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RACE AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Leadership • Gentrification

Policing • Loaded Terms

Implicit Bias • Character Lending

RESOURCES

"Growing a Stronger Nonprofit Housing Sector," by Nancy Rase and Paul Weech. Shelterforce, Summer 2013. bit.ly/2uGs9De

Race to Lead: *Confronting the Nonprofit Racial Leadership Gap*, by Sean Thomas-Breitfeld and Frances Kunreuther. Building Movement Project, 2017. bit.ly/2tjMVVN

"Internships Are Not a Privilege," by Darren Walker. The New York Times, July 5, 2016. nyti.ms/2uDJIOv

NALCAB Colegio Economic Development Fellowship Program bit.ly/2u0kCI

National CAPACD Next Generation Leadership Program bit.ly/2v12F4B

NeighborWorks REDI Leadership Program bit.ly/2vTmJ5d

Mel King Institute for Community Building bit.ly/2uE4ZOR

that can help them navigate internally in the organization and externally in the community as they may encounter instances of inequity or racism."

The Community Leadership Partnership (CLP) sets up community development certificate programs in community colleges. Inspired by an associate's degree in community planning started by the Community Development Technology Center, which helped residents of South Central Los Angeles find a career path working in their own neighborhood, CLP aims to introduce the idea that this is a field you can work in. The coursework mixes understanding of the local region and the history of efforts to change things with discussions of structural racism, internalized oppression, and trauma and development of practical organizing skills, all leading to an internship at a local organization. The program "really enriches the backgrounds of people doing this work, rather than the normal showing up at an organization with no context," says Mott.

Beane defends the role of formal education and degrees in community development and community organizing. "A degree is critical,"

he says. "It's a process. Action, reaction, reflection. This is one of the major principles of organizing." CLP's model of setting up a degree program at a community college allows this kind of training to happen with a local focus without placing the responsibility of sustaining the program on already strapped nonprofits, he argues.

"I wouldn't be at a manager level if I hadn't had an entry-level point into the field," says Shelia Balque, who works for CD Tech in Los Angeles as the program and student affairs manager for the Public Allies Los Angeles Americorps program and is also program coordinator for the Community Planning and Economic Development Program at LA Tech-Trade Community College. The latter was inspiration for the Community Learning Partnership network. To have [diverse] executive level leadership, she points out, you need a critical mass of diverse staff and leaders in the field to begin with. "For me, or most folks, when they think of organizing, or community planning, people don't consider it a career pathway that you can sustain yourself in," says Balque, who is African American. "[You have to] connect community development ideas with the ability to earn a living for their families."

What is still desperately needed to keep CLP's coursework-and-internships model afloat is money to pay

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ZOMBIFYING NEIGHBORHOODS: THE CULTURAL RAMIFICATIONS OF GENTRIFICATION

By Blights Out

"For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity." — Frantz Fanon

THERE ONCE WAS a time when societies believed that the erection of architecture was a violation of the Earth. In *Architecture and Violence*, author Behir Kenzari describes the millennia-old practice of construction rites, which demanded that an architect spill blood on his building's foundation stone as a

does not only shift the law to suit its purposes during exceptional times: the practice is foundational. John Winthrop, the architect of puritan new world colonialism and American exceptionalism ("City upon a Hill"), codified the theft of Native American land into a doctrine known as *vacuum domicilium*, which stated that land

Gentrification is not just physical displacement; it's cultural appropriation across entire neighborhoods. Artists have an obligation not to participate.

sacrifice for the privatization of land that once belonged to no one and to all. Our national culture does not bestow land with such dignity. Instead, private ownership is at the core of our values.

It is said that any atrocity committed by a nation state is lawful since the state created and, therefore, exists outside the law. It only has to shift the boundaries of the law to encompass cruel or unusual actions it wishes to perform. "Never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was legal," Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us. But the state

without "permanent development" is open for occupation. Having encountered places and people that existed beyond the cultural imagination that underpinned their own legal premises, the English self-ordained themselves with the authority to judge the value of indigenous peoples' land use—their architecture, cultural practices, and agriculture—and found it worthless.

With time, those wielding the power to negate cultural value commodified those same cultures in order to extract economic value from them. This model defines our history

One home's freshly renovated facade is juxtaposed by a badly burned side in the rapidly gentrifying Marigny neighborhood in New Orleans. The renovated side shows the hallmarks of gentrification, including sans-serif address numerals and a blood red door.

and frames many of the issues of place and culture that we address today.

The subject of cultural appropriation, for example, has gone viral. What is cultural appropriation? Why are folks so mad?

Cultural appropriation—the theft and hollowing out of culture, place, and people into commodities—cannot be separated from the historic abuse of various cultures and the labeling of their bearers as “primitive,” “inferior,” “dangerous,” and “illegal” in order to establish dominion over them. People whose cultures have been commodified

are mad about cultural appropriation because it cannot be separated from the theft of their land, life, dignity, freedom, and rights. It cannot be separated from colonialism, from the murder with impunity of Black men and women by the police, or from the gentrification of their neighborhoods. Indeed, our organization, Blights Out, would argue that gentrification and cultural appropriation are two sides of the same coin.

Gentrification is also often apologetic. It only meant well; it only wanted to make things nicer; it only wanted to introduce more options; how was it to know the repercussions of its actions; didn't you people want nice things?

Blights Outs is a collective of artists, activists, and architects with a mission

to generate dialogue, art, and actions that challenge the land-use policies that drive gentrification and unequal property development in New Orleans. Our central goal is to purchase a blighted property and transform it into a hub for that mission, and in the process, demystify the system of housing development and expose the policies that lead to displacement.

The Roots of Gentrification

If you were to read think pieces in *Slate* or *The Washington Post*, you might come to believe that gentrification and displacement are myths, or at least impossible to define. So, to add to the rebuttals, we've perused and compiled definitions for the word “gentrification” from Merriam-Webster, Oxford, Cambridge, and Collins dictionaries to create this:

“During gentrification, ‘people who have money’ move into ‘deteriorating’ neighborhoods, ‘improving’ the district by ‘conforming’ the area to their ‘tastes,’ ‘changing its character,’ ‘often displacing’ the poorer residents, and making the place ‘more refined and polite,’ according to the newcomers’ system of values.”

Dictionaries, like laws and history, are written by the elite: humans marred by personal biases, class interests, and the associated value systems of their time and place. The descriptive and active words in these

definitions—taste, character, refined, polite, conform, and improve—are not neutral. They are subjective, and under the guise of objectivity they express opinions about class, betraying a value system that is shared by those wealthier newcomers who are, quite clearly, the protagonists in the dictionaries’ version of the story of gentrification.

The value system of the dominant culture (the culture of “people with money”) is upheld as capable of gauging the harm caused by gentrification.

“Residents of gentrifying neighborhoods also tend to benefit from gentrification across the board,” reads a 2015 *CityLab* article, “experiencing an average increase of 11 points in their credit scores—and roughly 23 in neighborhoods with intense gentrification—compared to non-residents.” The article goes on to measure displacement’s negative toll on the gentrified neighborhood’s poorest residents by the lowering of their credit scores, as they are forced into other neighborhoods with higher concentrations of poverty.

Like dictionaries, these analyses of gentrification are blighted by bias. Benefit and harm are reduced to profit and loss, neighborhoods are reduced to markets, and communities are reduced to shareholders. Little is said of aspects of life not measurable by dollars or data. Never is it assumed that folks might want to stay in or leave their neighborhoods for reasons such as history, community, or culture. The authors have overlooked, cannot see, or do not understand these factors.

We should not be shocked to learn that words are not vessels of pure meaning, and that they in fact can harbor histories and agendas that can turn them into weapons. Over the past decade in the United States, we have watched as the words “freedom,” “democracy,” “community,” and “truth” have been drained of meaning by our nation’s military, political, and economic elites. Through our research into the word “auction,” Blights Out discovered a lineage from the slave auction system that enriched the ancestors of today’s ruling class to the contemporary real estate market that gentrifies historically Black neighborhoods.

We didn’t read about it in a dictionary or encyclopedia. In fact, Wikipedia’s entry on “auction” doesn’t even mention U.S. slave auctions. We had to dig up the nuances of the word and stitch them together from old newspaper articles and advertisements. Our research exposed a direct line from the largest antebellum slave auctioneer to the New Orleans City Planning Commission.

Under antebellum Louisiana law, Black people were considered “real estate” to be mortgaged, bought, and sold at auction, along with other property like horses, fine art, and land. Black people, like Native

Americans, were dehumanized; their intrinsic humanity was stripped away and replaced with monetary value. (And since property equals political power, slavers also got a bonus of three-fifths of an electoral vote per human in their collection.)

During slavery, the corrosive process of devaluation was not contained to human bodies; it was applied to their ideas, expressions, and effects. The process has been replicated in colonization, cultural appropriation, Jim Crow, redlining, urban renewal, and gentrification.

Though enslaved Africans were forced to surrender their languages, art, architecture, and social structures, they still forged West African Adinkra symbols into the wrought iron of New Orleans architecture, reminding us of their past, and their presence.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Black women’s hair was considered too “free” to be seen out in public, so sumptuary laws mandated that all women of color—free or enslaved—cover their hair. These *tignons*—elaborately tied, colorfully dyed head wraps—became symbols of Black beauty and pride. Today, Black girls from the American South to South Africa are suspended from high school for wearing their hair naturally, while their white classmates dabble in the same styles as an exotic souvenir from a tropical vacation, ignorant of the history of Afro-Colombian women braiding maps to freedom into their hair.

In New Orleans, the cultural traditions that inspire people to move here are being supplanted by zombie versions of themselves as rents go up, income stays low, and people struggle to survive. Iconic Second Lines have been hijacked and commodified for the pleasure of tourists and newcomers who are looking for a party but know nothing of the history of resistance infused in the art form. They suck the life out through the gaze of their camera lenses and turn it into dollars that aren’t shared with the keepers of the cultures. Few revelers know that Second Lines are retentions of West African funeral traditions of “walking the corpse,” saved and performed by enslaved Africans and their descendants, and that the benevolent societies that organize them were formed because insurance companies wouldn’t protect Black neighborhoods after slavery.

An Exquisite Corpse

A gentrified aesthetic is by definition out of place and time and is devoid of context, spirit, or backstory. It is aspirational and unhinged from reality. Its obsession with an “industrial aesthetic”—high ceilings, open floor plans, raw materials of brick, steel, and wood—fetishizes our nation’s manufacturing industry, ignoring the suffering of the people left in the wake of its collapse. “Loft living” is the dream of life without labor, workshops without working-class people.

A sprawling white “hipster” is memorialized against a backdrop of romanticized visions of blight in a mural that dominates an intersection in the historically Black 7th Ward.



The gentrified aesthetic is a warning, like a burning effigy; an exquisite corpse of other places, other people, other cultures treated as found objects and sewn together like a scarecrow. It is violent. It means: Get out. This is our land now. You belong to yesterday. The dominating face of the incoming, cop-friendly population looms like

Big Brother from a mural on the side of a house where a white artist has painted his own image into a neighborhood from which long-time residents are being pushed out; his gaze soothes newcomers but taunts the people who lived there first. Slowly, those people become whispers of memory. Some say that: "No one used to live there" at all.

Whether through *vacuum domicillam* or contemporary policy, the only culture of gentrification is money. It is brand. It is policy. It is an economic and political system. It is capitalism. It is also often apologetic. It only meant well; it only wanted to make things nicer; it only wanted to introduce more options; how was it to know the repercussions of its actions; didn't you people want nice things; didn't you make money from the sale of your house? It can't help its nature any more than a predator can.

Art and Culture as Resistance

Here in Louisiana, the debt incurred by an individual property owner latches onto land. Tens of thousands of properties in New Orleans are stagnating under the weight of debt. One we attempted to purchase has a burden of \$97,000 that cannot be legally forgiven. Rather than be allowed to contribute business or shelter to the neighborhood, these properties are held hostage until that debt—which only rich developers can afford to take on—is paid.

The failure of the system is responsible for the failure of the community.

Blights Out was formed from the recognition that "development" is a murky and mysterious process that operates above the heads and outside the purview of local residents. For three years, we tried to acquire a property without going through the potentially predatory auction process. We wanted to rehab a two-story building into permanently affordable housing, backed by a land trust, with a community arts and organizing space on the ground level.

Our first property choice burned down and the third was demolished by the city before all of our members had a chance to see it. Between this, a home that was one of several purchased by a nonprofit with plans to turn them into affordable housing was subsequently given away when the nonprofit ran out of funds. We tried to acquire the home from the person, a lawyer based in New York, but she sold it. By this writing, the home is still vacant, but has been flipped at least three times and increased in value from \$8,000 to almost \$200,000.

We have documented this story and the various ways in which the legal and economic system caused our attempts to fall through, from flipping to demolition. Through the failure of our attempts to acquire property, we have succeeded in our mission to demystify housing development: Capitalism's values have made gentrification inevitable.

Reparations must be paid—in the form of law, land, and culture—to return dignity to people and to the Earth itself. Our art is designed to achieve these goals.

Art and culture are not platonic "goods." Sometimes they can be predators, sometimes prey, and sometimes they can be zombies. But context matters. History matters. Place matters. People matter. So how do you keep your art and the land from being complicit in gentrification? You make them utterly unpalatable to profit-oriented culture so that it won't want to be seen near them, let alone co-opt them. In doing this, you orient them toward liberation. You give them life and consciousness. You return them to themselves.

The following mandates have guided our creative process and could be a light for others to follow:

- Interrogate yourself. Who is it for? What do you hope this work will do? Why are you the one to do it? Implicate yourself in your work.
- Relinquish sole authorship. Try collectivity, which lifts up both the one and the many. An example is our Blights Out for President project, which began in 2016 by flipping the typical election campaign, jargon-heavy propaganda and creating a crowd-sourced collection of lawn signs and billboards with clear, relatable calls for housing justice.
- Never act for communities without residents as equal co-creators and co-thinkers. Gather information from those who are rarely consulted about the fate of their own neighborhoods, homes, and lives. An example is the

Citizen's Development Platform, which began in 2016. Over the course of the year, Blights Out hosted a series of forums, visioning exercises, and teachings to analyze the political structures that support a system of inequity and stimulate our communities' imaginations to design the future they want for their neighborhoods. Their ideas were turned into a platform that clearly articulated demands to achieve this vision.

• Question your medium. The emphasis on visual art has been linked to the supremacy of Western thought and its emphasis on the eye as the "noblest of senses": on truth as what is seen vs. felt; on the centering of spectator vs. participant; on quantity vs. quality. You get bonus points for a performance because it is more difficult to objectify. Examples are our Home Court Crawl, during which we held spoken word events on the porches of vacant homes with a Second Line-style parade between them, and The Theatre of

the Gentrified, a pop-up public theater that brings Blights Out's Living Glossary Project to life.

In all of this, be authentic and radically honest in your rendering of the truth. In The Living Glossary project, the impersonal and sterile (but exclusively used) vocabulary of housing development is replaced with more honest terms. The glossary details the historical origins and socio-political contexts of words like "blight" and "property" and includes oral histories from people whose lives have been affected by the concepts. By sharing the actual, lived experiences behind these everyday words, people better understand their power and can work against the systems that employ them. ☉

To comment on this article, visit bit.ly/BlightsOut or write to letters@nhi.org.

BLIGHTS OUT is an arts and housing justice advocacy organization based in New Orleans.

The Living Glossary project performed by Mariama Eversley, A Scribe Called Quest, and Dalquiri Rene Jones for Blights Out.

COMMODIFIED HOUSING IS CLASS WARFARE

BLIGHTS OUT FOR PRESIDENT | BLIGHTSOUT.ORG

The Blights Out for President election signage campaign hijacks the aesthetics of election propaganda to create yard signs and billboards calling for housing justice.

RESOURCES

Blights Out
bit.ly/2v0wm4m

Home Court Crawl
bit.ly/2v3lq0q

"The Closest Look Yet at Gentrification and Displacement," by Richard Florida. *CityLab*, Nov. 2, 2015.
bit.ly/2eLcfcw

"Afro-Colombian Women Braid Messages of Freedom in Hairstyles," by DeNeen Brown. *The Washington Post*, July 8, 2011.
wapo.st/2uU55Bx

