Unfixing Imaginings of the City: Art, Gentrification, and Cultures of Surveillance

Phanuel Antwi and Amber Dean

Abstract

Hamilton, so frequently imagined as “the city that once worked,” is now imagined as “the city in need of fixing.” The current drive “to fix” the downtown core in particular results in narrow imaginings that endorse a “cleansing” and uniformity aimed at displacing some of the city’s most marginalized members. In this article, we examine an art exhibit that, through its deployment of images of surveillance, raises questions about the role of artists and the arts in gentrification at the local level, and leaves us asking: how do we go about unfixing the fixed images of the city, particularly of those who are imagined to live the lives of those fixed images?

Imagining Hamilton

Hamilton is a city whose fate is decided in part by the ways it is imagined. When each of us first began telling people that we were thinking of moving to Hamilton – a city of approximately 500,000 about an hour’s drive from Toronto – the reactions we received ranged from surprise to outright horror. Why would anyone move to a polluted, dirty, industrial wasteland, people wanted to know? And didn’t we know about the extensive urban poverty, the run-down, crumbling old brick buildings from the city’s heyday as an industrial hub of Central Canada, and the overabundance of factory workers (and presumed accompanying lack of potential for any sort of queer, creative, or intellectual community)? The only exception to these sorts of imaginings of the city came from those who had actually lived in Hamilton before, who tended to be much more positive and hopeful about the city and the kinds of community we each might find or build here. This discrepancy made us wonder: how is Hamilton being imagined, and why is it being imagined through these particular frameworks, or lenses?

Because Southern Ontario is a space defined largely by the practice of commuting, many people only see Hamilton as they drive over the Sky Bridge on the Queen Elizabeth Way (QEW) highway from Toronto to Niagara and

destinations beyond one of the busiest Canada/US border-crossings. The view from the bridge can confirm what many people think they already know about Hamilton: that its meaning and potential is constrained to that of a predictable and homogeneous (post-)industrial city. People who live in the city, however, view it through this lens only rarely, as the bridge and factory strip exist on the city’s outskirts and the QEW offers mainly a thoroughfare for commuters. Nonetheless, we suspect that this view contributes to conventional assumptions that the city of Hamilton is “dirty” or “ugly” or “depressing.” We also suspect that when people imagine the city this way, they are imagining more than the physical factory structures or industrial landscape. In fact, we note a recent desire to advance descriptions of the city’s cultural scene as “gritty,” and an increasing boastfulness about its working-class roots (in the form of the local “Gritlit” literature festival, or T-shirts that read “Art is the New Steel”). These recent semi-ironic cultural productions have made us think about the similarities and difference between this “grit culture” and an idealized notion of working class culture that animates the city’s imagination of itself, one that presumes a shared set of “traditional” working class values and valorizes a protestant work ethic. Both of these imaginings pit a notion of “the working-class” against, on the one hand, conventional imaginings of “high” culture and, on the other, against an imagining that might include communities struggling with extremes of poverty, homelessness, addiction or street-based sex work, the latter being considered “degenerate” and “devoid of culture.” This new turn to “grit culture” aims to stake out a middle-ground for the city of Hamilton and emphasizes precisely what so many artists who have defected from Toronto find attractive about our city: namely, very affordable gallery, loft, and work/live space. Thus, although Hamilton is imagined by many to lack a conventional cultural “scene,” there is nonetheless a growing sense that there is a unique culture here, one that is increasingly associated with the arts but gains traction because it maintains a reference to imaginings of the city’s industrial past, which, we note, is not actually “past” just yet.

Fixing the city

These nuances and contradictions come at a time when imaginings of the city as an icon of industrial urban development have been largely abandoned. Hamilton, so frequently imagined as “the city that once worked,” is now imagined as “the city in need of fixing.” The current drive “to fix” the downtown core in particular arises in connection with the anticipated arriving of the Pan-American Games in 2015. The promise of these games produces imaginings that predict international attention and tourism and an increase in the preponderance of eyes on the downtown core. Tellingly, in an interview

Let’s commit ourselves to fixing the downtown once and for all. We have to do something with the peep show, bingo parlour and thrift store. We also have to deal with the people who have taken control of downtown by squatters’ rights. They’re an undefinable group, not winos, not bums, but it’s daunting for other people who go down there. [. . .] Attitude surveys show people still think the core is unclean and unsafe, and until we change that perception we won’t have succeeded. iii

Bratina’s argument, especially apparent in the word “fixing,” imagines the city to be broken, tarnished, and requiring a collective commitment to restore it to its workable order. At the same time, his appeal to empirical data (attitude surveys) not only works to give the project of fixing its legitimacy, but also touches upon the fact that perception is singularly particular, even discriminatory, and that change in perception demands deception and determination. For example, Bratina’s statement suggests that people who are both marginalized and disenfranchised currently exercise a kind of power and control over the downtown area merely by their presence. As a result he not only wants to change people’s perceptions of downtown, he also wants to change the demography of the downtown core, the assumption being that this change will lead to a “clean and safe” attitude and space. This thinking is a hallmark of gentrification: “fixing” here means to displace supposedly undesirable people. It is, of course, the case that “fixing” is an unforgiving word. In a basic sense, fixing implies a form of deception: that displacement is a “fix” for social problems, and that “fixing up the place” therefore offers some form of solution to the persistent problems of poverty and social marginalization. At the same time, the word establishes, or fixes-in-place, key “facts” about the city. It pins down the city of Hamilton with specific knowledge, making it difficult for us to detach from this particular, fixed imagining of the city. The discourse shifts towards all sorts of people and groups imagined to be in the way of “the fix,” forgetting that the conversation is already fixed within given parameters.

The notion of “an undefinable group” – that is, a group imagined as making downtown “daunting for other people who go down there” – leaves us believing that someone has a more legitimate claim on the public space of the downtown core. As a gentrifying project designed to take us from a living, messy city (with its multiplicitous views) to home-and-business-owners’ visions of a

refined, flattened, and controlled city, the project of imagining the characters in the downtown core as "squatters" and as "undefinable" depends on more or less unquestioned conceptions of what qualifies as a street-oriented, public neighbourhood and who deserves to exist there. In reacting against people who are imagined to have undemocratically “taken control of downtown,” Bratina and his supporters do not concern themselves with the lives of those who they imagine to be a part of this amorphous, ill-defined group. So, for example, the free food servings of the radical anti-poverty group Food not Bombs, made every Saturday morning in Gore Park, at the heart of the city, might well benefit the lives of many who fall into the “undefinable group” that Bratina draws attention to, but it seems clear from his statements that the ongoing benefits of such social justice work are in jeopardy, because Food not Bombs works to bring together this “undefinable group” in a very visible way. Bratina’s concern, by contrast, is to imagine how to transform the place of the downtown space in the Hamilton imagination such that there are no longer opportunities for the “undefinable group” to congregate and thereby become visible. It’s certainly not the case that the present downtown couldn’t benefit from some civic attention, the kind that might begin to redress the unjust circumstances that leave many people living there with much more precarity in their daily lives. But the kind of “fixing” that Bratina and his cohorts have in mind is not intended to benefit the lives of the most marginalized living in downtown now. Indeed, this brand of fixing requires imagining those people right out of the picture.

Re-imagining the downtown core means, in this example, that what exists “now” vanishes into a “used to be,” emphasizing why the people there now must be done away with. Moreover, an idealized notion of civic control is glorified when controlling downtown alludes to dealing away with anyone who is seen to be roaming that public domain, anyone who is believed to be a lawless, unrefined commoner. These ongoing deals cost us the possibility of a truly shared public space, one that would include all inhabitants of the city. They also produce a mental barrier with respect to the erosion of public services, as we are invited to imagine the reduction or elimination of such services as a useful tool for reducing the “concentration” of people perceived to collectively embody a set of social problems in the downtown core.

However, when we begin to ask, “who belongs in the downtown and what criteria define the terms of their belonging,” not only do we begin to reconsider the controlling perceptions of the city of Hamilton, we also become oriented to the sociological parameters that inform a one-sided construction of the city, trapping and delimiting how it is frequently imagined.
Because of its abundance of factories, Hamilton has long been imagined as a working class city, and this imagining of the city overshadows the reality of it as also being a racialized working city. And since many (perhaps most) people in Canada believe that we live in a classless and colourblind society, it becomes a challenge for people to articulate what exactly this might mean today. As a result, when signs of a working class culture are frequently interpreted as less valuable or less desirable (read: low) forms of culture or as a lack of culture, what is concealed in this logic of interpretation is race thinking. Take, for example, Bratina’s comments in the local paper quoted above. Thrift stores, bingo halls and strip clubs may represent a lack of culture in popular imaginings, and yet, for many in this city, they represent affordable shopping and entertainment, as well as a source of employment, especially important in times of massive factory layoffs. When such forms of culture are not widely believed to qualify as “culture,” they are easily imagined as of little value, and then imagined away. This classist logic, we believe, has much to say about white racial identity, the invisible norm. The difficulty with accepting thrift stores, bingo halls, or strip clubs as forms of popular culture is not only that they contradict and offend prevailing social values and the privilege of middle-class social reformers, but that these forms of culture call to poor whites, thereby betraying the privileged place of whiteness as an unmarked, normative racial category. As a result, to trash these forms of culture as “unclean and unsafe,” and therefore in need of fixing, shows how poor marginalized whites in Hamilton are imagined (as trash) and, at the same time, calls attention to the extent to which fixing Hamilton is also a racialized project.

Creative classes

The project of re-imagining Hamilton is presently bolstered by the ideology that lies behind the work of University of Toronto-based urban planning guru Richard Florida, author of the immensely popular book The Rise of the Creative Class and inventor of the “creativity index,” a statistical method for assessing a city’s potential for economic success based on its ability to attract artists and foster an appealing cultural scene. Florida has been touted as the new champion of artists, bohemians, musicians and queers, as his research ties urban economic growth and development to both the presence of a “Creative Class” (vaguely defined as being composed of people who employ some form of creativity in their work life) and tolerance for diversity (measurable, according to Florida, in part by how well a city treats its gay population). Florida’s Creative Economy ideology predicts that if a city can attract and retain a strong Creative Class, its economic success is virtually guaranteed. The theory proposes that the presence of the creative class will attract large companies, the high-tech
industry and investors rather than other way around, as is often assumed. What Florida cannot account for, except through token gestures towards an ill-defined notion of “social responsibility,” is the dilemma that the Creative Class maps far too neatly onto whiteness, while the “service class” required to maintain the busy schedules of creative professionals is vastly disproportionately racialized. In Florida’s work we once again see how imaginings of class are deployed to obscure what is, at its core, also a racial project.

Thanks in no small part to a recent upsurge in “Creative Class” boosterism in Hamilton, this city has lately become an attractive place for artists to work and live. There is a burgeoning arts “scene” on the main downtown thoroughfare of James Street North, where galleries have begun to outnumber the workingmen’s watering holes and Portuguese or Italian grocers that once predominated in this working class, immigrant neighbourhood. One might hope that this would provide a venue for different imaginings of the city, different ways of picturing and thinking about the city that challenge conventional frameworks. No doubt some such re-imagining work is taking place. However, the most well-publicized and talked about re-presentations of the city in spaces for art on James North have worked primarily to bolster conventional frameworks that give evidence of poverty and neglect as signs that the city is lacking in spaces for “culture.” In line with Florida’s prophesies, “Culture” (as in “arts and culture,” which we might also call big “C” Culture) is imagined as inherently good for the city and its residents. This logic becomes clearer when we look closely at a recent art exhibit launched in a gallery at the heart of the James Street North “scene.”

The exhibit “The Hood, the Bad and the Ugly” (which showed at the you me gallery on James North August 14 to September 6, 2009 and received a fair bit of - primarily positive - attention in the local press[vi]) mobilized conventional frameworks for imagining Hamilton – and particularly Hamilton’s downtown neighbourhoods – to make claims for the superiority and inherent good of big “C” Culture and, in particular, spaces for the arts. Gary Santucci, one of five artists whose work was exhibited in this show, has been living and working in a converted warehouse and arts space in the Landsdale neighbourhood east of downtown Hamilton for several years. His contribution to this exhibit consisted of images taken by the surveillance cameras on his warehouse, as well as still photographs of abandoned storefronts and of women he assumed were engaged in soliciting for sex on the streets outside of his building. All of the images were taken (and exhibited) without the knowledge or consent of the people whose images they “fix.” Similarly, mobilizing and speaking to conventional imaginings of Hamilton’s inner-city, artist James Chambers

exhibited an enlarged image of the downtown area borrowed from a website that tracks locations where crime happens and notes the type of crime that took place. Unfortunately, the other artists in the exhibition whose work did more to challenge conventional frameworks for imagining the inner city received little critical attention or commentary in the local paper. Their work was made to take a backseat to Santucci’s contribution, which, according to the gallery’s website, was the flagship of the exhibition.

We should say here that we’re not interested in guessing at the intentions of these artists. Rather, we’re concerned with the way they draw on and reinforce common imaginings of the city’s core. Santucci is currently in a protracted and widely publicized battle with the city to secure proper zoning for his work/live art space. Given this history, his exhibit of stereotypical images of inner-city “degeneracy” can be read as a way of pointing a finger back at the city – as if to say, ‘this is what passes for culture in this neighbourhood? And you want to make it difficult for me to run my business?’ At the artist’s talk that accompanied the exhibit, Chambers expressed a similar sentiment when he complained about the number of social services operating in his James North neighbourhood and worried aloud that the local “character” would scare away wealthier gallery-goers from nearby Burlington, a posh, bedroom community a short distance down the QEW from Hamilton. Neither artist expressed any concern about the long history of artists’ contributions to gentrification, occurring when artists move into impoverished urban neighbourhoods and contribute (sometimes unintentionally) to the displacement of those who previously called the area home, which of course frequently leads to their own eventual displacement as property and rental prices inflate.

Art exhibits like this re-present Hamilton to Hamiltonians (and others) in ways that reinforce the most conventional ways the city is imagined: as a real life version of Batman’s crime-ridden, anarchic Gotham City with little to offer in the way of culture or community. Any effort to bring Culture to this presumed wasteland, then, is imagined as inherently good for the city and the people who live here. In the face of widespread imaginings that there is no culture of any value in Hamilton, it becomes extremely difficult to critically evaluate what kinds of big “C” “Culture” are being celebrated and what kinds of social change they are likely to inspire. We are not trying to argue that the cultures of drug dealing or street-based, survival sex work that do exist in Hamilton’s downtown require no intervention or that they should be validated and preserved in their current form. But we are concerned with the kinds of interventions that imaginings like those of Bratina, Santucci and Chambers suggest: namely, that these “undesirable” activities should be cleared away in the interests of making unfettered space for

big “C” Culture (and, a la Florida, the accompanying economic growth and social prosperity). We’re concerned that those imaginings that posit big “C” Culture as inherently good for the city and its residents don’t consider how those most impacted by the unjust and uneven effects of urban poverty might imagine the city’s economic priorities quite differently. The poverty that has come to characterize working-class cities in (post)-industrial North America is seldom linked to the neoliberal economic imagination, with its emphasis on free trade outsourcing and the supremacy of profit and business. Instead, this poverty is frequently imagined as inherent to industry-based cities, which simply haven’t done enough to re-invigorate or diversify their economies. Imaginings like Santucci’s and Chamber’s (or Bratina’s, for that matter) posit that those people whose lives are eked out through street-based cultures are just another aspect of the decrepit streetscape, equivalent to the crumbling, boarded-up buildings. Whether one is taking and exhibiting an image of a building or a person, the same principles are considered to apply. For example, the people in Santucci’s surveillance images are imagined as just another part of the derelict streetscape, requiring clearance. Any claims those people might make about how or if their images ought to be exhibited as “art” are made to appear as unnecessary or unthinkable: they are a part of the landscape, and if the landscape is to be changed to make way for big “C” Cultural institutions and practices, then the imaginings or desires that such people might hold for the spaces from which they are to be cleared are deemed largely inconsequential.

Imaginings like these should give us pause. We would argue that they are an indication that the city remains haunted by a past with claims on the present that continue to be disavowed. For the frameworks deployed to suggest that the urban, working class culture of Hamilton lacks the cachet of big “C” Culture and therefore isn’t worth preserving resemble nineteenth century arguments about the supposed lack of Culture to be found in indigenous communities in Canada and elsewhere. In the logic of colonialism, this lack of Culture justified a massive displacement of indigenous peoples and widespread destruction of indigenous cultures and languages. The return of an imagined “Culturelessness,” especially on this land, requires interrogation. It’s not a coincidence, for example, that people experiencing homelessness and urban poverty or doing street sex work in Hamilton are disproportionately of indigenous ancestry. As geographer Neil Smith argues in his influential work on the politics of gentrification:

[T]he term “urban pioneer” [often used to describe those imagined as the desirable new occupants of a “revitalized” inner city] is therefore as arrogant as the original notion of “pioneers” in that it

suggests a city not yet socially inhabited; like Native Americans, the urban working class is seen as less than social, a part of the physical environment.\textsuperscript{vii}

The connections between Hamilton’s histories of colonization and the ongoing displacements of the city’s inner city neighbourhoods are themselves displaced by the representational practices we’ve discussed thus far. In this way, gentrification is made to appear to be more about poverty or class and its character as a racial project remains hidden.

Will Heikoop, one of the artists in the exhibition whose work was unfortunately overshadowed by the attention paid to Chamber’s and Santucci’s conventional, stereotypical imaginings of Hamilton, exhibited photographs that invited viewers to imagine the spaces of Hamilton’s downtown through a somewhat different lens. Heikoop’s photographs depict not the people subject to surveillance but the spaces where surveillance happens, including a series of doorways and windows attached to buildings clearly marked by signs that read “under surveillance.” By presenting viewers with a series of such spaces, Heikoop’s images turn the gaze back on those who are doing the surveilling and invite us, as viewers, to re-imagine what we believe is sinister about the inner city. Could it be that the act of surveillance itself, with its usual goals of social control and “cleaning up” streetscapes for business and gentrification frames the streets as “degenerate” in popular imaginings, regardless of what forms of culture might unfold there? In other words, does surveillance not (only) capture but (also) create the problems that must be “fixed”? Heikoop’s art subtly offers a foil to the politics of the surveillance practices at work in Santucci’s representations, thereby challenging the inherent good of big-C Culture and its promises. Taken a step further, Heikoop’s shifted gaze invites us, as consumers of these conventional imaginings of Hamilton, to turn the lens back on ourselves and our own assumptions about the right to the city and the displacements that have for centuries been rationalized by narrow imaginings of what qualifies as “culture.”

Radical reimaginings

In the end, we are not opposed to re-imagining the city, nor do we believe that anyone, even those who posit the troubling imaginings we’ve critiqued above, should be excluded from this process. But we are interested in what it is that sparks people’s imaginings of the city, and concerned about whose imaginings are given priority. We are opposed to imaginings that fix a common measure of value, since the idea of a fixable city rests on the belief that only certain

members in that city are capable of imagining it otherwise, that only certain imaginings are worthwhile. The issue for us is not whether a community should change but how change can be introduced into a lived environment without it ignoring the imaginings or ruining the lives and culture of those who have long lived in a particular neighbourhood. With this in mind, we are less interested in the question, “what is it about the city of Hamilton that needs fixing?” and are instead preoccupied with the question “how do we go about unfixing the fixed images of the city, particularly of those who are imagined to live the lives of those fixed images?” These questions are urgent because recent revitalization initiatives from municipal officials and downtown boosters are increasingly turning the city of Hamilton into a city of clearance, a city where you either fix things or shut them down. As a result, we are compelled by artistic, political and pedagogical projects that work to unfix the fixed images of the city, thereby challenging us to reconsider the ways that cities get re-imagined, and for whose benefit.

Endnotes

Phanuel Antwi is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University. His research interests include Canadian literature and culture, material culture, postcolonialism, community-based cultural production, and critical race and gender studies. His articles have appeared in Studies in Canadian Literature and PRECIPe: A Literary Journal. He is also a co-editor of an upcoming special issue on the theme of “Postcolonial Intimacies” for Intervention: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies.

Amber Dean is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University. Her research interests include visual cultures of poverty, suffering and loss and feminist, indigenous and decolonizing perspectives on reconciliation and justice. She is the author of several articles and essays in publications such as Canadian Woman Studies; Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies; and, with Kara Granzow, in Topia and Fuse Magazine. In 2007, Dean co-edited, with Anne Stone, a special issue of West Coast Line on representations of murdered and missing women.

While layoffs over the last two decades have reduced the number of Hamiltonians employed in the factories, the many factories that remain nonetheless still offer a significant source of employment in the city.


v For signs of Creative Class boosterism at work in Hamilton, see http://creativehamilton.ca/


References


Hamilton Creative City Initiative, Phase Two. See http://creativehamilton.ca/


---. “Should we see the faces of prostitution?” The Hamilton Spectator, September 17, 2009, available online at http://www.thespec.com/article/634492


