Manila's metropolitan landscape of gentrification: Global urban development, accumulation by dispossession & neoliberal warfare against informality

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ABSTRACT

A new regime of gentrification is dramatically restructuring Manila's metropolitan landscape. Grounded upon an on-going neoliberal warfare of accumulation by dispossession, this gentrification serves as the fulfillment of postcolonial visions of a world class and modern metropolis through public–private arrangements and market-oriented developments but necessitates the systematic demolition of informal settlements, the home of the Manila's urban poor and working class population. Through a mixed-methods approach, this paper examines gentrification's spatial forms and trajectories and exposes context specific dynamics facilitating accumulation by dispossession. Using barangay (village)-level data on changes in population of informal households and median zonal values, I calculate for local measures of spatial autocorrelation and locate significant clusters of spatial shifts. Using the quantitative results plus field narratives and community histories, I triangulate local dynamics of accumulation by dispossession. What emerges is a sprawling gentrification process that, in producing a market-oriented metropolis, displaces and asphyxiates informal spaces. These accounts illustrate the contingencies of violence, neoliberal urbanism, colonial legacies of land regimes, and elite power in the production of a globally-competitive Manila. With other Global South megacities similarly competing in the global market, gentrification in Manila, with its expanding landscape of property accumulation and 'legitimized' dispossession, is instructive of the emerging form of gentrification in the 21st century.

1. Introduction

"So we chose to partner with an equally world-class personality known for her fine taste, having been exposed to the world of real estate development early on and the world's top beach destinations."

[– Century Properties co-chief operations officer John Victor Antonio on hiring Paris Hilton Dumlao, 2014]

Paris has come to Manila. Century Properties, one of the Philippines' major real estate developers, contracted American celebrity Paris Hilton as a brand endorser of the company's newest condominium project (Dumlao, 2014). The following year, the company partnered with Donald Trump to build a Trump Tower in Makati (Rappler, 2012). For Century Properties, these partnerships with 'world-class' personalities are critical in marketing their company and branding Manila as an 'international city' that can compete with other Asian cities (Lichauco, 2012: 68). Other developers,

businesses, government agencies and groups similarly summon the 'global' to promote Manila as an investment haven. These efforts seem to have borne fruit, as evidenced by Manila's exceptional economic performance in real estate. The Urban Land Institute's (ULI) Real Estate surveys of Asia-Pacific cities recently hailed Manila as the region's 4th most investment-competitive city (Urban Land Institute, 2013). This ranking reflects the city's on-going property boom, which financial pundits predict to continue over the next few years, as business processing outsourcing (BPO) companies and overseas Filipinos sustain the high demand for office and residential units (Colliers, 2013).

These narratives project a successful Manila, a metropolis on the 'right' path to progress. This supposed 'success' can be seen in Manila's changing built environments, as they mimic 'world class' developments, from high-end condominium projects to commercial and leisure spaces. These new developments are marketed to an emerging Filipino middle class, comprised of overseas Filipinos and young urban professionals. But undergirding these idyllic depictions of a globally-competitive Manila are the turbulent spatialities of violent displacements of the urban poor. This

paper exposes this underbelly by explicating the spatialities of accumulation by dispossession, as thousands of urban poor families are evicted to accommodate new developments. I argue that Manila's facelift is illustrative of a globalized form of gentrification, a kind that fulfills postcolonial visions of a globally-competitive and modern metropolis. In doing so, it draws ideas and capital through transnational organizations and use global symbols and aesthetics to facilitate consent. Such consent tends to legitimize the annihilation of informal spaces and the displacement of the urban poor to make way for new globalized spaces. Cognizant of postcolonial provocations in urban theory (e.g. Roy, 2009a; Robinson, 2006), this paper attends to calls in rethinking gentrification and how it variegatedly operates and emerges in multiple contexts beyond archetypical Global North cities (Lees, 2012, 2003; Harris, 2008; Clark, 2005). The paper connects with recent efforts that interrogate the varied types of transformations shaping gentrification across contexts, paying close attention to processes in the Global South, from slum gentrification in India to megacity displacements in China (see cases discussed in Lees et al., 2016, 2015).

While gentrification is not a recent phenomenon in Manila, the current form articulates global aspirations and market-oriented visions in urban projects, spurred by strategic public–private partnerships. Using a mixed-method approach, this paper seeks to map its spatial expressions and explicate context-specific dynamics of accumulation by dispossession. What is the shape and spatial trajectory of gentrification in Manila? By presenting partial cartographies of gentrification since 2000, I locate sites of demographic shifts of informal households, demolition cases, and property zonal values, and, along with field accounts, use these sites to triangulate contextual dynamics of urban change as new developments meld into a supposed 'chameleon'-like Asian megacity (Roy, 2009a). Contrary to a monocentric inner city narrative of gentrification in post-industrial Anglo-American cities, emergent patterns allude to sprawling radial reconfigurations that concomitantly asphyxiate spaces of informality. New 'globally-competitive' business districts, mixed urban zones, parks and infrastructure projects – from districts of Old Manila to the suburbs – have boosted property values while displacing informal settlers. These accounts not only illustrate 'spatial fixes' of urban capital accumulation (Harvey, 1982) but also unravel context-specific contingencies of gentrification and neoliberal urbanism and the enduring colonial legacies expressed through property relations, elite power, local politics and urban development. Within a neoliberal regime of public–private partnerships, violent evictions and displacement of informal settlers are legitimized by the allure of global and profitable developments, civil society sentiments regarding property rights, and promises of relocation to distant socialized housing projects. As more megacities in the Global South enact market-oriented urban renewal projects, Manila's current neoliberal-global regime of accumulation by dispossession and cut-throat urban warfare against informality is instructive of one of the emerging modes of gentrification of the 21st century.

2. Provincializing gentrification?

While studies have pointed out that gentrification has become a global phenomenon (e.g. Atkinson and Bridge, 2005; Smith, 2002), much needs to be done, empirically and theoretically, to account for urban transformations "beyond the usual suspects in Britain, Europe and North America" (Lees et al., 2016: 3). Resuscitating her earlier call in considering context and temporality in gentrification research, Loretta Lees (2012) recently argued for rethinking gentrification in view of Global South contexts. As large-scale urban transformations reshape many Global South cities, Lees advocates a comparative approach that attends to postcolonial provocations in urban studies. This entails an 'unlearning' of dominant approaches and a concomitant reconceptualization, as new theoretical frames are adopted to account for various urban issues atypical of Euro-American accounts of gentrification. In moving forward, Lees et al. (2016) builds on recent debates on planetary urbanization (Brenner, 2014; Merrifield, 2013) and pushes forth a "planetary gentrification" perspective. Such perspective advances a postcolonial approach that considers situated accounts of gentrification "beyond the usual suspects" and the multiple entanglements and relationalities that facilitate urban transformations in various contexts. Such involves the unhinging of binaries (North/South) and questioning of diffusionist narratives in gentrification studies. The project seriously reflects on diverse Global South terrains in an attempt to theorize gentrification as a planetary process, as it considers various themes, such as state-market relations, global gentrification, slum displacements, and gentrification. This effort effectively sutures and builds upon theoretical implications of a recently edited collection (Lees et al., 2015) that featured an impressive array of gentrifications beyond the usual suspects, from state-led gentrification in Middle Eastern cities to informal settlement displacements in southern Europe. Adding to these efforts is a special issue in Urban Studies that attempt to "locate" gentrification in East Asia, featuring reflections about the concept in relation to Asian terrains (Waley, 2015; Yip and Tran, 2015) and case studies that interrogated the multifaceted dynamics of gentrification in Asia (Shin, 2015; Shin and Kim, 2015; Hudalah et al., 2014).

Theorizing gentrification in the Global South necessitates a reflection of legacies of colonialism on urbanization, in particular how cities evolve and become embedded within historical flows of capital, peoples, and ideas (King, 2004, 1999; Kusno, 2000). From imperial entrepots to postcolonial primate cities, Global South cities have been disparaged as 'overurbanized' (Davis, 2006; Bradshaw, 1987; Gugler, 1982; Sovani, 1964) Third World excesses (Roberts, 1978). In contrast with these are the so-called global cities, idealized 'global' nodes that dominate financial transactions and information flows (Castells, 1996; Sassen, 1990). These cities are ranked and tiered in a 'metageography' (Beaverstock et al., 2000) where Global North cities are positioned in the upper ranks. Such ranking has engendered a hypercompetitive inter-urban ecology where cities compete for political-economic power. For Global South megacities, reaching 'global city' status entails the construction of megacity projects, grounded upon a postcolonial impetus to attract global capital through neoliberal restructuring and modernist masterplanning (Bishop and Clancey, 2003; Hee and Ooi, 2003; Kusno, 2000). This urban ideal stems from post-colonial compulsions to build a modern nation (e.g. He, 2010, 2007) and of idealizing particular urban imageries and bodies.

In the quest of becoming a 'global city', gentrification's revanchistic mechanism (Smith, 2002) may articulate itself in Global South contexts through the recouping of land by national elites and a systematic warfare against informality (Roy, 2005). Slums, in particular, whose tenure status are most likely informal, tend to be targeted not only for the visual spectacle of poverty but also for their irrationality, since an informal "mode of urbanism" (Desai and Loftus, 2012; Roy, 2005) is not readily legible to 'formal' legal arrangements of property rights and finance. In efforts to produce metropolitan landscapes of profitability, constituted by "vast networks of banks, business centers and major productive entities", informal spaces are possible sites for accumulation. The production of these spaces allude to the classic capital-centric framework explaining urban change, wherein actors seek a 'spatial fix' to entrench property accumulation (Harvey, 1982, 1985), as they move to locations where 'rent gaps' are high, sites where potential property values are expected to be higher under better land use