Narratives of Displacements:
Introduction to the Themed Issue

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In memory of Sandra Annunziata.

one of Sandra's closest colleagues for many years, who have helped edit Sandra's paper and written n eulogy introducing it.

Abstract

This is a themed issue about displacements. Or more precisely, about research grounded in narratives of people suffering displacement in its various forms, and their all too visible and yet oftentimes made-invisible demographics. 'All too visible' as those individuals or groups stand out either as scapegoats on which to lay blame for urban problems, or as the human fallout of ongoing processes of class struggles and racialised conflicts under neoliberal, neocolonial and neonationalist regimes of spatial encroachment. Yet, their subjectivity, agency and voice are invisibilised in public and political discourse, as well as in academic research, or they are altogether erased through the poor selection of methodologies that fail to capture the discrete statistical categories that can register displacement. Therefore, those afflicted by it become un-researchable. The papers within this themed issue collectively seek to re-center displacement, through investigations and narratives of displaced populations.

Keywords

Narratives of Displacements - Introduction to the Themed Issue

The aim of this themed issue is rather modest. As an editorial team, we called on experientially-grounded and contextually sensitive studies on various forms of displacement, whose angle and results would be highly pertinent to the lives of the displaced populations themselves. The contributing authors were invited to problematize displacement as a multifaceted concept and real-life condition that nowadays constitutes a dominant force in the shaping of the urban condition for millions across the globe. We contend that displacement is an intricate phenomenon occurring as a consequence of negotiations over the exertion of power and control of physical space and its concomitant sense of place. We do not, however, want to fetishize displacement by treating it as yet another metanarrative. Rather, by bringing to the fore the displaced and their experiences we want to enhance the conceptual apparatus around contemporary facets of dispossession and displacement in a critical manner. In doing so, we contribute to the critical stream of research, to which ACME speaks to, which aims to radically reorient the longstanding scholarly focus on the middle-class experiences of urbanism, gentrification, and beyond.

In addition to urban studies, displacement as a concept is also used extensively in the field of migration studies. The entrenchment of Fortress Europe and the plight of refugees across the Mediterranean and other contested and highly

securitized border zones across the world are part and parcel of the workings of the globalised displacement regimes. According to UN estimations, over 70 million people were displaced globally in 2018 because of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence or human rights violations and the number has almost doubled over the last decade (UNHCR, 2018). As some of these people seek refuge in the global North they are often once again confronted with struggles over space, leading to serial experiences of displacements of different kinds. In this collection of papers, local experiences of displacements in cities across the global North are connected to different political developments regarding issues of urban development, austerity and migration. By focusing on the experiences of those suffering from displacement processes, the papers included in the themed issue provide a narrative lens through which the connections between these contested political issues emerge more clearly. As editors we hope that this interdisciplinary approach will inspire and embolden more research within critical geography, connecting local struggles around gentrification with issues such as racialization, discrimination and migration control.

However, the majority of papers in this collection are primarily concerned with current debates within urban gentrification research and before we introduce each separate paper more closely, we will position the overall approach of the themed issue in relation to current debates on displacements in the form of gentrification within urban studies. Indeed, much ink has been spilled on defining what displacement is (Slater, 2009). But despite a plethora of conceptually rich and sophisticated definitions of displacement (Marcuse, 1985; Hartman, Keating, and LeGates, 1982; Kearns and Mason, 2013; Sims, 2015; Grier and Grier, 1980), the scope and scale of the problem has been a hot topic in academia over the past two decades. Conceptual as well as methodological issues in measuring displacement in urban studies have produced two camps: one that for lack of robust evidence of widespread displacement in their studies on gentrification wants to decouple and conceptually remove the taken-for-granted relationship between gentrification and displacemet (Butler, 2007; Vigdor, 2002; Kohn, 2013; McKinnish, Walsh, and White, 2010; Meltzer and Ghorbani, 2017; Vigdor, 2010; Helbrecht, 2018; Freeman, 2005; Freeman, Cassola, and Cai, 2016). These studies find that resident mobilities are complex and not always unidirectional, and that older inhabitants sometimes entrench in gentrifying areas, and consequently benefit from the neighborhood upgrades.

The other camp (Wacquant, 2008; Davidson, 2011; Slater, 2006; Clark, 2006) is fundamentally critical of this attempt at the 'gentrification of gentrification research' (Wacquant, 2008) and argues that the decoupling of displacement and gentrification necessarily entails an 'eviction of critical perspectives from gentrification research' (Slater, 2006, 746). One reason for this eviction of critical perspectives, they claim, is methodological: because 'by definition, displaced residents have disappeared from the very places where researchers and census-takers go to look for them' (Newman and Wyly, 2006, 27). Another reason is ideological. Wacquant (2008) argues that neoliberal agendas have resulted in the erasure of the

working class and lower income segments both in public and academic discourse. The dominating discourse on the supply-side analysis of urban change that put poor and displaced persons at the center of the analysis in the 1970s and 80s, has given way to increased interest in middle class sensibilities and housing consumption patterns in the demand-side analysis of recent decades – at the cost of the visibility, agency of, and concern for disenfranchised populations.

In recent years a third camp has grown out of the academic debate of the former two. Trying to rectify the proposed ideological and methodological blindness, new and more spatially sensitive methodologies and conceptualizations of displacement have been undertaken; with analysis borrowing from phenomenology (Pull and Richard, 2019; Valli, 2015; Davidson, 2009; Atkinson, 2000), feminism (Edwards and Hogarth, 2008; McLean, 2014; Wright, 2014) and postcolonial studies (Ghertner, 2014; Cartier, 2017; Maloutas, 2018; Escobar, 2003). What these studies have in common is that while they retain the critical edge of bringing the displaced to the fore, as Wacquant (2008) and Slater (2006) have called for, many of them also approach displacement in its own right, carefully decoupling it from gentrification. Without downplaying gentrification's severe effects, they unshackle displacement from gentrification and explore what happens when the gentrification baggage has been let loose.

It is within this latter vein of research that this themed issue is situated, while also pointing out the effects of disciplinary barriers in the study of the phenomenon. The articles of this themed issue address displacement from a cross-disciplinary perspective and encompass multiple socio-geographical contexts. By focusing on its plural form, the papers allow narratives of displacement*s* to emerge beyond local issues of gentrification as the highly variable and elusive outcome of contextually-sensitive processes and power struggles. As such, the papers use displacement as an adjustable lens (rather than a static notion) to examine and inquire into negotiations and struggles around space and place. As editors, we hope that this approach can foster interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological cross-fertilisation between different academic fields.

In the first paper of the themed issue, Stefano Portelli recollects the experiences of the inhabitants of Bon Pastor, a working-class neighborhood in the northern parts of Barcelona, Spain, with a rich history of autonomy and resistance in relation to local authorities. The neighborhood's original design from 1929 consisted of a horizontal grid of one-story houses, where all tenants had direct access to the street. Specific forms of social interactions were thereby enabled that were lost once the area was demolished in favor of high-rise buildings. Even though the residents were offered housing in new apartment complexes, the verticalization, as Portelli calls it, of their social relations drastically dispossessed people of face-to-face interactions that had enabled a specific, and seemingly unique, sense of political community and opened up for centralized, top-down control. Portelli's presence in the area for over a decade enables a rich analysis of the inhabitants' experience of displacement without their physical removal from their neighbourhood, enabling an

analysis of how presumably minimally-invasive reshuffling of people from low-rise to high-rise buildings may bring about just as severe effects as physical relocation on the affected communities.

Similar to Portelli, Sander van Lanen explores narratives of displacement that does not necessarily involve physical relocation. Van Lanen investigates the experiences of young people in Ballyum, a neighborhood in Dublin, Ireland, struck exceptionally hard by austerity measures following the 2008 economic crisis. The local decline in support services, housing, and labour market access have gradually eroded young people's sense of belonging in relation to their local community, their city and their nation. Young people looking for independence were faced with exclusion. Although not physically displaced, the affective displacement they experienced resulted in their estrangement through different forms of abandonment, while no viable options of alternative places to move to were available to them. Van Lanen suggests that their experiences could be described as a 'sense of displacement' linked to austerity urbanism. The cross-scalar alienation experienced by young people in Ballyum occurred in a relatively stable physical and social environment. Thus, van Lanen argues, the 'sense of displacement' caused by the qualitative transformation of one's homeplace can capture their experiences of loss and dissociation while they remain evidently emplaced: having nowhere to go nor belong to, but still not feeling quite at place in their presumed 'home'.

Emil Pull also recollects experiences and narratives of alienation in relation to one's home. Focusing on processes of 'renoviction' in Uppsala, Sweden, Pull conceptualizes all forms of mundane displacements that lead to forced relocation as 'structural displacement'. Mundane displacements occur within existing legal frameworks by housing companies driven by profit maximation rather than a care for their existing tenants as they increase rent through luxury renovations, which force people to relocate. Pull argues, through a historical exposé, that formal eviction rates are a blunt instrument for understanding the housing regime, and highlights the inverse correlation between evictions and homelessness by showing how increased access to housing for people suffering from social problems leads to increased evictions rates because of inability to pay rent or social problematics. Rather, all forms of displacement processes, from formal evictions to slow processes of alienation through 'renoviction' operations should be considered together as 'structural evictions'. Renoviction processes also lead to alienation, as portrayed in the narratives of tenants in Uppsala collected by Pull, and which resemble the 'sense of displacement' highlighted by van Lanen in Ballyum. Alienation through covert renoviction processes needs to be politicized, Pull argues, so that not only formal evictions are discussed in official statistics, policy and research, but also their most subtle and covert expressions.

Moving the focus more towards issues of migration, Sandra Annunziata explores the events surrounding the involuntary removal of refugees from the occupied building of Via Curtatone in Rome, Italy, in 2017. The evacuation of the 'refugee-squatters' received national attention and was connected to the political

developments of increased nationalist populism in Italy at the time. A central development in this context, Annunziata argues, is that 'refugees' and/or 'transit migrants' currently living in Italy are constantly at risk of being displaced through fast evictions. Until recently, Italy had relatively long and drawn out eviction processes, which allowed for negotiations and explorations of alternative housing arrangements for squatters. In the current political climate, however, fast evictions have been increasingly employed as an anti-migrant device. For precarious migrants, the housing question is of uttermost importance as it is connected to their access to welfare services. Thus, Annunziata argues, the evictability of migrants in Italy has become a political tool to suppress solidarity practices among- and for unwanted populations. Migrants' evictability is a practice which, through their serial evictions, perpetuates the threat of their displacement and disables migrants' ability to achieve a sense of home and belonging, while barring them from claiming rights on the basis of settlement. Annunziata sees strong connections between evictability and discriminatory practices: as migrants and minority groups are affected the hardest by the changing eviction practices, these forms of displacement are a form of ethnic and racial discrimination in themselves.

Drawing on research among undocumented migrant families in Malmö, Sweden, and Birmingham, UK, Jacob Lind also discusses the issue of migrant evictability and connects it to the issue of deportability, suggesting that the concept of 'displaceability' could be useful for understanding the interrelated processes of spatial exclusion that takes place at different scales along the life courses of precarious migrants. Within the context of irregular migration, on which Lind's paper focuses, displacement can encompass different experiences of physical relocation as a consequence of violent conflict, the threat of deportation and the difficulty of finding a stable housing situation. Similar to Annunziata, Lind explores the effects of living with the constant threat of displacement and focuses on how its potentiality is used as a political tool of affective governance: the instrumentalisation of fear, anxiety and insecurity gives rise to migrant suppression. Spatial vulnerability is experienced on all scales throughout many irregular migrants' trajectories and life courses, thereby leading Lind to suggest that displaceability is a concept that bears great potential to connect fields of research that are currently not often discussed together, such as migration and gentrification research. Such a connection could enrich our understanding of how spatial 'vulnerabilisation' is a technique used to govern precarious migrants across different scales.

Finally, Terra Graziani and Mary Shi discuss how The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project (AEMP), originating from San Francisco, US, produces data for justice rather than for academia. Graziani and Shi engage in a methodological introspection of their dual roles as researchers and activists in this project. By mapping displacement processes through innovative technologies and locally grounded critical epistemologies, AEMP recognizes and centers on the agency of the dispossessed. In doing so, this project enables the creation of a historically accurate archive of displacement narratives induced by different gentrification processes in

Northern American cities. Quality knowledge of this kind, Graziani and Shi argue, can only be produced in a politically and ethically relevant way if grounded in the communities it is meant to serve, where community-produced knowledge has equal value to official data from courthouses or statistical authorities. Graziani and Shi suggest that mutual aid, accountability, and embeddedness are principles that need to be thoroughly problematised in research projects which, similarly to what the AEMP does, aspire to navigate between academia and activism. The methodological reflections of Graziani and Shi resonate with the other texts of this themed issue, while all authors are to a greater or lesser extent similarly invested in their research participants' struggles. Graziani and Shi point out that displacement processes take place both in relation to individuals' physical relocation as well as on the level of knowledge production through the violence exerted by the erasure of underprivileged perspectives. Thus, engaged, embedded and grounded epistemologies are indispensable for the production of research that aims to more justly connect the causes of academia and the public it is meant to serve, as well as for the development of approaches that will be more sensitive towards the nuanced narratives of displacements by those subjected to it.

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