



Every house a sanctuary: Fighting displacement on all fronts in Sunset Park, Brooklyn

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Abstract

The right to housing has been a key focus for both immigrant rights and anti-gentrification activists in the United States. In this update, I highlight the ways in which these come together in the neighborhood of Sunset Park, Brooklyn, New York. In 2019, the neighborhood was specifically targeted in a series of raids by United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement resulting in a rapid mobilization of existing anti-gentrification networks to protect those vulnerable. I argue that this mobilization and its success highlights contradictions in liberal, pro-immigrant rights discourses that ignore the increasing threat of gentrification in “sanctuary cities.” Recognizing and exploiting this contradiction provides a way forward for thinking about secure housing as a requirement for sanctuary.

Keywords

gentrification, displacement, immigration, rezoning, Brooklyn

At 6:00 am on Thursday, 18 July 2019, a group of about 15 community members stood gathered outside the office of New York City council member Carlos Menchaca. We were there to distribute ‘know your rights’ information to the community and watch for, report, and record any activity by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents as well as over policing in the neighborhood. That morning was uneventful, but tensions in the neighborhood remained high. Over the past week, immigration officials had attempted a combined total of four raids in the Southwest Brooklyn neighborhood, all of them unsuccessful as residents and neighbors refused to open their doors (see Mena 2019). During a community vigil the previous Sunday, activists confronted armed but otherwise unidentified New York Police Department detectives standing on a street corner. The image



of men with guns and bullet proof vests – though a typical part of the heavily policed New York City visual landscape – was enough to send some residents into hiding, seeking sanctuary in nearby churches and even in storefronts with owners sympathetic to their situation (Muñiz 2019).

As I watched the stories of the raids and their subsequent failures get shared among my colleagues and comrades I could not help but feel like something was missing from the conversation, a point confirmed when someone asked in an ICE Watch group chat what kinds of best practices those in Sunset Park would recommend. Neither my partner nor I could provide an answer. Jorge Muñiz (2019), had some suggestions but the reality is that Sunset Park's relative success was due in part to previous experiences with ICE, several relatively tight-knit communities existing within the larger neighborhood (see Hum 2014), and decades of environmental, racial, and housing justice activism from a wide variety of NGOs, government agencies, and radical political groups. The context for the response to the ICE raids was one in which struggles over the future of the neighborhood were being actively waged and the trust and solidarity built in those battles helped to inform the praxis of at least the more radical community groups. The last time I stood in front of Carlos Menchaca's office was almost exactly a month earlier, delivering a letter signed by hundreds of community members demanding that the councilmember oppose a rezoning proposal¹ that would forever change the neighborhood's working class and immigrant character under the banner of Protect Sunset Park, an alliance of residents and local anti-gentrification groups (see Dejesus 2019).

In conversations with other local organizers and activists, I noticed a contradiction in the discourses surrounding displacement. To the elected officials representing the neighborhood to the city (and who thus had the power to stop rezoning) it was generally acceptable that some people might be displaced by changes in the character of the neighborhood's industrial waterfront so long as this displacement occurred at a rate and manner acceptable to their broader politics². At the same time, the rhetoric from these officials surrounding ICE raids – articulated at public events and vigils – was that everyone belongs and no one should be displaced. This contradiction reveals that within this discourse, displacement by the state is unacceptable on the grounds that it relies on the legitimacy of state violence and especially on the grounds that it is being called for by a government opposed by most city officials in New York. There was, for example, no centrally coordinated attempt to stop raids under the Obama administration, even though – according to long-time residents, some of whom were their targets – they frequently occurred within the neighborhood. However, displacement by capital is a consequence of market conditions even if those conditions are created and fomented within and through political (in)action including zoning changes (see Stein 2019).

¹ Zoning changes in New York City go through the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP), which gives neighborhood city council representatives significant control over zoning and planning processes (see Croghan 2019).

² This report, written in the last days of July 2019 and edited in March 2020, reflects accurately on the situation at the time. However, developments in the neighborhood, especially around rezoning, happen rapidly.

Understanding and struggling along the lines of this division is important because, at the most fundamental level, access to housing within a supportive and active neighborhood has helped to keep people safe from the raids. While the sanctuary spaces at local churches, the daily ICE Watch activities, and the rapid response networks that emerged to confront the threat of ICE are all important, it was the ability to stay inside of a house and refuse to open the door that prevented arrests. This, however, raises questions:

- What happens when our neighbors are displaced from these houses because they can no longer afford the rent? If they move to new neighborhoods or outside of the city, will they still have the support they have now?
- What happens to the dynamic of the community when the long-time residents who have fought struggles are forced to leave? Will new members take their place, or will these organizations slowly die?
- Most importantly, what does it say to residents when policymakers appear to say, ‘you belong, but only if you can afford it’?

These are not hypotheticals. Decades of careful research on gentrification and displacement in New York City and similar cities by Peter Marcuse (e.g. 1985a; 1985b; 2015; see also Slater 2009) and others (e.g. Atkinson 2000; Newman and Wyly 2006) have shown that there is a clear link between changes to local economies brought about by local and regional urban policy and the displacement of long-time and low income residents, especially those who cannot afford to live in the newly developed political economies either socially or economically. There is little existing research on gentrification’s impact on those without citizenship status. However, because they may not be able to find work or engage in community activities, they are likely to be disproportionately affected.

The solution I am proposing is to do as the title of this brief intervention suggests: to consider every home a real or potential sanctuary, consider every attempt to remove someone from that home an act of displacement, and to fight that displacement at every step. To do so attempts a discursive shift which explicitly links the right to live in the United States (or any country) with a right to live in a particular neighborhood. Such a move shifts the focus from a person’s citizenship status or ability to pay and instead moves the grounds of struggle to a focus on secure housing itself. In turn, this has the potential to force politicians to take actual stands against displacement rather than doing so only when it is politically convenient, as has been the case in Sunset Park. It also connects local issues of displacement to the global processes that force people to emigrate in the first place. Local political, economic, or social conditions often force migrants to leave their communities and find new homes of relative safety even if it means taking legal risks. The informal networks of housing and employment that exist within immigrant-majority communities like Sunset Park can help to mitigate those risks (see Mehta and Napier-Moor 2010). As long-established communities start to disappear or as people are forced once again to leave, that safety begins to disappear.

In Bush Terminal Waterfront Park, there is a mural designed and painted by artist Angel Garcia and the community group Groundswell depicting a Sunset Park multi-ethnic

coalition of Sunset Park residents removing two figures representing both ICE and luxury developers from the neighborhood. The design, a visual representation of the argument made here, came from the community. The reframing that I am proposing is an opportunity to put that idea into action, both in Sunset Park and elsewhere.

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