

The Henceforward Episode 25

Gentrification in Toronto

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Eve: Aang aang. This is Eve Tuck, and this is The Henceforward, a podcast about connections between Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island. Here, we come to the table to discuss settler colonialism and anti-blackness, but more, to imagine shared features and the practices of theory and care that it will take to get there, to get elsewhere.

Nisha: We're here. Nisha.

Chris: Chris.

Greer: And Greer.

Nisha: We're going to have a little chat about gentrification in the city of Toronto. You make sense of gentrification in this city, going into the topic becomes this mashup of opinion, but the same stories seem to inevitably come up again and again, people being forced in their neighborhoods, other people watching their neighborhoods changing dramatically all around them, real estate prices sky rocketing, new types of people moving in, coffee shops, franchises, or hipster bars.

Greer: It seems like in Toronto these days, almost everyone has an opinion about gentrification, what's happening, what's not happening.

Chris: Yeah. I think each one of us has a story to tell about this.

Nisha: Yeah. The story is mildly amusing, like my friends in Leslieville who are having trouble finding anything with gluten to really terrible stories, right?

Chris: The fact that the poorest people in our communities are getting pushed further and further out of our cities. We have to commute a long, long distance to come to basic spaces for work, for food, and for community.

Greer: Whatever the nature of the story, one thing is for sure. This is happening all over Toronto.

Nisha: Yeah, and it's kind of the settler colonial society's modus operandi, right? This idea that there's progress and following this logic in belief in private property, and that this so-called growing the economy is always going to take priority. Toronto's development marches on, and it's always going to be a good thing.

Chris: The notion of linear time where we are moving towards something, away from the past into a future that is considered de facto better for no other reason that it's the

future plays a big role in how people are cultured to understand things like gentrification as some kind of positive progress.

Nisha: Let's listen to this guy, Christopher Hume, from the Toronto Star who has things to say about 30 years of gentrification.

Christopher: Gentrification is the inevitable result in a city that is successful. People want to live here, land values goes up, gentrification follows. This happened in the east, and we've seen it in Riverdale, Leslieville, Queen St. East. And let's not forget, Parkdale, the great battlefield of gentrification was built in the late 19th century as a neighborhood for the rich. The only constant in any city is change. Forget that and you forget what the city is all about.

Let's also keep in mind that the only thing worse than gentrification is no gentrification. For the Toronto Star, I'm Christopher Hume.

Chris: I think we need to really challenge this idea of change, and question what is considered change. When we say change for the better, change for who? Christopher Hume cites Parkdale. Yes, there's been lots of changes with those grand old houses, the 19th century houses have become the 21st century tenements.

These tenements are subjected to the power of landlords consistently changing laws that protect property owners at the expense of racialized people, and racialized impoverished people. So very much, the community is changing, but we are seeing more and more impoverished people living in that community, and the gentrification is contesting their ability to be in that spaces, and I think that's a huge concern about this opinion piece by Christopher Hume. It doesn't catch the reality that racialized people are facing in the city of Toronto or other working-class people.

Nisha: But it also uses that logic of settler colonialism, this idea that change is always good, and that is inevitable. It's always talked about in terms of progress, and he uses that word, successful. Oh, it's a sign of a successful city. Well, is a successful city one in which racialized and poor people have to move further and further away, and travel, and suffer the longer and longer commute to get into the city to do the jobs that they are supposed to be doing inside of the city.

Is that our notion of success? There's never a consideration of the erasures that are happening with gentrification. It's always just as if the change is something good.

Chris: I think it's really important if you take the TTC and Now Magazine had a really good article to talk about race, racialization, working class people at the TDC. If you take the TDC at 4:00, 5:00 in the morning, you see our mostly Black and brown bodies going to work, they might be living in the east part of the city, and they're travelling to Mississauga or Brampton to find work.

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This is a really huge issue of people having to go longer distances, and its working class people have to go through these long distances. They're bodies are being erased and pushed out of the area such as Leslieville which you want to talk a little bit about.

Nisha: Yeah. I live somewhat close-ish to Leslieville. Something that strikes me about Leslieville is there's this old heritage home there. It's called Ashbridge's Bay, and there's a flea market there, and it's a leftover part. It's this one last house that's left over from whatever Leslieville looked like 30 somewhat years ago, I think it was almost like the suburbs of Toronto at that time. There was these huge homes and these huge properties.

This heritage place has been left there as a trace of what it looked like in the past. Right across from it, there are these houses, these connected houses that were homes for working class people at some point, they're all boarded up, and there's a huge billboard in front that's advertising the Leslieville condos. So they're going to be completely ripped down and replaced by these really soulless class condos. I just don't understand why they couldn't renovate those homes and keep the city low. Stop building these huge skyscrapers but keep things a bit lower to the ground.

In any case, really, the idea here that I'm thinking about is Lisa Lowe's idea of past conditional temporality. We'll always have traces of the past all around us. But now that we have these technologies to just constantly erase things, and not remember what was there before and not even think about it or pay any kind of heed to it, what are we left with? What are we doing in these neighborhoods where there's these drastic renovations and construction happening, and you don't really know what the past was. Where does that leave us?

Chris: There's a couple of places to speak about. I know that we've talked previously about Honest Ed's, and that particular space in the kitchen table conversation, talking about Caribbean Roti Palace. And Caribbean Roti Palace, even prior to the 30 years that Iqbal family had owned it, it was another West Indian restaurant from a period of time where the entire area was a Black community, a West Indian community.

Talking about gentrification, all those people have been moved. That center of a Black community has been erased. I think this is an ongoing concern where this erasure of these important sense of resistance continues to occur. I think your previous work looking at Honest Ed's is really important.

Humber College, Lakeshore Campus, and I remember in undergrad, way back in the day, we would just go because it was a so-called haunted site. When it was starting to be gentrified, it was becoming Humber College, and the stories came out that it used to be an asylum for people with mental health issues.

The site there has many bodies, many people died there. It's just thinking about that and Lowe's concept about those lives, those experiences, those context of being erased through gentrification. It's both intentional and unintentional. Even the unintentional part, it doesn't matter. Just the fact that the bodies that are coming there and the structures and who was able to live in those areas erases long histories of struggle, long histories of people being.

Nisha: Yeah, and what happens to us when we erase these things, when we don't consider, when we just blindly move forward on this notion that we're moving forward, which we are. We're always living in a present that is informed by the past.

[Kitchen Table Talk Begins]

Sandi: Welcome to the kitchen table where Indigenous folks and Black folks come to meet to discuss some very serious topic. I'm Sandi Wemigwase.

Sandy: I am Sandy Hudson.

Jade: I am Jade Nixon.

Cornel: I'm Cornel Grey.

Michelle: I'm Michelle Forde.

Megan: And I'm Megan Scribe.

Sandy: I got scared, well I am scared, with the new Eglinton LRT line because there's sort of like the Little Jamaican communities out there which I have a connection to. Along all the stops, there seems to be all these condos that are starting to get build around the stops for the LRT and I noticed that the one in the middle of Little Jamaica is called Cedarvale. And Cedarvale is a park where a lot of very wealthy people go to – it's like behind Little Jamaica, behind all of the small shops where the working-class folks live. And I was like, *why would you name the station Cedarvale?* And then I see, you know, these condos starting to pop and I'm like oh my god, we're not going to have this anymore. I think it's going to be gone soon.

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Cornel: It's a broad concept, I think, about gentrification as an extension of settler colonialism. I think whenever we have discussions about gentrification, we really need to be specific about communities that are being affected. So actually the reason media is excited, it's talked about in terms of property development, entrepreneurship, and try to attract business and kind of cultivating a certain kind of bourgeois hipster, potentially, kind of lifestyle that we don't often think about how, as you said, an uprooting that leads to this idea of maintaining or keeping or

transforming certain spaces into white spaces specifically, and that comes as a result of the displacement of poor people, of people of color.

[End of Kitchen Table Talk]

Chris: Yeah, so Greer, that was pretty intense, the conversation. I think that Sandy was dead on. I want to introduce the three ideas: community, commodification, and exoticism. Cedarvale, I know the park, I know exactly where she's talking about, and she's right that what is happening with the LRT is going to erase the Caribbean, the Black community that has been there for decades.

The reason why I want to talk about the erasure of community but also how certain parts of the community become commodified by exoticism. In the kitchen conversation, they talk about royalty shops. I know in Parkdale, for instance, so the community, the Caribbean community, a lot of them have been displaced and moved, but a lot of the so-called "hipsters" are now exoticizing the royalty, so those businesses are still maintaining themselves.

I can see this duality where the Black and brown bodies are going to be pushed out, but certain elements where people can incorporate into the hipster notion will remain. This, in itself, is a disfiguration. It's also extremely concerning. Another form of exoticism connected with racism. Just to also contradict that. It's interesting, the LRT, right? And now the expansion with the LRD, which was supposed to make the city so much accessible. Twenty years ago, we were supposed to have -- and I don't know if you remember whether we were supposed the subway?

Nisha: Oh, yeah.

Chris: One of the reasons why, they're political, but I believe it was more racial in the sense of they didn't want those racialized communities having easier access to transportation.

Greer: Of course. I think what you're talking about with the tokenizing of particular parts of culture and people is really important to bring forward especially when food is such as safe thing to have, it's a safe thing to want to have around in communities. There's no commitment to actually doing anything or being responsible or accountable if you're just focused on eating all the time, and not thinking about where the food is coming from, or who's preparing it, or what you're doing by living in that place and taking up space in particular ways.

Chris: Very much, I think it's about how multiculturalism reinforces gentrification, and the connection between the two, where we celebrate people's cultures but we know what challenges the power and balances or the forms of power that exist. I think that it's really, really important what you're saying about the erasure was brought in connecting with food.

Greer: It's something that's very colonial as well, like going in and saying okay, picking and choosing like this is the part of this that I want. This is the part of Indigenous land and Indigenous culture that I want to take, like the state coming in and white people coming in and doing that, and enacting that, and implementing that, without question, and with very little regulation or conversation or anything.

Chris: I think we also talked about the role of business improvement associations, and how they're the main movers for gentrification in our communities. Have you seen this action in anything in your experiences?

Greer: Yeah. Oh, totally. I mean every neighborhood has a BIA organization going strong, and particularly, when I was living in the east and it was very clear what types of businesses and business opportunities that were being you know, opened up, particularly in Riverside and Leslieville and long beaches, about who is able to come in to the community and what they were doing, and what was acceptable and not acceptable.

There's a lot of power in that. You have to look at who sits on those committees and where do they get that power to enact and really push for this idea of what a neighborhood looks like and feels like and what that means.

Chris: And who's permitted most spaces and who's not. I think a lot of these BIAs, as they're called, are responsible for pushing squeegee kids, people who are considered homeless, people who have mental health issues, they're seen as non-acceptable or non-belong in those spaces.

I think we're going to listen to a clip for the Junction area.

[0:15:15]

Chris: We're talking today to Hijin Park, a resident of the Junction, and we're also talking to Insuh. Say hi, Insuh!

Insuh: Hi!

Chris: Hello.

Hijin: Hi.

Chris: We're talking tonight about gentrification and the Junction. What are some of the observations? What have you seen around here? To contextualize, the Junction is in the western part of the city. It's in the Keele, Dundas area, and it strikes us for a significant portion of the western part of Toronto. What are some of your thoughts and observations about gentrification?

Hijin: I lived in the Junction for not too long, like two and a half years, but since living here, I mean there's definitely a lot of talk about gentrification, not only the Junction, but the neighboring neighborhood of the Junction triangle.

In terms of the Junction, I barely know anything about it prior to moving into the Junction beyond the fact that it was supposed to be this up and coming sort of trended area, had no idea exactly about where it was per se.

Since living here, I learned more about it than it used to be a very white working class, eastern European neighborhood, lots of factories, slaughter houses, all of that. Now, I would say that it's still very, very white, so it became from being white working class, eastern European immigrant to more white middle class, upper middle class, a neighborhood with also a significant or what seems to be quite a significant number of mixed race couples that are specifically white men and Asian women.

Then they live in a part of the Junction that is talked about, and this is primarily through Facebook and Facebook Junction pages as being part of the Junction that Junction people don't want to go on because they think that it's unsafe.

It's a two-block stretch, about two-three block stretch of Dundas West from Keele to Dupont and Annette. It's considered to be unsafe, I guess, because it's the part of the Junction that is yet to be adequately gentrified. It has -- it is changing so it is considered to be possibly more adequately gentrified by some, but it's still not quite there, part of the Salvation Army.

There's significant social housing to build two large buildings that are significant housing, social housing, and then there's also a pretty large apartment building that is very run down, sort of known as very, very cheap and really inadequate housing, and for housing and secure. I guess just to mention, there's also the prison, maybe that's quite close by, so maybe that's part of it too.

Chris: Is it Federal Corrections Institute? Federal Correction Facility. Sorry.

Hijin: Okay. I've read different things about it, but that's also part of the Junction too. This part, there's a couple of things that have happened. One my street, there's been quite a few houses that have been for sale since I've lived there, and I've only been there for about two and a half years, and the people that move in are -- the people that we vote tend to be senior citizens. They move out, and the people that move in are young couples, mid 30s to let's say early 40s with very young kids or let's say maybe early 30s with very young kids.

Actually, this area, I've been told by people that work at the drop-in child centers that this has the highest concentration of kids under six in all of North America. It seems to be even more so because there are -- my street is only about a block and a half. There are a lot. There are a lot of kids under five that are probably within this

group of 22, 25, maybe 30 house. There's about at least ten kids, at least, if not more.

Chris: Describe what's going on at the park.

Hijin: Because there are so many kids in this area, a lot of my experience of gentrification really is as a mother because since moving here, I had a baby very shortly after I moved here. It's from dealing with mothers and parks, and their ideas about motherhood as well as ideas about family.

There's this park, it's on Dundas, and that two-block strip that I was talking about where it's considered to be unsafe. The park, when I first moved in, it just became quite clear that no kids actually go there, and parents don't take their kids there.

That park is used by the people that live in that two-block strip that don't actually have kids, they're adults, some older adults but varying in age for sure, from young to let's say 50s and 60s, who don't have kids. They go there to drink coffee, to talk, to sleep. Then I start seeing these signs about the Friends of Watkinson Park, and they were advertising just flyers, bring your kids, there will be painting, face painting I guess attracts kids. We're going to make a sign. They built a birdhouse and they put that out. They were trying to beautify the park.

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I'm not sure exactly how that will work, I'm sure it had something to do with the city as well. The next thing I know is the park was behind a chain of event, and it became clear that they're actually going to rebuild the park. They're going to change the park. I guess that they would beautify it, revitalize it, and really what it seemed like what they wanted to was they wanted to make it a kid park, and they wanted to push out the residents that currently use the park.

For once, it was then a chain of events or it's surrounded by a chain of events. And then eventually, they opened it up again and it had a new kid play structure, and the play structure there is clearly for kids that are more younger. They had the opening or the reopening of Watkinson Park, and again it was advertised as music, kid stuff, coloring, painting and things like that. When they opened it up, there also was a sign that I noticed that basically -- I can't remember what the bylaw was, but it was a sign, it was a city sign, and it said that no one can enter the park unless you have a kid.

Clearly, that kind of tells you everything in terms of what they wanted to do with park or how they wanted to change the park and it tells us something about gentrification. I do think that one thing about gentrification that maybe sometimes is a topic not as much is how much it has to do with family, or it is in terms of the it's the young families coming in.

Chris: There's a particular type of young family.

Hijin: Particular kind of young family, disturbing kind of young family in terms of well, what I hear a lot, and I guess how I experienced it is things like, don't you're your kids Cheerios because it's processed and there's sugar in there, but you don't necessarily know it, and everyone wants to dress their kids in MEC and Patagonia, organic strawberries, and I guess hiking is probably -- very white, very sort of -- very white, at least white aspirations or half white.

It actually seems that the park -- well, somebody took it down and there has been no efforts to place the sign. For one, I can tell though what's happened to the park in that it is sort of used by both. Both parents take their kids there, and again, maybe not the parents, the parent that was scared of the two-block strip.

Initially, they're still scared of it, so they probably wouldn't, but some of the parents necessary do and also the people that used to hang out there before, and it was their hangout. They all come to the park now too, and it seems to me that people are very friendly actually. That park stands out to me too in terms of it seemed pretty clear that they wanted to push certain people out, but at the same time, I think they were unsuccessful in doing that.

Chris: It's a contested site.

Hijin: It's a contested site, yes.

Chris: And it's a contested site for several reasons. They recently built new condos.

Hijin: Oh, there is a new condo.

Chris: And that's also shifting what type of people are buying, what type of stores are in the neighborhood, would you say so?

Hijin: It's shifting in that the store that has moved in there is on the main floor of that condo is the LCBO, and I guess every gentrified neighborhood needs is LCBO, and that's why the Junction does not have a park because it was *dry* until 2000.

Chris: What does dry mean?

Hijin: Dry means there was no alcohol. No alcohol in the Junction. There was some sort of bylaw or some sort of law that there was no alcohol in the Junction until 2000.

Chris: What public spaces are here in this community?

Hijin: Public spaces as in?

Chris: So you've got a park that's contested, and hypothetically if a lot of these people want to push the regular users out, where would they go?

Hijin: I don't know. I'm not sure where else they would go. I guess that actually part of the conversation that also was on Facebook, and I joined Facebook only because of this Junction which is where I get all these information, and also I experienced it myself that I hear all the conversation is people talking about how just leave the park alone, there's tons of parks in the area, there's like within a 10-15 minute walk from me. I'd say about five really great, large kids' parks, and some people are sitting. I'll just leave and other people are saying, it doesn't really matter because I would never walk down that street anyway.

It was all sorts of different views, but definitely some people said just let them have the park, it's their park, and you have other parks, so why must you convert everything to be your park where you can feel safe?

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Chris: I think just before we started this interview, there was in Toronto Star a few years ago, that talked about gentrification. Do you remember one of the findings from this article?

Hijin: The article was just about how people use that term loosely, but it actually refers to a jump in income of the bottom 40% to I think the top 60%, and that hasn't happened in – well, it actually hasn't happened a lot places in Toronto – there's only like 1% of the neighborhoods in Toronto that actually that has happened to and the Junction is one of them.

Another one, the one that it focused on the most is actually Leslieville. The Junction is referred to by people that don't know the Junction as the western Leslieville. So if you're more familiar with Leslieville, it's basically, in terms of the distance from the downtown core, and that a lot of neighborhoods in Toronto have some elements of gentrification, but there's actually very few that have the significant income change.

My little strip right here, and I was looking at the map because the Toronto Star article has stats on the different areas of the geographic map, is 57% increase over I think it was a five-year period. It was a short year period -- oh, no. Ten-year period. There has been 57% increase in household income in my two-block strip. It's not a large space. It's quite significant in terms of gentrification.

Eve: The Henceforward, Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island.

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