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Commentary

Displacement, Out-of-placeness, and urban research in the south: An experiential perspective

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Abstract
Interdisciplinary engagements encounter a significant challenge in surmounting defensive barriers within conventional urban research. This emphasizes the necessity of creating space for comprehensive dialogs to tackle pivotal issues related to social justice in urban practice and academia. Urban research in the global south mandates a specific perspective that extends beyond the common oversight and veiling of specific viewpoints and encounters. Black geographies offers a language that acknowledges experiential, ingrained, and incarnate realities, contexts, and expressions of urbanization that surpass materiality. By extension, and as Bloch and Meyer argue, it expands the scope of contemplation to contemporary themes such as displacement.

Displacement and out-of-placeness

Urban research requires a particular way of seeing beyond the general erasure and masking of particular views and experiences. This emphasizes the necessity of creating space for broader conversations on contemporary themes of urban and social nature. Take, for instance, displacement. In many contexts where gentrification has occurred, displacement has almost invariably led to the tearing down of the urban fabric of poor neighborhoods in the name of progress, with states and private actors actively promoting and prioritizing new large-scale infrastructure development programs and real estate developments. Displacement has emerged as a key concern in its multiple, material, experiential, and incarnate forms beyond material dislocation.

In the global south, many burgeoning megacities have entered a critical stage where the spectacle of official planning and anticipatory actions from those seeking material gains from gentrification processes have become key features of contemporary urbanization. Synonymous with the urge to bring linearity and regularity to urban space, these processes have accelerated capitalist land transformations and future drives to achieve global, "world-class," and high-modern city status (Guma, 2021). Despite claims of equity, inclusion, and

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justice, and several demolitions, these large-scale programs and developments have led to the rise in machinations of disembodied, decontextualized, and institutionalized displacement, entailing brutal segregation and erasure in the continued and evolving production and redevelopment of cities. These programs and developments highlight urbanization in general and gentrification in particular as processes that function as displacement, therefore, divisive, discriminatory, and exclusionary, continuously marginalizing, destroying, disconnecting, and dislocating many (ibid.). In many cases, displacements and forced resettlements have become a major phenomenon where bodies have been rendered "out of place" as "invaders," "trespassers," and "outsiders" (Combs, 2022; Puwar, 2004). The urban majority, thus, are left subservient to the interests of the elite and as a kind of "dissonant bodies" (Puwar, 2004: 31–54), subjected to circumscription based on how geographies and bodies are imagined both politically, historically, and conceptually.

Displacement is not only a core component of gentrification, but it is also a critical structuring feature of Western capitalist landscapes and one where its structuring unfolds affectively: "through the re-articulation and rematerialization of embodied relations within place" (Bloch and Meyer, 2023). This, by extension, is true not only in the global North but also in the global south, where gentrification reproduces structural systems of oppression and marginalization, class and racial stratification, and urban poverty. In many cities, gentrification processes have exacerbated underlying inequalities and sparked antigentrification grassroots and political movements, protests, struggles, and activism. Resistance to gentrification has become common in many cities, highlighting different forms of displacement and "out-of-place" bodies. One such form is survival, where one could think of residents who, in their persistence to live in the city, must organize, mobilize and constitute primary forms of struggle for social and racial justice. Here, urban populations, in situ, engage in several individual and collective forms of hustling in fringe positions. They circumvent gentrification threats and processes side by side, employing different popular mechanisms that inevitably interweave economic opportunities with social relations. For them, to inhabit the city is to inhabit a thickening of heterogeneous and provisional intersections and webs of urban life through lived experiences, strategies, practices, and trajectories. These processes often incorporate sociogenic philosophies and grounded community work and networks (Jon et al., 2023), drawing us to ordinary, heterogeneous, and diverse assemblages and forms of organizing beyond exclusive, neoliberal, and market-oriented interventions.

Urban populations resist in ways that are elusive, employing ordinary and mundane modalities, materialities, and architectural forms and aesthetics. Those who dwell in the informal settlements maintain a state of provisionality through how they build, inhabit, and sustain shanty houses in order to evade physical displacement through evictions in hostile formal planning environments (Guma, 2021). They cast subversive and anti-establishment maneuvers to cope with marginality and survive several eviction threats and harsh socioeconomic conditions across time and space. Their inhabitation sites thus become symbolic, political, and central sites of resistance as they must defy formal institutions and broader markets and practices of city-making. They strategize as "out of place" bodies while staying put through articulations that attest to their urban resilience and agency in resisting forms of capture. These emphasize the significance of processes involving generative and creative practices of evasion and refusal, rather than direct contestation, as a means of thinking about displacement. Their resistance is rooted in "fugitivity," which is a recognition that signifies efforts toward liberation within oppressive structural conditions that deny freedom (Cante, 2023). Fugitivity recognizes the paradox of seeking emancipation while simultaneously facing the pervasive effects of oppressive structures through radical practices and micropolitics (Simone, 2016).

In these processes, the notion of home ascribes a different meaning. It is more than a place where one currently lives. Many urban residents live in the city, yet the city is never truly a place they call home. They do not truly feel "at home" in the city, as understandings of what the home is and where the

home is are incredibly personal experiences. Most of these, however, do not consider the city their home mostly because they are inhabiting the city temporarily: as transient immigrants and as settlers from rural areas and elsewhere. They are not born—and were not raised—in the city, and while they may have extensive networks in the city, their neighborhoods, and their communities, they do not really have strong ties to the city. The city may be a place of habitation and livelihood. However, they will not claim it, its streets and neighborhood, as their home as they are only transitory residents only marginally and temporarily residing in the city. However, their sense of home is someplace elsewhere, often in the countryside.

Here, out-of-placeness and displacement highlight a prevailing theme of belonging that challenges the absorbed images of home prevalent in the Western perspective. The notion of "home" becomes an ontological difficulty rather than obvious. It is experiential, rooted, and nuanced, producing a consciousness beyond essentialist hegemonic narratives of what it means to call a place home. Home displays invasive effects resulting from an inevitable and illusive displacement subjected to residents, a displacement only faced through experience and where experience encompasses belonging beyond parallaxical views of place, presence, and placeness.

Understanding displacement as more than observable dislocation of bodies necessitates acknowledging how urban populations survive, navigate and produce spatial practices that inform the politics of urban space beyond location. Not much academic work has examined contentious and ambivalent forms of such displacement and out-of-placeness. There is still room to bring the plight, idiosyncrasies, and context-specificities of out-of-place bodies to the fore of theory-making and policy-design processes. It is imperative to explore individual and collective actions regarding how urban populations confront various iterations synonymous with contemporary forms of capture. There is a need, therefore, to examine urban populations not as passive agents that are victims of the consequences of gentrification and extended urban redevelopment programs but as pro-active agents responding in varied ways beyond those that are easily observable and measurable.

These measures, including sociomaterial and techno-popular forms and articulations engineered by urban populations in everyday life, and evasion and refusal, are inevitable features of many southern cities. They constitute embodied forms where displacement, as Bloch and Meyer, from the global North, "functions through people's embodied place-making capacities, only some of which manifest in physical mobility."

Urban research in the south

Black geographies offers a language that acknowledges experiential, ingrained, and incarnate realities, contexts, and expressions of urbanization that surpass materiality. As Bloch and Meyer argue, it expands the scope of contemplation to contemporary themes such as displacement. In the global south, however, much more needs to be done to advance a more complex, complete, and balanced conceptualization beyond the general masking of particular voices and segregation and erasure of particular views (Guma, 2020). A crucial aspect to consider is the need for a deep reflection on theory beyond hegemonic scholarly traditions toward reflections that respect alternative, located, and situated epistemologies in critical urban theory. Such epistemologies include local legends, emplaced knowledge, and local oratures, more loosely, the oral tradition. How we interrogate critical urban research, especially from the global south, much change to reflect actual philosophies and sensibilities that exist and shape bodies and places. Beyond the repeated thinking of southern cities simply as sites for empirical urban research that needs to then travel to the global North, acknowledging the historical, contemporary, and continuous existence of knowledge and knowledge production in the global south is important. Mainstream work on urbanization processes still often resides or has roots in the global north, from "seminal" scholars deploying their own research and analytical categories and valuations. With some exceptions, scholars from—or oriented within the well-worn paths of—the Global North continue to offer intellectual theorizations, sometimes without due regard for local realities and patterns of thought, practice, and ingenuity. With

little or no power to speak up in the face of respected experts, emergent scholars are often left with no choice but to rely on "seminal" researchers and academics that barely pay attention to—or care for—other, different ways of seeing, reading, or being in the world.

It is important, therefore, to contemplate further how we research, read, and write about the urban and how we read, count and tell such themes and subjects as displacement and out-of-placeness beyond reductionist understandings. Bloch and Meyer's provocations are pertinent not only to current thinking and practices in gentrification studies but also to urban planning and geography, and also both for the global north and the global south. I agree that urban research needs to move away from methodologies and methodological approaches that rely solely on the counting of bodies, which is prevalent in both quantitative and qualitative research. The overemphasis on counting bodies hinders the comprehension of articulations such as displacement as a process of embodiment. Because human beings are emotional and spiritual beings that cannot be reduced to capitalist logics, our focus as researchers should be on highlighting how urban populations cultivate agency and create conditions where people can lead fulfilling lives beyond predefined equations and rationality. This will address the tendency to frame urban questions in a way that gives primary importance to urban phenomena that can be measured through empirical, preferably quantitative, methods. It will extend the much-needed attention to questions often deemed worthy of consideration and those that often get overlooked, more so in a way that is pivotal to highlighting and tackling issues related to social justice in both urban practice and academia.

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Author Biography

Prince K. Guma is an urban scholar, social scientist, and researcher of cities, infrastructures, technologies, and everyday life in the global south. His work is situated at the intersection of Science and Technology Studies, Urban Studies, and Southern Urbanism and is hoped to provide a menu for new explorations, enhance our understandings of urban and infrastructural possibilities, and add new insights to debates on urbanity in Africa and elsewhere.