



Matt Hern, *What a City Is For: Remaking the Politics of Displacement*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016. ISBN: 9780262034883 (cloth); ISBN: 9780262534420 (paper); ISBN: 9780262333474 (ebook)

In *What a City Is For*, Matt Hern sets out to rethink the politics of displacement, property, and gentrification. At the heart of his discussion is an exploration of Portland, Oregon's Albina, once a predominantly black neighborhood that has now experienced new waves of gentrification and displacement, much of it spearheaded by Portland City Council. Yet while Albina at first appears to be central to Hern's argument, he actually uses this case as a jumping off point from which to contemplate a host of other urban dilemmas that ultimately lead him to ask the eponymous question of the book. This is an ambitious task, and the author leads us through a vast array of both geographic cases and theoretical discussions ranging from the transformation of East Vancouver through activist sweat equity to the prescriptions and various responses on the Left and Right to the idea of a Georgist land tax.

Part of the job of the reviewer is to summarize the arguments of a given work. For Hern's text, that is unusually difficult. In part this might stem from the fact that the author is not a traditional academic; rather, he is an activist who has also spent a lot of time in both academic and policy circles. That unconventional role perhaps allows him the liberty to be much more audacious in his scholarship. He begins by considering gentrification as it has affected Albina and Portland more generally. From there, he explores questions of displacement as they emerge in both the neighborhoods under investigation and more historic processes of dispossession and removal, particularly as they are experienced by indigenous populations. Such questions lead him to examine discourses on development and post-coloniality, welcome additions to contemporary scholarship on gentrification in North America and Western Europe. Throughout, he considers an exciting array of experiments in housing, community, and land. He also makes important nods to ecological debates on the urban under the threat of climate change.

These manifold considerations reveal city-making and emplacement to be continuously in the process of becoming, always open for disruption, and new horizons of political possibility. Hern also calls upon us to take seriously the issue of sovereignty as it relates to territory and the city, and what emerges is a sense of the urgency of our need to confront dominant models of urbanization. While hesitant to offer any concrete policy prescriptions, the author reads hope into the promise of sharing as a means of reorienting the city around the aspirations of everyday inhabitants.

The enduring role of property in defining our contemporary urban landscapes seems to be at the center of Hern's argument. This is an important issue, one that has garnered attention from a number of scholars working on the urban land question. Hern draws upon multiple debates to explore this issue; his narrative meanders through conversations on development, indigeneity, and sovereignty, all big themes evoked by the politics of property and urban land. This is an ambitious and compelling project that takes us on a kaleidoscopic tour of homeless camps and squatter communities, through the writings of Escobar and Agamben, and to the author's own neighborhood. Yet in the process, the central questions that seem to animate Hern's engagement with the city get lost. So, too, does the city itself fade from view many times throughout the text. Albina, set up as a kind of centerpiece to this discussion, disappears early, replaced sporadically with other places and their peoples. In the process, we forget about the very real issues facing Portland's black community. Furthermore, I was left wondering about the juxtaposition of indigenous erasure with the contemporary issue of racialized displacement. Yes, both involve processes of domination. But central to much of the black experience has been continuous and ongoing displacement and dispossession. Their presence in the Pacific Northwest was always uneasy and precarious. Beyond illuminating forms of racialized violence and exploitation, what might we learn from placing these two processes in conversation with one another? What might we see if we consider endless displacement—essentially landlessness—alongside deep connections to land and territory?

One of the most intriguing components of the work is Hern's eagerness to transgress traditional theoretical boundaries; again I think this is a product of his unique position at the crossroads of activism and the academy. His recourse to development studies in particular is especially welcome, yet I thought he could go further. Specifically, he could have drawn upon the emerging canon of post-colonial urban scholars who are grappling with these same questions; for example, scholars such as Asher Ghertner and Ananya Roy have drawn out the paradoxical and by no means stable systems of ownership within the Global South (see Ghertner 2012; Roy 2003, 2017). What is particularly useful about their work is that it prompts us to de-familiarize and make strange our common assumptions around property, a sacrosanct and seemingly hegemonic system. Perhaps the process of de-colonizing land and the city—a process Hern is very much an advocate for—would benefit from an engagement with debates that emerge on those very themes within the Global South.

In taking us through what can be described as a pretty wild ride (Hern is well versed in an impressive variety of theory, which he conjugates with numerous discussions gleaned from housing experts and activists), the author loses sight of the multiple meanings of property within the United States. Property has long been a central mechanism for a host of ends. As Hern notes, it is the primary vehicle by which families accrue equity. But that characteristic is important because, in many instances, that equity can be a matter of life or death in the absence of a robust system of public welfare. Rethinking the politics of urban land requires not only crafting anew our relation to property in land, but also radically investing in the public provision of services. In addition to property's role as a welfare mechanism, moreover, its central place within the legal imaginary has meant that it serves to apportion rights. Thus, as N.B.D. Connolly (2014) writes in his recent book, black investment in property was an opportunity to access some of the rights once reserved wholly for white Americans. It also provided a bulwark against the kinds of displacements alluded to above. Meanwhile, our property regime—built on an instantiating act of violence, often then relying on the violence of chattel slavery—is deeply enmeshed with race,

with blackness, but also, as Cheryl Harris (1995) reminds us, whiteness. To remake property, then, requires the transformation of legal doctrine, social welfare, and the attendant ideologies that prop up this system. But it also requires exploring the entwinements between property and personhood and the social identities enmeshed with racial politics.

The book is an interesting addition to the ever-expanding literature on gentrification and displacement. Those themes have become central to the disciplines of geography and urban studies. Yet I remain skeptical of our use of these terms. In particular, they seem to have become interchangeable, even when they describe two different processes. As researchers at UC Berkeley have argued using quantitative data, often gentrification occurs *after* displacement.¹ Displacement, then, allows for predatory capital to seep into certain parts of the city, rather than vice versa. In future works, I would be keen to see more nuanced attention to these two processes so as to better understand the kinds of transformations to which Hern alludes. We seem to take these processes for granted, often without interrogating the fine-grained details of how they actually take place. But I'm also skeptical that these two processes are the most important hallmarks of contemporary urbanism. Everywhere we look, people are talking about gentrification, abetted by our system of property in land. Yet the vast majority of processes in cities in both the Global North and South do not fall under this rubric. Instead, movement and migration, disinvestment, making do, and new forms of collective life—such as the homeless encampment Hern documents—are central to our urban landscapes.

With this in mind, I think Hern draws attention, albeit unintentionally, to a central issue with current work on gentrification. The cases of Albina and his own neighborhood in East Vancouver act as examples from which he makes much of his argument and draws his conclusions. He describes the gentrification at work in each place; in Albina, the Portland City Council decided to remake the neighborhood, setting in motion the transformation of this slice of the city; in East Vancouver, meanwhile, Hern describes his own activism and the efforts of local

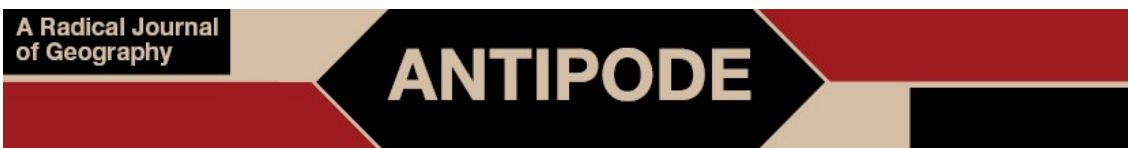
¹ See <http://www.urbandisplacement.org/> (last accessed 19 April 2017).

community groups to slowly improve the neighborhood over time. The changing landscape has lent itself to skyrocketing property values, an unfortunate by-product of communal grassroots energy. In both Pacific Northwest neighborhoods, trendy stores and upwardly mobile young (white) families are now the norm, and so we label these areas “gentrified”. Yet it seems to me that the processes that led to this common endpoint are very different. One is a top-down, state-led project of removal and renewal. The other, however, is an incremental, bottom-up effort of improvement. What Hern illustrates here is the fuzziness and imprecision of gentrification as an overarching category of urban transformation and rising land rents.

This is an audacious and at times chaotic text. At the same time, the author’s willingness to traverse traditional categories of theory, practice, and the professional silos of the academy is incredibly welcome. As an academic who takes up activist scholarship, I welcome more work by activists who penetrate the academy.

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