

The Myth That Will Not Die

Written by David Villano, Special to the BT
February 2020

Yes, some of Miami's gritty urban areas are gentrifying, but no, it's not because of climate change



In his past November, radio and podcast listeners tuned in across America to *There Goes the Neighborhood*, a 90-minute, three-part series produced by WNYC, New York's public radio station, that blames sea level rise for the affordable-housing crisis and ensuing economic diaspora of Miami's Little Haiti. Miami-based reporter Nadege Green, who collaborated on the series, argues that developers and land speculators are furtively targeting the area for its prime location along a geologic ridge that tops ten feet -- far higher than the city's flood-prone coastal areas.

A Harvard researcher has termed this race to cheap high ground "climate gentrification," and the smoking gun, here in Little Haiti, is produced early and sensationally in the series' first segment, when Green informs the researcher that she's identified a company that is buying up Little Haiti real estate. Its name? Premium Elevation.

"What?! Are you serious?" responds Harvard's Jesse Keenan, oddly surprised by what appears to confirm (anecdotally, at least) his climate gentrification theory.

Green: "Not kidding you."

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Keenan: “Oh, my god.”

Green: “When I found that, I was just like -- it speaks to your point, that even if you’re not saying for sure this is a thing, that people are thinking about this. People are thinking about this.



Keenan: “That’s the most real thing I’ve heard in a long time.”

Unfortunately, Keenan is not the only one surprised and rendered somewhat speechless by Green’s dramatic pronouncement.

Premium Elevation, a quick online records search reveals, is a company registered to 64-year-old Miami Gardens resident Arnold Coats, who, in a recent interview with the *BT*, says he picked the business name -- way back in 2008, long before the area’s prices began skyrocketing -- simply because one of two properties he owned is a two-story duplex on NW 2nd Court with a fine view from the second floor. He’s owned the duplex since 1998; the other property, a single-family home on NW 83rd Street, since 2011.

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“Wow, this is amazing,” says the chatty and affable Coats when told he and his company had been branded a predatory high-ground land speculator. “Climate gentri... Can you tell me what all that means? Man, this is just crazy.”

It’s been nearly three years since Keenan began promoting his headline-grabbing theory that a subtle yet concerted retreat to higher ground was driving the gentrification of Miami’s urban, inland neighborhoods. With every flooded street in Miami Beach and each breached seawall in coastal Miami, he posited, the smart money flows west, pushing out the poor and disenfranchised who have long occupied the higher elevations there. “It just turns out that the cheapest parts of town farthest from the beach are the highest elevation,” Keenan told the online trade journal *E&E News* back in May 2017. “And now they’re worth a lot more than they used to be. That’s it, it’s that simple.”



A year later he bolstered his argument with a peer-reviewed study showing coastal and lower-elevation property values throughout Miami-Dade rising at a slower rate than those on higher ground.

In the study, “Climate gentrification: from theory to empiricism in Miami-Dade County, Florida” (April 2018), Keenan cautions that his theory, as it applies to Miami, is still just that: a conjecture in need of more research. And yet few people -- not least within the news media -- appear to be listening.

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Property values have risen in Little Haiti and surrounding areas because land there is still cheaper than in Wynwood, the Design District, and just about anywhere else near the urban core of a city flush with investment dollars, a growing population, and where building sites are increasingly scarce. While the study does show a *correlation* between higher elevations and higher rates of increased property values, it does not show

causation

-- that Little Haiti property values have soared

because

of its elevation.

Keenan does acknowledge the difference, through he hedges his statistical bets. The evidence shows an increasing demand for high ground, his study concludes, which “may lead to more widespread relocations that serve to gentrify higher elevation communities.” And yet he also cautions that “it is difficult to identify the effect of elevation on price appreciation independent of other variables.” While the ambiguity may have been lost on local and national news media, not everyone here accepts his climate gentrification theory as irrefutable fact.

Investor and developer interest in the neighborhoods north of downtown are “just the natural progression of growth -- just the next exit farther from town,” says Jim Fried of Sandstone Realty Advisors and a recent candidate for a Miami city commission seat. He calls it: “Your garden-variety gentrification,” not tied to elevation.



And this from Ines Hegedus-Garcia, past president of the Miami Association of Realtors: “What is happening in the areas in question, like Little Haiti, Allapattah, and other urban areas of

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Miami, is simple gentrification that is not associated with higher elevations. The affordability factor is what is most attractive about these areas.”

What’s more, adds Peter Ehrlich, who began investing in Little Haiti real estate in the 1990s, back when it was still known as Lemon City, property values in the area have actually declined over the past year and a half, squeezing some debt-burdened landlords. He too debunks the climate gentrification theory: “I’ve seen no evidence that buyers have invested in the Lemon City, Little River, and Little Haiti areas because those neighborhoods sit on high ground. Buyers are attracted to the proximity to Biscayne Boulevard, the Design District, and to I-95. Climate gentrification? Nice buzz word, but I’m still looking for evidence it exists, at least in Miami.”

Hugh Gladwin, a recently retired anthropology professor at Florida International University who has studied the link between housing and climate resilience planning in Miami-Dade, says in an e-mail that he has stopped giving interviews on the subject of climate gentrification -- in a kind of frustrated protest -- calling it a “symbolic piece in the picture of lack of workforce housing and old-fashioned gentrification going on in South Florida.”

Researchers at the University of Miami also doubt the link between elevation and property values in Miami. “Eighteen months ago this was an interesting idea, but we’ve really seen no data to support it,” says Sam Purkis, chairman of the Department of Marine Geosciences and a member of a cross-disciplinary team at the university studying how communities respond to climate risks at a hyper-local level.

Purkis, a marine geologist, isn’t surprised by the lack of evidence. He says anyone banking on Miami’s high ground to offer sanctuary from the rising seas would be throwing good money after bad. The periodic flooding and increased storm frequency and intensity -- the effects of which we are beginning to feel -- will take a monumental toll on sewer and water systems, roads, bridges, fiber optic systems, and other municipal infrastructure that city residents -- rich and poor alike -- take for granted. “Miami is not going to be a pretty place to live, whatever the elevation,” Purkis predicts.

And yet the myth will not die.

In the past year alone, virtually every major national news organization has chronicled the plight

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of Miami's low-income, mostly minority populations, those cast adrift by redevelopment and rising housing costs, with headlines such as: "Miami's Little Haiti wasn't a target for developers -- until the seas started to rise" (CNN); "Rising Risks: 'Climate gentrification' is changing Miami real estate values -- for better and worse" (CNBC); "As climate change hits Miami, only the rich will be able to protect themselves" (HuffPost); and this NPR report, also from Miami reporter Nadege Green, posted just last December: "As Miami faces threats from sea level rise, some worry about climate gentrification."

The *Miami Herald* joined in with a prominent Sunday story by Green on November 10, 2019. Its headline: "Climate Gentrification: Elevation that protects against sea-level rise is becoming a factor in neighborhood investment." (Green declined comment on her reporting and on the feedback she's received, saying that's the role of readers and radio listeners.)

Robert Gutsche, a former FIU communications professor now at Lancaster University in the UK, has studied and published on the interface of national and local news media in the coverage of climate change in Miami. He says the climate gentrification story has followed a predictable pattern here, with the local news outlets conceding their reportorial authority and embracing the more superficial, sensational reporting of the national press.

"It should be the opposite, with local reporters taking the lead, digging deeper," says Gutsche. He calls Miami's local reporting on climate issues a "regurgitation of national news."

City of Miami officials appear in no hurry to set the record straight. In November 2018, city commissioners responded to the storm of negative press -- and the social justice demands it spawned -- by kicking the can a bit and ordering an in-house study to gauge the impact of climate-related displacement within low-income communities. But rather than debunk, once and for all, climate gentrification in Miami, the report largely sidestepped the issue, instead summarizing the Harvard study and providing a primer on Miami's development landscape and generic solutions to the affordable-housing crisis. About the most definitive and damaging assessment of Keenan's high-ground hypotheses is this, buried deep in the report: "The narrative of the city's own residents causing climate gentrification will be a complex case to make."

And yet last November, Miami-Dade County Commissioner Xavier Suarez gave it a go in a *Miami Herald* op-ed he titled "We can reverse climate gentrification, keeping long-time residents from being

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displaced.”

Even the city’s field research for its year-long study generated little evidence to back up Keenan. At a public workshop this past September -- promoted with an event name that might have biased any data it produced: “Climate Gentrification Workshop” -- participants did not list “climate” or “elevation” among the key factors they believe most influenced gentrification.

Sue Trone, a senior planning department official at the City of Miami and a co-author of the study, says she and other planning officials were not entirely surprised that workshop participants focused more on traditional drivers of gentrification: politics, local economic conditions, land scarcity, and housing inventory were all mentioned.

“Even Keenan says climate is just one of a number of factors to consider, one of many,” offers Trone. “It’s a very difficult thing to parse out.” (Keenan did not respond to requests for comment for this article.)

Affordable housing advocates and others promoting urban social justice in Miami all agree -- the causes of rising rents, redevelopment pressures, local migration patterns, and changing community dynamics are multifactorial. And yet the threat of climate-induced displacement simplifies and clarifies the struggle. While elevation may (or may not) be among the factors driving development decisions, the rallying cry of climate gentrification neatly shifts the debate from one of fairness to one of historic entitlement, and with a very tangible, definable prize at stake: high ground. The absence of hard evidence is no match for moral authority.

“I am 100 percent sure that [climate gentrification] is happening all over Little Haiti and other communities like this because of their elevation. There is just so much evidence,” says Community Justice Project’s Denise Gharthey, a Harvard-trained lawyer who moved here from New York last summer to tackle “climate gentrification and racial justice” causes.

Like other activists, Gharthey proposes a familiar grab bag of policy remedies (nothing specific to elevation) to mitigate the effects, helping residents weather the market forces of change: community land trusts, luxury- and second-home taxes, inclusionary zoning rules, mandatory displacement studies for new developments, and repeal of the Special Area Plan (SAP) provisions in Miami’s zoning code that encourage the accumulation of large parcels for mega

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developments.

Jessica Saint-Fleur is a Little Haiti native who works with the community organizing group Engage Miami. She counts herself among those who believe her neighborhood and others nearby are caught in a great high-ground land rush, and anyone who thinks otherwise is something of a climate-gentrification denier. “Rents are going up, people are being forced out of their homes, people are being harassed into selling their properties. It’s pretty clear what’s going on.”

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