“Know Austin, Love Austin: Clarksville”

“They do want to remain together in the same sweet spirit as a community, as they have if there's any way possible to do it.”

These are the words of an elderly gentleman interviewed in 1970 about the fate of his Clarksville community. Clarksville is one Austin's most emblematic cases of the organized seizure and displacement of Black people from their communities.

While the Clarksville case may seemingly be unique, we must understand that the case of Clarksville is representative of many Black communities in the city of Austin, the state of Texas, the United States, and beyond. In the most extreme sense, Clarksville embodies what I like to call the “preservation of Black history without the preservation of Black people.”

At the core of what I’m asking us to ask is who owns history? Or can history be owned? If so, who is it to benefit from its ownership? Well, in order to answer these questions, I think we must take a look at history.

Clarksville’s roots are deeply seated in the self-determination of formerly enslaved African people who wanted something of their own. They were determined to create their own community where they could be and become the people they always wanted to be.

Mainstream accounts will credit the said benevolence of people like Governor Elisha Pease, who gave land to people he held in bondage, and I quote, for their “good and loyal service.” This “good and loyal service” was being attributed to race-based enslavement. Nothing less than a part of a dehumanizing institution that reduced the individual to a piece of property—one that must render labor, render service lest be sold away from friends, family, and other loved ones. Therefore, whether formerly enslaved African persons or their descendants were granted land or purchased it with their own resources, the hundreds of years of their labor, which was free, guaranteed the wealth of the individuals in positions to sell or grant land to any individual.

Nonetheless, these newly emancipated persons set out to create their own community, which we now call Freedom Colonies or Freedom Towns. And in 1871, Charles Clark, a newly emancipated African person, purchased two acres of land from Confederate General Nathan Shelley and went on to sell plots to other liberated African persons and their descendants and a community was formed.

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It was named for Charles Clark, the man who decided Clarksville would be a place where Black men, women, and children could reunite with their families and friends, torn apart during slavery. As more Black families arrived in the area, Clark's visions guided them. He wanted them to direct their own lives and freely practice their religion away from the gaze of the establishment. It was theirs.

They were united by a shared history of being reduced to a condition, being “enslaved” and never “a slave,” and they were determined to be someone—to become citizens of the United States of America on their own terms. And that's what they did.

In Clarksville lived prominent figures such as Elias Mayes, a Black state of Texas Legislators during Reconstruction. There also lived many “extraordinary-ordinary people,” people who history had seemed to forgot. But these washerwomen, horse shoers, blacksmiths, preachers, domestic workers, bricklayers, and farmers live on in their descendants, and they lived on within every function of this city that could not have survived without their labor.

Clarksville was like the more than 500 Freedom Colonies that existed in the state of Texas, a number which exceeds any other state in the country. But, I'm cautious to state that figure as a matter of fact because, in many instances, established Black communities were not recorded in the ledgers of mainstream history due to resistance on their part and denial of who they were by the larger society. Perhaps it was only three-fifths of the actual number. Who really knows?

Many Freedom Colonies attempted to be as self-reliant as possible because they understood that mainstream society wouldn't give them a fair opportunity. So they operated independently and, as a result, the architects of this country's history did not recognize their histories. If the history of places like Clarksville were to remain, it would be through its people. And that's exactly what happened.

When the City of Austin made the decision to become what is renowned for today—a place of pristine green natural spaces, the center of knowledge production and innovative technology—they faced a problem. Black people and their communities dispersed in various parts of the city, stood as a challenge to them achieving their goals.

The city’s solution to this challenge was the creation of the 1928 Master Plan, which designated the area east of East Avenue, or present day I-35, to become the “Negro District,” where all services for Black people were to be located. It was a deliberate and strategic decision to force Black people to move into East Austin. Those residents and community members that decided to remain in place were denied services and public investment.

Clarksville's present legacy is usually defined by the longtime resistance and activism of residents to fight against this displacement and remain in their West Austin neighborhood. Clarksville's residents employed many strategies to remain together in the "same sweet spirit as a community as they always" had since 1871. They petitioned the city. They organized. They protested. But they were still under threat more than 100 years following Clarksville's foundation. The construction of the MoPac Expressway destroyed all the communities' homes west of the Missouri Pacific Railroad. An additional plan to construct another expressway through the neighborhood followed.

One of the strategies the Clarksville residents employed to prevent the further destruction of their community was filing for historic preservation. They pulled on the fact that they had been there for over 100 years and they had built a community. They highlighted important places like Sweet Home Missionary Baptist Church—what it meant to the community, what it meant to the city, and the state.

Their efforts at historic preservation were successful and Clarksville was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

However, currently, very few Black residents remain in Clarksville. Mainstream narratives tell us that Clarksville's proximity to downtown has fueled the increased property values and the gentrification of the area. But what is often discounted within this narrative and rhetoric is the central role that race plays in determining property value, and specifically the amount of Black people that live within a neighborhood and its proximity to other Black enclaves.

So now if we come back, looking at the history of Clarksville and return to my earlier questions of can history be owned, and if so, who benefits from its ownership?

Clarksville is now seen as a safe space to learn about Black history and Black people absent of the actual Black people. Now, newer residents, often without the over 100 years of history connected to the neighborhood, own and profit from the neighborhood's history and former people. There are material benefits such as tax breaks that come with historic preservation that the earlier residents were able to achieve.

With that, I'll end with a quote from Mr. Seymour Washington, a former Clarksville resident in 1970 as MoPac was slated to be built through his neighborhood.

He said, "You can't stop progress. Progress is going on, regardless of what people say you can't stop progress. If it's coming through here, it's just coming through. And it's not anything we can do about it. If

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you have to move, you have to move .... Don't know where to go. Just got to find a place just like a rabbit find him a new home in the grass."

History is property. Who owns Clarksville's property?

"Woe to those who devise iniquity ... Because it is in the power of their hand. They covet fields and take them by violence, also houses, and seize them. So they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance." (Micah 2:1-2 ESV)

In many ways, place is as important to belonging as people. There's something special about being able to call a people family and a place home. This innate desire we have to belong to a people and have a place to call our own is no accident or surprise. It's in our very genesis. God created mankind, a people, in a place, the Garden of Eden. From the onset of creation, we have been connected to the intimate reality of being in relationship with fellow image-bearers in a setting that provides opportunity for us to live out the life we have been blessed with in community. For many of the black people who leaned into one another for community and called the neighborhood of Clarksville home, this sacred reality of belonging was unjustly taken from them. Due to the onslaught of systematic disenfranchisement through gentrification and the racialized reality of increased property values, the people of Clarksville and the place itself suffered immense destruction.

This reality grieves the heart of God and He does not take lightly to the injustice that was imposed upon our brothers and sisters.

In my earlier reading, we hear God speaking through the prophet Micah as He gives a divine invocation on those who maintain a social order that deprives families of the intergenerational wealth afforded them by real property and the opportunity to call a place home and a people, family.

God cares about our lived experiences, our spiritual and physical flourishing, and He will not ignore injustice. As the people of God, we ought to reflect the heart of God in all that we do. So, as you consider the history of the Clarksville neighborhood and the people who once called it home, how can the practice of lament and advocacy serve to reflect the heart of God in our city? What must it have been like for countless families to have been robbed of their homes and subsequently their inheritance? The men and women who endured the intentional terror of being driven out of their Garden of Eden are not an afterthought in the mind and heart of God. Our heavenly Father cares, His justice will come down like a mighty stream, and His people, the church of Jesus Christ, will be the conduits through which it does. God's march towards redemption has not stopped and we are invited to keep on marching with Him.

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As we turn to prayer, I want to invite you to consider who our God is. Specifically, that He is a God of justice. What does that mean? Why does it matter? And why is it good news for His people? Allow the gospel to shape this prayer as you consider the good news message is the truth that we were afforded reconciliation to God through the price His son paid on our behalf for our sins to satisfy God's need for justice. Call to mind this gospel truth and the ways that this informs our understanding of who our God is. You can pray now.

Now take time to consider the history, the lived reality, and the consequences of sin against our Black brothers and sisters that Javier so brilliantly unpacked for us. Lament the injustices of the past, their lingering effects on the present, and the ways in which those have gone unaddressed in our city to this day. Ask the Lord to give conviction, particularly for our leaders, leaders who are in positions of power in our church, in workplaces across our city, and in our local government. Ask the Lord to give them hearts of repentance and that justice, where it's due in the eyes of God, will be. You can pray now.

Lastly, call to mind our Black brothers and sisters who have had to navigate the subsequent consequences of this historic sin. Pray for the Clarksville community and that God would restore what was lost. If you are a person of color, take this space now to take your burdens before God. Know that He hears you, that you are loved by Him and by your church family. We serve an incarnational God and He is with us, always, in our suffering. You can pray now.

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