

Land and Housing

From Uprooting Racism by Paul Kivel

Land is wealth. It is the foundation for housing, the source of food, the producer of wood, minerals, oil, gas and other resources, the location of industry. The history of racism in the United States can be traced to people's possession of and dispossession from land. Racism today is still inscribed with those practices and patterns of dispossession.

The accumulation of white wealth began with the theft of land. When settlers arrived on the continent, Native Americans used all of the land to sustain themselves and their communities. Steadily, using extreme force, white people pushed Native Americans off their land. The church had ruled before Columbus even set sail that any land, anywhere in the world, not ruled by Christian leaders could be legitimately claimed by Christians. In other words, those who set out to "discover" land were acting under a god-given mandate to steal it from its non-Christian residents. This legal "Doctrine of Discovery" is still cited in contemporary land use cases involving Native Americans.¹

Early settlers stole vast tracts of land, contradictorily claiming it was both uninhabited and that its inhabitants were not using it productively. Speculators such as George Washington became rich from selling land to which they had no title or right. Native Americans were routinely forced to move from area to area to land that white people did not want - until they decided they wanted it. Nor could Native Americans claim title to land in court because they had no legal standing. By the end of the colonial period most

land had been accumulated into vast farms and estates by the US ruling class, enshrining their power in the Constitution by granting voting rights only to white Christian men of property, i.e. those who owned land.

In 1862, the first section of what eventually amounted to 270,000,000 acres of land was opened up to homesteading by primarily white Christian men (you had to be a citizen or intended citizen to qualify). Over 10% of the land area of the United States was ultimately given away for free after the US army had violently driven Native Americans off and white settlers "made improvements" to the land. Today, 46 million white people or 20% of the white population are direct beneficiaries of the Homestead Act.²

In 1887, The Dawes Act broke up tribal holdings into small individual properties and allowed the US government to claim the "surplus" thus facilitating white people acquiring even more Native American land. At the same time, the federal government took responsibility for collecting fees from anyone who used tribal land, with the money to be held in a trust fund. Although the fees were consistently undervalued by the government, over the decades billions were paid by mining, oil and gas companies, ranchers and others who degraded the land through extraction and pollution; even now over \$350 million is collected annually by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, part of the Interior Department. The money was supposed to be given to the descendants of the original Indian land owners, but every audit since 1928 has found billions missing from the trust fund.³ It is certainly the biggest and longest-standing financial scandal in the history of the United States.

In 1996, in the largest ever class action lawsuit against the US government, more than 300,000 Native Americans asked for \$27.5 billion in settlement. The government delayed, often claiming that vital records couldn't be found. It was later discovered that boxes of documents were being destroyed even as lawyers from the government said they were searching for them. The director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Secretary of the Interior were eventually held in contempt and fined, but no restitution was made and the amount owed continued to accumulate. After some time the total amount owed Native Americans was calculated to be close to \$50 billion, but despite repeated audits reporting massive government fraud and incompetence and several court rulings in favor of the plaintiffs, the government delayed payments and refused a settlement.

Finally, in December 2009, Attorney General Eric Holder reached an agreement with Native American groups to pay plaintiffs \$3.4 billion, \$2 billion of which would be set aside for a land consolidation scholarship program to benefit Native American investments. The settlement is currently scheduled to be finalized and implemented in 2011.⁴

Many white people are resentful of Native Americans being able to run casinos on their land (only about 5% of Native nations do so), but every year the federal government deprives native peoples of billions of dollars in legitimate land use fees, keeping Native communities in poverty.

In general, African Americans could not own land until after the Civil War in most of the US. After the war, Blacks could buy land if they had the money and a few were able to purchase farms and urban home sites. Some were even able to become prosperous from land, work and businesses. However eventually, no matter how long established or successful, whites found ways to dispossess them of their land and possessions, usually forcing them to vacate their homes in what can be called a process of ethnic cleansing that no part of the country was immune to.

White people used a variety of means to carry out Black ethnic cleansing. There were large-scale race riots that destroyed entire city sections of prosperous Black communities such as Tulsa, Oklahoma and Rosewood, Florida. There were smaller scale murders, threats and intimidation that pushed Blacks out of towns and counties in fear of their lives. In hundreds, probably thousands of places across the country, Black populations declined precipitously, often within days or weeks because African Americans were murdered, warned to leave or burned out. They lost their land, homes and possessions, anything they could not carry with them.

Most of those towns and counties have stayed white. For example, Forsyth County, Georgia is now a white commuter area in the Atlanta metropolitan area. In 1912 there was a racial cleansing in which its white residents drove out the 1000 black residents. Forced to flee within days, most Blacks lost everything and Whites quickly took over their land and possessions. Nearly a century later in 2000, out of a population of 98,000 there were only 684 Blacks, most living on the county's border.⁵

In other towns, counties, neighborhoods and suburbs cleansing wasn't necessary because white people never allowed people of color to settle in the first place. Sometimes a county's reputation was enough to keep people away or too afraid to return and claim their land and possessions. Sometimes threats and intimidation was used, including explicit warning signs such as "Nigger, Don't Let the Sun Go Down On You in ...". Two towns in Nevada sounded a whistle at 6 PM to warn Native Americans to leave.

Today, when a cross is burned in a yard or graffiti is written on a doorway, wall or fence, people of color understand it as a warning that they are not wanted and if they do not leave, more serious violence will follow. They have a century and a half of evidence that white people will burn out or kill them if they ignore or are ignorant of these warnings. They also know that few other whites will try to protect them and that they will have little legal redress, can hope for little more than an apology decades, or even a hundred years later.

The support of farming in the US is another land use issue that demonstrates massive racial disparities. The government has systematically supported white farmers by providing subsidized loans, agricultural colleges, extensive networks of rural agricultural support, crop supports and subsidies. Recently it was revealed that access to credit and other government support was systematically denied to Black and Native farmers in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s leading thousands to lose their farms. In a massive settlement in

1999, the government admitted longstanding policies and practices of racial discrimination. In 2011 President Obama signed the bill that would settle the claims.⁶

The result of these and many other land policies is that white people own 98% of all privately-owned agricultural land in the US.⁷

Although main targets of exclusion and discrimination have been Native Americans and African Americans, other groups such as Jews, Asian Americans (primarily Chinese and Japanese) and Latino/as (primarily Mexicans) have also been subject to racial cleansing and exclusion in both urban and rural areas. Most infamously, 110,000 Japanese Americans were rounded up and sent to concentration camps at the beginning of World War II, losing their land, homes and almost everything they owned. But there are many other less publicized examples of White people using intimidation, arson and physical violence to expel or keep people of color and Jews out of neighborhoods and towns. Historian James Loewen estimates that there may have been 10,000 of these white-only areas at their height in 1970, and that millions of people live in or grew up in sundown towns and suburbs.⁸

When Civil Rights laws made formal segregation illegal in the 1960s, white people began moving out of urban areas to the suburbs to recreate whites-only areas. This was facilitated by federal housing policies and subsidies for building roads, schools and other infrastructure in new areas. Whites-only communities were maintained as gated communities through the use of red-lining, steering and implicit agreements. White real

estate agents might steer white clients and people of color into different neighborhoods, quote higher rents or house prices to people of color or use selective advertising to fill vacancies or promote properties.

As historian Loewen emphasizes, very few white towns or suburbs are that way by accident. Although today the means of enforcement are usually more subtle (and clearly illegal) white people in the US continue to flock to and segregate themselves within all-white enclaves. Threats, intimidation, past reputation, tacit agreements and subtle pressure can all maintain white segregation. White people, when deciding where to live, may not even be consciously aware that they are being steered or that they themselves favor white only areas, camouflaging their interests with such racially coded phrases as *safety*, *good schools* or *nicer neighborhoods*. As sociologist Bonilla-Silva observes, “...although a variety of data suggest racial considerations are central to whites’ residential choices, more than 90 percent of whites state in surveys that they have no problem with the idea of blacks moving into their neighborhoods.”⁹

Meanwhile, the prosperous communities of color that had flourished in the postwar era were again demolished. Funded by the federal government and cleared through the use of eminent domain laws, large public projects such as ports, post offices, airports, convention centers and sports stadiums, as well as freeways and rapid transit systems designed to service suburban areas, destroyed the housing, communal networks, small businesses, cultural centers and generally thriving communities that people of color had created in urban centers. Those communities that remained had no economic infrastructure left as

corporations moved manufacturing facilities overseas and local businesses located their offices and stores in the suburbs. White city governments often located garbage dumps and toxic waste facilities in communities of color.¹⁰

The current cycle of white displacement of people of color from the land continues as older white people decide that the suburbs don't meet their needs and younger white people look for inexpensive housing in culturally diverse urban areas. Labeled *gentrification*, this process is fueled by local development policies that emphasize high-end condos, boutique businesses, high-tech jobs and the advantages of "environmentally friendly" living. The overall effect is to destroy intact, if vulnerable, communities of color by raising rents and housing prices, pushing out local ethnic businesses and diminishing job opportunities as small scale manufacturing is replaced by more favored land uses.¹¹

The land you live on was surely stolen from Native Americans, but it is also likely to have been either subsequently stolen from African Americans or other people of color, or just maintained as white-only space by systematic racial policies and practices.

1. For a detailed history and current legal examples of the use of this doctrine, see Steven T. Newcomb. *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery*. Fulcrum, 2008.
2. Trina Williams. *The Homestead Act: A Major Asset-building Policy in American History*. Center for Social Development, Washington University, 2000.

3. This information is drawn from Michael Riley. "Feds Settle Suit over Mismanagement of Indian Trust Lands." *Denver Post*, February 26, 2011. [online]. [cited February 26, 2011]. denverpost.com/ci_13956753; Joel Dyer. "Billions Missing from US Indian Trust fund." *Albion Monitor*, August 15, 1996. [online]. [cited February 26, 2011]. albionmonitor.com/free/biatrustfund.html.
4. Ibid.
5. For a full description of several racial cleansings see Elliot Jaspin. *Buried in the Bitter Waters: The Hidden History of Racial Cleansing in America*. Basic, 2007. For information on Forsyth County, see pps 6-7 and 125-151.
6. Steve Baragona. "U.S. Government Settles Claims with Black, Native American Farmers." *Voice of America News.com*, December 6, 2010. [online]. [cited February 26, 2011]. voanews.com/english/news/usa/US-Government-Settles-with--111394004.html.
7. Jess Gilbert et al. *Who Owns the Land? Agricultural Land Ownership by Race/Ethnicity in Rural America*. Economic Research Service/USDA Newsletter, Vol 17#4 (Winter 2002).
8. Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, p. 12.
9. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, 2nd ed. Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, p. 11.
10. For a detailed account of the dumping of garbage and toxic and environmentally damaging waste in poor communities of color see Robert D. Bullard. *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*, 3rd ed. Westview, 2000; Robert D. Bullard and

Benjamin Chavis Jr. *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*.
South End, 1999.

11. For a detailed analysis of gentrification see Maureen Kennedy and Paul Leonard.
Dealing with Neighborhood Change: A Primer on Gentrification and Policy Choices.
The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy and PolicyLink,
April, 2001. [online. [cited February 26, 2011].

[policylink.org/atf/cf/%7B97C6D565-BB43-406D-A6D5-
ECA3BBF35AF0%7D/DealingWithGentrification_final.pdf](http://policylink.org/atf/cf/%7B97C6D565-BB43-406D-A6D5-ECA3BBF35AF0%7D/DealingWithGentrification_final.pdf).