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## From 1890 to Today, Nothing's Changed: Gentrification in Harlem and the Abuse of Eminent Domain

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From 1890 to Today, Nothing's Changed:  
Gentrification in Harlem and the Abuse of Eminent Domain

Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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Dziadek, this is dedicated to you. I love and miss you, always.

## PREFACE

Before I delve into my research regarding Harlem's current landscape, and how it necessarily relates back to the problematic nature of its Black cultural formation, I will introduce my work with a first-hand account of my recent trip to the actual area itself. The nature of my trip was to see if there was any value in what I've read and analyzed about the current state of Harlem, versus what tangibly exists there. Consequentially, not only did I viscerally feel the discrepancy in atmosphere when relocating to different places within the neighborhood, but I felt its powerful implication from an immediate perspective.

Wondering about what historical landmark I could potentially study in depth for my personal research, I went to my father—who in his youth, frequented the streets of Harlem and the attractions it had to offer—for some insight. He immediately recommended Sylvia's, a historic local restaurant-turned-tourist-attraction.



Sylvia's Restaurant, located on 328 Malcolm X Blvd in Harlem.

Sylvia's, located on Malcolm X Boulevard and known notoriously as the staple "soul food" restaurant in the area for tourists and passer-bys, has seen a drastic transformation in the recent decades. Since the 1990s, the establishment has not only expanded its dining area, but also its customer base. This demographic expansion, however, does not come without an inherent exclusionary factor.

Walking into the restaurant myself, I was earnestly taken back by the environment of which its interior boasted. The restaurant's peripheral— i.e., the street on which Sylvia's is located— fits a normalized and, if you will, stereotypical illustration of the Harlem that most non-residents may think of. It was overwhelmingly Black, with a much "localized" dynamic. Taking one step between the brick-binded walls of the establishment, my initial line of vision revealed a fairly diverse crowd of customers; both racially and spatially. As many socialized comfortably at the bar which was mounted parallel to the entrance doorway, there was undoubtedly a presence of newcomers within that mix; strangers to the area who had heard of this particular place as an exemplification of the forthcoming commercialization of Harlem. As I turned to my left and followed the hostess, I saw an entirely new enclave of the place, which uncovered a fresh array of individuals.

Taking a fair glimpse around and accounting for the fullness of the establishment, I felt whiteness. An abundance of it; constituting around sixty-to-seventy percent of the general populace, if I'm being conservative with my estimation. With a heightened sense of the racial atmosphere, I picked up on conversations I otherwise would have never taken upon myself to pay attention to. Some were being exchanged in what were unmistakably European dialects. I was shocked.

This said, predating my trip to Harlem, I had looked into researching the local food culture of the area; places where one could find Harlem residents dining. Resultantly, I had come across an article entitled: “Where do the locals go for Soul Food in Harlem?” The piece didn’t fail to incorporate the infamous Sylvia’s. Thus, the first paragraph of an entire subsection dedicated to the restaurant began as follows:

“Tourists from all over the country come to Sylvia’s—buses line up outside the restaurant—but it’s retained a strong local fan base.”

I ordered the fried chicken with mac ‘n cheese and collard greens. The entire meal was delicious. But as I gandered around the space, a question throbbed intensely in the back of my mind; *where* have these locals disappeared to?

Wanting to investigate this question with some primary-source material to work with, I caught the attention of a middle-aged Black woman in work attire and asked if there was anyone currently working whom has extensive knowledge of the restaurant’s social history. In an exhausted tone, she promised that she’d try to find someone who could help me. But as the wait staff flew around me in a constant state of hurry, I knew I’d have to find my answer elsewhere.

I left the restaurant confused by the conflicting sentiments of it I let fester in my mind, and wondered where else I could go to understand its transformation. Hesitant to do so, I’d convinced myself that the street was where I’d need to go for the most valuable information. Amidst the hustle and bustle of rush hour, I was—by the grace of some sort of overseeing power—able to stop and speak with two Harlem locals on Malcolm X Boulevard about the restaurant’s changing demographic; and additionally, about Harlem in its entirety.

The first was an older Black male, who leaned coolly on a mailbox as he spoke charismatically with another older man of color.

“Excuse me”, I piped, “I don’t mean to interrupt, but I was wondering if I could speak with you shortly about something important.”

Recognizing the awkwardness of my request the second those words escaped my mouth, my brain began preparing for rejection. Ready to scurry away in embarrassment, my heels were on their way toward making an inherent turn in the opposite direction as the man studied me in clear skepticism.

“Yes, young lady, what can I help you with?”

“I- I just wanted to ask you a couple of questions about Harlem— if you happen to be a local, that is. See, I’m doing my senior thesis on the shifting racial dynamic of Harlem, and I want to understand its impact from more than just a classroom perspective.”

Those words were my golden ticket to a plethora of information. Thirty minutes. That is how long it took for the man to tell me *everything* I needed to know about Harlem— literally *everything* I had studied up to that point; from the fact that the gentrification had begun over thirty years ago, to Columbia’s recent seizure of property in West Harlem via eminent domain. At the end of our exchange, I asked for his name.

“Robert McCullough.”

I thanked him. We parted ways. I still think of him. But I’ll probably never see him again. Robert McCullough. The man who told me the entire history of Harlem, from nineteen hundred to this very day; in greater personal detail than any professor I’ve ever had, lecturer I’ve ever listened to, or book I’ve ever read. One thing he said in particular resonated with me, because it was something I had never even really considered. And the fact that he was so adamant about it made me want to comprehend the relative meaning behind his request:

“The word ‘affordable’ is highly overused. Go back to your smart school. Ask your friends if they know what ‘affordable housing’ is. Then have them answer this question: ‘Affordable for whom?’”

I haven’t yet asked my friends about their knowledge of affordable housing. But after thinking about Robert’s question, I understand why it is so pressing. Robert’s voice—and those of many others like him—are obscured by the sentiments of gentrification; the sentiment that aesthetic value supersedes human worth, the sentiment that one culture can overtake another that has cultivated for generations just because it flaunts more wealth, the sentiment that longtime Harlem residents have no sovereignty over their own homes. And with the perceivable “improvement” of the area’s aesthetic, it enables a trying question: “Who can afford these improvements?”

The next resident I talked to was another Black man, who I imagined to be in his late twenties or early thirties. Skeptical as well, but ultimately willing to listen and help me out, he explained to me how Sylvia’s had undergone a great transformation in the past twenty or so years, from the time he was a young child.

“They aren’t as good as they used to be. They’ve become too commercialized. All the locals know it. In fact, you see that restaurant over there? Jacob’s? [He pointed to another restaurant close by on Malcolm X Blvd] That’s where everyone goes now.”

This gesture made me think back to my meal at Sylvia’s. The collard greens I had there had been the best ones I’ve tasted in my entire life; I had even told my father so. But had someone from thirty years in the past been dining with me at that time, they probably would have insisted that I’d never had Sylvia’s collard greens at their best. In a way, my initial question had



been answered: “Where did the Harlem locals go?” They left, because just as many other renowned landmarks of Harlem, Sylvia’s began to cater to the fetishizing white community.

The young man and I talked a bit more about Harlem and how it’s changed racially, and just like Robert, the he had an inexplicable knowledge of Harlem’s early Black history and a just as strong awareness of the present. I didn’t catch his name, because he had an important phone call to take.

My time talking to these men was of great impression and importance for my true understanding of Harlem. It confirmed at least two important facts that I had gone in understanding about Harlem. One: Harlem is being gentrified. And two: This gentrification is bad for the majority of Harlem’s native locals. For contextual purposes, gentrification is the process by which the arrival of wealthier people in an existing urban district results in a related increase in rents and property values, and changes in the district's inherent culture. The term is holds an implicit negative connotation, suggesting the displacement of poor communities by rich outsiders.<sup>1</sup> This is a reality in Harlem.

In speaking to one of my closest friends about this profound experience and the resonance of my interaction with them, she brought up a significant point. The information they were able to provide me with about the cultural roots of Harlem, their anecdotal accounts of how gentrification is impacting them and the people they love, and the sorrow they feel in response to Harlem’s changing culture, displayed how naturally engaged Harlem residents are with the area; how much pride they take in being Harlemites. Tabulated Census Data from National Historical Geographic Information System allude to Harlem’s influx of whites after the 1980s, when the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/pov/flagwars/what-is-gentrification/>

gentrification phenomenon was becoming more prominent. In fact, I noticed more of a white mixture on the commercialized 125<sup>th</sup> Street.



Starbucks Coffee, Located on 125<sup>th</sup> and Lenox Ave.

Located right on 125<sup>th</sup> and Lenox stands a Starbucks, a strong indicator of *any* area (especially in New York City) that there exists some sort of white community nearby. The establishment opened officially on May 5, 1999 – the high-time of whites migrating to the area. Respectively, a less-than-enthused New York Post article emerged the next day with the following statement as its opening:

Harlem residents now have the same opportunity as other Manhattanites to spend \$1.75 for a cup of Starbucks joe – and that, apparently, is cause for celebration.<sup>2</sup>

With that knowledge, it is presumable to say that wealthier (white) gentrifiers have little to no personal connection to the area and would likely *never* be able to spout such insightful knowledge about the neighborhood as the two men I had the honor of speaking with. After all, how many white families have lived in Harlem for *generations*, as Robert's family had?

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<sup>2</sup> <http://nypost.com/1999/05/06/starbucks-goes-uptown-grand-opening-for-first-harlem-store/>

While I'm glad to have had the opportunity to visit the place of which I have been studying for over a semester, my internal conscious fostered an intrinsic guilt as I facilitated the above dialogues with Harlem residents. I couldn't help but think, who was I, a young, pestering mixed woman with a "white" voice and a privileged background, to infringe upon a community of which I know is already experiencing trivial social, economic and political oppression? I dined at Sylvia's, just as every one of those "tourists" I was so harshly angered by. And while my travel there may have been for the purpose of research, I couldn't help but insert my personal privilege into the context of every social encounter I had in Harlem. From the high-end Acura I sat and explored the neighborhood in, to the general imposing nature of my trip, I, a mixed woman of color who on a daily basis experiences some form of racism, was *still* to some degree encompassing what it is like to be a gentrifier in Harlem. And that acknowledgement incited an anger within me, because I am *still* more apologetic about my imposition than white gentrifiers have ever been.

At the same time, I wonder where the future of Harlem lays without academics and intellectuals like myself. Because the United States was built under the philosophy that Black people do not deserve to be protected under the law, the systematic oppression continues to perpetuate itself. This severely stunts any progress of Blacks as a whole and because of this I feel an *obligation* to be the voice of the persistently hushed communities of color. The subdual of Black voices is something that pains my heart to acknowledge as a tangible reality. Its prevalence—and almost implicitness—is enormously problematic. And in regard to that sentiment, it is prosperous that one must hold a degree from a prestigious institution, or prominent political stature in order to exploit the marginalization that has been long occurring in this nation, even after the explicit legislative restrictions of peoples of color. And I suppose

taking all that into account, my ultimate question is: “How can we incorporate all our voices into one powerful, collective movement?”

I have no answer as of now. Perhaps there is no answer to be found. Perhaps I’m asking the wrong question. Perhaps I’m living out not *the* solution, but *a* solution. Maybe dialogue is good. Maybe people like myself *should* be educating ourselves outside the comfort of a classroom, even if it does come at the expense of unintentionally patronizing the people we so direly want to help. Because we understand that we are simply more fortunate. We are privileged. And maybe someday, something will come of that acknowledgement. Maybe one day these people won’t be physically harassed by law enforcement, economically oppressed by racism, socially belittled by internalized racial sentiments, and condescended by people who just happened to be born into more privilege.

I can’t imagine what it possibly feels like to have cultivated such a resilient culture in response to oppression, only to have that culture stripped from me by the very same oppressor. But that is the experience of the African American people of the United States. And a prime example of this is what’s been happening in Harlem. The lack of acknowledgement, or regard, for the people of color in the neighborhood (being predominantly Black) is a very legitimate concern. Those of who I was fortunate enough to speak with during my time visiting were more than aware of this; Robert even pointing out that he was a community director and was actively trying to make the issues with gentrification visible. However, even with a push for anti-gentrification legislation within the community, the voices of Harlem continue to be suppressed.

A chief concern today, and an emphasis of Robert's narrative, is Columbia's infiltration of West Harlem. In the fall of 2002, representatives at Columbia University posited a plan for development that would entail the University's expansion into West Harlem. In 2003, President Bollinger of Columbia announced his plan to construct a new addition to the college's campus in a corner of Harlem called Manhattanville. A subsequent statement went as follows:

Columbia University's proposal for a major expansion into the Manhattanville area is a reflection of two of the institution's most important goals. One is Columbia's urgent need for additional space. The other is a continuation of the commitment to the communities of Upper Manhattan and our belief that this effort will bring economic and other benefits to our neighbors. The University feels that it benefits enormously by living amid such creative and resilient communities. We must continue to intellectually engage the challenges of our world, and we must be physically and spiritually integrated into the fabric of our neighborhoods and this city.

In this work, I will explain why what's occurred in West Harlem over the years is such a perilous indicator of what may be to come for the future of Harlem; why Bollinger's claim that he will bring "economic and other benefits to our neighbors" was one of false pretenses, and emphasizing that even with activism, native Harlemites may find themselves being forced out, regardless of a stark resistance. I will frame my argument taking into account the forced nature of the development of "Black Harlem", and leave it up to the reader as to why this situation—one that is reflected in the perpetuation of a problematic history for people of color in this nation—is so dire.

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## INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS HARLEM?

If you google search the question “What is Harlem”, what pops up? Well, for starters, on the upper right hand side of the web page you’ll find a map of Harlem accompanied by the building complex that stands at 135th street along with a brief blurb of its demographics and history provided by the infamous Wikipedia. “Harlem is a large neighborhood in the northern section of the New York City borough of Manhattan. Since the 1920s, Harlem has been known as a major African-American residential, cultural and business center.”



Figure 1: Rowhouse built for the African-American population of Harlem in the 1930s.

This is not untrue. But perhaps what is more telling as to what the social climate of the neighborhood emanates, are the immediate results you’ll find directly under the search bar. Three posts down from the top, you’ll find a link to [tripadvisor.com](https://www.tripadvisor.com), with the pegged question “Is Harlem now a safe place to visit?” Four posts further, a trending question from [streeteasy.com](https://www.streeteasy.com); “Is Harlem Safe for Me?”. Venture to the second page of results, and you’ll read at the very top: “Is Harlem

safe at night?”—courteous of a worried visitor of askanewyorker.com. If you click on it, just for fun, the full question (from 2014) reads: “I have heard that Harlem has been gentrified. How true is this? I saw online an apt that fits my budget, it is on West 138th. Is that a good neighborhood? How about at night?”

So what is the relevance of random internet results in understanding the social scheme of Harlem? They elucidate attitudes of sententious conjecture and superiority towards a neighborhood with a history rich with economic and cultural diversity. Though in contemporary perception, Harlem’s structure is vigorously Black, the knowledge behind how this formation came into being is typically uncommon. The collective understanding of Harlem’s history dates back no further than the time of the infamous Harlem Renaissance; the cultural, social, and artistic explosion that took place in Harlem between the end of World War I and the middle of the 1930s. During this period Harlem was a cultural hub, drawing Black writers, artists, musicians, photographers, poets, and scholars.<sup>1</sup> However, does one ever wonder what Harlem looked like before the emergence of so much Black greatness in just one small expanse? Surely, there had to be a more erratic background to the pre-movement than just the confines of such a limited area.

And truly enough, the talent of these Black artists had been cultivated separately from dispersed places around the United States (primarily the east coast). Preceding the Harlem Renaissance movement, there had been a drastic and necessary cultural change in Harlem’s social atmosphere. Black Americans from various regions of the United States fled to Harlem to escape social persecution enforced by hateful sentiments of the post-Jim Crow era. Even Blacks local to the northeast, and New York itself, took to the opportunity being offered by the real estate market

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<sup>1</sup> "The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow." PBS.

<[http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories\\_events\\_harlem.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_harlem.html)>



in the seemingly peaceful Harlem: “After the Civil War, many Blacks living in the South and the Caribbean fled oppressive social conditions and sought opportunities in northern cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit. New York, one of the key ports along the East Coast, became a primary destination. After 1900, as the existing Black neighborhoods in Manhattan’s midtown area became overcrowded, the northern Manhattan community of Harlem became an attractive and accessible destination for some Black New Yorkers.”<sup>2</sup> This migration, thus, can be viewed as a diaspora of a sort; the second major dispersion Black people in the United States (into one general area) since the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

What is not understood by many who have imagined the history of “Black” Harlem, however, are its implicit white roots (and its eventual racial transformation due to desperate reactions of Blacks to escape maltreatment in other areas of the States). When contextualizing the power structure of Harlem in the modern era, it is important to understand what its historic origins looked like. From this, we are allowing for a connection to be drawn between the circumstances of Harlem’s history and its contemporary dynamic; enabling a comparative understand of what has and hasn’t changed about the area spatially, socially, and culturally over the course of time. Such information coagulates the eventual argument of how and why this dynamic is problematic in contemporary Harlem.

This said, the colonization of what became “New Harlaam”, was indorsed by the Dutch in the early seventeenth century. In 1637, siblings Hendrick (Henry), Isaac and Rachel de Forest were the first settlers of the area.<sup>3</sup> The area, at the time, was still being occupied by Native

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<sup>2</sup> McGruder, Kevin. *Race and Real Estate: Conflict and Cooperation in Harlem, 1890-1920*. Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia UP, 2015. Pp. 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Lambert, Tim. “A SHORT HISTORY OF NEW YORK CITY.” *A History of New York City*.

Americans, who the European settlers of the area were having conflicts with at the time.<sup>4</sup>

Because of this, the early settlers were forced to flee to “New Amsterdam” in (the tip of) lower Manhattan while the native population gradually decreased amidst conflict with the Dutch.<sup>5</sup> The settlement was named *Nieuw Haarlem* (New Haarlem), after the Dutch city of Haarlem, and was formally incorporated in 1660 under leadership of Peter Stuyvesant.<sup>6</sup> However, in 1696, an English fleet took over the Manhattan area<sup>7</sup>. After a brief reclaiming by the Dutch, the English formally took over the colony. When the British officially seized the area, the new regime tried to change the name to Lancaster. However, it failed to stick, as descendants of the original settlers continued to live in the area.<sup>8</sup> The name *Nieuw Haarlem* adapted to “Harlem”.<sup>9</sup>

African slaves played a major role in building this seventeenth century colony. In fact, an 1880 New York Times article acknowledged the work that was put in by Blacks when the area was first mobilizing. The direct quote, taken from a primary source document, goes as follows: “They will employ negroes to assist the inhabitants to make a good wagon-road to New Amsterdam, and they "will not undertake the establishment of any other village or concentration, nor permit others to do so, until the aforesaid village shall have arrived in esse;”.<sup>10</sup> Still, these slaves accounted for a small population and had not yet posed a threat to the developing white Harlem culture. By 1664, there were only 375 Africans within the entire city of New York

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<sup>4</sup> “History of Harlem”. *Wikimedia Foundation*.

<[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Harlem#CITEREFGill2011](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Harlem#CITEREFGill2011)>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Lambert, Tim. “A SHORT HISTORY OF NEW YORK CITY.” A History of New York City.

<sup>8</sup> Williams, Keith. “Tracking 300 Years of Harlem’s Ever-Shifting Boundaries.” 20 August 2015. <<http://ny.curbed.com/2015/8/20/9933196/tracing-350-years-of-harlems-ever-shifting-boundaries>>

<sup>9</sup> “History of Harlem”. *Wikimedia Foundation*.

<[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Harlem#CITEREFGill2011](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Harlem#CITEREFGill2011)>

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.thehistorybox.com/ny\\_city/nycity\\_harlem\\_old\\_times\\_article1419a.htm](http://www.thehistorybox.com/ny_city/nycity_harlem_old_times_article1419a.htm)

(formerly New Amsterdam, preceding British takeover).<sup>11</sup> In September 1776, the area now called Manhattanville (then known as Hollow Way) saw warfare action during the Revolutionary War in the Battle of Harlem Heights. The Continental Army won, but the British retaliated later than year and burned Harlem down.

Still, the culture of Harlem continued to flourish in its whiteness. This whiteness, however, did see its fair share of variety. Manhattanville, characterizing the western region of Harlem, saw “American patriots and British loyalists intermarried. Residents included slave owners, Quaker antislavery activists, and Black abolitionists. Tradesmen, poor laborers, and wealthy industrialists commonly worshipped under the same roof. The town was a toehold for newly arriving Americans and a homestead of some citizens with ancient lineages.”<sup>12</sup> Descendants of African slaves were ones to help restore Harlem’s landscape after the attack on Manhattanville.

Though it was nowhere near the magnitude of the one to come, post-Revolutionary War New York City did see a minor migration of Blacks. Because the boundaries of the city moved northward, so did these people of African descent. At this time, a Black Church named St. Philip’s came into being.<sup>13</sup> The congregation was located on Collect (Centre) Street between Leonard and Anthony (Worth) Streets.<sup>14</sup> This institution, as well as the few other Black churches of New York, had all been constructed in lower Manhattan where a small community of freed Blacks lived at the time. Blacks were given restrictive opportunities to engage communally with whites, thus this social isolation prompted them to begin establishing their own small communities. Even so, they

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<sup>11</sup> McGruder, Kevin. *Race and Real Estate: Conflict and Cooperation in Harlem, 1890-1920*. Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia UP, 2015. Pp. 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> Washington, Eric K. *Manhattanville: Old Heart of West Harlem*. Arcadia Publishing, 2002. Pp. 19-20.

<sup>13</sup> McGruder, Kevin. *Race and Real Estate: Conflict and Cooperation in Harlem, 1890-1920*. Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia UP, 2015. Pp. 19.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* Pp. 19.

faced deterrents. Though St. Philip's began worshipping in 1809, its admission to the fold of Episcopal churches took decades.<sup>15</sup>

Though they had gained their freedom, Black New Yorkers' social autonomy in the nineteenth century did not obliterate their subordinate status in society. In the first half of the century, African Americans were restricted from entering skilled trades, mostly appearing in service work and unskilled labor.<sup>16</sup> In 1834, anti-abolitionist rhetoric sparked riots resulting in the white demolishing of Black homes, businesses and churches, including St. Philip's.<sup>17</sup> The establishment of these Black institutions posed a competition to whites. Thus, Blacks began to get pushed out of the industries they had once dominated: "Reports considering the status of Black New Yorkers during the period 1834-1846 concluded that economic opportunities were declining and in many cases African Americans were being displaced from skilled positions by European immigrants."<sup>18</sup> Mid-nineteenth century New York saw an influx of both Irish and German immigrants, leading to less of a demand overall for Black labor.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1850s, Seneca Village, a Manhattan community with a huge Black presence, was cleared out for demolition to make way for the development of what we know today as Central Park.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, Black settlement was prominent in Greenwich Village, where whites themselves also resided.<sup>21</sup> Residential segregation was not strictly enforced at the time, and so Black New Yorkers took it upon themselves to move northward in Manhattan.<sup>22</sup> This said, any

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Pp. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Pp. 20.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Pp. 21.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Pp. 21.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Pp. 21.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Pp. 22.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Pp. 22.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Pp. 22.

restrictions they faced within the housing market were more so based on the landlords' individual preferences rather than on a community-wide policy of racial segregation<sup>23</sup> (which would later on change with the incoming mass migration of Blacks around 1900).

The American Civil War exacerbated racial tensions in New York City. When New York men began to get drafted, there had been a scapegoat mentality directed at Black people. This anti-Black sentiment transcended into violence when in July 1863, four days of rioting broke out in which hundreds of white men and women attacked the homes of Blacks and abolitionists.<sup>24</sup> Union troops fighting in the South were called up to restore order.<sup>25</sup> After this ordeal, many Blacks left the city. In fact, in 1865, New York City's Black population declined from the 12,574 it had been in 1860 to 10,000; constituting a mere 1.4 percent of the population.<sup>26</sup>

There was a quick turnaround, however, marking the end of the Civil War. From 1870 to 1890, approximately 123,000 Black people migrated northward.<sup>27</sup> Because of relation to current residents, many of these Blacks were drawn to New York City.<sup>28</sup> Brooklyn, which would remain a separate city until the 1898 consolidation of Greater New York, sheltered many Blacks, with the number growing after the Draft Riots; and "by the late nineteenth century, Brooklyn was the center of the Black elite in the region."<sup>29</sup>

This did not necessarily deter the growth of Black community in other areas of the city. Greenwich Village still saw its fair share of Blacks. In fact, the Black churches of the time served as indication to this. There were two specifically located in this region; Abyssinian Baptist Church

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Pp. 22.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Pp. 24.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Pp. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Pp. 24.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Pp. 25.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Pp. 25.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Pp. 26.

located on Waverly Place and Zion African Methodist Church on Bleecker and 10<sup>th</sup> Streets.<sup>30</sup> However, this Black concentration was widely dispersed; meaning “the small numbers of Black residents did not threaten white homeowners or renters to the point that Blacks were consigned to one neighborhood. The number of Black residents of Manhattan was not large enough to change the character of most neighborhoods...”<sup>31</sup> This perception would begin to take a dramatic and toxic turn by the late 1890s.

The Panic of 1873 and the subsequent depression caused East Harlem began to take on an ethnic transformation. After a trolley company imported Italians to break a strike, more trains brought Italians to the area.<sup>32</sup> East 106th Street soon became "Italian Harlem" until the 1920s; it had become the largest Italian population center in the world outside of Italy.<sup>33</sup> A Jewish community was also on the rise.<sup>34</sup>

Harlem also saw a migration of Blacks like no other time in history: “While African Americans lived in Harlem since at least the 1650s, it wasn't until World War I when the Black community began to really take root around 125th Street. Much of the immigrant labor force had returned to Europe to fight for their native flags, so industrial interests brought Blacks from the South to take their place, and no doubt the presence of Jim Crow served as an impetus for many workers' moves.”<sup>35</sup> These new opportunities led to many Blacks having influence of buying power

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Pp. 26.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. Pp. 27.

<sup>32</sup> Williams, Keith. “Tracking 300 Years of Harlem’s Ever-Shifting Boundaries.” 20 August 2015. <<http://ny.curbed.com/2015/8/20/9933196/tracing-350-years-of-harlems-ever-shifting-boundaries>>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

in the real estate market. However, it wasn't long before the new flourishing of this group faced issues with white supremacists.

As a result, this perceivable “infiltration” of Blacks saw split reactions by residential whites living in Harlem at the time. While some made conscious efforts to help Blacks make a smoother transition into their new place of residency, many of them were hostile towards Blacks during this racial shift. Any support Blacks received came as a result of a stark resistance among certain groups of whites in the area. The fluctuating ethnic paradigm of the time posed a threat to whites for a multitude of reasons: “concerns about a reduction in property values that could result from the Black presence in a neighborhood, an assumption that all Blacks were of lower economic class and would import vice and violence to middle-class Harlem, and a broader concern that the culture of the community was about to change from what white residents had known.”<sup>36</sup> However, because said opposition to the idea of Black presence wasn't quite as violent as it had been in other cities (i.e. Chicago, where whites actively used bombing tactics to scare away Blacks<sup>37</sup>), it allowed for the continuation and prospering of the inevitable “Black culture” of Harlem.

After a long-standing feud between settling Blacks and their opponents, it was clear that the new Black atmosphere that Harlem was beginning to exude was not disappearing anytime soon. The formerly robust “white” culture of Harlem was fizzling out. And the only pragmatic option left for these racist whites was to move out. So that is exactly what they did.

And thus, Harlem became the epicenter for all things “Black”. In fact, a survey in 1929 found that whites owned and operated 81.51% of the neighborhood's 10,319 businesses. By the late 1960s, 60% of the businesses in Harlem responding to surveys reported ownership by Blacks,

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<sup>36</sup> McGruder, Kevin. *Race and Real Estate: Conflict and Cooperation in Harlem, 1890-1920*. Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia UP, 2015. Pp. 6.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* Pp. 10.

and an overwhelming fraction of new businesses were Black owned after that time.<sup>38</sup> The famous Harlem Renaissance solidified this identifier for the modern Harlem.

But then, what is now the contemporary perception of Harlem? Technically, it is still perceived as being notoriously “Black”. And, intrinsic to this assumption, ostensibly poor. But while this postulation was at one time customarily true, it is changing. The white population of Harlem has grown more rapidly since 2000 than any time of the twentieth century. Young millennials and middle-class whites working in the breadths of the affluent Manhattan industries are pushing themselves, and their cultures, into the nucleus of the neighborhood that has been for one hundred years been cultivating its own unique culture.

White culture in the United States has always been the dominant one. It has survived and thrived through the overtaking, suppression and oppression of other cultures and races, and this is a legacy which impacts the structure of American society today. The majority of the nation’s wealth is controlled by white people. And it continues to function in relation to what benefits these individuals. Resultantly, the structural rift between whites and Blacks remains as ardent as ever. This relationship; the association between oppressor and oppressed, is now most bluntly apparent in urban spaces, where diversity once thrived and survived.

Harlem is one of the prime areas where this dichotomy between two major racial groups has thrived over time. Over one hundred and twenty years has passed since the desperate diaspora of Blacks into Harlem in order to escape white persecution. But today, we are seeing an adverse outcome. The Blacks are being pushed out; and by the same oppressive system which forced them there: The laws of enablement. In the following chapter, I will speak to how eminent

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<sup>38</sup> “History of Harlem”. *Wikimedia Foundation*.  
<[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Harlem#CITEREFGill2011](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Harlem#CITEREFGill2011)>



domain manipulated the outcome of a fierce battle between the West Harlem community and Columbia University; and in the following chapter, explain how such laws of privilege control the landscape of Harlem and other urban communities.

## CHAPTER 1: THE (IL)LEGAL SUCCESSIONS OF THE MANHATTANVILLE DEVELOPMENT PLAN

When in public discourse we discuss minorities being forced out of their places of residency, we are talking about gentrification. But what is the meaning behind this word? If you search the term itself on google, the first result that pops up will read:

gen·tri·fy  
*verb*

renovate and improve (especially a house or district) so that it conforms to middle-class taste

- make (someone or their way of life) more refined or dignified.

This definition itself is an indicator of a problematic outlook. It implies that the livelihood of poorer-class citizens is not “dignified”; that in order to be “dignified”, one must hold a “middle class” status and ideology. This classist, and implicitly racist sentiment, is one that fueled one of the leading displacement phenomenas of Harlem to date.

Manhattanville, a “gritty neighborhood of auto-repair shops, tenements and small manufacturers”<sup>39</sup>, was perceived by Columbia as not only a vital space for a larger revitalization of Columbia University as an institution, but as a contribution to the aesthetic and economic betterment of Upper Manhattan. This plan, however, was almost instantaneously contested by the West Harlem community, their respective organizations and Columbia students and faculty alike. This said, in the spring of 2003, The Coalition to Preserve Community began to meet in St. Mary's Church of Harlem to organize their demands against Columbia's expansion plans.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Eviatar, Daphne. "The Manhattanville Project." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 20 May 2006.

<sup>40</sup> *Columbia's West Harlem Expansion: A Look at the Issues*. New York: Columbia U's Student Coalition on Expansion and Gentrification.

Subsequently, in October of 2003, an alliance of various Columbia student-run groups merged to organize a panel called “The Ethics of Expansion”; investigating how expansion would affect community members.<sup>41</sup> The collective worry about the potential cultural and economic damages that could be done to indigenous Harlemites in light of this expansion caused for there to be an organic fusion of interest between Harlem residents, Columbia students and organizers.

This coalition of activism fashioned a movement that would gain momentum very quickly. A local West Harlem organization called the Community Board 9 Manhattan (CB9),<sup>42</sup> influenced by the concerns of its community members, and along with student-lead campus organization SCEG (Student Coalition on Expansion and Gentrification; emerging from the initial group which organized the October 2013 panel), enabled a transpiring of the involvement of other anti-expansion organizations. Each group played an integral role in the collective fight against Columbia’s complete and unrestricted occupation of Manhattanville. Though they weren’t completely successful with the bargain they had hoped for, they did present Columbia with a ton of pressure that lead to an eventual agreement between themselves and the university. However, while this movement did lead to somewhat of a mutual consensus about what should and would be done to Manhattanville, the residual effects of the expansion, and Columbia’s willingness to fulfill their end of the bargain, are still arguable.

In June of 2004, CB9 passed a resolution condemning the use of eminent domain as a corporate development tool.<sup>43</sup> This is an integral component of the entire conflict between Columbia and its resistance, as Columbia’s domain of power laid within its ability to practice eminent domain. Eminent domain, the power of the state to seize private property without the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

owner's consent, was used by Columbia in order to attain property that still belonged to West Harlem business owners.<sup>44</sup> While the Fifth Amendment bans the confiscation of property “without just compensation”, the criteria for which adequately encompasses “just compensation”, is ambiguous. In the case of property overtaken by Columbia, this criteria was not decided by direct negotiation between Columbia and (at the time) current property owners, but by the government agency that was secretly in negotiation with Columbia.<sup>45</sup>

In 2005, Columbia sent a letter to the Empire State Development Corporation (ESDC), New York State’s leading economic development agency which had the power to condemn property for seizure on behalf of the University. The ESDC respectively began a Neighborhood Conditions Study, which had the potential of declaring the expansion area blighted. If the study found the region to be blighted (which it did), then the state of NY would be able to invoke the power of eminent domain to forcibly buy property in the area from owners who have refused to sell. It was later revealed that the University funneled the ESDC \$300,000 per year of study.<sup>46</sup>

To make matters more corrupt, while all the scandal with Columbia and the ESDC ensued behind-the-scenes, Columbia had been sporting a façade of diplomacy.

In early 2005, the city met with local constituents and Columbia to assess how the proceedings of a synchronized viewing of Columbia’s 197-C plan and the Community Board’s 197-A plan would be processed. The city committed funds to the development of a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) – a document that codifies points of consensus and agreement between the parties – a route that ideally leads to greater public benefits.<sup>47</sup>

With this need for a CBA came the formation of the Local Development Corporation (LDC), an organization that would “represent a broad range of constituents and ensure

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

communication to the public”<sup>48</sup>. Community organizations, as well as student-based groups, had begun putting together their demands for this documented agreement to come.

In the spring of 2004, Columbia submitted its initial rezoning plan to the city of New York and in April of 2004, Columbia president Lee Bollinger presented the plan to CB9.<sup>49</sup> Disgruntled by the proposal, community members questioned how residents could possibly benefit from the expansion. Not long after, in June of 2004, Columbia’s Community Advisory Board dismantled just as they were in the process of completing a report supporting CB9’s 197-A plan.<sup>50</sup> This plan, which was completed by CB9 in the fall of 2004, provided an alternative plan for development, countering Columbia’s “all or nothing” sentiments concerning expansion. Though the board began developing the plan in 1991, it saw revisions as Columbia’s influence spread to areas designated in the plan.

Most simply put, the 197-a plan called for “the protection and creation of affordable housing and living wage jobs, environmentally sustainable development, and in-fill development (building around non-Columbia-owned properties).”<sup>51</sup> Concretely stated in it was a request for the prohibition of the use of eminent domain to convey property to any private party seeking development in Manhattan’s Community District 9 (including Columbia’s proposed expansion area).<sup>52</sup>

In March of 2006, The West Harlem Local Development Corporation (WHLDC) was established as the sole negotiating body between community representatives and Columbia

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

University.<sup>53</sup> Their main purpose was to reflect and mediate the needs of both the University and community residents via a legally binding Community Benefits Agreement document. However, in October of 2006, WHLDC voted not to take eminent domain off the table as a prerequisite for negotiating its Community Benefits Agreement with Columbia and the City.<sup>54</sup> The decision generated a conversation within the community about the LDC's willingness to adequately represent the requests and needs of West Harlem residents and businesses. This said, the West Harlem Business group (WHBG) used their own tactic to fight Columbia's use of eminent domain. In November of 2006, the WHBG filed a lawsuit against the ESDC for refusing to disclose information about the possible use of eminent domain for Columbia's proposed Manhattanville expansion.<sup>55</sup> The case overview is as follows:

The agency refused to disclose any documents to petitioner business association regarding an agreement between a university and the agency, relying on the exemption set forth in Public Officer's Law § 87(2)(c). In providing the documents to the trial court for an in camera review, the agency failed to identify which documents fell within each particular exemption. As a result, the trial court had to create its own document log. It then ordered disclosure of all documents that were not intra- or inter-agency and/or were disclosed to unidentified persons or non-agency individuals. The Court of Appeals found, inter alia, that because none of the agency's affidavits sufficiently identified the particular exemption to which the submitted records were subject, leaving that task to trial court, the agency could not complain that trial court improperly labeled the documents. Therefore, the trial court properly ordered disclosure of the documents.<sup>56</sup>

In January of 2007, The Columbia Spectator obtained the University's General Project Plan for the expansion and reported that the document, recently submitted to ESDC "anticipates

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> 13 N.Y.3d 882; 921 N.E.2d 592; 893 N.Y.S.2d 825; 2009 N.Y. LEXIS 4474; 2009 NY Slip Op 9268. LexisNexis Academic. Web.

that the area [of Manhattanville] will be declared blighted and provides for the use of eminent domain to acquire property.”<sup>57</sup> Columbia’s assumption of blight in the expansion area came before the blight study. This alone was a core cause for suspicion of their already stark opposition.

In March of 2007, Columbia announced its first eviction of a tenant on University-owned property in the expansion zone, claiming that they had not paid their rent.<sup>58</sup> The tenant, Broadway Auto Center at 3251 Broadway, refuted with the claim that Columbia had been neglecting essential repairs, and as a result (in addition to Columbia’s increase of scaffolding that blocked the storefront from public view), greatly reduced the Auto Center’s business.<sup>59</sup> Columbia began facing legal battles with more local businesspeople shortly after. On January 21, 2009, Tuck-It-Away Storage owner Nick Sprayregen and gas station owners Gurnam and Parminder Singh filed separate lawsuits with the New York State Supreme Court Appellate Division against ESDC, challenging the state's approval of using eminent domain to seize their properties.

The individual disputes Columbia was beginning to endure transcended into a greater transpiring of legislative resistance. On May 4, 2009, CB9 voted for its delegates on the WHLDC to turn down Columbia's Community Benefits Agreement for Manhattanville.<sup>60</sup> Despite this effort, on May 18, 2009, WHLDC and University Trustees signed the Community Benefits Agreement.<sup>61</sup> Following this judicial blow to West Harlem locals, David Smith,

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<sup>57</sup> *Columbia’s West Harlem Expansion: A Look at the Issues*. New York: Columbia U's Student Coalition on Expansion and Gentrification.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Kirschenbaum, Kim. "Manhattanville Expansion Timeline." *Columbia Daily Spectator*. 29 May 2010.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

attorney for the Singh family, and Norman Siegel, representing Sprayregen, brought their case against the state to the New York State Supreme Court Appellate Division, where they questioned the legality of the ESDC's use of eminent domain. On December 3, 2009, The New York State Supreme Court, Appellate Division declared in a 3-2 ruling that the state seizure of private property in the 17-acre expansion zone was illegal.<sup>62</sup> However, ESDC formally appealed this verdict on January 8, 2010.<sup>63</sup> Later that year, this decision was upturned by the U.S. Supreme Court, specifying that Columbia could move ahead with their expansion.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Stohr, Greg. "Columbia University Expansion Allowed by High Court." *Bloomberg.com*. Bloomberg, 13 Dec. 2010. Web.



## CHAPTER 2: EMINENT DOMAIN AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF ITS ENABLEMENT

Columbia's initial plan (falsely) accounted for the obvious needs of the surrounding community when it proposed its entry into Manhattanville, meaning it was aware of the radical and domineering racial transformation that has been transpiring in Harlem over the past thirty or so years. And even with the plea of CB9 to refrain from the use of eminent domain as a means to gain access to the region, Columbia ignored this request and development was allowed anyway. This pegs an important question specific to the case of Columbia in West Harlem, but also in relation to the enabling of gentrification at a large: *How* exactly was eminent domain enabled if it was faced with such zealous opposition?

Eminent domain, or the process by which the government takes property from private owners, is a perplexing procedure; from its guidelines, to its structural process, to its general morality. Its purpose is to convert private property into some public use, be it a public facility or the economic development of a previously blighted area.<sup>65</sup> The most common usage of eminent domain is to obtain title to property used for roads and other public facilities; however, the stakes have taken a tangent trajectory from the law's initial intentions.<sup>66</sup>

The federal government has been, for quite some time now, (ab)using the power of eminent domain to acquire property for public use.

It "appertains to every independent government. It requires no constitutional recognition; it is an attribute of sovereignty." *Boom Co. v. Patterson*, 98 U.S. 403 (1879). However, the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution stipulates: "nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> "Understanding Eminent Domain." *HG.org*. <<https://www.hg.org/article.asp?id=31079>>

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*.

This means that whenever the United States obtains a property via eminent domain, it has a constitutional responsibility to justly compensate the property owner for the fair market value of the property. This is problematic because the determination of “fair market” value can be ambiguous and easy to skew. Though the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution forbids the confiscation of property without just compensation, the amount to be paid is not negotiated in a traditional sense. In fact, it is often the case that the amounts the government proposes to pay are inadequate to cover the actual value of the property as determined by the owner.<sup>68</sup> For this reason (along with not wanting to be stripped of valuable or sentimental land), the process of eminent domain can be quite lengthy. A quick summary of how the entire process operates is:

1. Condemning agency with interest in your property hires an appraiser to inspect and appraise your property.
2. Agency makes an offer, usually a low one.
3. If you don't work out a deal through negotiation with the condemning agency, a public hearing is scheduled where agency has to prove necessity for greatest public good.
4. Condemning agency will next file a complaint against you in Superior Court. Agency will serve a summons and complaint on you and interested parties, requiring a response. You may challenge the complaint although it's likely to be overruled.
5. Agency must deposit "probable compensation" and file a motion for prejudgment possession. You may object once again. If motion is approved, agency may take possession of your property within 30 days.
6. Your attorney will obtain appraisal reports from appraisers and expert witnesses to establish property's fair market value. Reports are exchanged with condemning agency.
7. Parties come to an agreement through mediation in most cases.
8. If no settlement is agreed upon, condemning agency will provide a final offer.
9. Trial is held to determine fair market value of your property and hear any other issues.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> "What Is Eminent Domain?" <<http://www.fishertalwar.com/what-is-eminent-domain>>

Unfortunately for the contesting side, the benefit usually goes into the hand of the government. The first U.S. Supreme Court case in relation to eminent domain very clearly attests to this fact. The court was presented with the issue of eminent domain in the case of *Kohl v. United States* and the situation was as follows: A Cincinnati landowner was challenging the United States' attempt to seize his land for the development of a custom house and post office building. Regardless, Kohl lost under Supreme Court Justice William Strong's position that the federal government had authority to appropriate property for public uses "essential to its independent existence and perpetuity." *Kohl v. United States*, 91 U.S. 367,371 (1875).<sup>70</sup>

A similar verdict was found in the Supreme Court case *State v. Gettysburg Electric Railroad Company*. In this circumstance, Congress wanted to acquire land to preserve the site of the Gettysburg Battlefield in Pennsylvania, but the railroad company that owned some of its property challenged this action. The final verdict happened that the federal government has the authority to condemn land "whenever it is necessary or appropriate to use the land in the execution of any of the powers granted to it by the constitution." *United States v. Gettysburg Electric Ry.*, 160 U.S. 668,679 (1896)<sup>71</sup>

The use of eminent domain today, however, has proved to be less for preservation and more to cater to capitalistic desires. This said, it's been enormously oppressive to communities where property developers convince the city to obtain private land for the purpose of profit. The law has gone as far as defining "public use" as "for the public good", which are completely different things. Under the "public good" definition, cities can claim private property and allow private developers to raise new buildings for the sole purpose of profit growth.

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<sup>70</sup> "Understanding Eminent Domain." *HG.org*. <<https://www.hg.org/article.asp?id=31079>>

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*.

When the property owner loses their case, the government will assign someone to meet with the owners and discuss an adequate amount of compensation. These amounts are determined through a mix of property values, use of the property (i.e., whether it was residential or commercial), and statutory factors. While there is some room for negotiation, it does not usually go to the advantage of the property owner. In this case, if the owner is not satisfied with the given negotiated number, they can insist that the matter be decided by a judge. In some jurisdictions, accommodations are made for just such a scenario, such that attorney fees may be paid for by the government if it is determined that the government's offer was too low.<sup>72</sup> This process is tedious, however, and does not guarantee sufficient compensation. In the case of Columbia, the institution came out of the bargain with success, while the community was forced to accept an equivocal resolution. That said, after understanding all the controversy that's erupted between University and its resistance, it is only natural for one to wonder: What *is* so wrong about using eminent domain to attain expansion?

President Lee Bollinger and his administration's plans for expansion appealed as a positive project on various public platforms. The focal goal, to improve and sustain Columbia's stature so to remain at or supersede the competitive level of other Ivy League institutions such as Yale and Harvard, appeared genuine in academic intent. "As knowledge grows and fields grow, we need more faculty, you need a certain scale," Bollinger said. "And we need places to put them. Now, a number of young faculty share offices. Our science departments have lab conditions that don't compare to what other top universities have."<sup>73</sup> At this time, Columbia had

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Eviatar, Daphne. "The Manhattanville Project." *The New York Times*. The New York Times. 20 May 2006.

194 square feet per student while Harvard sported 368.<sup>74</sup> Additionally, Bollinger ardently spoke about how it could actually benefit the Manhattanville area.

The president of the university came to Columbia with the respect of many Harlem residents and activists. There had prior been suspicions regarding Columbia's relationship with Harlem, but while the president of the University of Michigan, Bollinger was regarded for defending a challenge to its affirmative-action program.<sup>75</sup> He presented Columbia's plan as promoting the integration of a public-service-oriented university with its diverse surroundings. "There was a time when Columbia really turned its back on where it was located," Bollinger says. "I wanted to take exactly the opposite approach."<sup>76</sup>

However, it was obvious that those who would be experiencing the effects of this plan in the local area felt skepticisms toward Bollinger's claims. Though he did acknowledge and consider the West Harlem community as the plan was in its crafting process, it is important to consider that the magnitude of antagonistic opposition to the plan, and legal ratifications made to it as a result. These incidents constitute legitimate evidence that expansion could be detrimental to the West Harlem Community.

This said, Columbia would innately have the upper hand in this battle when it pertained to gaining public support because of its influence and wealth. Bollinger reacted to this discontent by expounding that Columbia has an obligation to its surrounding community, but he believes that the university's nonprofit status works in a unique way: "We're not here to make money, we're here to discover knowledge. So there's a larger public interest here that's extremely

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

important to keep one's eye on."<sup>77</sup> It was up to the coalition of student activists and local organizations to cut a rift in the idealism that Columbia was projecting and provide some figures of their own for the public and policymakers to acknowledge.

It is important to note, however, that Community Board 9, composed of about 50 people appointed by the borough president who represent a broad cross-section of West Harlem residents, activists and business owners, did not oppose Columbia's expansion to West Harlem entirely.<sup>78</sup> They did, nonetheless, want Columbia to conform to a very different West Harlem plan that the board has developed; one that would more adequately and efficiently encapsulate the needs of the West Harlem community. After community meetings and consultations with countless urban-planning experts in over a decade's time, the board decided that the best plan would entail some manufacturing, preserve more historic architecture and allow current property owners to remain; meaning the university would have to build around them.<sup>79</sup> The SCEG perfectly captures and addresses all points of contention regarding Columbia's proposals for expansion vs. the community's requests in their informational book, *Columbia's West Harlem Expansion: A Look at the Issues*.

A main source of worry surrounding Columbia's threatening presence in Harlem came from its history with construction and expansion. In the 1960s, in order to make way for the development of the eastern portion of Columbia's Morningside Campus and housing for Columbia affiliates in the neighborhood, the University evicted more than 9,000 people.<sup>80</sup> Since

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> *Columbia's West Harlem Expansion: A Look at the Issues*. New York: Columbia U's Student Coalition on Expansion and Gentrification.

that time, there has been a proliferation of developments made in the area that changed its entire cultural atmosphere.

Today, Morningside Heights (the southern portion of the West Harlem village) is deemed the “acropolis of the new world” for its “concentration of world-class institutions and architecture”. It comprises of many prestigious educational institutions, including: Bank Street College, Barnard College, Columbia University, Teacher’s College, and The Manhattan School of Music. The establishment of such institutions, as well as the additional Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, The Jewish Theological Seminary, Union Theological Seminary, The National Council of Churches, Riverside Church, the Grotto Church of Notre Dame, St. Luke’s-Roosevelt Hospital, and at its northernmost point, two large housing complexes: the General Grant Public Housing Development and Morningside Gardens, creates a culture in Morningside Heights that emblemizes the dichotomy of wealth versus poverty. This is dangerous because as such wealth expands, it leaves continuously less space for the poor.<sup>81</sup>

Because of observation of what’s occurred in Morningside Heights, there existed legitimate fear that the recent development plan would avowal similar consequences in Manhattanville. The initial plan had not committed Columbia “to creating a single unit of affordable housing as part of an expansion project that will only exacerbate the existing housing crises in the University, the neighborhood, and the City at large.”<sup>82</sup> To this, the SCEG proposed a need for affordable housing suitable for the income range of locals.

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<sup>81</sup> “About Community Board 9.” Manhattan CB 9.

<<http://www.nyc.gov/html/mancb9/html/about/about.shtml>>

<sup>82</sup> *Columbia’s West Harlem Expansion: A Look at the Issues*. New York: Columbia U’s Student Coalition on Expansion and Gentrification.

Another huge concern at hand was the prospect of the lack of jobs that would be provided by the expansion plan, providing living wages for indigenous Harlemites.

One of the major selling points of Columbia's expansion plan is the University's claim that the development would create 6,900 new jobs in the area: 21% administrators, 20% researchers, 14% faculty, 14% technicians, 9% post-doc, 7% support staff, 6% clerical staff, and 9% non-Columbia jobs.<sup>83</sup>

Three incredibly poignant counterarguments to this selling point were made by the SCEG:

- Of the Columbia jobs, only support staff and clerical staff do not require advanced degrees or extensive job training, and they are the only jobs that Columbia could not readily fill with University affiliates (most technician positions, for example, are likely to be awarded to graduate students). These jobs would account for about 900 of the new jobs created by the expansion.
- The University estimates that 9% would be non-Columbia jobs – about 620 mostly minimum-wage, service sector jobs (retail, food service, etc.).
- The tradeoff of these 1500 or so jobs, created over the next 30 years, does not add up when considering that there are already 1,600 jobs in the area, as estimated by the EIS Scoping Document.<sup>84</sup>

Though two of the points had no other suggest solutions other than terminating the plan entirely, the SCEG was diplomatic and asked that instead, living wages be made a priority for all workers related to the expansion.

Another issue that was brought up in the booklet was concern regarding retail:

Columbia says that they will encourage ground-level retail to make the neighborhood more vibrant, but change in retail is one type of gentrification. If the retail stores included in the plan are only high-end, they will not benefit, for example, residents of Manhattanville or Grant Houses, who may be forced to travel farther to buy things they need at prices they can afford.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

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Figure 2: The Jerome L. Greene Science Center, which will be home to the Columbia University Mortimer B. Zuckerman Mind Brain Behavior Institute.

This concern was specific to Columbia’s trustees selecting the firm Winick Realty Group LLC to market three retail spaces slated for phase one of the university’s Manhattanville expansion plans. The stores will offer a collective 22,115 square feet of available space on the base of the 450,000-square-foot Jerome L. Greene Science Center on the northwest corner of West 129th Street and Broadway. The Winick broker team with the listing—Kenneth Hochhauser, Kelly Gedinsky and Michael Gleicher—are programming a 5,395-square-foot space for a grab-and-go tenant, a 7,050-square-foot corner storefront for non-food retail and a 6,255-square-foot spread for a traditional restaurant. All three stores include mezzanine and lower level space and will see traffic from both pedestrians visiting the Mortimer B. Zuckerman Mind

Brain Behavior Institute in the graduate science building above and other rising structures near the site.<sup>86</sup>

This brought a larger, more problematic issue to the discussion: gentrification. The term is innately negative, and often does come as a result of retail targeting. In the case of Columbia, the poorer natives of Harlem would not only have to worry about the potential of being evicted due to rising rent prices due to growing neighborhood affluence, but even given that they are able to find some sort of arrangement, they would be culturally displaced.

With the plethora of concerns and demands laid out in text so clearly and expressed so fervently by activists, the resulting CBA was formed to make amends for the invasion of both private and public land by Columbia:

... The agreement, documented in a memorandum of understanding, rather than an actual CBA, envisioned that Columbia would provide \$150 million in community benefits, including a new public school for CB9, \$20 million worth of in-kind benefits, a \$24 million housing fund and \$76 million for a “benefits fund” which would be managed by a committee of WHLDC representatives, elected officials and Columbia representatives...

... The CBA provides more detail about how the \$76 million benefits fund agreed to in the MOU would be used: those funds would be disbursed annually over sixteen years to pay for improvements to public housing in the area; fund a resource center for the community; fund an assessment of public transportation, pedestrian and parking needs in the community; pay for an assessment of community health needs; and support a clinic that would provide legal services and housing advocacy for the local community (such as assisting local tenants in eviction proceedings). In addition to that fund, and the in-kind services and demonstration school provided for in the MOU, the CBA commits Columbia to pay a living wage to all employees on the expanded campus, to hire local residents, to give contracts to minority and women-owned businesses, to fund summer internships for local children, undertake a number of environmental improvements, and provide space for a day care facility.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Salinger, Tobias. "Columbia Taps Winick for Manhattanville Retail." *YIMBY Forums*. N.p., 16 Jan. 2015.

<sup>87</sup> *THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY BENEFIT AGREEMENTS IN NEW YORK CITY'S LAND USE PROCESS* (2010); *New York City Bar*.

It wasn't a solution to the problems raised as much as a compensating bargain for those problems. Though CB9 and others still had their issues with the agreement, it was signed by the WHLDC in May 2009 and put into effect. But its effectiveness in fostering a successful indigenous West Harlem community, and whether Columbia would remain loyal to it, were two queries that would come about next.

### CHAPTER 3: HARLEM GENTRIFICATION VIA APPLIED THEORY

Outlets like The Harlem Times speak on the expansion's residual effects and Columbia's faux pro-community guise.



Figure 3: Columbia University Expansion Area 10/16/2007 - View from the southeast.

... displaced Black, brown, and poor residents scurry to the outer boroughs in search of refuge. Current residents endure the noise and air pollution produced by relentless construction work, and the small businesses that remain struggle to keep afloat in the gentrified moat that is 21st century Harlem. Columbia University and its staunchest allies periodically pump leaflets, newsletters, and mass emails into the community to promote as well as inculcate points from the infamous Community Benefits Agreement (CBA). Its latest dose, released in September 2013, is titled "Growing Together: An Update on Community Services, Amenities, and Benefits of Columbia University's Manhattanville Campus in West Harlem."<sup>88</sup>

As apparent by the above excerpt, Columbia has long been defending their role in fostering a palpable struggle to its supposed counterparts. Emphasizing the positive aspects gentrification

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<sup>88</sup> Moore, Tasha. "Harlem and the Columbia Expansion." *The Harlem Times*. 2013.  
<<http://theharlemtimes.com/online-news/harlem-columbia-expansion>>

would bring into the area, they've failed to consider—or to care about, rather— its (culturally) indigenous people.

The population of whites in Harlem from 2000 to 2016 has grown quicker than any sixteen-year period after 1900. The below chart tracks the increase of the Black population of Harlem between 1910 and 1940, and the respective influx of whites in the area from 1980 to 2006.

**Population and Racial Composition Harlem  
1910-1940 and 1980-2006<sup>89</sup>**

	Black (percentage)	White (percentage)	Total Population
1910	9.89%	90.01%	181,949.00
1920	32.43%	67.47%	216,026.00
1930	70.18%	29.43%	209,663.38
1940	89.31%	10.48%	209,663.38
1980	94.17%	0.62%	108,236.00
1990	87.55%	1.50%	101,026.00
2000	77.49%	2.07%	109,091.00
2006	69.27%	6.55%	118,111.00

And this is circumstance is not only particular to Harlem; it has been cultivating on a grandiose scale. Nellie Hester Bailey, Cofounder of the Harlem Tenants Council, says:

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<sup>89</sup> 1910 to 1940, Census Tract Data from National Historical Geographical Information System, Compiled by Andrew A. Beveridge and Co-workers; 1980 through 2000, Tabulated Census Data from National Historical Geographic Information System; 2006 Data from American Community Survey, U.S. Bureau of the Census Boundary Files from National Historical Geographic Information System 1910 to 2000, U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006

The story of Harlem here is really a reflection of the stories of Harlem across this nation, and it is about what are we going to do. This is not just a local problem. It's not just a Harlem problem. What's happening in Harlem is happening in the Bronx and Bedford-Stuyvesant, where these communities are being lost, where people are being driven out, and deliberately so, as a result of public policy, which is really about ethnic cleansing. You've got to get out of here. We don't care where you go. New York City has, on any given night, 38,000 people in its homeless shelter system--38,000. Mayor Bloomberg has made it clear we don't care where you go. We will give you money, a one-way ticket to leave New York City, but we want you out of here. You have to leave. This is expensive real estate. We can no longer afford to have working-class Black people here or immigrant communities with great expectations. We have other plans, and these plans are governed and driven by the market.<sup>90</sup>

The first acknowledgement of the process of gentrification came from British sociologist Ruth Glass. Her knowledge of the postwar disturbances that resulted in the formation of the British welfare state led her to take on critical theories of intellectual thinkers such as Marx and Engels, nurturing a natural curiosity about how housing struggles coincided with class struggles in London (particularly in Islington, where she lived).<sup>91</sup> Her newly fostered interest led to her commitment towards learning about the accelerating rehabilitation of Victorian lodging houses, tenurial transformation from renting to owning, property price increases, and the displacement of working-class occupiers by middle-class incomers.<sup>92</sup> With a palpable understanding of the respective relationship between these separate issues, she developed the term “gentrification” in 1964.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Bailey, Nellie. "Columbia U., Race, Class and the Gentrification of Harlem." *The Real News Network*. 24 July 2011.  
<[http://www.therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=14120](http://www.therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=14120)>.

<sup>91</sup> Slater, Tom. "Gentrification of the City." *The New Blackwell Companion to the City*. 1: January, 2011.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

David Harvey's work on accumulation by dispossession and Marx's thesis of the cyclical crisis of capitalism are two theoretical analyses of society that can be used to interpret why contemporary gentrification is so dangerous. In order to contextualize this, an understanding of the working relationship between eminent domain and accumulation by possession must occur. After such analysis, it becomes simple to break down the relationship between gentrification and ethos (common knowledge), which will inevitably reveal the phenomenon of gentrification as more than just a historical event, but rather the result of set of common social attitudes within any given moment.

Gentrification, the material reality of the process of urbanization, is a neoliberal theory which epitomizes an economic expansion that caters to a state-recognized culture; i.e., ethos. It thrives in a capitalist State. Harvey posits that the politics of this capitalism are affected by the perpetual need to find profitable terrains for capital surplus consumption and absorption.”<sup>94</sup>

To claim the right to the city in the sense I mean it here is to claim some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and re-made and to do so in a fundamental and radical way. From their very inception, cities have arisen through the geographical and social concentrations of a surplus product. Urbanization has always been, therefore, a class phenomena of some sort, since surpluses have been extracted from somewhere and from somebody (usually an oppressed peasantry) while the control over the disbursement of the surplus typically lies in a few hands. This general situation persists under capitalism, of course, but in this case there is an intimate connection with the perpetual search for surplus value (profit) that drives the capitalist dynamic. To produce surplus value, capitalists have to produce a surplus product. Since urbanization depends on the mobilization of a surplus product an inner connection emerges between the development of capitalism and urbanization.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Harvey, David. “THE RIGHT TO THE CITY”.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

In simpler terms, the ruling class is constantly seeking ways to increase its own profit. This comes in the form of exploitative labor, displacement (or dispossession) and more; typically targeting the already most marginalized groups in any given society.

The process of urbanization is one that modern capitalists love to abuse. And with it comes a radical transformation of lifestyle. Harvey acknowledges this in his interpretation of urban life as a commodity:

Quality of urban life has become a commodity for those with money, as has the city itself in a world where consumerism, tourism, cultural and knowledge-based industries have become major aspects of urban political economy. The postmodernist penchant for encouraging the formation of market niches, both in urban lifestyle choices and in consumer habits, and cultural forms, surrounds the contemporary urban experience with an aura of freedom of choice in the market, provided you have the money.<sup>96</sup>

This is an encapsulation of what has been occurring in Harlem. Harvey argues that under the conditions of the spreading neoliberal ethic, the ideals of urban identity become much more difficult to sustain. In the past decades, the neoliberal turn has restored class power to rich elites. In this case of the United States, these rich elites are predominately white people. And the perpetuation of their own wealth by means of control of real estate enables society to maintain an explicitly classist and racist stature of affluence.

Though this calls into question the positive sentiments of the neoliberal “free market”, government officials are allowing the process of urbanization to continue in an oppressive manner. Some, like former Mayor of New York City, Michael Bloomberg, even promote it past the point of mere enablement. Harvey (in 2003) articulated the corrosive ethos of the controlling class of New York via the ideology of its former mayor Bloomberg:

Increasingly, we see the right to the city falling into the hands of private or quasi-private interests. In New York City, for example, we have a billionaire mayor,

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.



Michael Bloomberg, who is re-shaping the city after his heart's desire along lines favorable to the developers, to Wall Street and transnational capitalist class elements, while continuing to sell the city as an optimal location for high value businesses and a fantastic destination for tourists, thus turning Manhattan in effect into one vast gated community for the rich.<sup>97</sup>

As prominent and influential political figures reinforce this ethos of high-class (and implicitly white) agendas, it encourages larger institutions to take place in its permeation. This product of the capitalist State leads to another consequential problem in urban spaces:

Dispossession. German philosopher and social scientist Friedrich Engels asserts that:

The growth of the big modern cities gives the land in certain areas, particularly in those areas which are centrally situated, an artificially and colossally increasing value; the buildings erected on these areas depress this value instead of increasing it, because they no longer belong to the changed circumstances. They are pulled down and replaced by others. This takes place above all with worker's houses which are situated centrally and whose rents, even with the greatest overcrowding, can never, or only very slowly, increase above a certain maximum. They are pulled down and in their stead shops, warehouses and public building are erected.

Ultimately, in a modern context, this dispossession takes the form of displacement; a direct consequence of gentrification. Institutions of higher education – such as Columbia—are especially playing a role in the dissemination of the elitist implications of urbanization, resulting in the displacement of the areas' native inhabitants via eminent domain.

However, the issue of eminent domain within the framework of urbanization is not unique to Columbia University; it is happening on a global scale and is not prompting positive results for displaced parties:

With the attempt to turn Mumbai into a global financial center to rival Shanghai, the property development boom gathers pace and the land the slum dwellers occupy appears increasingly valuable. The value of the land in Dharavi, one of the most prominent slums in Mumbai, is put at \$2 billion and the pressure to clear the slum (for environmental and social reasons that mask the land grab) is mounting daily. Financial powers backed by the state push for forcible slum clearance, in

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

some cases violently taking possession of a terrain occupied for a whole generation by the slum dwellers. Capital accumulation on the land through real estate activity booms as land is acquired at almost no cost. Will the people displaced get compensation? The lucky ones get a bit. But while the Indian constitution specifies that the state has the obligation to protect the lives and well-being of the whole population irrespective of caste and class, and to guarantee rights to livelihood housing and shelter, the Indian Supreme Court has issued both non-judgments and judgments that re-write this constitutional requirement... So the slumdwellers either resist and fight or move with their few belongings to camp out on the highway margins or wherever they can find a tiny space.<sup>98</sup>

When institutions plan to implement themselves into designated areas, it is a conscious and informed decision. They are deliberately attracting the attention of specific individuals and disrupting the livelihoods of others. And if institutions are apathetic to the repercussions of their judgments, they explicitly perpetuate—and can even worsen—oppressive circumstances for those who exist as outliers. Conclusively, urbanization centralizes capital; and anyone who exists outside of that capital is, essentially, ostracized.

While the notion of bourgeois individualism is a very real reality, some gentrifiers remain unaware of the detriments their migration to urban areas can cause. Thirty-one year old Laura Murray, a graduate student in medical anthropology at Columbia, who moved to the Sugar Hill area in 2009, claimed that she feels “a community” there that she doesn’t feel “in other parts of the city”.<sup>99</sup> But while the cultural exhilaration of Harlem may fulfill people like Murray’s visceral happiness, the Black natives of Harlem see it as yet another form of white appropriation. Howard Dodson, director of Harlem’s Schomburg Center for Research and in Black Culture, regurgitates this notion when he, spoke to the New York Times in 2010. Dodson posited that: “There are people who would like to maintain Harlem as a ‘black enclave,’ but,” he posited “the

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Roberts, Sam. “No Longer Majority Black, Harlem Is in Transition”. The New York Times. 5 January 2010. < [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/06/nyregion/06harlem.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/06/nyregion/06harlem.html?_r=2)>

only way to do that is to own it". But in the way that the current structure of capitalism exists, with majority of the capital of Manhattan (and the nation, in general) in the hands of white men, that is simply not a practical reality at this moment.

## CONCLUSION

Power and prestige are two core components of privilege that are inherently linked to the oppression of the ‘lesser’ masses. With an awareness of already-oppressive circumstances in respective spaces, why is it that institutions hold the authority to elect the details of their next occupation? Shouldn’t there be a greater moral responsibility put on institutions when it comes to their development choices? And why is urbanism allowed to be so exclusive? The answer to all these questions can be found with four simple words: The Laws of Enablement.

The sentiments of capitalism, of which are embedded into the United States’ ethos, enables an unfair leverage to people who exist at the top of the economic system. The wealthy invest in projects that will generate more wealth for themselves; and usually this entails an inherent apathy towards those who may be negatively impacted. Though this attitude may not always be explicitly racist, it perpetuates a class disparity that—because of the historical context of this nation—is inherently of racial relevance.

The gentrification crisis in Harlem uncovers the power of capitalism for what it is; an oppressive system fueled by a contemporary neoliberal ideology that seeks to either maintain the economic status quo or improve circumstances for already-wealthy individuals. The fact that our country’s modern wealth has archaeologically belonged to people of a white background, compromises the preservation of Black Harlem (and many other places in the United States) in the hands of a white elitist class. The continuous role of capitalism maintains economic power in the hands of such elite, which propagates an unchanging social climate of inequity.

It is an especially disheartening incidence to observe in Harlem, a place that has for so long fought to cultivate its own autonomous Black culture after suffering tremendous stress from an unwarranted migration northward, incited by instances of extreme racial animosity and

violence. I framework this occurrence as a “diaspora” not only to use as a descriptive term for what ensued at this time, but also for comparative value. In 1890, Blacks were bullied out of their homes in the south because their physical safety and racial progress was at a constant risk. This racism was explicitly protected by the law. Today, the descendants of those very people remain oppressed by the system of capitalism; especially in the wake of an amplified desire for urbanization.

This is a problem. My entire thesis alludes to this very explicitly. I have laid out how gentrification and its consequential displacement of marginalized people is enabling a revoltingly unequal American society. It is another form of segregation. And, as it’s generally been in this nation, this decision to remain separate is not on the part of Black Americans. With the recognition of this, there must be a quest for some sort of solution.

In the preface I asked the question: “How can we incorporate all our voices into one powerful, collective movement?” By this, I was suggesting that there need be an acknowledgement—on a national platform—of the troubles associated with capitalist, “free market” expansion. Because in the end, it really serves to benefit one particular class of people, while entirely exploiting another. The culture of Harlem is one of great strength and pride; however, I feel remised to say that its preservation is doomed in the face of modern urbanization. That is, unless there is one collective movement to extract the injustices of the law that further marginalize people who have already been historically oppressed: Namely, people of color.

The content that I have provided asserts that gentrification is most definitely an issue in Harlem; however, it is not a Harlem issue. That is to say, the effects of gentrification nationwide—even in other boroughs of New York City—are also becoming more prominent as time progresses. If we decide not to take precaution, and leave these conversations of how to

combat gentrification each time a new case has already occurred, it will eventually become too late to transform public knowledge and unconcern.

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