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There Goes the Neighborhood: Combating Displacement in Richmond's Historically Black Neighborhoods

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There Goes the Neighborhood

I grew up in the old Harlem, New York. Where the hot summers would bring the kids outside to run through the fire hydrants that we turned into sprinklers, stoops and railings became the porches that we didn't have, and the corner store was our very own Walmart of snacks. 125th street, home of the famous Apollo Theater, was the place to get bootleg CDs and DVDs, and the latest Air Force One sneakers.

I had the opportunity to traverse many cultural spaces by way of being a smart [Black kid](#) from the hood, but even after the long days of summer camps and evenings of violin lessons on the lower east side, nothing felt quite like home as much as the 1.4 square miles of my Black, Harlem community.

In the summer of 2017, Wholefoods came to Harlem, right on 125th street and just a few avenues away from the Apollo. And well, there went the neighborhood. Its arrival was indicative of a different Harlem. Up until then, Harlem felt impenetrable to processes I would later learn about as an urban planner - gentrification and displacement and the inner workings of policies that drove them.

The change that engulfed Harlem is part of a national trend in gentrifying [legacy Black cities](#) and neighborhoods across the country—wealthy, white families are moving to non-white, predominantly Black neighborhoods. According to the [New York Times](#), since the year 2000, white residents moving to non-white communities has affected about one in six predominantly African-American census tracts. Inner cities and downtown centers once plagued by disinvestment, to which minorities were relegated, are attracting new development. The insidious nature of the changes happening in communities like Harlem is not simply the emergence of more white faces on Harlem's streets or the newly built bike lanes. The changes symbolize renewed interest in communities that have long fought for the very resources and amenities that new residents can now access so easily. They also symbolize an erasure of the very Blackness and cultural and social norms that created such a dynamic community.

The sudden interest in Black communities across the country is not, in fact, a sudden process. While the demographic shifts suggest a pattern of individual, white households choosing to move to historically Black and disinvested neighborhoods to spur gentrification and eventually displacement, their accomplices include [housing policies](#) that both encourage and intensify changes in these Black communities. The gentrification process and the displacement it incites perpetuates patterns of injustice as Black communities are erased, removed from the fabric of reinvested communities, and priced out of the very neighborhoods that once offered affordability. These injustices are deeply rooted in the United States' [long history](#) of intentional disinvestment in Black communities and other communities of color. This disinvestment was aided by federal, state, and local housing policies throughout the country, beginning in the early 20th century. This included practices such as redlining, blockbusting, urban renewal and highway construction, to name a few - the culmination of these interventions disseminated Black neighborhoods throughout the country. Richmond's Black communities were no exception.

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As the city of Richmond undergoes significant transition, **achieving racial equity means implementing policies to combat involuntary displacement of Black residents and to preserve the culture embedded within historic Black communities.**

Neighborhood Change in the City of Richmond

In Richmond, gentrification has been pretty significant in neighborhoods such as Jackson Ward, Church Hill, and more recently, the city's North Side. As each of these neighborhoods have undergone gentrification, both physical and cultural displacement have occurred. This year, Jackson Ward celebrated its [150th anniversary](#), which prompted reflections on the changes that the neighborhood has undergone over the last century and how it has endured after decades of forcible displacement of its Black residents.

What does it mean for a neighborhood, once known as the Harlem of the South, to have transformed to a majority white community, where African-Americans only comprise about [23% of the population](#)? Or when long time residents are forced to move and are replaced by new and younger ones? History and culture is lost, and we lose the benefit of not only learning about the history of a community from those who lived there, but we risk the history being lost altogether if we do not continuously highlight the historical narratives and markers of its Black culture. Trailblazers such as Maggie Lena Walker and Oliver Hill, who helped make the neighborhood such a staple in Richmond's Black community, are not just figures of the past. Their legacy can remain even as the community transforms and can even light our path forward.

As the city of Richmond undergoes significant transition, achieving racial equity means implementing policies to combat involuntary displacement of Black residents and to preserve the culture embedded within historic Black communities.

Church Hill is yet another example of a neighborhood where demographic shifts mirror those happening in historically disinvestment communities throughout the city. Church Hill is one of Richmond's oldest neighborhoods. Beginning in the late 1950s, the neighborhood experienced significant decline. Development and housing policies gave way to white flight, leaving behind low-income African-Americans to experience decades of disinvestment. That has since changed. Between 2000-2010, the neighborhood began to attract a whiter and more educated population. By 2015, African American households, both renters and homeowners, had [declined](#) by 20 percent, after comprising almost 90 percent of households in 2000. Even more striking, in this same period, Black homeowners in Church Hill declined by 23 percent, while white homeowners increased by 159 percent. Home values have grown at the same speed as white folks in the neighborhood. In just 4 years, between 2010-2014, home values increased by 30 percent, from a median sale price of \$165,000 to \$215,000 by 2014.

These changes in the demographic make-up of the community should have prompted decision-makers, elected officials, and policymakers to take a closer look at the policies driving such drastic change in the community and attracting residents so unlike the existing ones.

The demographic and housing market shifts are compounded by a contentious cultural shift, a shift that the preservation of Black businesses have been crucial in curtailing. Brookland Park Boulevard, located in Richmond's North Side and first [streetcar suburb](#), once served as the physical demarcation of white and Black residents in

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the neighborhood. Similar to Church Hill, the North Side's housing market is undergoing significant change and attracting a demographic that was once foreign to the community. However, the presence of Black businesses along this main commercial corridor has been key to the neighborhood maintaining its cultural footprint. These businesses reflect a commitment to making sure that Black culture and families are reflected even as the community changes. More importantly, the types of businesses matter: restaurants, Black hair salons and barbershops, which in the Black community are of great significance. They have long offered respite for us, serving as gathering spaces to discuss politics, culture, and social issues.

The presence of Black businesses along this main commercial corridor has been key to the neighborhood maintaining its cultural footprint.

Mobility vs. Displacement

As difficult as it may be, change is a fact of life. Neighborhoods change, and the people within those neighborhoods change as personal and economic factors drive them to move out of one community and into another. I, for one, have moved countless times in my life. For jobs, for school, or simply out of a desire to be somewhere else. But, it's important to distinguish the [process of this change](#) from the havoc it wreaks on the people who have called a community home.

Nothing is as simple as being either for or against something. When I hear gentrification, I have a visceral reaction because of how I've seen it change my own community, but I know that it denotes a process, not necessarily an outcome. I do not think any Black person who has lived in an under-resourced or impoverished community is against finally getting those resources we have fought so hard for. It's about more than being against change or investment or for it, especially when that investment is long overdue. But, it is a matter of not feeling disposable, unseen, or unheard as this investment occurs; of not feeling as though the white people moving in are somehow more deserving of paved sidewalks, greenspace, bike paths and grocery stores.

I don't believe gentrification has to lead to displacement, and in fact, there are [cities](#) across the country where policy has been key to combating involuntary displacement in communities of color.

Policy got us into this, so policy has to get us out.

Creating an equitable Richmond means being intentional about promoting policies that combat involuntary displacement, ensuring that Black households truly have a choice in remaining in their communities and that they can reap the benefits of reinvestment as much as their white counterparts. This includes policies that promote stability for Black homeowners and renters in historically Black neighborhoods.

Property Tax Relief

In places like the District of Columbia and Maryland, [caps on property taxes](#) for the elderly or low-income residents, called homestead laws, ensure that they can remain in their homes even as property taxes rise due to revitalization. What if these types of laws were expanded to all homeowners, regardless of age? This might be a solution for ensuring that Black homeowners are not priced out of their homes as their communities are revitalized.

Inclusionary Zoning

Additionally, a shrinking stock of affordable housing throughout the country increases the likelihood of working class families being displaced. In the [city of Richmond](#), a lack of affordable housing in neighborhoods that are rich in resources keeps many families from remaining in those communities. Passing and enforcing [inclusionary](#)

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[zoning](#) (IZ) laws that require developers to build a certain percentage of affordable housing in new or renovated buildings or to build more housing for larger families, can help ensure that residents find affordable housing within communities of their choice. [Burlington, Vermont](#) was an early adopter of inclusionary zoning in the 1990s. As part of the IZ requirements, at least 15-20 percent of newly built housing has to meet the affordability requirements, and they have to remain affordable for up to 99 years. This policy has allowed the locality to build 270 affordable units, and while it is not a perfect system, enforcing regulations means that people can access affordable housing in changing communities.

Preservation and Celebration

While Jackson Ward still struggles with the legacy of mass displacement of Black residents, the community does provide an example of how historic preservation policies help to combat cultural displacement in legacy Black communities. For example, in 1976, Jackson Ward was nominated for the National Register of Historic Places; efforts driven by those who recognized the need to protect the community's history. In 1978, it was recognized as a National Historic Landmark, followed by two local designations in 1986. These designations are significant because they not only provide federal and local protections against significant changes to historic properties, they also symbolize a commitment and recognition from officials that this Black community is worth being preserved. More recently, projects such as [The JXN Project](#) and the [Jackson Ward Collective](#) have been created to preserve Black culture by supporting Black business owners and ensuring that they have the resources needed to thrive. These types of projects help prevent [cultural and social displacement](#) by ensuring that minority business owners are embedded in the city's economy.

Why the Moment is Now

Black people and neighborhoods have always deserved to be protected from displacement, but the recent health crisis has shown us just how tenuous our circumstances could be without the proper interventions. The COVID-19 crisis hit hard, but [Black and Latino](#) communities were hit the hardest. For those who never truly understood the implications of decades of disinvestment and racism in housing within Black communities, the health crisis revealed just how deep these inequities run. As federal eviction moratoria are lifted and forbearance programs end, state and local policies are even more important to curtailing displacement.

If racial equity is to be achieved in Black communities that have long been the epicenter for disinvestment, then as reinvestment occurs, Black households must also be able to reap the benefits of this revitalization. And being able to remain there is simply the starting point, for as neighborhoods transform, we should not be left thinking, "there goes the neighborhood."

Mariah Williams

Born and raised in Harlem, New York, Mariah Williams is an urban planner, storyteller, adjunct professor, and researcher dedicated to highlighting the experiences of Black people and spaces in cities. Her work on Black joy, Black women, and community has been featured in *Next City*, *Third Wave Urbanism* and *For Harriet*. Mariah received her B.A in Sociology from the University of Richmond and her Masters of Urban and Regional Planning from Virginia Commonwealth University.