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Tanu Sankalia

University of San Francisco, tssankalia@usfca.edu

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American Indian and African American urban spatial imaginaries

Tanu Sankalia

Art + Architecture, College of Arts and Sciences, University of San Francisco

The Indian Relocation Act of 1956 radically transformed the lives of Native Americans. It set in motion their [mass migration to cities](#). As part of a broader Indian Termination Policy, the Act was not only envisioned to strip the Indian reservations of their trust status and end government support, but it was [ostensibly meant](#) to integrate American Indians into mainstream American urban life. Plainly, Tommy Orange tells us in [There There](#), it “was supposed to be the final, necessary step in [the] assimilation, absorption, [and] erasure” of American Indian identity.

But identity, or put another way, ways of living, cannot be erased that easily. Orange poignantly describes how Native Americans made the city their home: “We found one another, started up Indian Centers, brought out our families and powwows, our dances, our songs, our beadwork.” Their cultural resilience prevented them from being lost in the “stream of anonymous masses” in the city.

What then is the American Indian urban spatial imaginary? How can urban planning and design begin to fully consider, in our increasingly [multiethnic and multiracial cities of the twenty first century](#), the American Indian urban experience?

To try and explore this question, although in a somewhat indirect way, I turn to [my writing](#) on the work of landscape architect [Walter Hood](#), and in particular his book [Urban Diaries](#) (1997). In the 1990s, when Hood moved to West Oakland, a predominantly African American neighborhood, he encountered a built environment that had been transformed by the urban renewal projects—parks and low-income housing—of the 1970s. Twenty years later, the same projects intended to ameliorate blight were in decay creating an endless cycle of deterioration, renewal, and deterioration once again. The planners working on these projects, Hood notes, were following data from standard demographic profiles oblivious about the actual lives and lived spaces of the neighborhood’s residents.

Hood set out to engage his community: observe, record, and analyze the daily rituals of its residents, and in the process challenge the technocratic and quantitative models of planning commonly used by government agencies. He employed a wide range of qualitative tools of planning and design: researching social history, using

photo documentation, site inventories, post-occupancy evaluation, and daily journal entries that would “fully bring the human condition into the design process.”

Hood gave form to the identity and daily lives of West Oaklanders in peculiar and provocative designs such as “a street stadium,” “drive in brothel,” “music box under the freeway,” and “house for a prostitute,” among numerous others. In a discussion I had with him, he pointed out that the designs were not meant to be taken in their literal sense but were meant as a critique of the standardized designs of tot lots (play area for little children), game tables and picnic benches installed in parks, oblivious of the neighborhood’s, and its residents’ needs. His designs challenged the paternalistic and disengaged practices of institutional planning and design.

On another register, Hood’s designs articulate sociologist George Lipsitz’s theory that African American urban space functions as “augmented use value.” In his [article](#), “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape,” Lipsitz argues that the continuous destruction of neighborhoods by urban renewal schemes, freeway projects and the displacement of residents, coupled with housing discrimination, environmental racism, and police harassment has meant that inner city communities of color “do not and cannot control the uses to which their neighborhoods are put by the rest of the city, nor can they secure increases in the *exchange value* of their homes” [italics in original]. In contrast, their suburban counterparts are able to establish private enclaves with exclusionary zoning, restrictive covenants, tax subsidies, and physical amenities that produce augmented exchange value—quite simply, increases in the price of property.

Thus, the only recourse that communities of color have, Lipsitz writes, is “to increase the *use value* of their neighborhoods,” by creating “ferocious attachments to place and developing useful mechanisms of solidarity.” [italics in original] This particular use of urban space has created what Lipsitz calls a “counter spatial imaginary based on sociability and augmented use value.”

Walter Hood’s *Urban Diaries* is as an evocative document of the African American urban spatial imaginary. It is a situated study of everyday life that questions the ill-conceived projects of urban renewal, and compels city officials and planners to reconsider neighborhood change based on the urban experiences of African Americans in West Oakland. It shows how communities of color develop their own unique attachments to place.

Tommy Orange's American Indian spatial imaginary is resilient; however, also marked by loss. As he tells us, "But for Native people in this country, all over the Americas, it's been developed over, buried ancestral land, glass and concrete and wire and steel, unreturnable covered memory. There is no there there."

In this telling by Orange lies the paradox of urban Native Americans; the city is home, a home many now know better than the reservation, and yet the city has paved over the histories of the past, [histories](#) that could have constituted memory and identity rooted in place. Therein lies the challenge—can we give expression to the American Indian spatial imaginary? Can there be real places for American Indians, as Orange puts it "where we get to all be together, where we get to hear and see each other [...] Something intertribal, something old, something to make us money, something we could work toward, for our jewelry, our songs, our dances, our drum."

Tanu Sankalia is Associate Professor in the Department of Art + Architecture and Program Director of the Urban Studies program. His research and writing cover areas of city planning, urban design, and architecture in the San Francisco Bay Area and India.