



RETHINKING GENTRIFICATION AND RACIAL JUSTICE: RESISTING THE RETURN OF THE PLANTATION

Los Angeles Sentinel, 11-09-17, p. 6

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

IT IS NOT OVER-REACHING OR MISREADING the signs and tendencies of the time to conceive and confront the ongoing process of what is currently called gentrification as the *return of the plantation*. Indeed, it fits well within the context of the social “thunderdome” and moral wilderness that the dominant group, especially under the current mad regime, is establishing here in this country and trying to impose on the world. It is particularly associated with the South before and immediately after the civil war, but it was always a part of America itself as a political and social system socially schizophrenic in its Jekyll-like pretensions and pronouncements of freedom and justice and its hideous Hyde-like impositions of domination, deprivation and degradation on others.

The plantation is established by colonizers, newcomers who imposed themselves on the original residents and owners dispossessing them, disrupting their lives and degrading them. The original residents and those brought in as objects of cheap labor, behind the scenes sex and self-degrading entertainment are seen as disposable populations with only *derived relevance*, a relevance granted by their relationship with and use to the colonizers and newcomers. There is no human concern for the awesome suffering imposed on the victimized others, only a ruthless pursuit of profit for some, pleasure for others, and the shared satisfaction of power of all of them to realize their racial and class will, protect their interests and promote their way of life and death dealing in the world.

Clearly, one of the greatest problems of dealing with gentrification as the moral and social problem it is, is that it is camouflaged and cuddled in a narrative and mythology that pose it as a good and desirable process and practice, hiding the real suffering it causes. It is called a benefit, an improvement, and a process of renewal, and a revitalization and beautification project, but for whom and what about the life-taking and ugliness of human suffering it causes and leaves in its wake?

Gentrification is rooted in and reflective of a masking mythology by interlocking practices,

policies, propaganda and interests of banks, developers, corporations, government (politicians) and media. And it is based on the capitalist philosophy and practice of neo-liberalism marked by several defining assumptions and contentions. From the outset, everything is reduced to the economics of profit and loss and the market posed as the mother and matrix of human life and human good. Thus, humans are posed as objects of calculation of profit and loss without due consideration of harm to the vulnerable: the less powerful, less wealthy and less favored. Competition and consumption are seen as key to defining human life and human development. Ethics are separated from economics. Moral reflection and public discussion over issues that matter are diminished. And in their place, a market mentality emerges and exalts conversations of likes and dislikes of the individual consumer who is taught to constantly click and tweet these preferences and to consume without consideration of larger moral and social issues.

Thus, the false and misleading narrative is that gentrification comes with no costs, only good, i.e., economic prosperity, new amenities like dog parks, coffee shops, art colonies, new imposed transportation lines, sports stadiums, new housing and new residents and a new face uplift for the ugly, aging and distressed neighborhoods to be seized and forcibly reformed. And we are not to ask where are the people that originally occupied these spaces, who are now targeted, disrupted and diminished without consideration of what it will do to them?

Any serious ethical understanding and approach to social change and social development, would include how it will affect their lives, especially their capacity to live lives of dignity, decency and security in person and place. Gentrification, however, focuses on the most privileged and powerful, the most favored and deferred to, the moneyed groups with high-end consumer preferences and capacities. There is no serious questioning and concerns for what benefit and harm this will bring to the peoples of color or to the poor and working class. Thus, it is a mockery

**RETHINKING GENTRIFICATION AND RACIAL JUSTICE:
RESISTING THE RETURN OF THE PLANTATION**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 11-09-17, p. 6

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

of meaning and an irrational reasoning to claim that gentrification's so-called renewal benefits the neighborhood and the people in it, if they can't afford it, access it or enjoy it. As our honored teacher, Malcolm X taught, we can't righteously call ourselves diners, even if we are sitting at the table, if there's nothing on our plates.

Gentrification comes with human costs and human casualties, not simply displacement, but also *race and ethnic erasure and class cleansing*. It is racial erasure because it denies us the right of presence, the capacity to be present in our own historical communities. We are pushed out, rendered suspect in a newly constituted community with little or no place for *those with more color and less means*. And it is racial erasure because it undermines and dissolves community as a site of culture and its institutions that house and advance its legacies, interests and aspirations. And in their place rise the institutions of the newcomers and their pets and preferences.

And it is class cleansing because it seeks to clean the area of the dirty, diseased, and deficient things and people that go counter to the newcomers' conceptions of clean, healthy, beauty and security. Those who cannot afford the new rents or leases, or buy a condo or house of high-end costs are deemed unworthy of presence and removed.

Thus, stripped of all its high-priced camouflage is a process and practice of displacement, removal of real people from long held space central to concepts of community, with no place to go. It is acts of dispossession and the loss of property, housing, sites and structures of gathering, exchange and reaffirmation in community. Moreover, dispossession and displacement are followed by replacement, replacement in race and class terms. This, again, points not only to class issues of wealth and poverty, profit and loss in economic terms, but also to benefit and harm in racial terms. And again, it demonstrates the racial injustice and

oppression imposed on Black people and other people of color from the beginning of this country. That is why talks and programs of social justice are of less, little or no use to African Americans, if racial justice is not taken into consideration on every level.

At the heart of the devastating effect of gentrification, this return to the plantation in our historic communities, is its undermining Black community, its destruction, absorbing, and transforming cultural sites and sources into White places and programs of White preferences. It is a violation of our human rights to housing, security, association, to exist as a community and be free from both physical *and* cultural genocide. And clearly, the destructive impact on the culture, character and life-conditions of our communities across the country should and do raise these and related issues and generate resistance, not only from us and others similarly situated and impacted. It should also provoke resistance from those claiming concern for and commitment to human rights.

INDEED, ONLY THROUGH RIGHTEOUS AND relentless resistance can neighborhood development be reconceived and remade into a transformed and renewed process itself without the destructive character of its plantation policies and practices. Here it is important to note that the plantation metaphor speaks not only to gentrification as a particular form and site of oppression, but also to every other site and form of oppression, both psychological and physical, ideological and institutional and must be engaged in righteous and relentless resistance. Indeed, *every place of oppression is a plantation; every plantation a battlefield, and every battlefield an opportunity and opening to a new horizon and liberating history of humankind.*

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor and Chair of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* and *Introduction to Black Studies*, 4th Edition, www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org; www.MaulanaKarenga.org.