

The Erasure of a Black Sense of Place for Capital Accumulation: The Case of Little Jamaica

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ABSTRACT

Little Jamaica, a Black community in North-Western Toronto, has been a site of belonging for members of the Caribbean and African diaspora for more than 70 years. However, the community is on the brink of erasure due to the multi-billion-dollar Metrolinx Eglinton Crosstown Light Rail Transit (LRT) project. Due to the denial of Little Jamaica as a heritage conservation district, the city has allowed for its destruction for capital accumulation. By exploring the complex relationship between a Black sense of place, urban planning and capital interests, this paper will examine the distressing case of Little Jamaica. In order to protect Black communities and support Black futures, we must challenge systemic anti-Blackness in urban planning.

Introduction

Little Jamaica flourished with the arrival of Caribbean immigrants in the 1950s following changes in the Immigration Act and work schemes (Stover 2021). It quickly became a vibrant center for the Black community in North-Western Toronto. Numerous Black-owned businesses including barbershops, grocery stores, hair salons, and Caribbean restaurants were founded along the stretch of the Eglinton West Corridor from Keele Street to Marlee Avenue. Little Jamaica is home for many of the Caribbean and African diaspora who express feelings of belonging and a sense of place. However, Toronto's Eglinton Cross-town Light Rail Transit (LRT) project threatens to erase the neighbourhood. The transit led development project spearheaded by the provincial and municipal government has been detrimental to the Black community as it has enabled and promoted gentrification and urban renewal. In the past, Little Jamaica was brought to life by the laughter of residents walking down the street, whiffs of Caribbean food in the air and the sweet melodies of reggae music. During the height of construction, Little Jamaica was almost unrecognizable with a series of boarded-up buildings, blocked and narrow pathways because of ongoing construction, and 'for lease' signs on many storefronts (Bessonov 2020; Glover 2022).

This paper will argue that the City of Toronto's failure to recognize 'Little Jamaica' as a heritage site under the Ontario Heritage Act contributes to the erasure of a Black sense of place within the city for capital gain. To further this analysis, the paper will first examine

the theoretical framework of a Black sense of place outlined by Katherine McKittrick (2011). Next, the paper will apply Adam Bledsoe and Willie Jamal Wright's work to examine the role of anti-Blackness as a precursor for capital accumulation (Bledsoe and Wright 2018). Further, the paper will discuss the concept of displacing Blackness outlined by Ted Rutland, and the rejection of the Ontario Heritage Act (Rutland 2018). Lastly, the paper will discuss the community resistance in Little Jamaica and attempts to overcome the erasure of the community.

A Black sense of place

McKittrick argues that Black geographies in the Americas are inextricably linked to power dynamics, where there are "deliberate attempts to destroy a Black sense of place" (McKittrick 2011, 947). A Black sense of place can be conceptualized as the engagement of historical and contemporary struggles of Black communities regarding specific places. It recognizes how places inhabited by Black communities cannot be reduced to their physical characteristics but are intertwined with lived experiences, racial histories and cultural significance. Therefore, a Black sense of place is not rooted in a static and timebound way of seeing a place, but a dynamic and changing interaction based on legacies of racial violence and resistance (McKittrick 2011, 949).

This Black sense of place is constantly under threat and its erasure has been a source of profit for white people since the transatlantic slave trade. Moreover, Black bodies and space continue to be targets of spatialized violence.

The concept of spatial violence explains how architecture and the built environment can harm marginalized communities through design and the use of space (Waldron 2022). As McKittrick posits, the plantation institutionalized the “economized and enforced placelessness” of Black bodies which has created the racist underpinnings of “land exploitation as accumulation and emancipation” (McKittrick 2011, 947). Further, this phenomenon established during chattel slavery has normalized Black dispossession for capital means rooted in white supremacist ideals.

While the plantation may seem distant from the case of urban renewal in Little Jamaica, the two are directly linked as products of the legacies of colonial-racial geographies. A Black sense of place is more than simply a space that Black people call home but is a site of resistance against practices of domination and racial entanglements (McKittrick 2011, 947). Little Jamaica’s very existence is a story of a diasporic community that has challenged attempts of dehumanization rooted in tenets of coloniality (McKittrick 2011, 947). The neighbourhood, then, is a physical manifestation of the Black community’s long lasting resilience, which has created a Black sense of place. Thus, its erasure is more than the destruction of brick-and-mortar stores, but of a history and culture that fought to be established.

Black displacement and capital accumulation

The case of Little Jamaica is, unfortunately, not unique. It is part of a large pattern of anti-Blackness as a precursor to capital accu-

mulation. Beginning with the proliferation of slavery, the Black body has been conditioned to be perceived as ‘a-spatial’. In the white spatial imaginary, spaces that Black people occupy are seen as sites of exploitation due to their ‘emptiness’. By characterizing Black spaces as ‘lacking legitimate forms of occupation and usage’, the state can justify the exploitation of communities for projects such as the Eglinton LRT Crosstown. In fact, Bledsoe and Wright argue that “anti-Blackness makes possible the accumulation necessary for capitalist reproduction” (2018, 11). Despite there being clear historic ties to the Little Jamaica neighborhood as a site that garners senses of place for the Black community in Toronto, this usage of space is not as valuable nor as profitable as a transit-led development project. As a matter of fact, locations of Black populations are rarely considered to be used in the most ‘appropriate’ way if they are not the basis for capitalist extraction.

As Rutland posits, urban planning is often synonymous with the destruction of racialized communities (Rutland 2018). The colonial logic of Black a-spatiality has been embedded in urban planning and as such planning outcomes are rooted in anti-Blackness. Because Blackened spaces (meaning spaces occupied by Black people) are seen as ‘illegitimate’, urban planning practices continue to exploit them and choose them as sites of urban renewal. Black displacement in Canadian cities for urban renewal and transit-led development is commonplace. From Hogan’s Alley in Vancouver to Little Burgundy in Montreal, urban development projects go hand in hand with the removal of Black bodies and space (High 2019; CBC

2020). Blackness is displaced both physically and figuratively by planning, as the interests of the Black population are co-opted by capitalist desires. Due to reproduced power dynamics stemming from colonial practices, the Black body has been limited to a subordinate structural position which continues to be spatially and physically exploited.

While some may argue that the LRT is necessary to improve transit connectivity within the city, we must think critically about who will benefit from this development. The project has not only been over budget and drastically delayed but has directly contributed to the gentrification of Little Jamaica. With construction in the neighborhood for over 10 years, Black businesses have continued to close year by year with an approximate loss of 140 businesses since the beginning of the LRT construction (Kong 2023). Moreover, it is important to note that Black people are rarely the benefactors of the urban renewal ‘improvements’ in their communities. Instead, they are systematically separated from these spaces by those in power. Through their forcible removal, Black populations not only lose their communities and their sense of place but rarely get to reap any rewards from the process.

The Ontario Heritage Act and Little Jamaica

Little Jamaica’s erasure did not need to be imminent. In fact, the City of Toronto could have used legislation to halt the community’s destruction. Unfortunately, they failed to do so. Over the past few years, there has been widespread advocacy from the residents and com-

munity groups to protect Little Jamaica under the Ontario Heritage Act. With protection under the Ontario Heritage Act, a designated heritage district “gives City Council control over the alteration and demolition of certain elements of all buildings within an HCD in order to maintain, enhance and restore the heritage character of the District” (City of Toronto 2008).

In response to this request, the city expressed that it was ‘not the best fit for the area’ (Bozikovic 2021). Instead, in March 2021, the city decided to designate the area as Toronto’s first ‘cultural district’ meaning it “would provide economic support for business, arts and culture” (Bozikovic 2021). However, with no official definition of a cultural district, most residents remained wary of this development. While at face value this could be viewed as an acknowledgement of the important history of Little Jamaica, it is in fact another tool for the advancement of capital accumulation. This example perfectly illustrates what David Harvey coined the ‘spatial fix’, a reorganization and appropriation of space for profit (Harvey 2001). This phenomenon happens when: “In the midst of efforts to accumulate surplus value through real estate development via the gentrification of Black communities, municipalities attempt to appease Black communities and capitalize on Black cultural/spatial expressions by hemming Black histories into museums as they eradicate the makers of Black history” (Bledsoe and Wright 2018, 16).

In the case of Little Jamaica, its ‘cultural status’ is a means for the city to capitalize on the neighborhood’s rich and vibrant history. By openly advertising this neighbourhood as a cul-

tural hub, the city aims to profit from the remnants of the community that they are destroying. This paradoxical reality is commonplace in neoliberal governance strategies, as the city wants to celebrate diversity for tourism purposes while simultaneously divesting from the community. Little Jamaica's cultural distinction is a performative token gesture that exemplifies "a practice of gentrification in which cultural and historical landmarks are 'preserved' to give an area commercial appeal," like commissioning the beautiful Reggae Lane mural at 1584 Eglinton West by Adrian Hayles (Patel 2016; DiMatteo 2021).

On April 7th, City Councillor Josh Matlow presented a motion to the city council titled "Preserving the Past and Protecting the Future of Little Jamaica" in response to the undefined 'cultural district' designation. The motion asked that the city prioritize surveying Little Jamaica as a heritage conservation district protected under the Ontario Heritage Act. Matlow expressed that "We [the City] need to recognize this place [Little Jamaica] is worthy" (Bozikovic 2021). This motion was amended by Councillor Mike Colle to include that Little Jamaica should be "protected amid active and future development applications along Eglinton West that are gentrifying the area at a rapid pace" (Bozikovic 2021). The Toronto city council voted unanimously in support of the motion with the amendment.

Interestingly, two months after the passing of Councillor Matlow's motion to make Little Jamaica a heritage conservation district under study, the city reneged on their decision. They expressed that they wanted to refocus on mak-

ing Little Jamaica a 'cultural district' with no formal protection. Black community members took to social media to express their disappointment with the change in decision. "I grew up in Little Jamaica and wouldn't have it any other way. Making up a 'cultural district' term instead of declaring it a heritage district is total BS. It's basically them saying "you're cool, but we still want to demolish you and replace you with condos when the LRT opens"" — Jeff Veillette (@JeffVeillette), March 10, 2021 (Stover 2021).

While the city says they want to protect the community through cultural status, there are over 110 development applications for the area, from changes to existing buildings to new forty story condominiums (Samuel 2021). Why have they not pressed pause? Simply put, if they wanted to save the remnants of the neighbourhood, they would have.

The senior manager of heritage planning Mary MacDonald stated that "the built form of the Eglinton strip didn't seem to warrant heritage protection" (Bozikovic 2021). However, earlier in 2021, the city listed over 50 commercial buildings in Leslieville as historically significant and thus 'worthy' of protection (Bozikovic 2021). The inconsistency of the areas that are deemed to support the historic context of the city demonstrates the processes' subjectivity and anti-Blackness. While residents in Little Jamaica have lobbied the city to protect their community due to the Black sense of place it has created, it was not deemed worthy of heritage conservation. Nevertheless, some of the city's wealthiest and whitest neighbourhoods such as The Annex, Rosedale, Cab-

bagetown, The Danforth, and Leslieville, have been able to gain heritage designations or have been taken under review (Bozikovic 2021).

According to the city of Toronto, heritage conservation districts “are a planning tool that guide change in neighbourhoods that represent rich social, cultural and architectural history – places that contribute to the livability and appeal of Toronto as a multicultural, sustainable and equitable city” (City of Toronto 2023). Therefore, if Little Jamaica fits within the bounds of a designation of a heritage conservation district as defined by the city, why was it overlooked for the designation? Truthfully, allowing Little Jamaica heritage conservation district status would jeopardize the multibillion-dollar investment that the province and the city have injected into the Eglinton Crosstown LRT project. Moreover, the LRT project will garner over 10 billion dollars over time in real estate development, demonstrating how private interests have dominated the narrative concerning the protection of this area (Gordon 2018).

In addition to failing to recognize Little Jamaica as a conservation site, the city has excluded the area from the new affordable housing plan. The new framework called ‘inclusionary zoning’ would make it mandatory for developers to include a percentage of affordable units in newly built condominium buildings (Beattie 2021). Little Jamaica was narrowly excluded from this policy because the area ‘did not meet the housing demand for the program’. The city expressed that neighbourhoods along Eglinton West such as Little Jamaica will likely make the cut when the inclusionary zoning policy is reviewed in the next three years (Beattie 2021).

In other words, once new condos have already been built, the LRT has opened and the Black community has been displaced, affordable housing will be offered. The zoning assessment was done under provincial requirements to determine which neighbourhoods could “sustain the affordable housing requirement and not deter development” (Beattie 2021). Clearly, affordable housing for the Black population in Little Jamaica would hinder the city’s ability to sell astronomically priced condo units for the ‘creative class’ (Florida 2002).

Resistance in Little Jamaica

The erasure of Little Jamaica has by no means been taken lightly, and the fact that the battle is ongoing is due to the resistance and resilience exhibited by the Black community. Advocacy for the neighbourhood has been spearheaded by Black Urbanism Toronto (BUTO) and Black Futures on Eglinton. These community non-profits were essential in building the case for Little Jamaica’s heritage conservation status. BUTO was established in 2018 in response to the injustices and erasure of Little Jamaica caused by the LRT Crosstown construction (Black Urbanism Toronto 2024). They acknowledged that the disruptions caused by the urban renewal project were displacing Black communities and causing a decline in Black businesses. Their goal now is to continue advocating for the protection and preservation of Black communities and their cultural, economic and social interests. Further, BUTO was instrumental in raising awareness of the adverse effects of the LRT construction and represented the community in meetings with the

city. In collaboration with the Studio of Contemporary Architecture (SOCA) and the Open Architecture Collaborative Canada (OACC), BUTO prepared a public report on the future of Black businesses in Little Jamaica in 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the dire state of the neighbourhood and accelerated its erasure (Black Business Conversation 2020, 1). Further, BUTO advocated for Little Jamaica to be a target area for inclusionary zoning to combat rampant displacement of Black communities and gentrification. The resistance presented by BUTO is important as it aims to empower the Black community to continue to prosper and combat the narrative of Black a-spatiality.

Following the controversial decision to designate Little Jamaica as a cultural district, the Black community has had to work within the confines of the city's plan and has instilled confidence in Jay Pitter as a consultant on the project. As a Black place maker, she is known for her work at the intersection of equity and urban design. Using mapping, Jay Pitter has highlighted the importance of the spatial designations of the Black community within Toronto. The Final Consultant's Report on a Little Jamaica Cultural District Plan has finally been released on the City of Toronto's website, five months after the initial deadline of August 2023 (Pitter 2023). While the 136-page report is quite comprehensive, time will tell if the preservation of the community will be realized.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Little Jamaica that was once a hub of Black business and life is being

rapidly destroyed. The City of Toronto and the province have systematically contributed to the erasure of a Black sense of place in Little Jamaica for capital gain. By denying Little Jamaica's appeal for protection under the Ontario Heritage Act, the city revealed that its capitalist interests are far more important than preserving a Black sense of place. While this outcome is distressing, it is commonplace as urban renewal and development in Canada has been long rooted in anti-Blackness. The concepts of Black a-spatiality and emptiness continue to be held today and have manifested as foundational elements of urban planning. By failing to protect the area through legislation, excluding it from inclusionary zoning and identifying it as a 'cultural district' for tourism, Little Jamaica has become a pawn in the capitalist enterprise. Despite the government's intended purpose of governing the people's interests, they have been beholden to capitalist interests. While resistance and resilience have been ongoing, the fate of Little Jamaica will not be held in the hands of the people but the corporations. And they have long made up their minds – profit over people.

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