care enough to keep it this way.” Rather than view a handful of good houses as having the power to change the stigma, they viewed a handful of bad houses as negating their efforts. Anne, a white woman also residing in a mixed race working class neighborhood, noted that a bad house “sends a really bad message about the entire neighborhood. Like ‘oh look at the way they keep up.’ They don’t notice all the nice houses. They notice that one bad one and think that they’re in a bad neighborhood. I hate to think about it in a negative way but I think that.” The perception that one bad house defines a neighborhood’s reputation reflects the power of the stigma. As residents in stigmatized places internalize the stigma, they begin to see themselves through the lens of the stigma. It generates a sense of hopelessness. The absence of outside indicators, like new neighbors or new amenities, feeds the stigma. The use of reputational expansion was a means to change the place’s reputation among insiders by emphasizing the similarities between them and the regenerated white neighborhoods.

White residents who did not reflect the middle class whiteness of new Buffalo were either working class or did not work at all. They lived in modest homes that were not considered historical or architectural gems. And they lived in a racially and ethnically heterogeneous neighborhood. These whites shifted between wanting to redevelop their neighborhoods around the nostalgia of working class families to wanting the poor and Black populations out of “their” neighborhoods. For them, reputational expansion was done through deeper structural issues of inclusion and exclusion. Their inclusion was made relationally to racial and ethnic groups they wanted to exclude. In the spring of 2010, I sat down with two organizers who used a gardening metaphor of “weed and seed” to describe what was happening in their neighborhood:

Laura: Unfortunately, in the Westside, they had weed and seed.

Interviewer: What’s weed and seed?

Laura: It’s a federal program where you weed out the bad and seed good.

Diane: Problem is they moved elsewhere like rats.

Laura: Right, and they moved into [our neighborhood].

Diane: So, we wanna move them into the Niagara River and down by the Falls.

No, it’s not possible, but unfortunately, they moved the problem. They’re moving it out, out of the Westside, but they moved it into [our neighborhood].

The groups these two women referred to as “rats” are a mixture of Black, Puerto Rican, and South East Asians. Over the course of 20 years, the regeneration of Buffalo’s West Side displaced poor and minority residents to adjacent neighborhoods. This group hoped to use gardening to attract white homeowners to return to “their” neighborhood and displace the already displaced.

Although white residents embedded a nostalgia for white working class neighborhoods in their reputational expansion and inclusion activities, they did not always describe their actions and goals in racially charged rhetoric. It was usually told through a colorblind lens of neighborhood stability. As a local activist explained to me, the real goal behind her involvement in the garden tours was to create neighborhood stability through homeownership and families:



It's a nice area you know, it's changed, it's transitioned. But show that it's a good place to raise a family. We're sick of renters, not rentals. You want homeowners, you don't want the transient people who move out in the middle of the night, because I see U-Haul's going down the street. You want families, you want to bring that all back. You want a good business district. It just doesn't happen because you go like this, you know, it takes families and people to support it. And you don't get to know families without having good amenities, and you don't know what comes first, the chicken or the egg, so you just gotta throw everything in the pot and hope this is what you've created.

This nostalgia for a white neighborhood shows up in how she linked “good amenities” and a “good business district” with stable white families. It is also present in the way she contrasted “families” and “homeowners” with “transient people.” The transient people utterance referred to racial minorities. She also blamed absentee landlords who did not care who they rented to. However, rather than target the absentee landlords like whites who used reputational reframing strategies did, these whites used reputational expansion and inclusion to target the renters. By using the basis of whiteness as a means to achieve reputational expansion and inclusion, whites in these places harden boundaries between themselves and their nonwhite neighbors. They wanted the neighborhood to get better. And they wanted it to be segregated.

Reputational expansion and diversity

The two Black neighborhoods on the garden tour joined in 2018. Black neighborhoods previously attempted to join the garden tour, but the main garden tour organization turned them down on the basis that the garden tours were organized by neighborhood. The garden tour was on the West Side while Buffalo's majority Black neighborhoods are all located on its East Side. This made the garden tour overwhelmingly white and middle class. My sample reflected that population. Although the East Side garden tour has not been around long enough to draw general comparative inferences, East Side residents used a different reputation remaking framework than whites living in marginalized neighborhoods. Black respondents in my study explained their reasons for starting a garden tour first through a strategy of reputational reframing aimed at insiders to address the issues of abandonment and outsiders' perception of violence, followed by reputational expansion and diversity to displace whiteness embedded in the new Buffalo place reputation.

Reputational expansion and diversity meant creating a symbolic bridge between white and Black neighborhoods. The obvious difference between Black and all white neighborhoods is the role of racism. Racism generated the stigma and material conditions of urban blight and poverty that Blacks residents are disproportionately forced to endure. I asked a Black woman why she showed her house on the tour. Her response expressed both doubts on whether or not it mattered and the optimism of diversifying Buffalo's place reputation. She thought that mobilizing the community around gardening was more of a “bottom part of bringing people together.” Yet, she showed her house on the garden tour because



“you don’t see African Americans on the Garden Walk” and noted that white visitors to her home kept asking her “Is this the East Side?” in relation to existing white racial stereotypes of Black communities. As another woman who showed her house on the tour succinctly put it, “You expect to see burned down buildings, rundown buildings, not kept up neighborhoods. And that’s not the case. The East Side gets a bad rep.” They hoped to use the garden tour to change the neighborhood’s reputation by changing what outsiders saw: “I wanted to represent my neighborhood... I want somebody to look at the garden, not at the five vacant houses owned by banks and the one vacant house owned by a person that is abandoned one block from where we are sitting.” These three respondents shared the perspective that the East Side’s stigmatized reputation was unfair and undeserving. Mobilizing through the neighborhood and garden tour was one means to debunk the stigma.

Abandonment was an even bigger problem on the East Side than the city as a whole. The degree of abandonment and blight is amplified in hypersegregated neighborhoods (Massey and Denton 1993). Reputational expansion involves importing the institutional practices and discourses used to address abandonment from other block clubs and garden tour groups. Black residents also used the discursive framework of caring versus not caring landlords:

I would love for the neighborhood to pick up and everybody get involved. Unfortunately, there are quite a few homes in this area that are still rentals. Those people don’t really care, but the home owners who do live here would be really great if they all made their property look better and made the value of your home go up and just as the neighborhood, it makes the neighborhood kind of come together... The house behind me is just horrible. Every time I walk by, I’m mumbling because, and I’m sure one of them I know is a rental, and they don’t care.

Unlike the white neighborhoods that used reputational expansion strategies in my sample, this Black neighborhood did not have a block club. They were only beginning to organize and their primary means to do so was through personal networks between neighbors. Therefore, the language of caring versus not caring reflects the interactions with organizers from the main garden tour that provided organizational templates, advice, and best practices aimed at using a garden tour to regenerate the neighborhood.

The discursive framework of caring was salient in this neighborhood because of the devastating historical effect residential segregation had on Buffalo’s Black communities. In particular was how severe forms of abandonment and violence led to Black displacement from Black neighborhoods. Indeed, one woman explained to me the reasons why she got involved was that: “I want this to be a place that I can stay in. I don’t want to be the last person out of this neighborhood like my grandmother was on [street name]. She was forced out of her own home that she had lived in her entire life. It just wasn’t safe anymore. And if we don’t work as a unit here, we’re going to be defeating our own purpose.” The prospect of getting her neighbors to care would not only create the kind of community she wanted to live in, it would allow her to age in place.



The impact of reputational reframing on insiders and outsiders

The reputational making activities impacted both insiders and outsiders. It created a cultural framework for insiders to see themselves and their city differently from the stigma. Inhabitants did not automatically view the places that they live negatively. As Rebecca, who at the time was in her mid 30s, grew up in the city, and had recently bought a house with her husband, explained to me that being part of civic groups like the garden tour changed her perspective on the city:

Rebecca: People that are involved in revitalization weren't around when Buffalo was steel mills. They don't remember that. We got all this other stuff. We don't have to think about the past.

Interviewer: Who do we have to prove that to? Ourselves or other people?

Rebecca: I think it's the perception of other people. And I think it's people here. Because when people bash Buffalo, I'm like, move away. You'll be back. I'm telling you.

For some insiders, the positives of living in the Rust Belt, such as the presence of family and emotional connections to the Rust Belt itself, outweighs the benefits of better economic opportunities elsewhere (Harrison 2017). However, remaining in a place because of the pull of family is different from wanting to live in a place. For Rebecca, garden tourism represented a break from the past and the start of something new. If shuttered steel mills represented the past, then the blooming flowers represented the future, a future wrapped in optimism and hope among insiders, especially longtime residents.

We can see that both the enduring power of the stigma and the emergence of a new place reputation existed simultaneously in how outsiders perceived Buffalo's place reputation. Outsider's perception of Buffalo were shaped by issues like crime and poverty and abandonment, and although these issues were concentrated in specific neighborhoods, respondents in my sample understood them to be city wide characteristics of Buffalo. For example, a long time suburban resident who grew up in the city, and who was semiretired and caring for an aging family member at the time of the interview, saw the city through the stigma:

I can remember when I was a young girl you never heard of anyone being shot. And now it's a daily occurrence. I'm sure the drug situation in the city area has brought that on. I believe more than anything the lack of community. I really believe that's where we lost. I mean, you go into certain areas and you can see that the neighborhood is, you know, falling down.

She selected and then racialized a specific neighborhood attribute connected to stigma and projected it onto the city. Yet, despite viewing the city through the lens of the stigma, she still drove into the city for the tours. The gap between her view of the city and her social actions to visit the city indicates the influence of the new place's reputation. In contrast, a woman in her 40s who is a professional musician and moved to Buffalo from Canada said,



I never thought that I would live in Buffalo, but for me right I think it's great... I grew up in Toronto and I always heard that Buffalo was always on fire or something. When I moved here, I was so pleasantly surprised that my family had come to this particular neighborhood and saw how beautiful it was.

She filled her incomplete knowledge of the city and the area with the stigma. However, her view of the city changed after her experiences living in the city conflicted with the preexisting stigma. The instability of the place's reputation explains why these two women viewed the same place reputation in very different ways. However, the reputational making activities explains why the suburban respondent continued to see the city through the stigma and yet still partook in the garden tour activities. Reputational remaking also structured how the respondent living in one of the up and coming city neighborhoods experienced living in the city as a pleasurable place to live, in spite of the stigma that structured everything she previously knew about the place.

Conclusion

My findings shed light on the importance of culture and agency in the urban regeneration of ordinary cities. Rust Belt cities like Buffalo have been caught in a chicken and egg dilemma of whether capital investment is necessary to attract population or if population increases are necessary to attract capital. It turns out that cultural stigmas act as a barrier to both, and can be responsible for driving existing jobs and populations out of the area. The primary reason local residents mobilized to change outsiders' perception of the Buffalo region was due to the persistent failure of local elites to spearhead post-industrial economic development, either by attracting outside companies to relocate to the region, keeping the existing manufacturing sector from contracting, or developing local companies into national or international firms. There was a collective sentiment among the respondents that the only thing holding the region back were the outsiders' stereotypical impressions of the place. Whereas the literature on stigmas highlights the negative effects stigmas have on the places and people who reside there, this paper shows how local residents engaged in reputation making activities to debunk the stigmas and replace it with a new and positive place reputation.

The formation of a voluntary organization allowed the garden tours to expand originally across Buffalo's West Side, and then as a region wide organization. That they stumbled on garden tourism as a means to do so was at first accidental, given that the first few years of the tour was a handful of houses on a single city block. But participants quickly identified that gardening was a way to tie beautification efforts with civic pride. The importance of the organizational expansion was that it institutionalized a language of reputational reframing. Local block clubs used garden tourism to send cultural signals to outsiders that their neighborhood was up and coming, safe, and predominantly white and middle class. However, as more class and racially diverse neighborhoods entered the fray, these residents developed their own reputational reframing activities aimed at diversifying the reputation of new



Buffalo. As parts of the city went from bleak to chic, marginalized neighborhoods adopted reputational expansion activities in hopes of a similar turnaround. Marginalized whites used reputational expansion and inclusion to make claims for inclusion on the basis of shared whiteness, but at the continued exclusion of nonwhites. The majority Black neighborhoods used reputational expansion and diversity as a strategy to decenter the whiteness at the center of the new Buffalo place reputation. The existence of multiple types of reputation remaking frameworks indicates the ways that specific activities are institutionalized when residents associate them with social change. Marginalized residents mobilized through garden tourism as means of reputational expansion only after the dominant group achieved a degree of success through reputational reframing. They adopted and repurposed reputational reframing to fit their place based objectives to expand who was included in the city's new place reputation. This indicates how place reputational remaking activities become institutionalized as they become effective without erasing the agency of local actors.

We can assess the residents' success in changing the place's reputation on two dimensions: on outsiders and insiders. Regarding outsiders, there was an abrupt shift from capital disinvestment and population loss to the increase of private and public investment and a population increase in the city itself between 2010 and 2020. Investments flowed into the places where grassroots activities took place, especially the location of the garden tours. If outsiders use negative media portrayals of places to fill their ambiguous knowledge gaps of a city, then emergence of positive media stories also has the effect of filling an outsider's ambiguous knowledge gap of a city with positive images. Outsiders, including residents and public officials from other cities, visited the garden tour and solicited organizational leaders for advice on starting their own local garden tours hoping to replicate the effect they experienced in Buffalo. Regarding insiders, evidence that the reputational remaking practices worked is evidenced in how marginalized groups made claims to be part of the new Buffalo reputation. Following Malpas and Smith's theories of place and agency, insiders are aware of the stigmas and new place reputation activities, but the creation of the new place reputation also created the capacity for marginalized groups to make claims for reputational inclusion. The fact that they settled on forming their own garden tours highlights the impact garden tourism made and the extent the garden tours changed how existing residents who, by virtue of their race and or class, were outsiders in their own right.

The creation of a new Buffalo place reputation did not supplant existing class or racial inequalities. Residents targeted absentee landlords to replace them with homeowners or others who would rent out the units at market rate. It was not a housing justice movement. The residents sought to deracialize the image of the city rather than create a diverse or inclusive image of the city. This follows that the primary winners of the reputational changes were white middle class residents, who managed to change the physical properties and symbolic representation of the city to reflect themselves. Even working class white neighborhoods, specifically neighborhoods with garden tours that are located adjacent to the West Side, have experienced an uptick in capital investment and development. Real estate elites also benefited from a reputational change to capture the increased demand for housing and rising rents, as did the city and county governments who enjoyed an expanded tax base and



tax revenue. Little evidence exists to support that the reputational changes led to any material or symbolic benefits in Black neighborhoods. This points to the limits and underside of remaking place reputations. The absence of an overall moral commitment to racial and class inclusion inadvertently maintains existing forms of spatial inequality. While the reputation of the city or region may change, the new reputation hides real and existing spatial inequalities that make up everyday life in the Rust Belt.

Although the case study methodology limits the extent that I can draw broader theoretical inferences, it is nevertheless a starting point to develop broader theories on place reputations and urban development on ordinary cities and places like America's Rust Belt. Our understandings of urban development overwhelmingly rely on studies of global cities, which are then imported into ordinary cities, which inadvertently creates the impression that something like gentrification is the definitive experience of all urban areas (Mallach 2018), when gentrification, as Zukin stated, "is not the most important urban trend" (2016, p. 202). This makes gentrification an overused concept that has lost much of its critical application toward explaining urban change and inhibits our ability to theorize urban development in ordinary cities. Rather, the study of Rust Belt and ordinary cities has to account for how the grassroots social activities that are redefining place reputations, and how these reputational making activities are key aspects to how ordinary cities proceed with urban development.

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Randolph Hohle is an associate professor of sociology at SUNY Fredonia. He is the author of *The American Housing Question: Racism, Urban Citizenship and the Privilege of Mobility* (Lexington 2021), *Racism in the Neoliberal Era: A Meta History of Elite White Power* (Routledge 2018), *Race and the Origins of American Neoliberalism* (Routledge 2015), *Black Citizenship and Authenticity in the Civil Rights Movement* (Routledge 2013) and co-author of the 6th edition of the *New Urban Sociology* (Routledge 2019).

