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Revaluing Places: Hidden Histories from the Margins

Angel David Nieves



As a fourth-generation Washingtonian who lives in the same house in which my grandparents raised my father and his brothers and sisters, I am intimately aware of what this neighborhood has meant to this city generally, and African Americans in particular. I am also sufficiently versed in the history of this community to know that the “Little Ethiopia” proposal is an attempt to attach a label to this community that is not supported by the historical record.¹

These sentiments, expressed by a local blogger, reflect tensions surrounding the effort to designate an area in the Greater U Street/Shaw neighborhood of Washington, D.C., as “Little Ethiopia.” The direct subject of the quote is an on-line petition that exhorts readers to support the renaming of a once largely abandoned retail corridor along Ninth Street.² More than seventeen hundred people have signed the petition, circulated by Tamrat G. Medhin, chairman of the Ethiopian-American Constituency Foun-

ation. Others, however, see the effort as historically unjustified, and “a slap in the face to the memory of all the important African-American individuals, organizations, and institutions that have made that neighborhood great.”³

In specific terms, the proposal under review by the Washington, D.C., Council would allow the name Little Ethiopia to be posted on street signs and on placards in the windows of area businesses.⁴ But, more generally, it illustrates the difficulties facing cultural-heritage professionals, like preservationists, in the new multicultural urban centers of the United States. Where once there was consensus as to what constituted America’s urban heritage, this is now being contested as new immigrant groups stake claims to neighborhoods formerly associated with older marginalized groups.

Above: Little Ethiopia. Streetscape along Ninth Street NW, Washington, D.C.



Ninth and U Streets: The Making of Little Ethiopia

Known as “Black Broadway,” Ninth Street Northwest between T and U Streets was once a cultural hub of African-American history and culture. Black-owned businesses there, such as Ben’s Chili Bowl and Lee’s Flower Shop, helped sustain the surrounding area after the 1968 riots and during the long years of construction of the underground Metro line. Previous large-scale regeneration efforts in the area have been unsuccessful, partially because of the large number of absentee landlords. Fueled in part, by an influx of Ethiopian immigrants, dozens of jazz clubs, movie theaters, restaurants, and entertainment venues have

Above: Cultural Tourism DC (CTDC) street signage along Ninth and U Streets NW, Washington, D.C.

Opposite: One of the many new family-owned restaurants found in Little Ethiopia, Etete (or “mama” in Amharic) Ethiopian Cuisine Restaurant, 1942 Ninth Street NW.

reopened, and important U Street buildings such as the Lincoln Theater, Bohemian Caverns, and Industrial Bank have been rehabilitated.⁵

The revitalization trend began during the 1980s with the opening of restaurants by foreign-born businessmen along 18th Street NW in Adams Morgan. As one restaurant owner stated: “We bought abandoned buildings, rebuilt them and cleaned this area up to make it what it is.” In recent years, Ethiopians have opened as many as ten restaurants east of Thirteenth Street and along Ninth Street, between T and U Streets Northwest.⁶

One of these is Yared Tesfaye, co-owner of Etete Ethiopian Cuisine, on Ninth Street, downstairs from a new Ethiopian-owned hair salon. “This block was a dead block,” he explained in a *Washington Post* article. “There was no money being generated for the city.”⁷ Now investors are pouring money into the area.

Tamrat Medhin, of the Ethiopian American Constituency Foundation, explained how this activity led to the Little Ethiopia proposal: “We’d like to get recognition from the host country for our contributions.... There are thousands of people [Ethiopians] serving in taxis, parking lots, hotels and restaurants.”⁸

Opponents of the designation, however, take a different view. They note that the Ethiopians would not have been able to stake a claim to the area without the long-lasting contributions of African Americans. Some community leaders even dismiss the Ethiopians’ campaign as completely inappropriate, arguing that the history of African Americans along U Street would be significantly overshadowed, and even erased, by designating the area Little Ethiopia.

According to Myla Moss, an Advisory Neighborhood Commission member, whose local district includes the east side of Ninth Street: “You get a gold star because you’re good entrepreneurs, but that doesn’t mean you get a whole corner.... I don’t think you’re going to have a lot of the African-American community rallying around this.”⁹

Clyde Howard, a retired manager in the U.S. Postal Service put it this way:

African Americans made U Street what it was and never once petitioned to have U Street renamed. The Prince Hall Masons wanted U Street to be Prince Hall Avenue. It was rejected and now they want to come here and identify Ethiopia. No way. It opens the door for other people who want certain segments of the city identified. I understand Chinatown because (the Chinese) were all over that area. Everybody would want a particular section named after their ethnic origin. It will open a door for a mess.¹⁰

Valuing Place

The valuing of cultural heritage as a public good lies at the center of preservation policy in the U.S. In general, it has only been when a district, building, or artifact is believed to contribute to the collective understanding of what it means to be American that the case can be made to raise taxes or divert resources from other needs to protect it.

Recently, however, urban and regional development agendas have come to be dominated by concern for sustainable development, adaptive reuse, and community capacity-building through local heritage preservation. At the same time, the population of American cities has grown increasingly diverse, as postcolonial migrations have brought new social constructions of race, class, and ethnicity. To some extent, these migrations have caused U.S. metropolitan centers to address long-standing issues of segregation, marginalization, and unfair housing practices. However, recent literature has also suggested a growing relationship between the clustering of certain visible new minority groups in urban neighborhoods and the revaluing of older urban places.¹¹

Twenty years ago, studies of segregation compared only black and white residential patterns; nowadays any such analysis is incomplete without consideration of various Latino, Asian, and African populations. For example, by 2000, one in six persons, or 17 percent of metropolitan Washington's population, was foreign born. Similar trends have allowed cities in the "New South" like New Orleans, Atlanta, and Raleigh/Durham to support regeneration projects in areas once considered lost to violent crime, prostitution, and drug trafficking.

Washington offers a particularly stark example of the impact of these trends. Neighborhoods such as Shaw, Adams Morgan, Columbia Heights, Mount Pleasant, and Penn Quarter have all become hotspots for "new urban living." Large areas of these historically African-American areas are now being reclaimed not only by white and gay urban pioneers but also by new immigrant communities. Interestingly, however, despite the progressive, neoliberal-minded professional attitudes behind them, these gentrification and regeneration trends are only increasing Washington's socio-spatial segregation.

New patterns of racial division, however, tell only part of the story. Although ethnic enclaves are, in part, the result of racism and prejudice, a new appreciation of their historic value to marginalized communities is changing the way they are perceived by cultural heritage professionals.¹² In particular, urban enclaves—areas of strong residential and commercial concentration like "Little Ethiopia"—can



help relatively new immigrant groups claim a space for themselves through the promotion of greater visibility, political empowerment, and economic gains.

San Francisco's Chinatown and New York's Little Italy are recognized as two such successful historic enclaves. Recently, other areas of the Washington metropolitan region have been singled out through informal processes, such as Annandale's Koreatown. More formally, New York has created Korea Way, in Manhattan, while Los Angeles has designated a Thai Town and a Little Armenia.

In the past, as Joseph Heathcott has written, the heritage industry has been "yoked to its own legislative successes and disappointingly narrow statutory criteria" when responding to the interpretation, management, and recording of the history of migration and immigration in the U.S.¹³ But present demographic change is challenging design and heritage professionals to develop new policies and programs that acknowledge shared histories of mar-

ginalization. These policies can encourage multiple groups occupying the same neighborhoods to unite in a common effort to lay claim to their hidden histories of struggle in opposition to segregation.

One such effort in Los Angeles may provide an important precedent for Washington's U Street. Interestingly, it has also involved the designation of an area as "Little Ethiopia." Since 2003, when the Ethiopian-American Advocacy Group (EAAG) arranged for the designation of the area (along Fairfax Avenue, between Olympic and Pico), the Fairfax Avenue Ethiopian Business District (FAEBD) has helped local merchants and property owners market a variety of initiatives and beautification projects as a way to knit together seventeen underserved ethnic enclaves.¹⁴ Here, concern for heritage as a public good has been of value to many groups, even those with seemingly competing interests.

The present tensions surrounding the Little Ethiopia proposal in Washington call out for preservationists to take a role of greater advocacy, one which recognizes the mutual benefit the groups involved might gain from cooperating with each other.

Reawakening the Passion

The field of heritage preservation has undergone a transformation in the past decade, including as it now does, the hidden histories of marginalized communities and a subsequent appreciation of the ways those communities express values, citizenship, and racial-ethnic identity. With the revaluing of places across the American cultural landscape, communities and cultures that were once resigned to invisibility are now benefiting from a new and more profound understanding on the part of both heritage professionals and the public at large.

Yet a single ethnic group's claim to urban space is no longer easily accomplished in light of competing interests in contemporary American cities. The case of Washington's Little Ethiopia is but one example of the controversies that may act as a wake-up call to heritage professionals, challenging their comfortable notions of "valuing place." The preservationist Ned Kaufman may have said it best:

*Once upon a time, historic preservation was a passionate protest. Now it's a prudent profession. The question is: Could this careful, practical, well-organized profession of historic preservation once again give rise to a movement—a passionate effort to change, in profound ways, how society imagines, preserves, and inhabits its heritage.*¹⁵

Coming to terms with what Kaufman calls the "usefulness" in the urban places that minority groups inhabit and love may recenter current debate. It might even allow a certain knowing/unknowing to occur, through which old divisions might lose their sting and contemporary groups might find new ground for cooperation.

Developing the kind of alternative interdisciplinary methodology necessary to grasp the multiple meanings of difference in the cultural landscape, while also articulating a new model for historic preservation, poses considerable challenges.¹⁶ To begin, it involves rethinking the way meaning is inscribed in the landscapes of marginalized groups—for example, where Africans and African Americans have used everyday spaces to establish a collective identity in the face of racialized oppression. Yet by examining the embedded history of these places, one can further understand how the layering of historical meaning occurs. In the contemporary built environment, immigrant groups are continuing this process, not only articulating their complex social relations with the dominant order, but inscribing new layers of cultural meaning within cities such as Washington, D.C.

Notes

1. Michael K. Fauntroy http://www.michaelfauntroy.com/2005/11/globalization_a.html (accessed January 12, 2008).
2. www.petitiononline.com/ea100/petition.html.
3. Fauntroy, http://www.michaelfauntroy.com/2005/11/globalization_a.html (accessed January 12, 2008).
4. The Washington, D.C., Council is still considering the proposal. Council members feel that there is no need to grant them a special commemoration status. Little Ethiopia is in the Greater U Street Historic district already.
5. Daniel Muhammad, Mashadi Manong, and Rodney D. Green, "Scenarios for Economic Development in an Inner City Community in the District of Columbia," *Review of Black Political Economy*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2000), pp. 82-83.
6. After the fall of Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, Ethiopian immigration to major U.S. cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Washington grew rapidly. According to the 2000 Census, 15,000 Ethiopians live in the Washington region; however, the Ethiopian Embassy disputes that number, saying as many as 120,000 live there, and others have claimed the number may be as high as 200,000.
7. Walter Nicholls, "Washington's Little Ethiopia: A New Cluster of Restaurants Brings Exotic (Yet Inexpensive) Appeal to Ninth and U Streets," *Washington Post*, May 18, 2005, p. F01.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Paul Schwartzman, "Shaw Shuns 'Little Ethiopia': Black Leaders Note Immigrants' Pride But Resist Designation," *Washington Post*, July 25, 2005, p. B01.
10. Carla Thompson, "Ethiopians in Washington: History Confronts the Future," Special to AOL Black Voices, http://ethiopianworldfederation.org/ethiopians_in_washington.html.



11. See Angel David Nieves and Leslie M. Alexander, eds., *“We Shall Independent Be”*: African American Place-Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the U.S. (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008); Heather A. Smith and Owen J. Furuseh, eds., *Latinos in the New South: Transformations of Place* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2006); and Michael A. Burayidi, ed., *Urban Planning in a Multicultural Society* (Westport, CN: Praeger, 2000).

12. Elizabeth Chacko and Ivan Cheung, “The Formation of a Contemporary Ethnic Enclave: The Case of ‘Little Ethiopia’ in Los Angeles,” in John W. Frazier and Eugene Tettey-Fio, eds., *Race, Ethnicity, and Place in a Changing America* (Global Academic Publishing, 2006), pp. 131-32, 134.

13. Joseph Heathcott, “Curating the City: Challenges for Historic Preservation in the Twenty-First Century,” *Journal of Planning History* 5, No. 1 (2006), p. 83.

14. The project received support from the California State Assembly and the Los Angeles Neighborhood Initiative (LANI). See <http://www.lani.org/FAEBD.htm> (accessed January 20, 2008).

15. Ned Kaufman, “Moving Forward: Futures for a Preservation Movement,” in *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States*

(London: Routledge, 2003), p. 313.

16. Randall Mason, “Fixing Historic Preservation: A Constructive Critique of ‘Significance,’” *Places*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2004), p. 66; and Angel David Nieves, *“We Gave Our Hearts and Lives to It”: Black Women, Industrial Schools, and Nation-Building in the New South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming), p. 273.

All photos by author.

Above: A more casual dining experience can be found at Queen Makeda Ethiopian Restaurant, 1917 Ninth Street NW.