

DIVERSE CITIES: THE LEGACY OF COLONIALISM AND PERSISTENCE OF RACISM IN NEW YORK CITY

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In highly urbanised North America and Europe, local governments are facing protests against gentrification and displacement. The protests often open up new avenues for affected populations to participate in local decision-making – through community-based planning, participatory budgeting, and other inclusionary tactics. In response to threats of displacement of vulnerable populations, diversity – of ethnicity, race, gender, age and sexual orientation – is often recognised as a powerful element to be protected and promoted in local policy. It may lead to progress in realising the right to the city. In this chapter I will question whether inclusionary tactics tend to undo or reinforce diversity, considering the case of New York City.

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Within North America, New York City has a longstanding reputation for ethnic and racial diversity and tolerance of difference. However, in this city, where the majority of inhabitants are immigrants and the descendants of immigrants, the persistence of socioeconomic inequalities and disproportionate vulnerability of minorities to displacement are vivid reminders of how the long history of colonialism and racism remains an obstacle to the emergence of democratic and socially just cities. I will argue that behind the veneer of the diverse city we find one of the most ethnically segregated cities in the world. Attempts at participatory democracy obscure longstanding prejudices that interpret diversity through the lens of colonial and racist ideology, and reconstruct the economic and social divisions inherited from the past. The uncontested power of private property, the cornerstone of settler colonialism, territorial expansion and “The American Dream” of individual home ownership, is instrumental in reproducing gentrification, displacement and inequalities in cities and metropolitan regions throughout the nation.

I will first establish the context in North America, before discussing New York City and the case of one neighbourhood, Inwood.

I. Land and colonial North America

One of the great national myths in the United States is that the immigrants who came from Europe to free themselves from oppressive regimes and economic conditions defeated the colonial powers in America – Britain,

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France and Spain – and settled a mostly unpopulated continent. Indeed, Columbus was said to have “discovered” an American wilderness and settlers moving west were said to have occupied a barren land. The truth is that America was already occupied by indigenous nations. The settlers claimed land stewarded by indigenous people for themselves; militias and soldiers were dispatched to protect the white settlers; and some 38 million indigenous people died from the violence and diseases visited upon them as they were evicted. In the mid-nineteenth century “manifest destiny” was a popular cry that asserted that the US was destined to settle the entire continent. Thus, displacement was part of the story of colonisation from the start (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014) and both have remained central elements of modern urban development.

Most of what is now the United States of America – the 50 states making up the union – were previously lands under the stewardship of native nations, colonial territories occupied by European powers, or large parts of Mexico. The nation’s founders in 1776 included only the 13 states that were colonies under the British Empire. New states were added after more than a century of westward expansion abetted by military force and the injection of capital to build railroads and other infrastructure. Most important for our understanding of how this affects diversity and displacement in US cities are the radically different approaches to land of the settlers and indigenous people. Indigenous people treated the land as a sacred and integral part of life. The settlers treated land as a commodity, established individual ownership, and left large swaths under the trusteeship of the government for national parks, railroads and mining concessions; indigenous people were excluded from these lands (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014).

The right to land ownership is enshrined in the US Constitution and is treated as the basis for all other individual rights. In practice, it is a hallmark of white privilege. Property owners were mostly white males, and as land ownership was the point of entry into government, land was therefore the foundation for political power. Even today, the largest urban landowners are corporations and investment trusts mostly owned and controlled by white males. Cities in the United States develop in accordance with the private land market, where the role of government has been to regulate growth through zoning, taxation and health codes. Moves towards comprehensive planning in the public interest have been limited and at best resulted in big infrastructure projects, like the federal interstate highway network, which promoted private land development.

As historian Kenneth Jackson has demonstrated, the westward expansion in the 19th century and the establishment of private homesteads (on land once stewarded by indigenous people) was followed by a similar process of suburban development in the 20th century. Both were based on “The American Dream” of individual home ownership, a privilege unavailable to blacks due to slavery and then discrimination in the real estate, finance and insurance industries (Jackson, 1985). The dream would be supplemented by economic growth based on individual car ownership, individual computers, individual phones and electronic devices, and a surrender to mass consumption.

Coloniality in the US is not simply a remnant of the past. It lives on in the present. The US has a military presence in every part of the

globe and spends more on weapons than all other nations combined. However, the United States has dominated nations across the globe not by direct colonial rule but through nominally democratic proxy regimes, economic control, and military interventions. In the epoch of globalised capitalism the US exercises imperial power on a scale that none of the older colonial nations ever knew.¹

In the US federal system, financing and control of schools and urban services, and the right to local governance stem from private land ownership. To this day public education in the US is financed primarily by local property tax revenues, which guarantees that the wealthy have better schools and services. This explains why the US school system is highly segregated by income and race – low property values in black and poor communities starve the school systems while white homeowners have well-financed schools.

The important point here is that control over land has been a fundamental element in the distribution of political power in the US, and this is rooted in its colonial past and imperial present. It is not just the key to expansion, it is the key to sustaining the power of the propertied elites within every human settlement – the small town, city, suburb, and metropolitan region. Zoning and land-use planning, dominated by powerful property interests and elites, are critical in preserving segregation and white privilege, and they are obstacles to diversity, not tools for achieving it.

II. Race and displacement

Another great American myth is that the political foundation of the United States is individual freedom for all. The reality is that the nation was born a slave state. Millions of slaves were displaced from Africa. They were not only excluded from property ownership, they were property, while white settlers accumulated property in land. Race, displacement and colonialism were joined from the start.

It was not until the end of the Civil War in 1865 that slavery was abolished. After a single decade in which blacks began to reconstruct a different future, institutionalised racism re-emerged and led to a century of Jim Crow – a regime in which residential segregation and discrimination in public places were legal in the southern states. Throughout the South, restaurants, hotels, drinking fountains, rest rooms and most public facilities were labelled “Whites Only” and “Colored”. When the civil rights movement of the 1960s ended Jim Crow, a fierce backlash by entrenched whites took the form of “the war on crime” that produced the highest incarceration rate in the world, with a prison population that is mostly black and brown (African American and Latinx) (Alexander, 2012).

With the migration of blacks to the northern states (the first free states), racism persisted. Today, metropolitan areas in the US remain sharply segregated by race and ethnicity and local efforts to build communities based on democracy and equality confront a resistance to integration that has deep historical roots (Massey and Denton, 1993). In the post-World War II suburban boom, the government policy known as

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1. The US still rules Puerto Rico and a host of Pacific islands as colonies.

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“redlining” made it virtually impossible for blacks to buy new homes in the suburbs or to borrow to improve their homes in central cities.² Today, predatory lending by banks and financial institutions disproportionately exploits blacks and other minorities, while access to mortgage financing is still unequal. Local and national efforts that seek to build and defend diverse cities must therefore come to terms with the deep historical roots that continue to produce new forms of segregation. These are not simply “remnants” of a distant past. They exist and are reproduced in the present.

III. New York City: in the shadows of the luxury city

The brief discussion about New York City that follows underlines the main point I am making in this essay: the obstacles to democratic solutions to the divisions of race and class in the modern metropolis run very deep, and in the US they are imbedded in four centuries of settler colonialism and racism. They are reflected in a systemic process of *displacement* of people and entire communities based on race and ethnicity. In sum, displacement is an organic part of the nation's history and urban development (Fullilove, 2004).

From a distance New York City appears to be a model of cosmopolitanism, ethnic diversity and racial integration, an atypical model of social justice and ethnic integration. Often proclaimed to be a glorious “melting pot”, a majority of the population are immigrants and descendants of immigrants. A ride on the subway shows the visitor a broad array of races, colours, ethnicities, and sexually non-conforming people. Yet if we look at how and where people live, it is one of the most racially segregated of US cities and its landscape is fragmented into myriad ethnic enclaves. These racial and territorial divisions overlap with and reinforce huge imbalances in economic and political power and the ability to control development and change (Angotti, 2008; Angotti & Morse, 2017).

For example, after World War II, the federal government established an urban renewal programme that allowed the city to condemn land in low-income, largely black and Latinx neighbourhoods to promote new luxury developments. The neighbourhoods fought back during the powerful civil rights movement of the 1960s, highlighting racial injustices. At the same time, black neighbourhoods demanded community control of schools, which were largely staffed by white teachers who lived outside the city. After the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968 widespread civil disorder (in New York City and other large cities) further highlighted demands for change (*Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 1968).

IV. Land, race and community planning

Throughout history, the long-term structural inequalities related to land development, race and ethnicity have been met with protest and resistance. With the growth and maturity of the civil rights movement, black and Latinx neighbourhoods facing massive displacement fought back and were able to either slow down or stop the process, win important concessions, and open up new opportunities for the regulation and

2. Redlining refers to the practice used to prohibit all federally guaranteed mortgages in all census districts with a black population of over 5%. This overtly discriminatory policy was based on the assumption that investment in black communities was universally risky.

control of land development. Even though the city now boasts that it is “The Real Estate Capital of the World” it has not been able to conquer grassroots organising, as witnessed by the recent defeat of the plan by Amazon, the world’s largest corporation, to expand in the city due social mobilisations.

In its 400-year history, New York City has distinguished itself from other major US cities by never having developed and approved a comprehensive long-range plan. Ever since European settlers took over the land where the native Lene Lenape people lived, private land ownership has prevailed. Today, the hegemony of real estate is maintained by control over the city’s complex and convoluted zoning regulations.

On the other hand, community-based planning emerged as an instrument for empowering low-income communities. In 1959, residents and businesses in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, a multi-ethnic working class neighbourhood, faced an urban renewal plan that would have displaced thousands of people to allow for the construction of middle-income market-rate housing. They fought back and after more than a decade of struggle were able to defeat the plan and win support for their own plan. The Cooper Square Alternate Plan became the first of a long line of community plans generated as alternatives to the official plans driven by land market speculation and oblivious to the adverse impact on communities of colour (Angotti, 2008; 2014).

The long sequence of tenant and community protests against displacement led to major planning reforms. Following the historic civil rights protests and struggles against the urban renewal programme, political reforms were instituted to correct the historical imbalances in decision-making power. In 1975, the city established 50 community boards and a structured process for making major land use and zoning decisions. Previously the mayor and his planning commission had clear control.³ However, the powerful real estate industry shaped the new process in such a way that communities would have only a weak voice and a symbolic vote. This left the power in the hands of the traditional power brokers and political leaders, historically white men and allies of the most powerful landowners, who had the economic and political resources needed to get their way on land use issues. Today, the powerful Real Estate Board of New York (REBNY) is dominated by corporate firms and powerful individuals, and remains mostly male and mostly white. REBNY is the largest financial contributor to local politicians and has successfully opposed enhancing the powers of community boards, which have very small budgets and staff.

In 1989, reforms advocated by civil rights organisations gave community boards the explicit authority to develop their own plans. This drive for community-based planning was strongly supported by the environmental justice movement, which had fought against noxious facilities that negatively affected the health and environment in communities of colour. Community plans were understood as a means for guaranteeing community improvements without displacement once land values had increased after the elimination of environmental hazards (Sze, 2006).

However, what followed was a massive push from above for new luxury high-rise development facilitated by strategic zoning changes.

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3. The Uniform Land Use Review Process (ULURP) gave the decisive votes to the City Planning Commission, the majority of which is appointed by the mayor, the 51-member City Council and Borough President (there are five boroughs in the city).

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Community plans were virtually ignored and once again land value increases mattered most, not racial equity. While there have been many community-based plans, the city continues to rely on zoning changes, which tend to respond to developer needs instead of community concerns, and which disproportionately displace people of colour (Angotti and Morse, 2017).

V. Inwood: gentrification and displacement

Over the course of two years, the City of New York engaged the neighbourhood of Inwood (in the Borough of Manhattan) in an extensive process of public discussion about the city's proposal to rezone a large portion of the neighbourhood to promote new residential and commercial development. Inwood is an economically and racially mixed neighbourhood in which the largest group is made up of immigrants and the descendants of immigrants from the Dominican Republic. The greatest objection to the city's proposal was that it would feed the gentrification of the neighbourhood and displace the most vulnerable residents and small businesses. Especially among Dominicans, displacement was often seen as racially charged, since discriminatory practices in the real estate industry would limit the options of Dominican renters who were forced to move.⁴ Furthermore, rezonings typically raised land values in areas with low-rent housing, leading landlords to raise rents and convert their buildings into condominiums, cooperatives or other forms of home ownership, or sell them to big developers, driving out low-income renters.

The rezoning process in New York was launched along with an unprecedented array of participatory techniques, efforts at community-based planning and budgeting, and attempts to engage diverse sectors of the population. City representatives maintained that their objective was to preserve diversity in the community and some even argued that new development would make the community more diverse by bringing in more whites. Inclusionary zoning rules would require up to 30% of new housing units to be "affordable", though in reality most would be unaffordable to the vast majority of Inwood residents. Neighbourhood activists opposed to the rezonings understood this to mean the expulsion of low-income blacks and Dominicans and an eventual transition to a wealthier and whiter neighbourhood. In a community made up mostly of renters, more people would own their own homes. Rezoning advocates claimed that this was also a move towards greater diversity, but neighbourhood activists opposing the rezoning saw it as yet another factor leading to displacement since historically low-income people of colour do not have equal access to affordable home financing. Neighbourhood activists have launched two lawsuits, one of them alleging racial discrimination. They have forcefully denounced the city's participatory process as aimed at defusing community opposition instead of sharing decision-making power.

The Inwood rezoning followed a series of similar rezonings in other low-income communities of colour, all of which were undertaken during the administration of Mayor Bill DeBlasio, who ran on a platform based on reducing inequalities. All of DeBlasio's rezonings were hotly contested and faced significant opposition. Prior to DeBlasio, the administration

4. While many Dominicans are dark-skinned and do not always identify as black, racial discrimination in the US has been historically based on the fictitious binary of black/white. This is complicated by a thread of anti-black prejudice in the Dominican Republic based on hostility to its neighbour, Haiti, which launched the first revolution in the Americas led by former slaves.

of billionaire Michael Bloomberg had rezoned almost 40% of the land in the city to encourage new development. Most of these rezonings followed a similar pattern: areas with higher-income white populations would be preserved while areas with lower-income communities of colour (black, Latinx and Asian) tended to be targeted for new development, stimulating processes of gradual gentrification already underway and displacement of existing residents and small businesses (Angotti, 2008; Angotti and Morse, 2017). During public discussions and debates around the rezonings, many community activists raised longstanding charges that gentrification and displacement were not simply driven by economic phenomena but were part of the long and deep history of settler colonialism and racism that persist in the city, nation and throughout the Americas, including the Dominican Republic. Since the 19th century the US has followed the so-called Monroe Doctrine in Latin America, which reserves it the right to intervene overtly and covertly whenever it is considered in its national interest. It has done so many times (Galeano, 1973). The US invaded the Dominican Republic as recently as 1965 to overthrow a democratically elected president, an act that, along with economic dependency, contributed to the flow of Dominican immigrants to New York City.

Despite recent progressive changes in city government, private land ownership, first established by Dutch and British colonists on land once stewarded by the Lenape people, remains intractable. The owners have become corporate entities including real estate investment trusts, limited liability corporations, and investors from all over the world. This is not particularly different to how it was in the colonial period, when landowners were whites with roots in Europe; now they are truly globalised but remain organically tied to financial capital, Wall Street and global investment firms. While the colonial roots may have been forgotten by most, what has not changed is the organic connection between life in the city and control over land by external forces, and the connection between investments in land and the displacement of low-income people of colour.

Today the majority of households in the city are renters. When land values increase and owners seek to sell or redevelop their properties, they face enormous pressures to move out. Displacement also threatens small homeowners, especially black and Latinx homeowners who were able to buy their own homes despite discrimination by banks and insurance companies that refused to lend to them. In sum, the colonial heritage that gave power to landowners, mostly of European origin, persists today but in a new, more globalised form.

VI. Race matters

In sum, to use the words of Cornell West, “race matters” (West, 1993). Residential displacement has different consequences for blacks and whites. It is part of black history: blacks were displaced from Africa; then when slavery ended they fled racist exclusions in the South and moved to northern cities where they lived in segregated neighbourhoods. Then they were displaced from central cities by urban renewal programmes (this was known in the Civil Rights movement as “Negro Removal”) (Fullilove, 2004). Today, overheated real estate pressures continue to

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drive out blacks and other racial minorities so that large portions of the suburbs around New York City, once all white, are now all black, Latin and Asian. Contrary to many liberal myths, gentrification and displacement has not led to racial integration but instead has *re-segregated* the city and its suburbs (Regional Plan Association, 2017).

This reality flies in the face of the “melting pot” myth. It also refutes the real estate industry’s claims that only the development of more housing will provide the housing minorities need and automatically desegregate the city. On the contrary, the latest waves of high-rise development coincide with growing inequality and segregation. The prevailing urban strategy is based on “trickle-down economics” – the notion that by simply increasing the supply of housing, prices will come down, making more units available for people with lower incomes, who are disproportionately people of colour. This myth is belied by the evidence: the highest vacancy rates are in new buildings; after building booms, existing rents go up and not down, pushing out low-income tenants; and dramatic increases in land values, stimulated by new development, are a major obstacle to making housing more accessible to people on lower incomes.

In sum, the big issue is really about land, not housing. Land values rise with new luxury development, and this has a ripple effect that increases rents in nearby low-income housing, forcing people out. This takes us all the way back to the colonial legacy and usurpation of land that once only had a use value to indigenous people. The Dutch and English settlers took the land and sold it for its exchange value.

The promoters of New York City myths about diverse ethnicities also like to focus only on the urban core of some 8 million people, as if that were the entirety of the metropolis; in fact it is a region with more than 22 million people covering portions of three states – New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. The reality today is that the entire region, as well as the core City of New York, remains highly segregated by race and income, and is driven by the inexorable trends of land value increases spreading out from the centre to the periphery. As the suburbs become more ethnically diverse and gain more rental housing over homeownership, they are resegregating.⁵

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5. The Regional Plan Association, a powerful non-profit corporation, acknowledges that displacement of racial minorities in the region is a problem while the City of New York has ignored it. (Regional Plan Association, 2017; 2018).

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