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CLAIMING SPACE IN THE AIR AND ON THE BLOCK: THE GEOGRAPHY OF MICRORADIO AND STRUGGLES AGAINST DISPLACEMENT

INTRODUCTION

A radio wave appears to be fleeting. It cannot be seen or touched, apparently ungrounded, an ethereal presence detached from the earth. Yet radio in its smallest forms can be deeply connected to the land. The particular geography of microradio can be a powerful tool for fighting for the right to be in a certain place: the right to stay put over time, to create culture, to dwell. Here, I examine the case of one contemporary microradio station in its struggles against neighborhood displacement, and consider the possibilities for the future.

DISPLACEMENT, DWELLING AND THE RIGHT TO STAY PUT

The thorny question of gentrification-induced displacement first entered the U.S. public sphere in the mid-1970s. Across the country, housing costs were far outstripping incomes: the median cost of a new home doubled between 1970 and 1976, while the median family income rose by only 47% (FRIEDEN and SOLOMON 1977). Ominous headlines like “Housing Costs Outrun Income of Blacks” and “Middle Class Return Displaces Some Urban Poor” appeared regularly in major newspapers like *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* (FEINBERG 1975; REINHOLD 1977). While displacement due to direct government action was an old story, manifested most recently in federal urban renewal projects (see THURSZ 1966), displacement due to what was sometimes called “private urban renewal” was a new phenomenon (ZEITZ 1979). In 1977 displacement was of enough concern to warrant Congressional hearings, and in 1978 Congress required the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to conduct a study on the nature and extent of the phenomenon (HUD 1979; GOLDFIELD 1980).

HUD released its study, *Displacement Report*, in February 1979. The report, which was a survey of the existing research on displacement in American cities, concluded that no one had been able to prove that displacement was a statistically significant problem. The authors cite, for example, an 18-city survey which found that fewer than 100–200 households were displaced in each city annually. Another study cited estimated that 500,000 U.S. households were displaced each year between 1974 and 1976 – just 3.8% of the people who had moved in that time.

The available data, the authors argued, simply did not back up the media hype over displacement. “The major conclusion from this survey of displacement studies,” the authors wrote, “is that very little reliable information exists” (HUD 1979, 30). The stories about displacement were, a HUD official wrote later that year, simply that: stories. Until further research showed displacement was a problem, the federal government was not going to address it (SUMKA 1979).

Statistics told one story. But low-income people in central neighborhoods in many American cities seemed to be experiencing something else. At a national meeting in 1977, Legal Services attorneys, who worked with low-income people on a daily basis, identified displacement as their top priority for “national level research and coordinated action,” and formed the Legal Services Anti-Displacement Task Force to tackle the issue (HARTMAN, KEATING et al. 1982, 1). In 1981, two members of the task force, Richard LEGATES and Chester HARTMAN, published a critique of the HUD displacement study, meticulously taking apart its arguments and challenging both its statistics and its philosophy. Displacement, they argued, was in fact a major problem, both in terms of the numbers of people affected and the personal impacts of forced moves (LEGATES and HARTMAN 1981). The following year the National Housing Law Project published the book *Displacement: How to Fight It*, in which members of the task force, including HARTMAN and LEGATES, outlined practical methods for fighting displacement. It is here that the authors put forth the idea of a “right to stay put,” writing:

We put forward the twin goals of absolute defense of ‘the right to stay put’ and absolute requirement that there be one-for-one (or more) replacement of lower-rent units withdrawn from the market, realizing that many local groups will not be able to win such demands. For them, the anti-displacement battle may turn into a fight to get all they can to compensate for the pains and costs of dislocation, or to enable some residents to remain. But the push towards basic goals is always important (HARTMAN, KEATING et al. 1982, 5).

HARTMAN elaborates on this “basic goal” in his 1984 article, “The Right to Stay Put.” Here, he theorizes a right to stay in place despite the machinations of the housing market – and pushes for ridding the housing market of the profit motive all together, in order to make stable, decent housing accessible to all. He recommends policies to protect low-income home owners (including limits on property tax increases and challenges to shady mortgage lending practices) and renters (including enacting “just cause” eviction statutes and rent controls) (HARTMAN 1984). The right to stay put, here and in future works (see BRATT, STONE et al. 2006; HARTMAN 2006), is interchangeable with a right to housing. But a right to stay put should extend beyond the right to simple shelter. Being able to remain in place is about being able to continue to participate in the many daily rhythms of place, of which housing is just one part. A right to stay put, that is, can be theorized as part of a larger right to dwell.

The difference between dwelling in a place and simply being housed there is, in part, that dwelling requires time and intimacy. Dwelling, according to philosopher Martin HEIDEGGER, means to remain in a place over time (HEIDEGGER 1971). Dwelling, the environmental psychologist Susan SAEGERT writes later, connotes a certain intimacy that simple housing does not necessarily convey (SAEGERT

1985). Indian architect and activist Jai SEN articulates the distinction in his essay “It’s ‘Dwelling,’ Stupid, not ‘Housing’!” He writes:

‘[H]ousing’ – as it is commonly understood – refers merely to the four walls and roof (and floor) in which we may dwell, the building, whereas ‘dwelling’ refers to something far deeper: To the existential relations of *living in a place*, and to the wider social and cosmological meaning of this action. It refers to the act of ‘settling and residing’ somewhere, of *habiting* it, and of making it one’s home; and ultimately, of struggling for and building ‘one’s place in the world’. And – I propose – it is this (and not the gaining of the mere object called ‘housing’) that we, as living, sentient beings, all really struggle for (SEN 2002, 1–2, emphasis in original).

Basic housing is still a demand in much of the world, and much of the United States as well. But there are other necessary elements of daily life, as SEN suggests, that the bare concept of housing does not include. In the Maple Plains¹ neighborhood of Washington, D.C., where gentrification has been studied several times since the mid-1970s, there is continual concern about the displacement of people from housing (GALE 1976; WILLIAMS 1988; MODAN 2007). But there is also a concern for the displacement of culture and music from the streets, and of conversation and communication to the internet (LOUGHRAN 2008). In 1998, a small group of Maple Plains residents decided to fight against the displacement of their neighbors’ voices and cultures from a community dialogue that was increasingly shaped by internet discussion boards, and dominated by a few privileged interests. They wanted to create new ways to communicate and build understanding among residents, which they hoped would lead to a more just neighborhood: a more inclusive place in which to dwell. To achieve all this, they decided to start a microradio station.

THE PARTICULAR GEOGRAPHY OF MICRORADIO

A typical full-power radio station blankets a city with its sound. Regardless of where you may be in a given metropolitan area, you will hear its signal, and you can assume it will always be there. A microradio station is different: its signal is much less strong, and its broadcast reach is much smaller. “Microradio” is not a precise term, but rather a loose description for a radio station that is, simply, very small. Such a station may cover a very small town, or one neighborhood, or even just a single apartment building. The typical full-power FM station might broadcast at 50,000 watts, while a microradio FM station may broadcast anywhere from one tenth of a watt to a hundred watts.

Microradio in the United States emerged in part as a response to a radio industry that has, since its inception, moved ever more towards commercialization and homogenization. In the first few years of the 20th century, radio stations flourished as experiments, and at first no one could figure out how to make a

¹ The name of the neighborhood has been changed.

profit from broadcasting (MCCHESNEY 1998). After World War I, the company RCA, which manufactured radio equipment, was the only entity making money off radio; it encouraged the wild proliferation of amateur stations, since station operators needed to buy RCA gear in order to broadcast (SOLEY 1999). But by the time of the creation of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) with the Communications Act of 1934, commercial interests had realized that broadcast radio in fact offered great opportunity for profit. They convinced the government that radio supported by advertising dollars would ensure the greatest freedom of expression, and the commercial CBS and NBC networks began to dominate the airwaves (MCCHESNEY 1998). Still, the 1934 Act limited concentration of station ownership, banning any single individual or company from owning more than two stations, one AM and one FM, within a single market (GREVE, POZNER et al. 2006).

Starting in 1948, the FCC began issuing Class D licenses for FM radio, which at the time was unprofitable compared to AM radio. A Class D license allowed noncommercial operation at 10 watts for universities, and later, for other non-commercial entities. The small wattage of Class D licenses meant that they could be founded and run for much less money than full-power stations, and were therefore more accessible to small groups with small budgets (SOLEY 1999). In 1967, the Public Broadcasting Act created the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR), scoring a win for noncommercial media (MCCHESNEY 1998). But in 1978 the FCC stopped issuing Class D licenses, after several years of lobbying from NPR and the National Federation of Community Broadcasters, groups that represented larger-scale noncommercial broadcasters, who complained that the tiny 10-watt stations cluttered up the airwaves and were an inefficient use of the small part of the FM spectrum that is allocated for non-commercial use (WALKER 2001). In addition, existing Class D stations were given a secondary status that meant they could be displaced by larger stations (OPEL 2004). Class D stations continued to operate, but slowly, their numbers sank. Meanwhile, ownership restrictions continued to loosen under lobbying pressure from the commercially-oriented National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), which expressed concern about the dwindling profitability of radio. In 1985, restrictions were relaxed such that entities could own up to twelve AM and twelve FM stations nationwide (GREVE, POZNER et al. 2006).

But it was the Telecommunications Act of 1996 that really removed restrictions on media ownership, and made owning a radio station potentially much more profitable. Before the law was passed, an individual or company could own up to two FM and two AM stations within a single market area; afterwards, an entity could own up to eight stations within a single market, and could own an unlimited number of stations across the country. Within the first year of the law's passage, twenty percent of all radio stations changed ownership in a "wave of consolidation" (WIKLE and COMER 2009, 369). By 1999, nearly half the nation's 11,000 stations had been sold, almost always from smaller firms to larger firms (RUGGIERO 1999). By 2003, a single company, Clear Channel Communications, owned enough radio stations to reach 70% of American listeners (GREVE, POZNER

et al. 2006). Investors were developing nationwide chains of stations, cutting costs by mass-manufacturing programming for dozens of stations in a single studio in an anonymous city (BALLINGER 1998; WALKER 2001).

It was during this frenzy of radio ownership consolidation that microradio in the United States began to flourish in direct opposition to the increasing commercialization and homogenization of radio. Activists realized they could build their own small stations from a few hundred dollars' worth of electronics, search the FM dial for an empty frequency, and take to the air. Because no low-wattage FM radio licenses were available from the FCC, it was impossible to apply for one, so microradio was a strictly an illegal, "pirate," affair. Scores of stations multiplied across the country: Radio Mutiny in Philadelphia; KIND Radio, in San Marcos, Texas; Steal This Radio, a tiny station on New York's Lower East Side; Iowa City Free Radio; Beat Radio, a dance station in Minneapolis; Grid Radio in Cleveland; Free Radio Berkeley, which helped many other stations get started; and many, many more. Microradio was as wild hodge-podge of right wing gun enthusiasts, left wing social justice activists, zealous small businessmen, Christian evangelists, and anarchists. Some stations mimicked mainstream commercial radio, and some broadcast hell and damnation straight through the day and night. But the most interesting were those that crafted programming that reflected their communities' cultures and languages, and opened up room for anyone to come on the air and discuss whatever they wished. Free Radio Memphis had a show called "Solidarity Forever," focused on local labor issues and hosted by a member of the Industrial Workers of the World. Radio Mutiny had a show hosted by the Condom Lady, a public health worker by day who dispensed safe sex advice over the airwaves by night. Steal This Radio had an open mic hour in which anyone could come in off the streets and join in the broadcast. Beat Radio was started by a former commercial DJ in order to play dance music that other stations refused to play. Radio Zapata in Salinas, California, catered to the migrant workers of that town, ceasing operation when they left town for the winter and firing back up when they returned to work the fields in the spring (SAKOLSKY and DUNIFER 1998; SOLEY 1999; WALKER 2001). Though the FCC cracked down, shutting down more than 250 unlicensed stations in 1998 alone, an estimated 1,000 other stations continued to operate (OPEL 2004).

A station that operated out of a housing project in Springfield, Illinois, is widely considered to be the initial inspiration for the U.S. microradio movement, and demonstrates the unique geographic specificity of microradio (LANDAY 1998; SOLEY 1999). The John Hay Homes, built in 1940, was one of the first public housing projects in Illinois (DAVIS 1997). In the mid-1980s the project, which was almost entirely African American, was home to about 3000 people – one fifth of the black population of Springfield (SOLEY 1999). In 1986, the project's Tenants' Rights Association decided they needed to start their own radio station in order to reach residents. Mbanna Kantako, a blind man who had grown up in the project and lived there with his family, took the lead on developing the station, which was initially named WTRA to denote its connection with the tenant association.

WTRA started off with a single watt of power – tiny, but enough to cover the entire housing project and reach much of the black population of highly segregated Springfield. The tenants association used a small grant to buy the equipment and didn't worry about being busted by the FCC. Kantako ran the station out of his apartment with his wife, Dia, and their children. They played music, made political commentary, and, aware that much of their audience was functionally illiterate, read books and newspapers aloud over the air. They interviewed victims of police brutality in and around the project, and rebroadcast police dispatches so residents would know where the police were and what they were doing at any given time (SOLEY 1999). Kantako, who also helped organize the tenant association's 1000-volume Malcolm X Children's Library, described his station as "a Black Panther political education class on the radio" (quoted in LANDAY 1998, 94). Over the years, the station's name changed, from WTRA to Zoom Black Magic Liberation Radio to Black Liberation Radio to African Liberation Radio to Human Rights Radio. Of the name changes, Kantako explained:

We're learning as we go... We named our original organization the name we thought was a solution to our problems – the Tenants Rights Association. We thought if we got tenants' rights – boom – everything would fall into place. We learned that wasn't the case' (quoted in SOLEY 1999, 74).

In 1995, the Springfield Housing Authority decided to close the John Hay Homes in order to demolish it under the federal HOPE VI program (DAVIS 1997). Kantako responded by launching a new radio program called "The Great Land Grab," in which he argued against the destruction of the housing project and the "Negro removal" policies of the housing authority. But by mid-1996, the project was mostly vacant; in 1997, the Kantako family was finally moved out, and the John Hay Homes was destroyed. Though Kantako and his family continued to broadcast from their new home, their listeners had been scattered, and a single microradio station could no longer reach them all (SOLEY 1999). The power of the small station had been bound up in the physical concentration of its listeners, an intimate geography destroyed by policies that some activists decried as intentional "spatial deconcentration" strategies designed to dilute black political power (see Yulanda Ward Memorial Fund 1981). But even though the station's original home was destroyed, a small network of Black Liberation Radio had already begun to flourish, inspired by Kantako's example, with stations taking to the air in Decatur, Illinois; Chattanooga, Tennessee; and Richmond, Virginia (SOLEY 1999).

Japan's "mini FM" movement was another manifestation of hyperlocal radio. The movement began in the early 1980s as an explosion of tiny unlicensed radio stations. Tetsuo KOGAWA, an activist, professor, and leader in the mini FM movement, was interested in the communicative and performance art possibilities of small-scale radio, and had been inspired by Italy's free radio movement. One of the earliest mini FM stations was Radio Home Run, founded by KOGAWA's former students in a bohemian district of Tokyo. According to KOGAWA, the station was named for "a baseball term but its connotation was to 'cross distant borders,' because they wished to cross the borders of every obstacle (not only the

airwaves regulations but also sociocultural differences)''' (CHANDLER and NEUMARK 2005, 199). KOGAWA believed that the seeming limitation of the mini FM stations' tiny wattage allowed them to serve a unique community function. These stations, he theorized, should be intentionally miniature, with a broadcast range small enough that anyone listening could bicycle over within a few minutes to join the conversation (SOLEY 1999). "Paradoxically," KOGAWA writes,

limitations can always transform negative elements into positive ones. In our experience, listeners frequently visit their neighborhood stations, which consequently become communal gathering places. Given its essential difference from mass media, this should be the most positive function of free radio (KOGAWA 1993, 94).

For KOGAWA, the beauty of mini FM was that it erased the border between the producer and the listener of radio. And while the broadcasts that could be heard over the air were important, what were just as important were the in-person interactions that the small geographic scale of the broadcasts encouraged.

Locally-oriented radio was what the Swedish geographer Torsten HÄGERSTRAND had in mind when he theorized the "possibility space" of a communication technology. Radio, he argued, had been used to centralize the production and distribution of information and culture, but there was no reason the medium could not be used to enhance local, "situational" knowledge instead. He writes:

[T]elemedia have an inherent tendency to promote hierarchical and centre-directed links resulting in the withdrawal of people from face-to-face communication. But these limitations do not totally circumscribe the 'possibility space'... To bring broadcasting down from the national to the regional level implies that nearness might after all be of some importance. The nature and sources of situational knowledge form the interesting side of the matter. General knowledge is the same everywhere, but situational knowledge is bound to place and time (HÄGERSTRAND 1986, 20).

RADIO CPR

Radio CPR (short for "Community Powered Radio") was founded in Maple Plains in 1998 to create the kind of possibility space HÄGERSTRAND theorizes. It reflects elements of Human Rights Radio, Radio Home Run, and the many microradio stations that have flourished across the country in recent years. It has a small broadcast radius, covering only a few densely populated neighborhoods, and its members generally recognize that its strength is in its tight geographic focus. As one of the station's founding DJs, Aphrodite, told an interviewer in 2005, "Hopefully we have a radio station where anyone [elsewhere] in the world would have no interest in what we're talking about'" (quoted in BRINSON 2006, 552).

The germ of the idea for the station sprouted in 1996 when two Maple Plains social workers, outraged by that year's federal welfare and immigration "reform" laws, founded a group called Stand for Our Neighbors. They were witnessing the new legislation's immediate negative impacts on their clients, and wanted to organize to build solidarity with poor people in the neighborhood. Maple Plains was one of the most diverse parts of the city, with people of different classes,

racess and languages living within close proximity and passing each other on the street constantly. But people did not necessarily talk to each other in any substantive way, or have the opportunity to get to know one another. Increasingly, neighborhood conversation took place via internet discussion boards, which excluded swaths of the population and tended to degenerate into less-than-compassionate rhetoric (MODAN 2007). In response, Stand for Our Neighbors organized events across cultures to encourage Maple Plains residents to get to know one another. These events ranged from “neighborhood cabarets” at local restaurants and churches, highlighting the diverse talents of local people, to public forums in the basement of the neighborhood public library.

At one forum on crime and safety in the library’s basement, teenagers studying radio production at a local youth center played tapes of interviews they had conducted with other young people, on what safety meant to them. Their recordings were revealing. The young people, all Latino and African-American, had very different safety concerns than the mostly white, mostly upper-middle class people attending the forum. They did not express fear of being mugged, or of their cars being stolen, or of their homes being broken into. They were afraid of being harassed by police when they walked across the road that divided their poor neighborhood from the wealthier one to the west. They were afraid that their families would not be able to pay the rent, and that they would be evicted. They were afraid their family members would be deported. Safety was knowing they could walk down the street without being treated like criminals, that their families would not lose their homes, and that they would not be forced to leave the country. Watching the people at the forum listening to the tapes, it became clear how powerful it would be if these teenagers’ voices could be heard outside the context of a neighborhood meeting in a library. A radio station could broadcast the taped interviews and the neighborhood cabarets, bring in local activists for live discussion, play music created in the neighborhood but never heard on the city’s other radio stations, and serve as an outlet for every conceivable form of auditory creation. And so Radio CPR began.

Since its first broadcast in October 1998, Radio CPR has hosted scores of shows and hundreds of DJs. The station broadcasts every night, starting at about 6:00 PM, and signing off at about 1:00 AM. A typical Wednesday night’s broadcast in the summer of 2010, for example, begins with a show hosted by three librarians, in which they play music checked out from the neighborhood library, and promote public library events; it’s followed by a longrunning show hosted by Paleface, a British expatriate with a wealth of old reggae and punk records, who tells terrific tales of seeing punk bands in London in the ‘70s; and the evening finishes up with Zombie, another longstanding DJ whose show is devoted to go-go, one of the city’s uniquely indigenous musical forms that is wildly popular yet barely represented on the city’s airwaves. Over the years, CPR programming has included a Saturday morning show in which a neighborhood dad read children’s stories and played kids’ music; the Sunday evening “Neighborhood Power Hour,” which for ten years relayed neighborhood news, interviewed local activists, and was occasionally turned over to one of the DJ’s teenage sons and his friends to

play punk records (the DJ mom often referred to the station as a “gang prevention program” because of its ability to keep her son and his friends out of trouble); a Thursday evening experimental music show in which local musicians brought their instruments into the station and improvised live on the air; a Friday evening youth show, in which young people interviewed each other about the public school system, teen sex, and other issues, and read their poetry and played their favorite songs; a show devoted exclusively to Screw, the weird form of slowed-down rap originating out of Houston in the ‘90s; “The People’s Music Hour,” a folk music show interspersed with politics, hosted by a longtime neighborhood couple; numerous bilingual Spanish/English talk shows; and much, much more. Radio CPR currently broadcasts at about seventy watts, which covers two or three neighborhoods. It has never received any formal funding, and operates on the barest of shoestring budgets, supporting itself exclusively through small benefit concerts, dance parties, and record sales. Though between forty and fifty people participate regularly as DJs, a smaller group tends to be at the core of decision-making. Members gather at monthly meetings and do work in smaller committees that focus on technical and programming issues. Keeping the station going requires a lot of work, but the ability to create material sound where none existed before is powerful motivation.

From the outset, it was clear that Radio CPR was going to have to walk a fine line between being inclusive and expansive. Because of the station’s undocumented nature, its members needed to be careful about whom to involve, while not succumbing to paranoia about being busted by the FCC. The station was founded by a group of friends who knew that they both needed to involve people they trusted and also involve people they that did not yet know. The solution was to make new friends and expand friendship circles outward as more and more trust was built with new people, and connections were strengthened. As of this writing, twelve years after its founding, the station has never been contacted by the FCC, and working together on the station has engendered many friendships across race, class, religion, immigration status, and sexuality.

The station’s friendship circles have expanded out in all sorts of surprising ways. One evening, for instance, I walked into the neighborhood 7-Eleven to buy a bottle of orange juice. I was carrying a portable tape recorder and microphone, and was on my way to do an interview for my show. The 7-Eleven in our neighborhood is staffed almost entirely by Somali immigrants – perhaps the better term is war refugees (Maple Plains has long provided a home for people displaced from war and its repercussions throughout the world, from El Salvador to Vietnam). A long scar ran across the neck of the Somali man working the counter, slicing from jaw to collarbone, and a piece of his left ear was missing. He grinned as he rung me up, and asked what I was doing with the tape recorder. I told him about the station, and encouraged him to join us. He was interested, and we gave him a show in which he and a friend played Somali music and debated Somali politics – all in Somali, so I never understood a word. But the workers started listening to Radio CPR in the 7-Eleven, and walking into that chain store late at night and hearing our signal wafting through its fluorescent aisles was thrilling.

FIGHTING DISPLACEMENT WITH MICRORADIO

A radio station is not a house. It does not provide material shelter. But there are particular ways in which microradio's unique geography can aid communities in fighting displacement.

First, a microradio station can air programming that directly deals with the problems of housing displacement. It can host shows in which DJs discuss tenants' rights and housing concerns, interview tenant leaders, lawyers and activists, and share news of housing organizing efforts in their neighborhood and across the city. In 2003, for example, the tenants of a Maple Plains apartment building were able to buy their building from their landlord, a notorious slumlord, and preserve it as affordable housing in perpetuity. The tenants' association, which was highly organized and translated every document and every meeting into Spanish and Vietnamese in order to ensure communication among all tenants, was presided over by a Haitian immigrant who had moved into the building in 1978 (MORENO 2003). She came to the Radio CPR studio on multiple occasions to discuss the building's case on the air, and to ask for neighborhood support. In 2005 the tenants of another neighborhood apartment building were fighting condominium conversion, which would have displaced many of them (COHN 2005); again, the tenants' association president came on Radio CPR to discuss the case, and ask listeners to testify at the city council in their support. In 2008 an apartment building on Maple Plains' main commercial strip burnt to the ground in a terrific blaze, after having racked up over 7000 housing code violations in recent years; 200 low-income, mostly immigrant residents were instantly displaced (DVORAK and KLEIN 2008). Radio CPR DJs were quick to report on the disaster and offer assistance to the suddenly homeless families. The highly localized nature of the radio station ensured that listeners would be interested in the fate of the buildings they passed by every day, and also made it easier for tenant leaders to walk the few blocks over to the studio to share their stories.

Second, a microradio station can air music and culture that has been displaced from other media outlets. Go-go, punk, and bluegrass are all musical forms that either originated in D.C. or have flourished there in unique ways, but over the years it has become harder and harder to find this music on the radio dial. In 2001, for instance, WAMU, one of the city's two public radio stations, decided to cut its afternoon bluegrass and classic country. Washington, once known as the "Nashville of bluegrass," had long been an important center for bluegrass musicians, and the radio had been one way for musicians and fans to remember their history and keep up with current musical trends. But the WAMU manager said her listeners were more interested in news than music, so she replaced the bluegrass and country programming with more news and talk, essentially mimicking what the city's other public radio station, WETA, was already airing at that time, thus further eroding the diversity of the city's airwaves (AHRENS 2001). Programming at larger radio stations, even noncommercial ones, tends to follow financial dictates, and music that can't sell ads or generate listener donations may not make the cut. But the scale of microradio is so small, and its financial needs are

consequently so minor, that it allows all sorts of musical forms to flourish. One of Radio CPR's earliest DJs was herself a player of old time, blues, and bluegrass, who led the music at her Maple Plains church and in the 1970s had produced a beautiful album of songs, featuring a cover photograph of her standing on Maple Plains' main street. Her husband had written the record's liner notes. Together they aired music of the people, including the songs of many folk and bluegrass musicians. Go-go and punk also proliferate on the station, and local musicians consistently receive airplay, at times performing live on air.

A microradio station can also air music and culture that has been displaced from the neighborhood's streets themselves, and work to bring that music and culture back. In the late '90s, a small group of Maple Plains neighbors pressured local businesses to stop hosting live music, DJ-ing and dancing. They professed fear that the neighborhood was turning into an entertainment district, and felt threatened by the possibility of a noisier commercial strip. They warned that if the businesses refused to stop hosting music, their group would contest their liquor licenses (this was not an empty warning: the head of the neighbors group was a former member of the city's Alcoholic Beverage Control Board). The neighborhood businesses, which over the years had hosted live country, rock, punk, and Latin music, were upset about the pressure, but fearing the loss of their liquor licenses, they complied. A blow felt particularly hard by the neighborhood was the resultant loss of mariachi bands, which had once roamed from restaurant to restaurant, sometimes playing their instruments as they walked down the street, or stopping to play a song in the small neighborhood plaza (FISHER 2007). Members of Radio CPR responded to this de facto ban on live music by working for several years with other neighborhood residents to bring musical performance back to the neighborhood. (Maureen LOUGHRAN's excellent (2008) dissertation, *Community Powered Resistance: Radio, Music Scenes and Musical Activism in Washington, D.C.*, focuses on Radio CPR's work on this issue.) Because of this work, bands are once again permitted to play, DJs are permitted to spin records, and people are permitted to dance in Maple Plains. Radio CPR DJs now host regular cumbia/tropicalia music dance nights at a local Salvadoran restaurant; one of their recent dance nights was a benefit to send several CPR DJs to the Allied Media Conference, an annual convergence of progressive media-makers.

The tropicalia dance nights point to another way that microradio can help in the fight against all types of displacement: by creating physical spaces where people can both work and party together. Most radio listeners listen to the radio alone, in their cars or in their homes. Listening to the radio alone can be an intimate experience: the best DJs sound like they are speaking to you and you alone. But microradio is not just about what is heard beaming out over the airwaves, but about the work that goes into creating that signal. It is necessarily a communal project that relies on the freely given time and energy of its participants. Experience with Radio CPR shows that when people work together on a common project in which they share a common passion, they get to know each other in deep ways. They learn how to communicate, and they learn to trust each other. And they build social networks that extend far beyond their original groups of

friends. These networks are built among DJs during monthly meetings at local bars, afternoons spent cleaning the studio, rebuilding the transmitter or repositioning the antenna, and evenings on front porches combing through applications for new shows. Networks are built among DJs and other members of the community during the Maple Plains annual street festival, where Radio CPR organizes the children's stage every year; the annual neighborhood Halloween block party, where CPR provides live spooky music over the radio, and DJs serve as judges for the costume contest; local neighborhood council meetings, where DJs speak up in support of policies that support small businesses and immigrants' and housing rights; and dance parties and benefit concerts, where local bands play and people socialize into the night. It is these networks that help build a community that is stronger in the face of displacement, be it of home, music or public culture.

Finally, microradio may aid the fight against displacement most fundamentally in the way it challenges the private enclosure of public resources. The Radio Act of 1927 stipulated that broadcasters operate in the public interest, that licenses be renewed every three years, and that the airwaves were public property, owned by the U.S. government (SOLEY 1999). But from the inception of radio's regulation, elected officials have given away the spectrum to private industry: both in the hope that large private companies could make most efficient use of it, and because, since the early 1930s, defying the interests of big media has proven to be political suicide (MCCHESNEY 1998). Similarly, the history of land ownership in the U.S. has been one of expropriation, most fundamentally the original expropriation of land from its Native residents. To engage in microradio is to reclaim airspace that was once considered to be part of the common realm. To fight to stay put is to defy a system of property ownership that prioritizes protecting profit over meeting human need. Such struggles can take place within legal frameworks: residents can push governments to pass laws that protect and create affordable housing, just as media activists, Radio CPR members among them, successfully pushed the FCC in 2000 to create a new noncommercial low power FM (LPFM) community radio service (AHRENS 2000; OPEL 2004). But these struggles can also take place outside the law. HARTMAN ends his 1984 essay by commending squatters who take over buildings in order to house the homeless. An analysis of the community stations licensed under the initial rounds of the LPFM service found that, despite tremendous efforts to help progressive groups get licenses, most new stations went to rural, white America, and a large number of licenses went to Christian broadcasting organizations (WIKLE and COMER 2009). Legislation moving through Congress as of this writing would expand the service to provide opportunities for more low power stations, and in more urban areas, but its passage is not guaranteed. The opportunities presented by a legal low power FM service are great, and represent a major victory by media democracy groups. But squatting the airwaves is still important: it makes a political point about the continued need to fight a telecommunications system that is based on corporate profit, while at the same time directly creating a means of communication.

Fighting displacement with microradio is in no way unique to Radio CPR. *Steal This Radio*, for example, was simultaneously squatting the airwaves and the

land, operating out of a squatted building on New York City's Lower East Side. That station covered the evictions of fellow squatters, fought against the "rent-slavery economy," and provided a space for countering the "numbing effect of the corporate mediascape we all inhabit [that] casts a long shadow over so much of the lived experience of the city" (DJ TASHTEGO 1998, 136).

THE FETISH OF PLACE, AND OF THE RADIO FORM

It's exciting to take the air into your own hands and make something new of it. DJ TASHTEGO calls it the "sweet mystery of radio," and it is a remarkable and magical thing (DJ TASHTEGO 1998, 133). But microradio is not immune to critique.

One critique is that it encourages a fetishization of place: a sort of hyper-local navel-gazing and obsession with one particular place. In its intense focus on a single small place, microradio may contribute to the same fetishization of neighborhood that plays such an important role in gentrification. Since Radio CPR's first broadcast, median home sales prices in Maple Plains have more than doubled in constant 2009 dollars (from \$297,000 in 1998 to \$621,000 in 2009), and the median income of mortgage borrowers has risen by 42% (Urban Institute and Washington DC LISC 2009). When the neighborhood gentrifies, access to the station's airwaves becomes a point of privilege. Not everyone can afford to live within the broadcast range. Being able to tune into a cool little neighborhood radio station might be just one more thing that makes living in Maple Plains special and desirable, and ever more commodified – possibly, in a contorted way, even contributing to displacement.

Another critique is that, increasingly, microradio relies on a fetishization of the radio medium itself. FM radio may be of waning consequence in a country in which most people have ready access to fast internet connections. One recent listing of online radio stations provides links to 14,000 of them, and this list is, apparently, far from complete (TAUB 2009). FM radio may be headed the way of LP records: a few people might obsess over the medium and think it's cool, but no one really needs it. The focus on one small place that microradio requires may be becoming just a quaint, nostalgic throwback.

These critiques merit thoughtful response. While Radio CPR certainly focuses mostly on the neighborhoods within its small broadcast range, it also encourages a proliferation of community media engagement throughout the city (and, through participation in events like the Allied Media Conference, throughout the country). Rather than expand their own station's wattage, CPR members have worked to connect with other groups in the Washington area, from D.C.'s Anacostia neighborhood to the town of Frederick, Maryland, that might be interested in starting their own stations, in order to encourage a local network of microradio. This is a vision of microradio self-reproduction inspired by Free Radio Berkeley's Stephen DUNIFER's call to "let a thousand transmitters bloom" (SAKOLSKY and DUNIFER 1998). It is potentially a manifestation of what Ron SAKOLSKY calls "rhizomatic radio:" "[r]ampaging sound wave tubers where each stem is itself a rootstock

emitting new roots everywhere along its sonic path” (SAKOLSKY 1998, 7). In terms of Radio CPR’s relationship with its gentrifying neighborhood, the station is not necessarily fixed forever in space. Members may at some point decide to move the studio to another neighborhood in which more of its members live, or engage in more mobile broadcasts in other neighborhoods, in order to keep from being fossilized in place as a relic of a bygone era.

As for FM’s continued viability as a medium, it is important to remember that a microradio station does not exist in a communicative vacuum. As Felix GUATTARI, who was involved in Italy’s pirate radio station movement in the 1970s, writes of those stations:

We realize here that radio constitutes but one element at the heart of an entire range of communication means, from daily, informal encounters in the Piazza Maggiore to the newspaper – via billboards, mural paintings, posters, leaflets, meetings, community activities, celebrations, etc.” (GUATTARI 1993 [1978], 86).

The work of the neighborhood radio station is not just about the FM radio signal, but about the context in which it is created and heard. The handmade radio station – more mystical and seductive than the increasingly mundane internet – can be a hub around which all sorts of communication spins. There also may be something important about the nature of unlicensed radio itself: it may be because such stations are undocumented and therefore cannot receive any funding to operate that it can retain the kind of radical edge that community groups dependent on foundation grants – including groups working against displacement – may eventually lose (see INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence 2007). Along these lines, it is useful to consider future possibilities for microradio.

CONCLUSION: MICRORADIO AS CO-RESEARCH

Microradio is in a very different position today than it was in 1998, when Radio CPR was founded and hundreds of other tiny pirate stations were taking to the air across the country. The LPFM service has channeled some of the energy of the late ‘90s into licensed radio stations, and the terrific rise of the internet has totally altered the geography of media. The problem of displacement, however, has not changed, and social scientists still argue over its scale and impact (see FREEMAN and BRACONI 2004; and the response of NEWMAN and WYLY 2006).

I see the future of microradio as part of a larger project of neighborhood-based co-research. Co-research, also known as militant research or workers’ inquiry, is research that seeks to break down barriers between researchers and the object of research, and between research and politics. An early example is Karl MARX’s 1880 call for “A Workers’ Inquiry,” published in *La Revue Socialiste*, in which he called for French workers to systematically investigate their own conditions in order to, as he put it, “prepare the way for social regeneration” (MARX 1880, 1). In this piece, Marx introduces a one hundred question survey, which include questions ranging from “What is your trade?” to “Has the government or

municipality applied the laws regulating child labor? Do employers submit to these laws?” to “Have you noticed, in your personal experience, a bigger rise in the price of immediate necessities, e.g. rent, food, etc., than in wages?” (MARX 1880, 2–5). These questions were designed to elicit facts as well as raise consciousness. The feminist consciousness raising groups of the 1960s and ‘70s have also been theorized as a form of co-research, in that participants investigated their own experience of the world in order to change it (MALO DE MOLINA 2004). As feminist Kathie SARACHILD wrote of consciousness-raising in 1973:

The decision to emphasize our own feelings and experiences as women and to test all generalizations and reading we did by our own experience was actually the scientific method of research...It was also a method of radical organizing tested by other revolutions (quoted in MALO DE MOLINA 2004, 5).

Neighborhood-based research has proven to be a powerful component of anti-displacement work. HARTMAN et al. highlight, for example, the research-intensive work of San Francisco’s Duboce Triangle Neighborhood Alliance. Alliance members studied census data, real estate listings, and city and county records for the Duboce Triangle neighborhood in order to gain a better understanding of the nature and extent of displacement, and followed up their statistical analysis with a door-to-door survey of neighborhood residents. They found that, between 1970 and 1978, housing prices had increased far beyond incomes, and that working class residents were moving out and young professionals were moving in (HARTMAN, KEATING et al. 1982). Similarly, the Washington Urban League’s *SOS ’78 – Speak Out for Survival* door-to-door survey conducted in 1978 in four D.C. neighborhoods, including Maple Plains, found that 43% of those who had moved in the past two years cited rent increases, evictions, or urban renewal as reasons for moving (GALE 1980). In both San Francisco and Washington, D.C., neighborhood-based research in the late ‘70s countered the prevailing federal narrative that displacement was not a problem, and provided a basis for demanding changes to city policies on land, housing and real estate.

A microradio co-research project could serve as a repository and a hub for research that aids anti-displacement struggles, and a way to communicate information discovered. Microradio already has a long history of co-research, manifested in part by the Black Liberation Radio network of stations. Members of these stations were intimately aware of the injustice of land and housing distribution, and addressed those injustices on the air. Because microradio stations of necessity are so tightly geographically focused, they are in a good position to serve as a center for neighborhood co-research. At Radio CPR, as at many other microradio stations, this research has already been happening in informal and ad hoc ways, through in-studio interviews, discussions, and reporting on local issues of housing and land. But this work could become more intentional. The challenge is to deepen and extend the “possibility space” of radio in order to continue to work for a neighborhood – and a world – that values the right to dwell, and the right to stay put.

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