Caribbean Quilt

Journal Homepage: https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/cquilt/index

Gentrification in Toronto's Little Jamaica: Food for Resistance

Elizabeth Wong
Individual Undergraduate Research
Faculty of Arts & Science, University of Toronto

Elizabeth is an undergraduate student at the University of Toronto majoring in Diaspora and Transnational Studies and Ethics, Society, and Law. She was previously an undergraduate fellow at Victoria College's Northrop Frye Centre. Her work is interdisciplinary, often drawing on philosophy, anthropology, and cultural studies to think through the intersections of race, culture, and colonialism in Toronto and abroad.

KEYWORDS:
Gentrification
Cultural identity
Little Jamaica
Resistance
Food
Community
Hybridity

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, the Toronto neighbourhood, commonly known as Little Jamaica, has experienced gentrification through the construction of the Eglinton Crosstown Light Rail Transit. This gentrification has perpetuated social and economic inequalities affecting the Caribbean diaspora in Little Jamaica. Urban planning tools, such as the Heritage Conservation District, have been central to the effort to preserve and protect the distinctive culture in Little Jamaica. Nevertheless, community members recognize these measures as inadequate to curb gentrification and reduce economic inequality. I argue that analyzing gentrification only as a matter of urban planning fails to account for how the local community uses cultural forms, like food, to resist gentrification. Though food is widely recognized as a means of constructing identity and building community in the diaspora, less attention is paid to the political implications of food's social power. Drawing on interviews with community members and local activists, this essay examines how the Caribbean community in Little Jamaica constructs cultural identity through food, highlighting a tension between authenticity and hybridity that exists within this cultural identity. I conclude that because food produces cultural identity and community, food and food spaces may play a role in communities' resistance to gentrification and inequalities in the urban sphere.

Preface

This project was born from my interest in how cultural forms might become political tools. Though this research is centred on Little Jamaica and the Caribbean diaspora, I am not a member of the Caribbean diaspora nor a resident of Little Jamaica. I am interested in Little Jamaica because it has become an intersection of Toronto's culture, identity, and gentrification. This essay does not speak for Toronto's

Caribbean diaspora but instead seeks to shed light on alternative methods of political resistance at work in a diasporic city such as Toronto. This essay was not completed for a course but rather was the result of my receiving the Northrop Frye Undergraduate Research Award.

Introduction

Little Jamaica is a commercial corridor between Keele Street and Allen Road on Eglinton Avenue West. Though Little Jamaica includes a small residential area around Eglinton, it consists primarily of a cluster of Caribbean restaurants, grocery stores, hair salons, and music stores. Since 2011, Little Jamaica has been the site of the construction of the Eglinton Crosstown Light Rail Transit (LRT), a new branch of Toronto's public transit. This construction has driven the gentrification of Little Jamaica. This gentrification has worsened social and economic disparities between the racialized Caribbean diaspora living and working in Little Jamaica and wealthy white Torontonians. The construction of the Eglinton LRT has thus contributed to the displacement of the Caribbean diaspora from Little Jamaica.

Gentrification in Little Jamaica has been perceived as a matter of urban planning and thus has been tackled with urban planning tools. However, analyzing gentrification only as a matter of urban planning obscures how the local community engages in cultural resistance, taking up food, among other cultural forms, to resist gentrification. Because food remains central to community-building and the production of shared cultural identity in the diaspora, food and food spaces can contribute to communities' political projects, including their resistance to urban change and displacement.

Gentrification in Little Jamaica

For over a decade, the construction of the Eglinton LRT has slowed traffic, restricted parking, and obstructed street access to businesses in Little Jamaica. As a result, the small businesses that makeup Little Jamaica have suffered a steep decrease in sales. The city-wide closures during the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the effects of construction.[1] Many businesses could not keep up with increasing commercial rent prices and did not qualify for financial relief from the federal government because they were unregistered.[2] As a result, many businesses moved or shut down. Since the beginning of the Eglinton LRT construction, over 140 businesses along Eglinton have closed, many of which were Black-owned.[3] Gentrification has and continues to displace the Caribbean diaspora in Little Jamaica towards other parts of the GTA.

Community members are concerned about mass displacement for its effect on the culture of Little Jamaica. If Caribbean businesses and residents are driven out of Little Jamaica, Eglinton Avenue West will no longer be the cultural hub it is today. While the concern that gentrification can erase diasporic culture is widely shared, less attention has been paid to how the community takes up precisely these cultural forms to resist gentrification because gentrification continues to be framed as a problem to be solved through urban planning.

To mitigate displacement and cultural erasure in Little Jamaica, city councillors have motioned for Little Jamaica to be assessed as a possible Heritage Conservation District (HCD). Under the *Ontario Heritage Act*, the HCD protects areas with "significant cultural heritage value, character and integrity."[4] Though one might expect HCDs to protect various aspects of culture in neighbourhoods, urban planners have primarily applied HCDs to protect building façades and only those of British and French colonial settlements, not ethnic enclaves.[5] Thus, HCDs, among other urban planning tools, are not designed to protect minority cultures and prevent the displacement of disadvantaged groups. Little Jamaica has become the first primarily

[1] Romain Baker et al., "A BLACK BUSINESS CONVERSATION" (Toronto: Black Urbanism Toronto, July 2020), http://www.blackurbanismto.com/our-work/.

[2] Ross Cadastre (President of the Black Business and Professional Association) in conversation with the author, November 2, 2021.

[3] Baker et al., "A BLACK BUSINESS CONVERSATION."

[4] Scott Barrett, "Heritage Conservation Districts in Toronto," ed. Mary MacDonald (City of Toronto, City Planning Division, January 2012).

[5] Gordon W. Fulton, "Policy Issues and Their Impact on Practice: Heritage Conservation in Canada," *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology* 29, no. 3/4 (1998): 15.

racialized area and ethnic enclave to be considered for heritage designation. However, given that heritage designation has worked to protect only a community's aesthetic value, community members in Little Jamaica recognize that heritage designation is not enough to support social and cultural life in the neighbourhood.

Caribbean business owners have been further marginalized because they are under-represented in the three Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) in Little Jamaica that work alongside the City of Toronto to manage this neighbourhood's economic development.[6] Because many Black business owners have neither the time to volunteer in the local BIAs nor the money to buy into the BIAs, the diasporic community has only a peripheral influence on plans for Little Jamaica's development. Black Urbanism Toronto affirms that BIAs in Little Jamaica has not been "accountable and responsive to the Black business owners they represent."[7] In sum, the racialized owners of Caribbean businesses have difficulty resisting gentrification and shaping how Little Jamaica evolves through existing political networks and using urban planning tools.

Food for Cultural Identity and Cultural Resistance

Having recognized that HCD status is insufficient to support social and cultural life in Little Jamaica, community members have taken up several cultural forms, including food, to resist gentrification. Food has long been recognized as a means of constructing cultural identity in the diaspora. Those living in the diaspora might imagine a connection to the homeland by cooking, eating, and sharing particular "home" foods.[8] For many, food fulfils a nostalgic desire for a lost homeland and makes Little Jamaica a liminal space between the homeland and the host land.[9] Many community members described the food as a keystone of cultural identity in the Caribbean diaspora. Caribbean restaurants, farmers' markets, and grocery stores in Little Jamaica have provided the diasporic community with the foods that form a shared cuisine. Though Caribbean produce is now widely available in the GTA, many diaspora members who grew up or have developed ties to Little Jamaica and now live outside of Toronto continue to visit the neighbourhood grocers and restaurants. So, food draws the diaspora community from the wider GTA towards Little Jamaica to engage them in a continual production of cultural identity.

Because the community regularly interacts and gathers in their local restaurants and cafes, these have become important sites for producing and reproducing a shared cultural identity. Many in the diasporic community define Little Jamaica by its Caribbean restaurants, saying that the neighbourhood would not be the same without Rap's jerk chicken and Randy's patties, for example.[10] Randy's Patties closed this year, after 43 years of business, due to the Eglinton LRT construction and the pandemic. Some used gustatory metaphors to describe the neighbourhood's culture: Little Jamaica is a "taste" of the Caribbean, they would say.

Community members described cultural identity in Little Jamaica in different ways. Some community members vehemently maintained that Little Jamaica's culture is authentically Caribbean as a microcosm of life on the islands. They held that the social customs, culinary practices, and tastes represented in Little Jamaica were pure, insulated from foreign—mainly white Canadian—influence. One might question these claims of authenticity because culture inevitably changes in the diaspora. However, I argue that one might dismiss these claims of authenticity too quickly if one does not interrogate the socio-political context in which they are made. On my account, these community

[6] Sipo Maphangoh (senior urban planner at the City of Toronto) in discussion with the author, October 20, 2021.
[7] Baker et al., "A BLACK BUSINESS CONVERSATION."
[8] Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani, "Introduction - Diaspora and Transnationalism," in *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*, ed. Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2013), 2; Michelle Obeid, "Home-Making in the Diaspora," in *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*, ed. Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2013), 372.
[9] Debbie Gordon, "The Erasure of Little Jamaica: Exploring the Role of Design in the Gentrification of Toronto's Eglinton Avenue West" (York University, 2018), https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10315/35802/Gordon_Debbie_M_2018_Masters.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y; Robert Murdie and Carlos Teixeira, "The Impact of Gentrification on Ethnic Neighbourhoods in Toronto: A Case Study of Little Portugal," *Urban Studies* 48, no. 1 (2011): 1.
[10] Josh Matlow (city councillor) in discussion with the author, October 13, 2021.

members did not describe cultural identity as hybrid or unstable because cultural authenticity became a political strategy. Community members took up claims of authenticity to make a stronger argument for curbing gentrification in Little Jamaica. Claiming that Little Jamaica has a distinct, authentic culture allows the community to use a persuasive language of protection and preservation. To garner political and economic support from the provincial government, activists and city councillors insisted that Little Jamaica's distinct culture be preserved and protected. Though this rhetoric is restrictive because it assumes that culture is fixed, it remains helpful in drawing attention to how gentrification affects local culture. In Stuart Hall's terms, this authentic cultural identity is a strategic "positioning" that allows the diasporic community to pursue economic and social relief.[11]

Many community members claiming cultural authenticity were acutely aware that aspects of Caribbean culture have been co-opted and altered to fit Toronto's multicultural agenda. The founder of the Afro-Caribbean Farmers' Market in Little Jamaica insisted on the market's African and Caribbean nature to prevent this cultural form from being co-opted in the same way that Caribana had been made a celebration of multiculturalism.[12] The city renamed Caribana the Toronto Caribbean Carnival and couched it in the language of diversity and multiculturalism. What was once a celebration of the emancipation of enslaved people in Canada and an important political platform for the Caribbean community in Toronto became a heavily commoditized multicultural parade.[13] Claims of cultural authenticity help the diasporic community prevent their cultural forms from being incorporated into multicultural projects that perpetuate the idea that multiculturalism yields economic equality.

Though the effects of displacement are seen through the closure of many Caribbean restaurants, food is also a lens through which we can see the community's efforts to resist gentrification and displacement. Restaurants have become primary spaces for organized community meetings in Little Jamaica. Two not-for-profits held several community consultations and information sessions on resisting gentrification and working towards community land ownership at local restaurants. These organizations sought to support the restaurants during times of financial hardship, and they recognized the symbolic value of these restaurants for the residential and diasporic communities. In this way, food spaces became important sites for community organizing. Food, then, has the potential to be a tool for and site of cultural resistance because food contributes to the creation of cultural identity.

Conclusion

To sum up, I have suggested that gentrification ought to be analyzed not only through the lens of urban planning but through the lens of cultural resistance. The community in Little Jamaica is taking up cultural forms, including food, to resist gentrification. Food contributes to constructing cultural identity, which has been central to this community's political projects. Thus, I have identified that food and food spaces can play a role in communities' resistance to gentrification. Further research might examine how food contributes to different communities' political projects.

[11] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Stuart Hall: Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, ed. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 261.

[12] Lori Beazer (founder of the Afro-Caribbean Farmers' Market) in conversation with the author, October 25, 2021.

[13] Ibid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baker, Romain, Dane Gardener-Williams, Anyika Mark, Elizabeth Antczak, Mona Dai, Samuel Ganton, and Tura Wilson. "A BLACK BUSINESS CONVERSATION." Toronto: Black Urbanism Toronto, July 2020. http://www.blackurbanismto.com/our-work/.

Barrett, Scott. "Heritage Conservation Districts in Toronto." Edited by Mary MacDonald. City of Toronto, City Planning Division, January 2012. https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2012/pg/bgrd/backgroundfile-44992.pdf.

Case, Cheryll. "Black Futures on Eglinton." Community Cultural Mapping Study. CP Planning, January 14, 2021. https://cpplanning.ca/bfoe.

Fulton, Gordon W. "Policy Issues and Their Impact on Practice: Heritage Conservation in Canada." *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology* 29, no. 3/4 (1998): 13–16. https://doi.org/10.2307/1504605.

Gordon, Debbie. "The Erasure of Little Jamaica: Exploring the Role of Design in the Gentrification of Toronto's Eglinton Avenue West." York University, 2018. https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10315/35802/Gordon_Debbie_M_2018_Masters.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Stuart Hall: Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, edited by Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, 257–71. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1hhj1b9.

Hall, Stuart. "Culture, Resistance, and Struggle." In *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, edited by Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg, 180–206. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw8wg.

Hall, Stuart. "Thinking the Diaspora: Home-Thoughts from Abroad [1999]." In *Essential Essays, Volume 2*, edited by David Morley, 206–26. Duke University Press, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478002710-011.

Maphangoh, Sipo, and Elena Bird. "Little Jamaica & the Eglinton West Neighbourhoods." Planning Study. City of Toronto, March 2, 2021. www.toronto.ca/littlejamaica.

Mintz, Sidney W. *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the Past*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

Murdie, Robert, and Carlos Teixeira. "The Impact of Gentrification on Ethnic Neighbourhoods in Toronto: A Case Study of Little Portugal." *Urban Studies* 48, no. 1 (2011): 61–83. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098009360227.

Murdoch, H. Adlai. "'All Skin' Teeth Is Not Grin:'' Performing Caribbean Diasporic Identity in a Postcolonial Metropolitan Frame." *Callaloo* 30, no. 2 (2007): 575–93. https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2007.0208.

Obeid, Michelle. "Home-Making in the Diaspora." In *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*, edited by Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani, 366–80. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2013. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118320792.ch21.

Quayson, Ato, and Girish Daswani. "Introduction - Diaspora and Transnationalism." In *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*, edited by Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani, 1–26. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2013. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118320792.ch1.