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toward building a new society on the vacant lots of the old . . .

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Avarice and Avatar in Charm City: Stepping Up the Fight Against Displacement and Dispossession

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Recently, the city of Baltimore announced a new round of eminent domain that will displace over 80 families from their homes. The city's right to invoke eminent domain derives from the Takings Clause in the US Constitution and gives governments the right to confiscate people's property for the "public good."

The US Supreme Court affirmed the right of governments to confiscate (aka "landjack") personal property when it handed down *Kelo v. City of New London* in 2005. The ruling sanctioned and sanctified displacement and dispossession even when carried out by private developers and entities such as the East Baltimore Development Initiative (EBDI) or Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions.

Displacement and dispossession, of course, are as American as apple pie. Historical examples abound, but a few include:

- the resettlement of American Indians to reservations and the Trail of Tears
-

racial terrorism and mob murder which destroyed Black Wall Street in Tulsa, Oklahoma

- placing Japanese Americans in internment camps during World War II
- Johns Hopkins Institutions displacing over 800 African Americans during the Broadway Project of the 1950s (detailed in *Race, Class, Power and Organizing in East Baltimore* by Marisela Gomez)

Throughout American history, landjacking has often been accompanied by violence, whether physical or structural. The James Cameron blockbuster movie *Avatar* illustrated how corporate interests use naked force as they attempted to landjack the home of the Na'vi, the indigenous population on the planet Pandora. What *Avatar* masterfully depicts is methods that avaricious developers or corporation interests will use in order to extract resources and maximize profits.

In the movie, the corporate entity employs the use of carrots before picking up the stick. Scientists are deployed to learn about “the natives” and to discern what the Na'vi might desire in order to get them to leave their land. A school is also erected so that they can educate the “ignorant natives” and give them culture.

Displacement and dispossession in Baltimore has followed a similar pattern. In our story, Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions (JHMI) is one of many local corporate entities that use the landjacking techniques on display in *Avatar*. For years, the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions have used science to study black folk in an unethical and inhumane fashion. Some examples include the stolen cancer cells of Henrietta Lacks by Hopkins scientist George Gey as detailed in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot. Another more recent example is a study where families with small children were placed in homes with different level of [poisonous lead](#) [2]. Today, the Hopkins School of Education is the primary entity that will run the new school that is being constructed on the land of people they displaced and homes it razed or confiscated. The [Henderson-Hopkins school](#) [3] (currently the East Baltimore Community School) is used to justify their landjacking and to help dismiss criticism and protest of Hopkins' activity. “Look! We're here to help the children,” we are told.

But after displacing so many families, many of those children will not return to benefit from the new school. And what of the curriculum? Will they teach the children about displacement and dispossession? Will teachers instruct students about the damage of uprooting a people from their neighborhood, a phenomenon that researcher Mindy Fullilove calls root shock?

The Johns Hopkins example is only one among many examples of where corporate developers are changing the structure of Baltimore neighborhoods in partnership with the city. In most instances, corporate developers are using our tax dollars to subsidize their activity:

- EBDI has used over \$212.6 million of public dollars ([The Daily Record, Jan. 2011](#) [4])
- The Lexington Square Partner's “Superblock” project is slated to receive over [\\$22 million](#) [5] in public funds
-

Under Armour received \$35 million [6] to expand their Locust Point campus

Unlike *Avatar*, where corporate investors sponsor the military force who will occupy Pandora, we as taxpayers are sponsoring displacement and dispossession. We are sponsoring the multiple forms of displacement and dispossession that are reflective of American apartheid.[1]

The avarice and abject greed on display by corporate developers are not a new phenomenon. Their practices are rooted in the very foundation of America's birth and rise as a nation. Land is one of the most valuable forms of wealth (and therefore power) in a capitalistic society. Displacement and dispossession are nothing but Colonization and Manifest Destiny 2.0.

I believe where the Occupy Movement fell short in terms of inclusiveness is in articulating the way that wealth inequality is deeply rooted in American racism, racial terrorism, and white supremacy. The explosion of wealth inequality is strongly related to the struggle for land both historically and in the present day. Thus, we understand that displacement and dispossession are one of the primary drivers of wealth inequality, especially along racial lines. Now, the abuses of corporate developers, big banks, and predatory mortgage lenders threaten to destabilize the entire American economy and harm us all.

At the local level, corporate developers are too big to fail and the masses of non-wealthy people are too small to sustain. As we develop the progressive infrastructure to plant the seeds of sustainability and social justice, let us clearly proclaim that the fight against landjacking is a fight against both American racism and wealth inequality. Let us explain how displacement and dispossession have historically harmed black communities and how corporate developers given handouts in the form of taxpayer subsidies now threaten us all.

In order to win this fight, we need more advocates like Jake Sully—the protagonist in *Avatar*—who are willing to reject avarice and white privilege. Nearly every progressive should become more knowledgeable about the myriad ways which race continues to define who can stay and who must go when it comes to valuable property. We need to learn more about the multiple ways American apartheid determines who can maintain land ownership and who cannot. Progressives of all colors must reject the colorblind, racism-dodging strategy exemplified by President Obama, which ignores the wealth-negating damage that American apartheid has caused. Ultimately, landjacking is a part of the New Jim Crow, disproportionately damaging the quality of life for black folk, but increasingly locks out non-wealthy folk of all backgrounds from the multi-racial plutocratic circles of power.

NOTE:

[1] Following researcher Mindy Fullilove, I define *American apartheid* as a racist system characterized by segregation (i.e. Jim Crow), serial forced displacement, and land dispossession. The term denotes that each of these system components is enabled and enforced by government policies and participation that advantages one group (whites) while disadvantaging other groups of people (non-whites). American apartheid impacts the distribution of wealth and affects the levels of opportunity, thus having long-lasting consequences for different racial/ethnic groups.

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[1] <https://www.indyreader.org/contributor/lawrence-brown>

[2] <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2001/08/21/lead-paint.htm>

[3] <http://www.hendersonhopkins.org/K-8>

[4] <http://thedailyrecord.com/2011/02/07/resolution-on-new-east-baltimore-hearings-passes-unanimously/>

[5] <http://www.baltimorebrew.com/2012/12/03/city-council-set-to-approve-22m-in-tax-breaks-for-superblock/>

[6] http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2012-09-24/news/bs-md-ci-under-armour-tif-20120924_1_improvements-issue-bonds-council-members