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The Need for Inter/Subdisciplinary Thinking in Critical Conceptualizations of Displacement

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Displacement occupies an ambiguous position in contemporary geographical thought. Displacement through gentrification and regeneration has gained prominence in critical urban geography, even as critical migration, border, and citizenship studies have simultaneously produced a robust literature on transnational displacement and internally displaced persons. In response to emerging crises of global and urban order, this article adds to a consideration of displacement—as concept and methodology—through an urging of attention to three drivers common to urban, subnational, and transnational scales of displacement. Our key argument is to suggest an urgent research agenda addressing the different scales and roles of value, choice, and infrastructure, both as drivers in processes of displacement and as points of learning between subdisciplines. Collectively, our work on migration and urban restructuring shows that large-scale development and resettlement projects, labor markets, and extraordinary measures of crisis management generate new ways in which value is extracted from displaced bodies and depeopled places. Against a tendency to index displacement (in both policy and research methodology) as either voluntary or nonvoluntary, we advance a critique of the choice structure of displacement. We further call attention to the infrastructures and technologies through which displacement is moved from a temporary state of exception to an ongoing state of normality. In doing so, we call for the need to rethink the epistemology of displacement and identify the significance of cross-subdisciplinary conversations for this project. *Key Words: displacement, extraction, infrastructure, migration, urban studies.*

Displacement is a core spatial metaphor through which the social sciences understand the forms and processes of human mobility. Although the ontology and quality of place remains central to geographic thought, the heuristic implications of displacement have rarely been subject to sustained critical analysis. This is particularly striking given the ubiquity of the term within geographical analyses of the contemporary moment, when transformations in urban and rural environments (Harvey 2003; Li 2010; Janoschka and Sequera 2016), contested mobility in global human movement (Dwyer et al. 2016; Hyndman and Giles 2017), and even the apparent stasis necessitated by a global pandemic are liable to be conceptualized as forms of displacement. A nexus of relationships between place, (un)freedom, and mobility is invoked (consciously or not) when displacement is applied across a wide range of scales and subjects. What productive use could there be in thinking across these divergent applications of displacement, and what empirical and methodological value could such thinking serve for the displaced? In addressing these questions we do not seek to present an exhaustive review of the varied literature on displacement but rather to explore how different methodological approaches can inspire novel conceptual engagement with displacement across scales.

Displacement typically implies a form of injustice (analogous with expulsion and exclusion), and the identification of mobilities as displacements is strongly associated with a scholarship that seeks alliances with the displaced against coerced movement. By indexing population movement as displacement, geographers have typically sought to denaturalize such movements, identify those actors who benefit from or facilitate displacement, and articulate a politics of social and spatial justice for the displaced.

The direction of our thinking emerged out of conversations and research conducted across diverging fields, research locales, and theoretical standpoints. We are conscious that displacement functions as a spatial metaphor insofar as, even as a signifier, it implies a subjectivity defined by its relationship with

place (the displaced), the disruption of this relationship through mobility (displacement), and the possibility of replacement. Displacement is employed as a framework at a variety of scales that are necessarily overlapping. Displacement at the scale of an urban neighborhood requires awareness of how such contested mobilities (Cresswell 2006) coincide with transnational displacements driven by conflict and global labor markets—recognizing differing scales of displacement does not presume the primacy of any one scale.

We are also cognizant of intersections between displacement and colonial imaginaries of space. Displacement within social sciences has its origins in a metaphor borrowed from ecological sciences, connoting the invasion, expulsion, and replacement of one group by another in an environmental niche (Park and Burgess 1984)—in these terms, displacement implies a threat of replacement and justification for territorial chauvinism. Following Massey (2005), we must avoid an essentialist narrative of coherent and authentic place that precedes the displacements of modernity, but rather embed the negotiated, learned, and improvised nature of place in our methods. At the same time, we recognize that displacement does not merely connote a symbolic motif of geographic knowledge but a struggle experienced and opposed by grassroots actors around the globe (Tomiak 2017; Launius and Boyce 2021). This article proceeds through two main sections. First, we propose that attention to choice, value, and infrastructure can produce critical geographic knowledge across apparently distinct forms of displacement. Second, we illustrate these themes through drawing on expertise in two geographic fields of displacement: urban studies and migration studies.

Choice, Value, and Infrastructure: Concerns and Methods

We identify three drivers of displacement that run through and across different perspectives on displacement and that address the relationship between subjectivity, space, and movement: choice, value, and infrastructure. This ordering is useful because these categories serve as points for intersubdisciplinary learning and provide a fertile ground for innovative methodological approaches.

First, displacement requires a critical approach to the idea of choice and the economic, institutional, and social forces that structure the decision to move.

We understand freedom to be always constrained and through the concept of choice draw attention to the un-freedoms and restrictions of agency imposed on those who undergo displacement. Geographers have been critical of a pernicious understanding of mobile populations that draws on a false binary between voluntary and forced movement. This is apparent in the work of migration scholars, which has sought to contest the legal and political categorization of displaced people based on whether their mobility is judged to be forced or voluntary (Trujillo-Pagan 2018; Haas, Castles, and Miller 2020), to think of migration both beyond the liberal notion of autonomous choice and the romanticization of movement as an emancipatory act (De Genova, Garelli, and Tazzioli 2018), and to recognize the structural violence that unequally distributes the possibility to displace oneself across geographies and subject positions. Crawley and Skleparis (2018) were critical of a discourse around migration that posits a clear distinction between the coerced movement of refugees and the voluntary movement of economic migrants. Critiques at the urban scale have similarly challenged the naturalization of residential displacement as a by-product of urban improvements (Marcuse 1985; Slater 2014), thus neglecting the psychosocial ties that constitute place (Easton et al. 2020). The problematization of liberal autonomous choice in mobility we adopt here also offers an incisive point from which to extend and deepen the critique of the "false choice" that is assumed in discussion of urban change. There are thus striking possibilities for a shared research agenda of migration and urban displacement to interrogate the construction of voluntary choice in mobility and the notions of agency and space that underpin it.

The second unifying concern we identify relates to the creation and capture of value through the occupation of space and the exploitation of the displaced. Marxist urban geographies have long recognized that the creation of surplus value requires the production, dispossession, and annihilation of space, resulting in displacement of previous land users and the accumulation of exchange value (Harvey 2003)—apparent in the metaphorical displacement and fixing of value in space (Bok 2019). Dispossessive displacement in processes of expulsion (Sassen 2014), land grabs (Li 2010), eviction (Baker 2020b), dispersal (Garelli and Tazzioli 2016), and development (Wang and Wu 2019) allows the

realization and capture of exchange value through the displacement of previous users of a space or resource. In the context of migration, displaced and im/mobilized "floating" labor power is feminized and exploited by virtue of its informal status (Gago 2017; Coddington, Conlon, and Martin 2020; De Genova and Roy 2020), forced into reliance on exploitative rentier economies (Wu, Zhang, and Webster 2013; Cowan 2018), or rendered as captive consumers and laborers in carceral confinement (Conlon and Hiemstra 2014). Interrogating the interconnections between global migratory displacement and the extraction of value in urban space and practice offers further ground for comparative urban methodologies (Robinson 2016) to think of displacement-as-spatial-fix through multiple scales.

Third, displacement depends on and calls into being a wide range of legal, institutional, and physical infrastructures of enforcement. Although this might refer to the infrastructure of the camp and the transport network, for instance, a more productive interpretation of displacement infrastructures is as that which "mediates and binds the relations which produce one kind of space over another, and must be managed, enacted and created" (Baker 2020a, 144). Critical study of the diffuse mediations of displacement is apparent in the export of expertise in displacement and resettlement by the Chinese state (Rogers and Wilmsen 2020) and the institutional forms that enable labor migration in Southeast Asia (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Further work entails tracing the digital and physical infrastructures that facilitate the extraction of value from the displaced, and the production of representations of space that facilitate the imaginative naturalization of displacement: the legal and planning mechanisms that designate certain places ("blight" or "empty") as displaceable and the mapping techniques that facilitate dispossession of contested land. We thus understand a broader process to be at work, whereby the restrictive infrastructures of the border also resonate at an urban scale. Apprehending the affordances of these infrastructures also entails understanding how they might be challenged, broken, or subverted by researchers who seek alliances with those who are displaced.

Choice, value, and infrastructure as drivers of displacement across disparate scales offer an indication of the future research agenda that might track and contest the politics of displacement in the current age. Beyond acting as common themes, they initiate

a methodology of displacement insofar as they offer pathways for reading and mapping displacement across disciplines and geographical locales. Specific examples of critical methodologies that engage with these drivers are discussed in the following section.

This methodological approach has implications for the epistemology of displacement: how displacement is measured, visualized, and narrated and the geographic metapolitics arising from such representations. Within urban studies, the precise measurement and visualization of residential displacement has been a key goal among scholars concerned with gentrification (Marcuse 1985; Easton et al. 2020) in seeking to empirically demonstrate and quantify the reality of residential displacement (Slater 2006). Scholarship on the dispossession and displacement of indigenous populations through colonial power structures is similarly concerned with challenging the representation of such processes as "natural" within settler-colonial logics and instead making explicit the violence they entail (Johnson and Murton 2007; Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, and Lees 2020). The drive to make displacement visible at the neighborhood and regional scale is apparent in large-scale, public-facing data aggregation and mapping projects such as The Urban Displacement Project (Zuk and Chapple 2015) and Eviction Lab (Desmond et al. 2018). The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project combines this approach with concerns related to colonial power structures and the naturalization of dispossession, involving community organizations and ethnographic data in the production of maps and digital presentations of displacement that form compelling visualizations of processes otherwise hidden (Maharawal and McElroy 2018; Graziani and Shi 2020).

At the scale of transnational migration, however, the scopic regimes of displacement connote a very different methodological politics. Risam (2019) critiqued digital visualizations of "unstoppable" linear flows of migration toward Europe as simplistic nonparticipatory representations of displacement that play into racist imaginaries of migrant "invasion." Other scholars have documented how the displacement of Roma migrants (Plájás, M'charek, and van Baar 2019) and so-called climate refugees (Methmann 2014) is visualized toward racist ends.

By highlighting the dual politics of visualizing displacement—as political necessity at the urban level and acquiescence to alarmist visual tropes at the level of transnational migration—we do not mean to

suggest that a research methodology across these domains is necessarily contradictory or compromised. Rather, we are calling attention to the ways in which the choice, value, and infrastructures associated with displacement are named, visualized, and deployed in the methodological approaches we advocate. Although these three factors drive context across scale, context matters, which necessitates critical considerations about and reflection on the methodological tools employed. We turn now to two interdisciplinary geographic fields where displacement has been a prominently explored theme, first within urban studies and then in migration studies. We focus on each of these literatures separately and then conclude by sketching an inter/subdisciplinary agenda for critical displacement studies.

Displacement between and beyond the Urban and the Transnational

Building on Blanco and Apaolaza's (2016) review of displacement scholarship, we discern three forms of coerced mobility typically documented within urban studies. Residents undergo displacement through the incorporation of rural territory into new urban developments, through the ordinary functioning of the housing market, and through projects that undertake the upgrading of existing urban space. Recent innovations in gentrification research demonstrate the potential for critical methodologies that reach beyond the neighborhood scale and offer the basis for launching new conceptualizations of displacement across scales and subfields.

Gentrification is still often reified as a "natural" change based around urban upgrading and improvements, overlooking the residential displacement accompanying such transformations (Marcuse 1985). Restructuring of the neoliberal city displaces the use value of housing as shelter and recuperates exchange value through the transformation of space. Residential displacement neatly illustrates the contradictions of the property market at an urban scale and the conflict between the use value of home and the exchange value of real estate as a vehicle for capital accumulation (Newman and Wyly 2006).

Displacement at the urban scale, however, also prompts organized resistance and constitutes one of the most widespread forms of popular oppositional politics (Li 2010; González 2016). An understanding and visualization of the mechanisms, actors, and

trends that facilitate gentrification and dispossession is vital and a point of collaboration with scholar activists. Grassroots urban campaigners thus seek to map the infrastructures of urban displacement—the eviction, the disinvestment, the tenancy agreement, the mortgage, the secure architecture, and, indeed, the immigration enforcement raid—so that their affordances and weak spots might be identified and exploited (Ferreri 2020).

Despite this, the systematic measuring and tracking of displacement on the city and regional scales has remained a persistent methodological challenge. Projects seeking to comprehensively quantify urban displacement based on census data and critical mapping methods have proven valuable but rare and necessarily offer an incomplete picture of displacement. Gentrification unfolds unevenly across time and space (Lees, Shin, and Lopez-Morales 2016), and it is difficult to distinguish displacement associated with such changes from neighborhood change and sub-census-scale displacements (e.g., household consolidation or downscaling). An approach grounded in "data scavenging" is required, cross-referencing between diverse forms of publicly available statistics, the groundwork of grassroots antigentrification groups, and ethnography (Easton et al. 2020).

Such a mixed approach is also required because the forms of displacement recognized at the urban scale are increasingly variegated (Alexandri, Gonzalez, and Hodkinson 2016), encompassing the cultural and architectural violence of domicide (Zhang 2018a) and the transformation of daily life itself (Janoschka and Sequera 2016). This is exemplified by the convergence of scales of displacement in the dispossession, resettlement, and upgrading of the urban built environment in contemporary China (Jiang, Waley, and Gonzalez 2018; Zhang 2018b; Rogers and Wilmsen 2020), wherein the experience of displacement is normalized and the notion of the freedom to "choose" between becoming mobile and staying put appears largely nonsensical. This, in turn, prompts a reconceptualization of urban displacement beyond a discrete event and an approach that redirects research toward the slow violence of development and the livelihood strategies of postdisplacement (Roast 2019; Wang 2020). Expulsion, dispossession, and narrowing of options in mobility unfold as "forms of slow displacement" marked by imperceptibility, delay, waiting, and endurance (Tyner 2020, 85).

What is at stake in advancing displacement in urban studies is then how to extend the comparative analysis that lies at its core to explore the shared features (generative comparison) and the repeated instances (genetic comparison) of displacement beyond the city scale (Robinson 2016). The methodologies that serve this comparison require an omnivorous approach to data scavenging, mapping, and making visible slow violence and subtle infrastructures as well as moments of conflict and an ethnographic approach that remains closely allied to urban activists and attentive to the global displacements that shape their struggle. This is exemplified most explicitly in recent work by the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project to map not just the financial and legal frameworks of displacement in the San Francisco Bay Area but also the lived experience of the displaced and their connections to global junctures of colonialism (Maharawal and McElroy 2018; Graziani and Shi 2020). These methods launch an expanded conceptualization of displacement, not as a single instance of coerced movement but rather as the longitudinal narrowing of choices through public institutional factors and the private functioning of the housing market.

Research in migration studies has historically focused on transnational displacement and shown a tendency to understand displacement through the lens of forced or voluntary mobility. This binary has a certain normative appeal and is certainly politically expedient yet is ill-suited to explaining the complexity of people's (im)mobilities, leading many migration scholars to now focus on how migration choice is structured along a forced–voluntary or coerced–free continuum and to consider the possibilities for resistance to conditions of displacement (Haas, Castles, and Miller 2020).

Critical refugee studies scholars further note that the normative impulse to categorize migrants and reify a putative distinction between economic migrants and refugees leads to a flattening of social realities and a migration policy blindness to the movement of people between categories over space and time, and to the structural inequalities underlying supposedly voluntary economic migration (Trujillo-Pagan 2018). The outcome is too frequently a scripting of economic motives for migration as illegitimate in public and policy discourse (Mountz 2004), a narration of the figures of the "good" and "bad" migrant (Anderson 2013), and

hierarchies of rights and entitlements around the calculated deservingness of displaced migrants (Smith and Waite 2019). Such critiques lead us to urge a (re)interrogation of how voluntary choice is constructed in mobility and the constituent elements of agency and space that scaffold it. In this vein, Brigden and Mainwaring (2016), among others, charted the fragmented character of mobility, calling attention to how migrants' journeys are punctuated by stops and starts, by periods of mobility, immobility, and stasis amidst transnational movement. This is significant for deconstructing imprecise categorizations of migrants and for analyzing how choice operates and morphs over time and space. Importantly, too, we can also contemplate how this approach might inform the previously discussed conceptualization of displacement at the urban scale as a longitudinal event that is marked by the sporadic and repeated constraining of choices. This indicates a point of learning associated with conceptualizations of choice in displacement, where the critical apparatus of migration studies can assist in problematizing a binary notion of forced versus voluntary, an insight particularly relevant for emerging bodies of scholarship concerning climate-induced displacement and the urban and regional levels.

In research with asylum seekers and refugees, there is growing awareness of the infrastructures that facilitate and extract value from forced migrants through their displacement, through smugglers and traffickers (Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou 2019), privatized detention centers and border security (Andersson 2014), and institutions that manage forced migrants once in country (Darling 2016; Coddington, Conlon, and Martin 2020). Refugees and asylum seekers therefore habitually face liminality, ontological insecurity (Waite, Valentine, and Lewis 2014), and precarity (Butler 2004). Many displaced migrants in Global North countries further face extraction in the shape of labor exploitation within deregulated and casualized formal and informal sectors (Hodkinson et al. 2020).

This extraction of value is exemplified by the generation of revenue within the carceral circuitry (Gill et al. 2018) of immigration detention. Value is extracted from displacement and circulation within spaces of migrant confinement and from migrants themselves as commodified labor within detention systems. The infrastructure that sustains immigration detention in the United States, for example,

operates largely through privatization and subcontracting between federal, state, and private-sector actors. In this complex system, detained migrants are understood as entities from which revenue and value are extracted as private companies as well as municipal and federal governments increasingly rely on migrant commodification to sustain hollowed-out, deindustrialized urban economies (Conlon and Hiemstra 2014, 2017; Turner and Peters 2017; Bales and Mayblin 2018). These emerging directions of research demonstrate how studies of transnational displacement can be enriched through engagement with critical urban studies and the political economy of local urban spaces.

Moreover, the expansion and operation of the detention system relies on carceral mobility, or displacements within and around the detention system of those already forcibly emplaced within carceral settings. Hiemstra (2013) documented the extensive movement of migrant detainees as a matter of routine in the United States, frequently resulting in deportations. Displacement is realized as a perhaps unstated policy goal and produced through mobility. The consequences for migrants include a severing of connections to social, emotional, and legal supports, all while entities involved in sustaining detention infrastructure—including transportation, health care, food services, and administration, for instance—extract value.

We close this section by outlining two illustrative features of the infrastructure of contemporary displacement(s) that further crisscross the interests of both urban studies and migration studies, and indicate the potential for fruitful reciprocal collaboration between these subdisciplines. The first is the city as the frontier of displacement for refugees. Despite the "refugee camp" and encampment experiences being the dominant imaginary of forced migrants' place of displacement and a highly visible element of the border spectacle (De Genova 2002; D. Martin, Minca, and Katz 2020), forcibly displaced people predominantly live in urban contexts. City living characterizes 80 percent of internally displaced persons and over 60 percent of refugees, asylum seekers, and expats in need of humanitarian protection (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2019). As such, forced displacement contributes toward planetary urbanization and displaced people drive urbanization through participation in city-making (Çaglar and Glick Schiller 2018; Alkhalili 2019).

Historically, formal refugee camps have been planned as humanitarian enclosures, with the planning rationale to provide efficient services and achieve the social control of refugees while segregating them from citizens. Camp spaces have become increasingly "urbanized" in many cases (Sanyal 2012; Ramadan 2013). Refugees improvise an infrastructure of permanence in temporary spaces of shelter, and institutional actors become the developers of a "humanitarian urbanism" (Potvin 2013; Jansen 2016). Refugee-led urbanization also occurs through refugee choice to live in urban neighborhoods, even when this means losing eligibility for aid and susceptibility to eviction and police harassment. The "politics of presence" (Darling 2017) of urban refugees, as well as the increased recognition of urban informality (AlSayyad and Roy 2003) in city making and of refugees' role (Fawaz 2017) at these urban frontiers, has broken through the policy canon of encamping displaced people inside the territory of host countries but outside the social and political life of the urban. At this intersection of urban and transnational displacements, we see a move to rescale the infrastructures that regulate international migration to police the movement of the displaced at the urban scale and to extract value from them. In the migrant worker centers of production in East and Southeast Asia (Yeoh and Chee 2016; Xiang 2020) and the transit points in the Mediterranean (Biehl 2015), the regimes for securing migrant labor through work permits and visas are reproduced at the neighborhood scale.

A second illustrative feature is the emergence of approaches to displacement management that rely on digital technologies and the private sector. The financial technology market, biometric industry, and digital connectivity sector have become key partners in the humanitarian infrastructure for governing the daily lives of refugees in cities and camps (L. Martin and Harker 2020). The imbrication of digital infrastructure, choice, and value in "techno-humanitarianism" (Morozov 2012) is discussed as a win-–win scenario within the humanitarian sector (Gabor and Brooks 2017). This datafication, however, produces modes of capitalist valorization and practices of extraction from forced displacement (Neilson 2018; Tazzioli 2022). Cards and iris scans document the purchasing power and consumption behaviors of refugee households (Lemberg-Pedersen and Haioty 2020), and access to humanitarian aid is granted

insofar as refugees constantly verify their preapproved identity and volunteer data. The techno-solutionist visualization of displacement reinforces power asymmetries between refugees and aid agencies, depoliticizes displacement, and advances business agendas (Madianou 2019).

Conclusions

We have sought to bring together contexts and scales at which displacement manifests within our subfields of human geography and offer preliminary thinking toward a research agenda of global displacements. With our focus on the comparative themes of choice, value, and infrastructures of displacement, we do not mean to draw simple equivalences between the scales and contexts of transnational, internal, and urban displacements. We are aware that the different forms of forced mobility outlined in this article are indexed as displacement in English and in contexts where an Anglophone nomenclature is imposed as the canon to study, categorize, and govern people. By unpacking the themes of choice, value, and infrastructure, our goal is to map the current conversation about displacement and to open the debate about the lived experiences of those who move and how they make sense of their experiences in the multiscalar contexts in which they occur.

We are arguing for a bridging of the scalar and interdisciplinary divide (urban–subnational–transnational) in the way we study and discuss displacement and suggest that such a move is necessary to address core issues of contemporary displacement: the categorizing of choice as a binary rather than a spectrum, the extraction of value through human mobility, and the emerging infrastructures that sustain and naturalize such processes. Indeed, this bridging is already underway in many of the examples of critical scholarship we have discussed, but it requires further extension and clarification of its relationship to displacement itself. Progressive methodologies (e.g., data scavenging, ethnographic coproduction with the displaced, and attention to historical displacements of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Projects) have potential for sites of future enquiry (e.g., the refugee as urban displacee and technological fix for infrastructures of displacement). We contend that there is value in thinking across subdisciplines, scales, and locales and that the shared concerns of displacement identified here offer compelling material for research

that seeks to bring together differing scales of displacement, enabling critical insights into how researchers seeking alliances with the displaced might support their struggles. Attention to ways in which displacement is categorized, visualized, and named affords insight into how such categories simultaneously shape and constrain our analysis. Working from a comparative methodology across urban and migratory scales requires an epistemology of displacement grounded in repeated instances and shared drivers (Robinson 2016), beyond the boundaries of any single scale or disciplinary silo.

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