

A Theology of Mission for Colonized Gentrifying Spaces

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While we do our good works let us not forget that the real solution lies in a world in which charity will have become unnecessary.

- Chinua Achebe

The social project named by literary critic bell hooks “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” has been founded on land grabs around the globe for more than 500 years. These interlocking systems of social, political, and economic oppression have worked ominously to seize property, disregarding “no vacancy” signs all over the planet. A more contemporary manifestation of this core strategy is the modern phenomenon of urban gentrification, “redevelopment” strategies dating back to at least the 1960s. Its latest iteration is rapidly spreading to inner-city cores all over North America, from New Orleans to Brooklyn, and San Francisco to Detroit.

One community’s ceiling is another community’s floor: as neighborhoods become gutted, blighted and burned out, property values drop and, eventually, “investors” scoop up land to “develop.” Sometimes, though, neighborhoods are *targeted* by banks and land developers *before* blight sets in. None of this “just happens.”²

As it was with land grabs in the “new world” since 1492, so today we, unfortunately, rarely find churches and Christian leaders committed both to evangelism *and* to the cultivation of sensitivity and social analysis. Before good news is proclaimed, root causes must be named in the midst of this opportunity-for-some-and-devastation-for-many situation. Drawing on the legacy of the African-American Civil Rights Movement and late twentieth- and early

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² Roberta Gratz, “Who Killed Public Housing in New Orleans?” *The Nation*, June 22–29, 2015.

twenty-first-century Anabaptism,³ I will home in on Detroit, Michigan, where my wife and I are currently sojourning, as a case study to carve out a starting line for evangelism in gentrifying spaces within North America: a mission primarily committed to (1) those surviving on the *margins*, (2) a pursuit of *justice* over charity and (3) race and class *reconciliation* as the ultimate goal.

Detroit: A History of Colonizing and Gentrifying

Since 1701, Detroit has been characterized, even named, by global trade (*detroit* in French, means “the strait”), a city located on a body of water connecting major Great Lakes shipping routes. European settlers stole both the name (*Wawiatonong* in Ojibwa means “where the river goes around”) and the land from the indigenous through force and intimidation.⁴

In the early twentieth century, Detroit became home to the American automobile industry and its population grew to more than two million by the 1950s. A decade later, aided by billions of federal dollars in the form of interstate highways and FHA loans and the promise of safer, less crowded neighborhoods, European-Americans, by the hundreds of thousands, began fleeing the city for the surrounding suburbs. Race and economics fueled this “white flight.”⁵

Today, Detroit is 83 percent African-American with an official unemployment rate of 15 percent (down from 25 percent just 5 years ago). The state government took over the reins of the city until the spring of 2015, replacing the duly elected mayor, city-council and school board with an Emergency Manager with dictatorial powers. Democracy hardly exists here.

Detroit was colonized and then abandoned by white, mostly “Christian,” settlers, backed by a church that has overwhelmingly justified the project. Its many beautiful church buildings were funded by capital “earned” through massive resource extraction and labor exploitation. Yet the faith communities who inhabit these structures by and large do not speak to the socio-political realities. As Wendell Berry wrote, “No wonder so many sermons are devoted

3 I am working here with the understanding of “Anabaptist mission” envisioned by the Mennonite Board of Missions in “A Theology of Mission in Outline” (introduced to me at Fuller Seminary by Wilbert Shenk), and incarnated by the Canadian Mennonite Elaine Enns and her partner, the Southern Californian Mennonite convert Ched Myers.

4 Thanks to Jim Perkinson, professor of Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit, for consistently reminding audiences of Detroit’s indigenous namesake.

5 Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Classics, 2013).

exclusively to 'spiritual' subjects. If one is living by the tithes of history's most destructive economy, then the disembodiment of the soul becomes the chief of worldly conveniences."⁶

Ultimately, according to Scott Martelle in *Detroit: A Biography*, a few basic factors have led to Detroit's rusting demise: "divestment and abandonment propelled by corporate decisions framed and added by government policies, from housing to free trade, with an overlay of stubbornly persistent racism."⁷

In the past decade, residents of the city have been decimated by racist predatory subprime loans (with skyrocketing interest rates) leading to mortgage foreclosures, in addition to increased unemployment, scores of school closures and decrepit infrastructure. To add insult to injury, not only have city leaders voted to raise residential water rates (already twice the national average) and ramp up water shut-offs for all those who are 2 months or \$150 behind on payments, but also there are tens of thousands of homes that face tax foreclosure—all of this without consideration as to whether households have small children, elderly residents or residents with medical conditions. Forty percent of Detroiters live below the poverty level. They, quite simply, can't keep up.

To make matters even more painful, a gentrification invasion is sweeping the city. Young, resourced, upwardly-mobile white folks are moving in, gobbling up properties and pricing renters (i.e., poor black families) out of neighborhoods that many have lived in for decades while significantly changing the look and culture of the place for those fortunate enough to stay. This opportunism is masked with labels like "development" and "entrepreneurship" and "what's best for Detroit."⁸

Indeed, gentrification doesn't just happen. It is typical for black homeowners to pay interest on bank loans starting at 10.5 percent, adjusting to 17.75 percent. To add insult to injury, it was just reported that city officials took government funds allocated for "mortgage relief" and diverted the monies towards

6 Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?: Essays* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 272.

7 Scott Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2012), xv.

8 Tom Walsh, "Pistons' Superagent to Seek Illitch Partnership," *Detroit Free Press*, June 8, 2015, <http://www.freep.com/story/money/business/columnists/tom-walsh/2015/06/06/gores-tellem-illitches-red-wings-pistons/28595777/>. The recent words of Detroit Pistons owner Tom Gores exemplify the kind of language used by the investor class, masking opportunism with a perceived altruism, "rallying around the city of Detroit and the state of Michigan" and "the opportunity to impact the Detroit community."

“blight removal.”⁹ Such structural decisions made by political and corporate elites (and many go unnoticed) represent the “principalities and powers” of gentrification.

Coming to Detroit: The World’s Largest Urban Farm

Enter Hantz Farms,¹⁰ a corporate sponsored¹¹ business enterprise on Detroit’s eastside that refers to itself as “Detroit’s saving grace.”¹² Hantz Farms is committed to cleaning up abandoned properties and replacing them with acres of oak and poplar saplings. The CEO is Michael Score, a Mennonite pastor with a degree in crop and soil sciences, a resident of virtually all-white Ypsilanti Township thirty miles to the west.

Score’s journey to Hantz Farms comes with a testimony: part-Christian, part-capitalist. After a stint with Mennonite Central Committee in the Democratic Republic of Congo and then a time of service in Kentucky, he became frustrated working on eastside Detroit gardening projects with formerly homeless and addicted men, many of whom bought drugs with the money they made. He went on a prayer walk and heard the voice of God: “Mike, you need to work with people where they’re at and with what they have.”¹³

In 2008, Score was introduced to businessman John Hantz, worth more than \$100 million, living in a 14,500-square-foot estate in Indian Village neighborhood of Detroit. During his daily commute to the suburbs, Hantz dreamed up a large urban farm on Detroit’s eastside, originating precisely where Score prayed years earlier. In December 2012, the Detroit city council held a long public meeting on Hantz’ plan to purchase 180 properties at \$300 a piece. 125 community members spoke out against it while 9 were in favor. The

9 Brian Lewis and Jeff Green, “TARP Funds Demolish Homes in Detroit to Lift Prices: Mortgages,” *BloombergBusiness*, March 3, 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-03-03/tarp-funds-demolish-homes-in-detroit-to-lift-prices-mortgages>.

10 What follows on Hantz is a short summary of what I covered in an article for *The Mennonite* in May 2015: Tommy Airey, “White Supremacy and Class Privilege in Detroit,” *The Mennonite*, May 27, 2015, <https://themennonite.org/feature/white-supremacy-and-class-privilege-in-detroit/>.

11 The Hantz Farms website lists Carhartt, Credit Union One, Agribank, Fifth Third Bank, Parjana, Alta Equipment Company, Detroit Bike City, Hellebuyck’s Power Equipment Center as sponsors (<http://www.hantzfarmsdetroit.com>).

12 www.hantzfarmsdetroit.com/introduction.html

13 Anna Grof, “Detroit Mennonite Runs Largest Urban Farm,” *The Mennonite*, June 2013, 34, <https://themennonite.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/1606web.pdf>.

council voted 5-4 in favor of Hantz and Score.¹⁴

So far, Hantz Farms has poured more than \$4 million into the project and has removed 55 abandoned residences and cleared brush to host two annual volunteer days in the Spring. More than 3,000 people have flocked to Hantz farms to plant more than 20,000 saplings. This is a mission based on “free market” principles. According to Hantz, “Detroit cannot create value until we create scarcity. Large-scale farming could begin to take land out of circulation in a positive way.”¹⁵

In late 2014, a week before Christmas, Score introduced me to new jargon during our conversation on Hantz farms property: psychic income.¹⁶ He claimed that his boss had already made good on his initial investment, cashing in on free advertising when media outlets reported on the opposition to the project. After reading about the new Eastside farm, numerous customers flocked to the financial services wing of the Hantz business.

The neighborhood is cleaner and safer. Score created five jobs. Property values are increasing (for the few who can afford housing). Hantz is even selling some of the land he bought at auction to neighbors as side plots. But he’s being selective and the development seems to fall along race and class lines.¹⁷ Alternative block clubs are being created to target poor black residents for removal.¹⁸ Young white entrepreneurs from Brooklyn have moved in to start businesses like Sister Pie and the Red Hook.

14 Ibid.

15 Matthew Dolan, “New Detroit Farm Plan Taking Root,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 6, 2012, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304898704577479090390757800>.

16 Psychic income traditionally refers to non-monetary or non-material satisfaction one gets from doing their job. Score stretched the definition to mean ways of making money when one is not even trying to.

17 This was related to me in an interview with a white resident new to an eastside neighborhood adjacent to Hantz Farms. After he bought a fixer-upper for \$500 at auction, Hantz sold three side plots to him (for \$1000 profit). Unfortunately, after this resident told some of his black neighbors that Hantz was willing to do business, Hantz refused to sell them land. This neighbor told me he got “caught up in the struggle [against gentrification] by being offended by it.”

18 Bill Wylie-Kellermann, “Gentrification: Can We Have a Real Conversation?” in *On The Edge* (Spring 2015): 5–6. Detroit has introduced a new word to the gentrification lexicon: blexting. Residents can take photos of rundown homes and text them to the Detroit Blight Task Force headed by Quicken Loans billionaire Dan Gilbert.

With the onset of mortgage and tax foreclosures, water shut-offs¹⁹ and/or increasing rents, far too many long-time residents will lose their homes, resulting in, what one Eastside community organizer referred to as “an inter-generational trail of tears.” Their parents and grandparents were driven east by freeway-construction-eminant-domain-destruction of the Black Bottom neighborhood adjacent to downtown in the 1950s and 60s.²⁰

Unfortunately, the Hantz Farms “mission” simply follows the current neo-liberal narrative that blends personal responsibility with austerity economics: decreased social spending, trickle-down development investment and charitable handouts coming from outsiders, who are overwhelmingly white and wealthy.

Towards A Theology of Mission For Gentrifying Spaces

What Detroit desperately needs is what is needed all over the globe: a theology and practice of mission that organizes *resistance and alternatives to*, rather than *reproducing*, the crises of “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” Such a mission would prioritize society’s most vulnerable, recognize racial politics, and pursue systemic justice.

First, a theology of mission for gentrifying spaces *starts with the needs of the most vulnerable*: poor people of color who stayed and paid and didn’t walk away from their neighborhoods when so many exited for the suburbs. Authentic Christian communities, according to the late 1970’s era Mennonite Board of Missions resource “Theology of Mission in Outline,” are those called to be “a sign and instrument of redemption”; but they “impede God’s mission when they promote ethnocentrism, secular power patterns, conquest or cultural enslavement.” First and foremost, we follow Jesus who “continued the Jubilee paradigm lifting up the weak and poor, healing the sick and releasing the prisoner, pronouncing judgment on the rich and powerful.”²¹

In his classic text, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman, who spent most of his years in inner-city contexts (Washington D.C., Boston, and San

19 Elected and appointed city leaders refuse to pursue an Environmental Protection Agency (1972) and city council (2006) commissioned “affordability plan” (no resident ought to pay more than 2.5 percent of income on water) and have significantly increased rates two years in a row. The city has contracted out a wrecking company to shut-off water to residents over \$150 delinquent on their bills.

20 John Gallagher, “When Detroit Paved Over Paradise: The Story of I-375,” *Detroit Free Press*, December 15, 2013, A1, A5.

21 Mennonite Board of Missions, “A Theology of Mission in Outline (Mennonite Board of Missions),” *Mission Focus* 6, no. 5 (May 1978): 9–13 (points 2, 4, and 33).

Francisco), called Christian theologians to give preference to those "with their backs against the wall."²² When Martin Luther King, Jr., who carried Thurman's text in his coat pocket nearly everywhere he traveled, animated the story of the rich man and Lazarus, he did not condemn the rich man because of his possessions. Instead, King proclaimed, "His sin was his refusal to use his wealth to bridge the gulf between the extremes of superfluous, inordinate wealth and abject, deadening poverty."²³

In the late 1980s and early 90s, Mennonite activist and biblical animator Ched Myers called First World Christians to the practice of taking "the perspective of the periphery." All of us with race and class privilege in North America, especially those of us called to mission in gentrified spaces, are doing what Myers calls "theology in Pharaoh's household." The vital combination of both *repentance* (turning from imperial seductions) and *resistance* (taking concrete stands to impede imperial progress) seeks what is best for poor and marginalized people by listening to them. These practices also call us to cede power, control, and vision over to them.²⁴

In Detroit, in the wake of state takeover of city council, the school board and Belle Isle (a historic park in the city), poor people of color have suffered massive job loss (after the 2007 recession), pay cuts, slashed pensions, skyrocketing medical bills, bloated heating bills, the highest water rates in the state, predatory lending, over-inflated property taxes, auto insurance more than double that of the suburbs, abysmal schools, pitiful public transportation, and meager access to nutritious food. These are some of the aspects of the continuation of de facto systemic racism in the United States today. To "save Detroit," white Christians ought to set themselves to the task of saving themselves by listening to the plight of the poor, researching the political and economic roots of these devastating issues, and then creatively naming them.

Second, a theology of mission within gentrifying spaces *starts with justice without neglecting works of mercy*—not vice versa. Anyone looking to save neighborhoods while bearing the Christian label "is confronted with the challenge of power whenever it aligns itself with oppressive social, economic or political

²² Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1981 [1949]), 7.

²³ Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Impassable Gulf (The Parable of Dives and Lazarus)," sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, October 2, 1955, http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Vol06Scans/2Oct1955TheImpassableGulf-TheParableofDivesandLazarus.pdf.

²⁴ Ched Myers, *Binding The Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

power interests.”²⁵

Dr. King, whose own legacy was remodeled by corporations and foundations “to fit a market-friendly format,”²⁶ clearly delineated the fatal flaws of the capitalism, an ideology that necessitated poverty in order to create wealthy elites. When he animated the parable of the Good Samaritan, exactly a year before his assassination, he challenged the American church to go beyond charity: “On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life’s roadside; but that will be only an initial act.... True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”²⁷

White Christians in gentrifying neighborhoods are commissioned to utilize a both/and litmus test in mission: works of mercy are good (and needed), but all of us are called to struggle for just policies. This requires commitment to social analysis *and* organizing at the local level. Far too many Christian leaders that I dialogue with refer to an either/or sense of call or giftedness: “some people are called to engage systems, but I feel called to treat symptoms,” they say. In Detroit, there are scores of corporate-funded foundations and non-profits “doing good things” in the city that often intensify gentrification’s negative effects. Unfortunately, these are fully committed to the political, economic and social status quo.

Lastly, a theology of mission within gentrifying spaces *focuses on a robust pursuit of race and class reconciliation as the ultimate goal*. Our projects must focus on the challenge of “extending God’s rule by overcoming all sin and ‘the dividing wall of hostility’—racism, sexism, tribalism, nationalism—and binding together as one new people individuals from many peoples.”²⁸

Restorative justice practitioner and author Elaine Enns, studying the historic relationship between Canadian Mennonite and First Nations populations, posits that the goal of healing the trauma brought upon by colonization is what she calls “restorative solidarity,” a combination of inner work, critical historical awareness and empathy that results in a deep understanding of “how our story is connected to theirs, such that our mutual healing and wholeness is, in fact,

25 Mennonite Board of Missions, "Theology of Mission," 9-13 (point 25).

26 See Arundhati Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 38–39.

27 King, “Beyond Vietnam—A Time to Break the Silence,” sermon at Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm>.

28 Mennonite Board of Missions, "Theology of Mission," 9–13 (point 22).

intertwined.”²⁹

Canada, just recently completing a four-year truth and reconciliation process, is far ahead of the States in this regard. However, as Enns models, a theology of mission must require that we challenge the church’s historic ignorance and arrogance where so much more is expected. Honest post-colonial conversations have much to teach us in neighborhoods where gentrification is beginning to germinate.

White Christians can advocate for the tireless work of John Conyers, the African-American who has represented Detroit in Congress for more than three decades. Every year, he introduces a bill at the start of the session calling for a robust study of slavery and its lingering effects as well as recommendations for “appropriate remedies.”³⁰ Every year, it gets voted down. A truth and reconciliation commission is unlikely to be achieved at the national level, but a Detroit-wide TRC could very well be utilized as a compelling experiment in truth if white Christians could help facilitate a space where Detroiters could tell stories of discrimination and displacement.³¹ Only this kind of conversation will begin to take real steps towards forgiveness, healing and reconciliation.

In 1968, Dr. King gave a rousing speech at Grosse Pointe High School, just a few miles to the east of where Score and I stood on Hantz property. Before he was interrupted twice by white protestors, King proclaimed:

Every city in our country has this kind of dualism, this schizophrenia, split at so many parts, and so every city ends up being two cities rather than one. There are two Americas. One America is beautiful for situation.... This other America has a daily ugliness about it that transforms the buoyancy of hope into the fatigue of despair.³²

Fifty years later, Detroit’s socially bifurcated reality has intensified as white gentrifiers carve out spaces from the neighborhoods of resilient, long-time black residents of the city. And so it goes everywhere else. There are not just “Two Detroits.” There are “Two New Orleans.” And “Two Baltimores.” And on and on and on.

29 Elaine Enns, “Facing History with Courage,” *Canadian Mennonite* 19, no. 5 (February 2015): 4–9.

30 Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case For Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, June 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

31 In the wake of the devastating massacre of November 3, 1979, the city of Greensboro, North Carolina pioneered this work in the United States. See www.greensborotrc.org.

32 King, “The Other America,” speech at Gross Pointe High School, March 14, 1968, <http://www.gphistorical.org/mlk/mlkspeech/>.

The division of Western cities into rich and poor, black and white has become inevitable partially because the verbal proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ and the pursuit of social justice have become isolated from one another in the minds and hearts of North American Christians for centuries.

The continuation of this race and class dualism calls for a theology of mission that emulsifies “evangelism” and “social justice,” buttressed by lessons from the African-American Civil Rights Movement and late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Anabaptism. These beckon us to a mission primarily committed to (1) the needs of those surviving on the *margins*, (2) a pursuit of *justice* over charity, and (3) race and class *reconciliation* as the ultimate goal. These voices proclaim that faithful mission is a daily reminder that gentrification (like colonization) never “just happens.” Like Christian mission everywhere, we are called to expose and heal the wounds that gentrification complicates.