



Is gentrification a municipal crime?

Reflections and strategies on 'Urban Activism: Staking Claims in the 21st Century City'

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Abstract

In this photographic ethnography, Dominic Timothy Moulden reflects upon his own organizing experiences with ONE D.C. in Washington D.C.- the capital of empire. He shows homes that have been evicted and scenes of gentrification, while offering the framework that “gentrification is a crime,” an analytic that would benefit scholar activists and community organizers to further explore. Moulden also proposes organizing strategies to address the issues of poor, Black, Brown, Indigenous, and all working-class people’s claim to a right to the city, particularly in Covid-19 contexts. Research and organizing must be brave enough to create zones of contestation and liberation, including ‘No Displacement Zones’ to contest the neoliberal politics and zones of gentrification.

Keywords

Gentrification, solidarity, photography, ethnography, empowerment

Introduction

Many scholars and organizers concern themselves with statistics and trends regarding crime in the metropolis or urban cities. Somehow the impact and effect of gentrification does not appear to be an issue of urban crime and violence to many social scientists and researchers. I want to propose that ‘*gentrification is a crime*’ and that scholar activists and community organizers need to consider having a few deeply thoughtful and reflective discussions and participatory action research projects with affected populations and community researchers to explore this idea.

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One of the first times I heard someone say that gentrification is a crime was in a meeting with a small group of tenant leaders and staff organizers at Organizing Neighborhood Equity D.C.—ONE D.C.—in the nation’s capital. It was Gloria Robinson, a native Washingtonian and former staff organizer who would repeat this phrase at our tenant meetings. In 2015, Washington, D.C. ceased to be a Black-majority city, and Ms. Robinson moved to Georgia. What is the crime she was referring to? The willful neglect of government and private developers to address the basic housing needs of low-income Black, Brown, and Immigrant residents. In D.C. this has resulted in the displacement of 40,000 Black residents from the city in the past 20 years.

These crimes are acts of conscious violence that cause the loss of homes for people living in neglected public and subsidized housing, underfunded neighborhoods that then become ripe for demolition and redevelopment. I have seen and felt the effects of these crimes upon communities. They carry the physical and psychological tolls of trauma. Who is perpetrating the crime? I have seen governments, developers, churches and other parties actively participate in the demise and destruction of Black working class homes and communities.

How will the victims of the crime organize for community accountability? Many of these crimes are visited upon Black women with children, the elderly, and others living on the margins of society. The victims are able to use community accountability methods through organizing resistance and resiliency by protesting, liberating homes by housing unhoused people in abandoned properties, and developing limited equity cooperatives as permanently low-cost housing. I hope to present several other methods of community accountability in this reflection. After hearing and reflecting on the accounts told by my comrades from Brazil and South Africa at the Harvard convening, describing daily life and daily violence experienced by shack dwellers, I began to wonder if it is time to raise this provocative and controversial question—is gentrification a crime?—as a global one.

At the convening, S’bu Zikode, president of the Abahlali base Mjondolo shack dwellers movement in South Africa and Welita Caetano, community leader at the Frente de Luta por Moradia (Housing Struggle Front) in Brazil, both described in detail how their lives, and the lives of the shack and housing dwellers were threatened and attacked in acts of physical violence because of their resistance and demands for housing justice. Both S’bu and Welita are in danger of being attacked by their governments for demanding and taking action on housing as a human right. The stakes are high, and all of our lives are valuable, but the power brokers still get away with these crimes. After the Staking Claims in the 21st Century City convening, it seems very important that we start to lay the groundwork for serious study, research, and photographic ethnography to explore whether some communities’ claims and my claims can be substantiated.

Where in the academic literature is there evidence that gentrification harms the poor? According to Jacob L. Vigdor who wrote a paper for the Brookings-Wharton Papers on Urban Affairs: ‘There is no evidence to suggest that gentrification increases the probability that low-status households exit their housing unit. Poor households are more likely to exit poverty themselves than be replaced by a non-poor household.’

I suggest that Mr. Vigdor and other social scientists and researchers who claim that there is no evidence, visit the tent dwellers living in several encampments in the nation's capital which in 2019 was deemed the most intensely gentrified city in the United States. If we want to find the evidence and secure the relevant research and create reports about displacement and the serial displacement that many urban dwellers experience in cities like D.C., the Bay Area, Chicago, and New Orleans, the relationship between the academy and the activist will need to drastically change.

The academy will be required to rely heavily on the fieldwork and participatory action research of community leaders and organizers. Case in point: I will demonstrate through the use of what I call photographic ethnography, the spaces and lives of tent dwellers in D.C. This first level of evidence shows the impact of gentrification and the violence inflicted on low-income, mostly Black people's health, wellness, shelter, education and ability to work. It takes daily self-defense to combat the D.C. Mayor's police state forces, which destroy and remove the personal belongings of the people who live in the tent dwellers' encampments.

Here are a few photos of an encampment in the rapidly gentrifying Shaw neighborhood—near the newly built Dunbar Senior High School. For decades members of the community made demands to rebuild the school, and for many years these demands went unheard. It was not until Shaw lost a significant portion of its Black population that the city found the resources to build a new school. Many long-time residents and the displaced continue to ask: D.C. for whom?

Take a good long look at these Shaw tent encampments (Figures 1 and 2). I see a bike, plants, and personal items — all on the land liberated by this encampment. Right behind the encampment is low-cost affordable housing called the Northwest Cooperative. I see a few people in need of the basic human right to a home. What do these encampments tell us about the evidence available to demonstrate that crimes are being committed against human beings? When does the international human right to shelter invoke a mandate for a just city

Figure 1

Shaw Encampment -
Summer 2020.
Source: author



Figure 2

Shaw Encampment -
Summer 2020.
Source: author



in the 21st Century? How would you feel and think about evidence if you were a tent dweller being interviewed during the Covid-19 pandemic?

We can keep telling ourselves there is no evidence that gentrification causes harm. However, when I teach about ‘the right to the city’ in the community and at the Maryland Institute College of Art, I start with a theory about displacement focused on “root shock.” Root shock is a direct harm to human beings during the long and grueling process of serial displacement ultimately sparked by gentrification. As an organizer and community researcher, I use the renowned social psychiatrist, Dr. Mindy Thompson Fullilove’s research and findings, ‘people who have been displaced experience “root shock,” the traumatic stress reaction to the loss of some or all of one’s emotional ecosystem. Root shock can follow natural disaster, development-induced displacement, war, and changes that play out slowly, such as those that accompany gentrification.’ Two anecdotes capture the lived experience and documented witnessing of root shock by displaced and harmed residents in D.C.

At Kelsey Gardens in Shaw, 54 long-time, Black working-class families were removed from their subsidized housing units against their will. These were housing units built for low-income residents after civil unrest in the 1960s and early 70s. In 2004, the Black church that owned the land where Kelsey Gardens sat, sought to profit by redeveloping the apartments, which now sat in close proximity to the newly developed Washington Convention Center.

In their exile from home, residents at Kelsey Gardens documented their heightened level of blood pressure and increased rates of diabetes. ONE D.C.’s staff documented that a few former residents became chronically ill and died during the seven-year forced exodus. We all witnessed the lived experience of root shock.

Figure 3

Kelsey Gardens
Demolition,
Washington, D.C. 2004
Source: author



The story of Ms. Shirley Williams and her family

At a D.C. Emancipation Day event in the mid-2000s, ONE D.C. members and former residents recounted the stories of the violent harm of these crimes. During the event, which was held at the African American Civil War Memorial Museum, several teachers from a local school overheard us describing this trauma and interrupted our event to speak. They told us that they saw the effects of these traumas on their students. Some of them were moving every couple of months, and students of theirs who'd been displaced started to be absent from class more often. When they were in class, the teachers said, these students were visibly stressed and found themselves tied up in more conflicts. These were the traumas of forced serial displacements and root shocks, and the stories were everywhere.

In a single year during my daily organizing work in D.C., we experienced the following: the partial demolition of the 535-unit Brookland Manor subsidized housing community, the first stages of the demolition of the 435-unit Barry Farm public housing community, and the shocking revelation that Perkins Homes in Southeast Baltimore where I grew up, would also be demolished. The harm is captured in the photos: unhoused human beings, demolition following years of neglect and improper management, destroyed and disappeared communities and histories (see figures 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5). Here is what it looks like for those who never experienced the shock and trauma of having your community torn down while you are resisting forced serial displacement.

I spent the first ten years of my childhood in the 668-unit Perkins Homes community (see figure 6). When I visited Perkins and used photographic ethnography to capture the present story of my working-class family's struggles with the housing crisis in the U.S., the moment brought back memories of the global struggle. This particular photo reminded me of the international struggle for land and housing, especially in Brazil and South Africa.

Figure 4

Brookland Manor
Protest, Washington,
D.C., 2017
Source: author



Figure 5

Barry Farm Public
Housing, Washington,
D.C. 2020
Source: author



Figure 6

209 Herring Court–
Perkins Homes,
Baltimore, Maryland 2020
Source: author



Figure 7

After Hurricane Maria,
Puerto Rico, 2018
Source: author



During my visit to Soweto, I took photos of the township while learning from the Soweto/Kliptown youth organizing group. In this collection of photos is the image of a shack-dwellers' house with a number sprayed on it. This marking signified that someone lives here and that the house should not be torn down. This marking is similar to the markings of names, numbers, and statements I documented in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria (see figure 7).

As I stood in front of the door of my childhood home, now marked with a red X for demolition, I imagined spraying 'Moulden', my family's last name, on the unit at 209 Herring Court as an act of resistance. These photos recall in me the way our homes and lands are contested spaces, and places of resistance. The empire's markings will not stop us from organizing for our right to housing and land. Even in turbulence and strife we are capable of resisting and fighting back against the empire. People all over the world show each other ways to confront the corporations and governments that use neglect and disaster capitalism to seize their homes.

The empire of capital must be challenged. The empire of capital values property over people, awards the super-rich with public benefits, and supports removing unhoused people and working-class people from prime real estate locations in the municipal city. What claims to the city do we have as Black working-class families? Who will join us in our claim that gentrification is a crime against humanity? How can we build and organize a strategy to highlight this claim?

A Vision for the 21st Century Just City

As I bring this reflection to a close and looking ahead and working toward a vision for the future of the 21st Century City, I want to propose a few organizing ideas and strategies to address the issues of poor, Black, Brown, Indigenous, and all working-class people's claim to a right to the city. Our research and organizing must be brave enough to create zones of

Figure 8

Protest against the Crime
of Gentrification,
Washington, D.C., 2017
Source: author



contestation and liberation. Thus, an initial step in our strategy needs to include ‘No Displacement Zones,’ to contest the neoliberal politics and economics of enterprise zones, empowerment zones, promise neighborhoods and now opportunity zones. We have to unite with the affected population and literally post new signs and markings that say the empire will not displace us in our liberation zones (see figure 8).

Imagine Brookland Manor, Barry Farm, and Perkins Homes zones where our participatory action research, our community organizing, and our strategies recognize the harm and violence of gentrification and seek to create no-displacement zones as an act of self-defense and self-care. Displaced people must make a claim in criminal or civil procedures in the same way that law students study a “taking” of property by the government through eminent domain. The harm caused should require compensatory damages and penalties and be accessed and imposed on governments, churches, developers and municipalities globally and locally.

Reparative economic justice must be paid to people who lose their homes in the form of rebuilding permanently affordable, low-cost housing and cash compensation to redress the physical and psychological harms inflicted on people who, as a result, require treatment by health professionals and wellness care. The nature of the crime or crimes are a moral and ethical infraction against humanity: a violation of a human right to housing. The public and ethical laws should be designed to address the particular rights of the poor and working-class people who need constitutional protection of their right to shelter, domicile, and a home.

Our strategy needs to include ‘community research centers.’ These are participatory action research spaces that are learning centers for political and popular education, where the affected populations are the organizers, researchers, and teachers with the academy as supporters and resource providers. These centers would be political learning spaces where apprentice organizers and apprentice community researchers learn to document their lived experience, write about it, photograph it, and tell it on their own terms as ways to inform local, national, and international policy. This is the bridge that the 21st Century City must

walk across, with activist scholars as educators for liberation. Lest we forget: all research and education is political.

And it is past time to organize for universal housing for all humans, on an international scale. No-displacement zones and community research centers in Brazil, South Africa, the U.S., and other nations are the first two steps leading to the global campaign of 'Homes for All.' We do not need a Covid-19 global pandemic to leave 40 million U.S. renters unable to pay rent, 50 million U.S. citizens food insecure, more than 300,000 dead, and millions unemployed to know that our research, organizing, and scholar activism requires us to address the land and housing inequities that will remain permanent without a global campaign.

About the author

Dominic T. Moulden is a longtime resource organizer at Organizing Neighborhood Equity (ONE DC), a collectively-led organization that builds people power and economic and racial equity in Washington, DC. He is a frequent lecturer at various universities and conferences regarding equitable revitalization, cooperative economics, affordable housing, workplace democracy, community development, and public policy. Moulden is also a community-accountable photographer and social justice documentarian. A native of east Baltimore, his images celebrate Black love and resilience while providing uncompromising witness to the ongoing displacement of Afrodiasporic people in Baltimore and elsewhere in the Americas. His creative practice and organizing work are both dedicated to fostering a culture of health that includes art, joy, and radical resource redistribution.