

Reflection on "On the Streets of Harlem, a Sense of 'Erase and Replace'" - Justin Okpara
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During my time at UMBC, I have taken about seven different art history classes, each covering a different aspect or form of art. How many of these classes talked about black artists? Three. Before you start thinking that this doesn't sound too bad, let me drop a few more numbers. Out of these three classes that did talk about black artists, within the span of a two hour and thirty-minute class, it usually took the professor less than an hour to cover black artists. Now, let's put this on a bigger scale. There are fifteen weeks in a semester, and these classes would take place once a week. This brings us to a total of thirty-seven hours and thirty minutes of class time. So for one class alone, out of thirty-seven hours and thirty minutes of class time, one hour was dedicated to black artists and thirty-six hours and thirty minutes were dedicated to white artists. If this doesn't scream every single word that has been associated with the plight of black people I don't know what will.

Mr. Bey's work highlights how the rich black culture that has dominated and elevated Harlem for so long is slowly being erased and replaced with white culture. In relation to what is happening in our education system, I believe that erasure is too soft of a term. Black history was and continues to be destroyed and replaced by narratives of the majority. A part of the reason why black history is not given the same attention that white history gets is that so much of it has been lost. In the past, those that had the resources to preserve and record history clearly did not think that black history was worth remembering. As a result of this, we are left with several pages missing from a story that could have been complete and beautiful.

I did not find out what gentrification was because of school, I found out what it was because my sister pointed out the sharp and calculated rise in the number of Starbucks cafes in our area. Gentrification is not being talked about enough in our education system and when it is, this phenomenon is usually not presented in a negative light. This is quite alarming to me due to how similar it is to redlining. Baltimore is a great example of both redlining and gentrification. Whenever I tell a person not from Maryland that my school is in Baltimore I usually get an "Oh isn't it dangerous there?" The answer to that question is both yes and no because there are parts of Baltimore full of violence and there are parts of Baltimore that are so free of it that you start to question if you're still in Baltimore. When you live in a place as safe as UMBC it can be very easy to ignore the violence and striking poverty that is no more than twenty minutes away from you. And when you refuse to acknowledge that something so devastating as gentrification is taking place, you are enabling its progression and prosperity.

As a visual artist, I personally feel like it's my responsibility to bring light to issues such as these and make sure that they cannot be ignored. The reason that I love art is that it's a powerful outlet to broadcast your voice and express yourself to the world. So as a black man who is directly affected by systemic racism and oppression, I would be doing myself, my family, my friends, and my black brothers and sisters a huge disservice if I did not use my platform to fight for our rights.