

6-11-2019

Little Haiti Confronts Gentrification, Dislocation, and Evictions Project Proposal

The Humanities Edge

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/humanities-edge-archive-faculty-programs>

Recommended Citation

The Humanities Edge, "Little Haiti Confronts Gentrification, Dislocation, and Evictions Project Proposal" (2019). *Humanities Edge Archive Faculty Programs*. 7.
<https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/humanities-edge-archive-faculty-programs/7>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the Humanities Edge Archive at FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Humanities Edge Archive Faculty Programs by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

Little Haiti Confronts Gentrification, Dislocation, and Evictions

**An FIU-MDC Faculty and Undergraduate Student
Community Research and Photography/Visual Arts Project**

Co-Directors

Richard Tardanico, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Sociology
Department of Global & Sociocultural Studies
Latin American & Caribbean Center
Florida International University
richard.tardanico@fiu.edu

Joseph Tamargo, M.F.A.
Associate Professor
Department of Arts & Philosophy
Miami-Dade College, Wolfson Campus
jtamargo@mdc.edu

FIU Undergraduate Students

Conor Andrich, Carlos Fleitas, Iman Kiffin, German Ruiz, Jeffrey Steele

MDC Undergraduate Students

Claudia Blanchard, Celine Bourseau, Elicaire Cadet, Devin Fuller,
Arnold Melgar, Barbara Morales, John Pierre Scholl

Community Partner

Family Action Network Movement (formerly Haitian Women of Miami)
Executive Director, Marleine Bastien, M.S.W., L.C.S.W.
mbastein@fanm.org

Project Overview

The proposed project addresses the question, How do Little Haiti's families, small businesses, and community at large attempt to cope with the neighborhood's rapid gentrification, including dislocations and evictions? The project does so by combining community advocacy research (Prof. Richard Tardanico, Department of Global & Sociocultural Studies, FIU) and photography (Prof. Joseph Tamargo, Department of Arts & Philosophy, MDC-Wolfson) in partnership with the Family Action Network Movement (FANM, formerly Haitian Women of Miami; executive director, Marleine Bastien). Within this partnership, faculty and undergraduate students will do the following:

- conduct literature, documentary, observational, and interview research concerning Little Haiti's history, current conditions, and neighborhood/community options (interviews with representative community leaders, business interests, residents, and former residents; and pertinent lawyers, journalists, scholars, activists, and others);
- photographically document Little Haiti's families, small businesses, and wider community as they attempt to cope with dislocations and evictions in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood;
- photographically document the broader depth and vibrancy of Little Haiti's culture(s), daily life, and architecture/urbanism, which are at risk as the neighborhood gentrifies;
- mentor members of FANM's youth groups in learning and conducting community research/advocacy photography;
- and, together with the mentored FANM youths, undertake a major photographic exhibition at the Little Haiti Cultural Complex, as well as prepare for future exhibitions and to publish the photos via print/digital media.

Prof. Tardanico (FIU) will supervise the community research activities. The participating FIU-MDC students have advanced skills in photography/visual arts. Co-director Prof. Tamargo of MDC will coordinate with FIU adjunct photography instructor Peggy Nolan to supervise the FIU-MDC photography/visual arts students. Other professional photographers/visual artists, from FIU and MDC faculty and staff as well as from South Florida in general and beyond, have volunteered to participate, ensuring multicultural artistic and mentorship expertise. Such expertise in the Haitian community will be recruited. All project activities will be undertaken in partnership with FANM.

The FIU-MDC students and FANM youth-group members will gain valuable skills of community research and photography and will undertake a major photographic exhibition. Prof. Tardanico will submit two articles for peer-review publication. Prof. Tamargo and Prof. Nolan will submit their own photographs for print/digital publication and for exhibition, as well as mentor the FIU-MDC students and FANM youth-group participants in undertaking exhibitions and print/digital publications beyond the project's culminating event.

The project's visual documentation will spread awareness of not only the cultural depth and vibrancy of Little Haiti, but also community-building options for neighborhood revitalization versus the deleterious consequences of large-scale gentrification. The proposed grant will represent seed funding for potential grants to underwrite future years of community research and visual arts in Little Haiti and other low-income districts in South Florida.

Background: The Gentrification Assault on Little Haiti

Little Haiti is a community under assault, within a socially and spatially polarizing metropolitan area. Little Haiti suffers from widespread precarious employment and worsening inequality/poverty; public and private disinvestment in neighborhood infrastructure and services; intensifying real estate speculation/gentrification; and plunging residential affordability as rental costs soar. Such deepening problems are compounded by a national backdrop of escalated animosity toward racial minorities and immigrants, together with the Haitian homeland's deep-seated crises and the repercussions of its 2010 earthquake (Bastien 2019; Campbell 2018; Flechas 2018; Portes and Armory 2018).

The City of Miami is reportedly nearing approval of the proposed mega-real estate project "Magic City Special Area Plan" in Little Haiti: a massive, gentrifying commercial complex including luxury 25-story apartment towers and restaurants-bars that seemingly taunt the district's low-income immigrant families, businesses whose backs are largely turned on the neighborhood's commerce and workforce, and an architectural scale that runs roughshod over its urban-cultural setting (Bastien 2019; Smiley and Viglucci 2017; Viglucci et al. 2019). If approved, the project portends the large-scale displacement of Little Haiti's residents and institutions. Additionally proposed for the district is the Eastside Ridge complex of 10 buildings and 28-story apartment towers. Avenues, a Manhattan-based nursery to 12th grade private school charging nearly \$60 thousand tuition per year, has announced plans to build a branch campus in Little Haiti (Bojnansky 2018; Flechas 2018; Smiley and Viglucci 2017; Wile 2018). Gentrifying displacement is already under way, as homeowners are being pressured to sell their homes to real estate speculators, apartment and business rents are escalating, and families and businesses are being evicted. This process forebodes the cultural and physical erasure of the district as a Haitian-anchored community, while tearing apart the fabric of South Florida's Haitian community in general (Bastien 2019; Bojnansky 2018; Campbell 2018).

Miami is a Dubai-like entrepôt city for the Caribbean and Latin America, a tourism mecca, and a hothouse for global speculative real estate investment (Portes and Armory 2018). Transformative change is therefore inevitable for Little Haiti, given its proximity to Miami's burgeoning downtown and financial district and its adjacency to affluent and boldly gentrifying areas. "Climate gentrification" may be yet another contributing factor, as Little Haiti's topographic elevation is significantly higher than that of Miami's flood-prone, affluent coastal neighborhoods (Fink 2019). The pragmatic challenge, then, is that of minimizing the scale and disruptive impact of gentrification on Little Haiti's families and community by conserving, as much as possible, what urban theorist Henri Lefebvre called "the right to the city" (Kofman and Lebas 1996). Doing so revolves around the strengthening of Little Haiti's community-based assets and political capacities, along with the building of alliances with supra-community allies and assets, to implement a comprehensive and durable community benefits agreement. Among the core components of such an agreement are the following (Bastien 2019):

- ample affordable local housing and a community land trust to facilitate local home ownership;
- job training, adequate-wage jobs with health insurance and pensions, a small-business incubator, and management opportunities for neighborhood residents;
- a ban on big-box stores;
- culturally contextual architecture, upgraded neighborhood infrastructure, and expanded green space;

- improved public transportation, sidewalks, and bicycle paths;
- enhanced community facilities and programs including child care, increased funding of local public education and scholarships;
- emphasis on local artists to produce urban revitalization artwork;
- housing, social service, food, health, transportation, and employment assistance for local residents who are displaced from the neighborhood;
- and, finally, administrative transparency and a performance bond to ensure compliance with the community agreement.

Little Haiti's foundational asset for community services and advocacy is the Family Action Network Movement (FANM) (Bastien 2019). FANM has spearheaded efforts to promote neighborhood awareness of the repercussions of wealth-extracting gentrification and to negotiate a comprehensive community benefits agreement, not only for Little Haiti but also in solidarity with South Florida's low-income communities at large. More broadly, FANM and its legal representative, The Community Justice Project, have been grappling with the provision of services to Little Haiti families evicted from rental housing and evicted small businesses, and with the provision of counseling support to local homeowners experiencing relentless pressure to sell their homes to real estate speculators.

While there have been historical varieties of community displacement in general and gentrification in particular, what threatens Little Haiti is the contemporary world's pervasive and predatory form of gentrification: a process fundamentally driven by wealthy real estate speculators that dispossesses, dislocates, and expels the working class and poor—typically racial-ethnic minorities—from their urban neighborhoods. Underlying this predatory form is the global ascent of market-dominated politics and financial speculation, which pits cities against each other in worldwide competition to attract capital into luxury property development for corporate business, tech/creative startups, and associated housing, retail, and leisure (Gavroche 2015; Main and Bell 2019). Investors, their government allies, and the mainstream media endeavor politically to legitimate these real estate projects, and thereby entice public support or elicit indifference outside the realm of core beneficiaries, by touting the shiny veneer of community-displacing gentrification: district and commercial revitalization; rising property values and municipal tax revenues; falling local poverty and crime; and lively restaurant/entertainment venues. Such discourse ignores wealth-extracting gentrification's repercussions for urban-territorial inequality (Desmond 2017; Development without Displacement 2015; Gavroche 2015; Main and Bell 2019; Markus and Zuk 2017).

First and foremost, predatory gentrification exerts profoundly negative consequences by displacing local residents, small businesses, churches, and social and health service organizations—all the more so in a predominately minority immigrant district that, given today's prevailing politics, is rife with fear of arrest, deportation, and family separation. Second, such gentrification exerts long-run disruptive impacts for many remaining residents, small businesses, and other entities, as it dislocates preexisting social networks, institutions, and markets in favor of new, generally discordant conditions. Third, its displacements undermine a preexisting community's political capacity to negotiate the terms of neighborhood change. Fourth, it generates broader, enduring social, economic, and fiscal costs to a metropolitan area, as the problems of displaced poor families are exacerbated and dispersed to other, frequently poorer

and less favorably located neighborhoods. And fifth, gentrification discourse diverts attention from the historical and contemporary roles of interrelated government policy, labor exploitation, and land-use/housing practices that have created racialized, socio-territorial inequalities of wealth and poverty across metropolitan areas (Connolly 2014). In so doing, such discourse marginalizes or precludes consideration of equitable, inclusionary alternatives to gentrification for revitalizing low-income districts (Development without Displacement 2015; Main and Bell 2019).

Regarding the above points, renters are the most vulnerable to residential displacement under aggressive gentrification as landlords seek to maximize profits. In this context, the proximate causes of tenant displacement are actions such as landlord disinvestment, negligence, and assorted abuses; steep rent increases, non-renewed leases, and absence of leases; building rehabilitation or demolition; and evictions as, in view of more profitable alternatives, landlords more strictly enforce lease provisions. Some homeowners may be vulnerable to foreclosure due to property tax liens, as building and zoning codes become more stringent or more strictly enforced, and sometimes possibly due to property tax increases. Whether due to gentrification or not, residential displacement attacks the very foundations of family life, above all when incomes and alternative neighborhood/housing options are precarious and families must care for children and special-needs members. Entwined with the mere threat or upcoming reality of displacement are heightened stress, health and mental health disorders, and frayed family relationships. These are compounded following displacement, as families are sometimes split apart, jobs and earnings are typically disrupted while costs mount, and homelessness or housing instability commonly ensue. Acute budget shortfalls dictate cutbacks in food, health care, child care, utilities payments, and more. When low-income families do find subsequent housing, it is frequently located in even poorer areas—within the metropolitan area or elsewhere—with higher crime rates, often more expensive but worse housing conditions, and disconnected access to transportation, jobs, and community social and institutional networks. The disruptions and trauma are most trying for children and youth and their schooling, as well as for special-needs family members, racial minorities, and undocumented immigrants. The web of repercussions for displaced low-income families and their members is likely to impact their life-long prospects (Desmond 2017; Markus and Zuk 2017).

For residents not yet displaced or managing to stay for the long run, culture clashes with gentrifying residents and businesses are a common problem. Such clashes may intersect with stricter policing to make remaining residents more vulnerable to criminalization and its financial as well as social impacts (Misra 2019). “Exclusionary displacement” is a largely overlooked, additional problem. In this regard, working-class and poor families cannot afford to move into a gentrifying neighborhood and, in any case, may no longer have incentive to do so as previous community anchors have eroded (Marcuse 1985).

When family configurations and subsequent relocation and housing options permit, some homeowners profit from gentrification by selling their homes. Some remaining residents, typically the more educated and skilled, commonly gain a foothold within a gentrified district. Many of these may be owners or professional and skilled employees of strategically situated local businesses. More tenuously situated businesses, however, become vulnerable to the loss of

clientele and employees, as well as to landlord practices of escalating rents, refusing to renew leases, and engaging in abuses to evict business tenants.

A much less apparent result of ongoing displacements is the eroded capacity of preexisting local residents and entities to mobilize politically to negotiate harm-reducing community benefits agreements and, short of such agreements, to negotiate piecemeal community improvements in their particular interests. This erosion occurs at two levels. Within the neighborhood, previous community networks dissipate; businesses, churches, and social service programs lose employees, clientele, congregations, and members, are displaced by rising taxes, or are evicted, perhaps closing down or moving elsewhere; the student, parent, and possibly leadership composition of schools changes; some residents, businesses, churches, and other organizations align and prosper with incoming gentrifying interests; and local socioeconomic and racial-ethnic transformation politically marginalizes many long-standing local groups. Beyond the neighborhood, such changes alter the politics of neighborhood relations with city and county government in favor of the new, gentrifying groups (Development without Displacement 2015; Misra 2019).

Summarizing the above, predatory gentrification creates a complex of costs to be entered into the accounting ledger against gentrification's presumed benefits. It not only displaces predominately working-class and poor families but also disperses most of them to other, commonly more distant neighborhoods of more concentrated disadvantage. Displaced families thereby become more vulnerable to crime; to job, financial, housing, transportation, and food insecurity; to deficits of care for children and special-needs members; and to problems of health and mental health. Racial-ethnic antagonism in new neighborhoods may compound these stresses and vulnerabilities, as do the chronic worries of undocumented immigrants. The dislocations experienced by children and youth frequently translate into declining school attendance and achievement, and beyond into stunted post-secondary education, occupational skills, and life chances. Not only do these and other problems represent setbacks and obstacles for individuals, families, and communities. They likewise represent lost productivity, utilities and tax revenues, and purchasing power for metropolitan economies; increased public health, social service, and law enforcement costs; and miscellaneous broader fiscal costs (Desmond 2017; Elliott and Kalish 2017; Markus and Zuk 2017).

Such setbacks, obstacles, losses and costs are glaring when contrasted against the vast potential for family, community, and metropolitan development if inclusionary, equitable neighborhood policies were substituted for wealth-extracting gentrification. Yet, by obfuscating the roles of exploitive and discriminatory policies and practices—past and present—as the foundations of class, racial, and locational impoverishment (Connolly 2014), mainstream discourse legitimates top-down gentrification while delegitimizing inclusionary, equitable alternatives for neighborhood revitalization. Most of the costs associated with this deep-seated asymmetry of political power and decision making are hidden from mainstream public view. What is not hidden are the consequent profound and widening inequalities that plague neighborhoods, communities, and cities today.

Activity Schedule

Prof. Tardanico (FIU) will supervise the community research activities. Prof. Tamargo (MDC) will supervise the photography/visual arts activities together with FIU adjunct photography instructor Peggy Nolan. All activities will be undertaken in partnership with FANM.

July-August 2019: Orientation activities

- reading list concerning social justice photography; gentrification in historical and global perspective; history of racialized land use/housing in South Florida; and history of greater Miami, Lemon City, and Little Haiti;
- reading list concerning City of Miami “Special Area Plans” and gentrification in Little Haiti/greater Miami, and concerning inclusionary/equitable alternatives to gentrification for revitalizing low-income neighborhoods;
- bi-weekly walking tours and exploratory photography in Little Haiti, guided by FANM and other community collaborators;
- bi-weekly summary meetings with Professors Tardanico, Tamargo, and Nolan.

September-December 2019

- Interviews with Marleine Bastien (executive director, FANM) and FANM staff; and with the Community Justice Project (legal service lawyers);
- Interviews with representative community leaders, business interests, and residents; and with pertinent lawyers, journalists, scholars, activists, and others, scheduled and supervised by Prof. Tardanico and FANM;
- FIU-MDC students mentor FANM youth-group members in community advocacy photography, *two hours bi-weekly (rotating groups of two-three FIU-MDC students)* under FANM staff supervision;
- Supervised by FANM and Professors Tamargo and Nolan (*including weekly meetings*), the FIU-MDC students photographically document Little Haiti’s families, small businesses, and wider community as they attempt to cope with dislocations and evictions in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood; and photographically document the broader depth and vibrancy of Little Haiti’s culture(s), daily life, and architecture/urbanism.

January-February 2020

- Continued FIU-MDC student *bi-weekly* mentorship of FANM youth-group members in community advocacy photography, under FANM staff supervision;
- Continued FIU-MDC student photographic documentation of Little Haiti’s families, small businesses, wider community, daily life, and architecture/urbanism, supervised by FANM and Professors Tamargo and Nolan (*weekly meetings*).

March-April 2020: Final Deliverables

- Supervised by Professors Tamargo and Nolan and FANM, the FIU-MDC students and FANM youth-group participants prepare for and undertake the project's culminating photographic/visual arts exhibition at the Little Haiti Cultural Complex;
 - Each FIU-MDC student will submit a 50+ page project book (photos, sketches, writings, documents, etc.).
 - Together, the FIU-MDC students, the faculty, FANM, and volunteer-participating professionals/community advocates will select photos (and related artwork, writings, documents, etc.) from the project books for the culminating exhibition, as well as discuss options for further exhibitions and for print/digital publication.
 - The FANM youth-group participants will chose, in consultation with the FIU-MDC students, faculty, and other participants, their own photos and associated work to display in the culminating exhibition, as well as discuss options for further exhibitions and for print/digital publication.
- Prof. Tardanico will submit two articles for publication (to *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* and *Urban Studies*).
- Professors Tamargo and Nolan will each submit a photography-based article for digital/print publication (to *Places Journal*) and will each submit their own photos for an exhibition beyond the project's culminating event.

References

- Bastien, Marleine. 2019. "Don't Let Magic City Development Destroy Little Haiti." *Miami Herald*, February 27, 2019.
- Bojnansky, Erik. 2018. "An Existential Question, but No Master Plan." *Biscayne Times*, November 2018.
- Campbell, Luther. 2018. "As Developers Target Miami's Poorest Neighborhoods, Minorities Get Kicked Out." *Miami New Times*. February 8, 2018.
- Connolly, N.D.B. 2014. *A World More Concrete: The Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.
- "Development without Displacement: Resisting Gentrification in the Bay Area." 2015. Oakland, CA: Causa Justa/Just Cause.
- Desmond, Matthew. 2017. *Eviction: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Elliott, Diana, and Emma Kalish. 2017. "Miami: The Cost of Eviction and Unpaid Bills of Financially Insecure Families for City Budgets." Urban Institute.
- Fink, Camile. 2019. "Climate Gentrification in Miami." *Planetizen*. January 6, 2019.
- Flechas, Joey. 2018. "Miami's Little Haiti Residents Push Back on Gentrification." *Miami Herald*, June 21, 2018.
- Gavroche, Julius. 2015. "Gentrification: The City as a Field of Appropriation, Dislocation and Segregation." *Autonomies* (blog). May 2015.
- "Gentrification and Displacement." n.d. Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco.
- Kofman, Eleonore, and Elizabeth Lebas, eds. 1996. *Henri Lefebvre: Writings on Cities*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Main, Kelly Leilani, and Diana X. Bell. 2019. "Forced from Home: A Human Rights Assessment of Displacement and Evictions in Boston's Chinatown." Chinese Progressive Association and Displacement Research & Action Network.

- Marcus, Justine, and Miriam Zuk. 2017. "Displacement in San Mateo County: Consequences for Neighborhoods, Housing, Quality of Life, and Health." Institute of Government Studies, UC Berkeley, May.
- Marcuse, Peter. 1985. "Gentrification, Abandonment, and Displacement: Connections, Causes, and Policy Responses in New York City." *Urban Law Annual* 28 (January).
- Misra, Tanvi. 2019. "What D.C.'s Go-Go Shutdown Reveals about Gentrification."
- Portes, Alejandro, and Ariel C. Armory. 2018. *The Global Edge: Miami in the Twenty-First Century*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Smiley, David, and Andres Viglucci. 2017. "Redesigning Miami, 9 Acres at a Time." *Miami Herald*, January 13, 2017.
- Viglucci, Andres, and Joey Flechas. 2019. "Massive Little Haiti Project and \$31M Aid Get Initial OK--but Not a Green Light Yet." *Miami Herald*. March 29, 2019.
- Wile, Rob. 2018. "Avenues, an Elite Private School, Will Open on Site of Little Haiti's Archbishop Curley School." *Miami Herald*. November 29, 2018.