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Decolonial ruptures of the city:
art-activism amid racialized dispossession in Oakland

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Abstract

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Since the onslaught of the 2008 recession, the newest tech boom has provoked a perfect storm of gentrification in the San Francisco Bay Area, with foreclosure, real estate speculation, rental prices and evictions rising simultaneously, causing low-income residents to be displaced from their homes at a rapid rate. In Oakland, these forces of dispossession are particularly pronounced, and this text documents this pivotal moment in the city's history, the post-recession boom of 2014 – 2016 and its affects on low-income Oakland residents of color. This project builds a contemporary archive of how art-activists of color use visual and performance art to organize against displacement, calling attention to the intersections between racial capitalist forces of gentrification and other forms of state violence, making their communities' struggles visible and creating resonant counter-narratives of the city they call home. In this text, I argue that Oakland has become a borderland, drawing from Gloria Anzaldúa, in which the tension, ambivalence and unrest of the borderlands offers a lens to understand the instability of cities gripped by rapid racialized dispossession. Utilizing the analytic of the borderlands, I

engage decolonial and Black geographic theory to comprehend the complexities of (dis)possession within Oakland, how racial capitalism continuously denies Black, Brown and Indigenous subjects full personhood, and how (dis)possession of personhood is inherently tied to conceptions of home and land. This project also complicates urban geography's understandings of the role art and artists play in gentrifying cities, as art-activists of color resist forces of redevelopment encroaching upon the city, and disrupt the notion that Oakland's geographies are in need of 'revitalization' from elsewhere. As such this text contributes to urban geographic theorizations of gentrification and creative cities, pushing discourses of creative actors and spaces, and dislocating the imaginary of low-income neighborhoods as spaces of uncreative blight. Lastly, drawing from Black geographies and decolonial thought, I cultivate the term decolonial geographies to represent the ways that artists of color rupture the racial capitalist and settler colonial order of the city. I argue that through their organizing and creative art practice, art-activists of color in Oakland are weaving decolonial geographies, calling attention to the intersecting forms of dispossession that continually seek to eviscerate their lives and presence from the landscape, and actively produce decolonial spaces in the landscapes they reside in. The spaces, performances, art and other forms of resistance being created by art-activists of color are actively decolonizing the increasingly hostile city by creating spatial and temporal ruptures for the envisioning of decolonial futures. The spaces of collective resistance and survival created by art-activists of color become tangible through the art practice, as they work to gradually disassemble colonial and racial capitalist power structures and imagine alternate futures.

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+++

“Caminante no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar” – Gloria Anzaldúa

INTRODUCTION

“Music as, among other things, a layered site of mythical, symbolic, and experiential histories; a secularizing ritual; tempos and beats that recode normative time; repurposed and shared (among a range of black and nonblack artists) texts and rhythms; intertextual; citing suffering, survival, love, happiness, revolution; a kinship-making activity.”

– Katharine McKittrick 2016: 86-87

RED MOON RISING

A group of drummers gather around Lake Merritt to honor a rare event – a total lunar eclipse. On this night in particular, the moon happens to be at its fullest and closest point to the earth, what some call a supermoon or red moon. As the moon is eclipsed by the earth’s umbra, the entity that breathes rhythms into our oceans slowly becomes shrouded in deep red hues. To some, to bear witness to this transformation is a sacred act. Regardless of one’s beliefs, the transition is awe-inspiring, and one cannot help but gaze at such a sight.

On this night of the red moon in late September, 2015, a drum circle began to form around 7 p.m. along the shores of Lake Merritt in Oakland, just before the eclipse was to begin. After drumming for around 90 minutes, a white neighbor approached them to demand that they cease drumming. The accounts of how this exchange unfolded differ greatly. Members of SambaFunk, the drumming group made up of mostly people of color, recall the man approaching them aggressively, demanding that they cease drumming immediately and that they needed a permit to be playing in the park. When the drummers responded by asking who he was and denying that they needed a permit, the man reportedly lunged at Theo Williams, the artistic director of the group, grabbing his wrists and prying the drumsticks from his hands. The man then told the group



Figure 1: Samba Funk Drummers, October 2015. Photo courtesy of Eric Arnold.

that if they didn't stop drumming he would call the police—which is exactly what he did. When the Oakland police arrived at 10 p.m., Williams stated that the drummers had already ended their drum circle for the night, but when the police entered the scene, the situation quickly escalated.

According to Williams, the police immediately took the side of the resident who had phoned them, and were hostile to the drummers from the start. “They shined a light in my face and screamed, ‘Get back, stay where you are!’....They immediately assumed that because I’m black, I’m the perpetrator....They assumed I had done something wrong.¹” The man then proceeded to tell the police he wanted to press charges against several of the drummers for assault, including individuals who had made no contact with the man, according to Williams and other members of the group. Williams responded by telling the police that he wished to press charges against the resident since it was he who had grabbed his wrists and forcibly removed the drumsticks from his hands. The dialogue continued for several hours, with more officers reporting to the scene, and eventually the resident decided not to press charges against Williams but did file

¹ Levin, S. (2015, September 15). OPD Responds to Noise Complaints by White Man Against Black Drummers at Lake Merritt, Sparks Concerns About Racial Profiling. *East Bay Express*. Retrieved from: <http://www.eastbayexpress.com/SevenDays/archives/2015/09/29/opd-responds-to-noise-complaints-by-white-man-against-black-drummers-at-lake-merritt-sparks-concerns-about-racial-profiling>

citations against two of the other drummers. One officer reportedly tried to convince Williams not to press charges against the resident, and the officer's actions prompted Williams to question, "Are you working for him or are you just out here to find out what is going on? He's coming here and flexing his white privilege and you guys are supporting that with the way you're responding."² The ordeal finally ended around 1:15 a.m., and resulted in multiple citations against the drummers and the resident himself. As Williams stated, "It looks like another one of these cases where anybody who is white and calls the police and says anything against any person of color, that person is guilty until proven innocent."³

While there have been no media reports on this incident interviewing the white resident, a man named Sean McDonald left a lengthy response on the *East Bay Express*' web version of the article quoted above, claiming to be said resident⁴. McDonald stated that the comment served as his "formal rebuttal" to the report published in the *Express*, offering his side of what had taken place. He claims that after trying to speak to several of the drummers while they played, that none of them stopped drumming, and when he approached Williams, "He looked right in my eyes, smiled in a dismissive fashion, and increased the volume and intensity of his drumming." This exchange must have infuriated McDonald, for it was then that he states he "put [his] hands on the drumsticks," which, McDonald alleges, provoked the entire group of drummers to surround him and begin to shove and yell at him. Then, McDonald states:

They hurled a number of white related racial slurs at me, and I began to back up, telling the group if they didn't want to stop drumming, I would just call the police. The intensity of the group increased dramatically at this point and the comments of "Gentrifier" and "Go

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ McDonald, S. (2015, October 2). Member Profile. *East Bay Express*. Retrieved from: Accessed 1/19/16, <http://www.eastbayexpress.com/oakland/Profile?oid=4521942>

back to Boston” (I was born in Torrance, CA and grew up in Inglewood, but whatever), among other comments were made.⁵

From there, McDonald claims that he then began to return to his apartment, but was followed by three of the drummers and harassed with questions about how long he had lived in Oakland, which is what McDonald claims provoked him to call the police.

The remainder of McDonald’s account is abound with statements seeking to deny his privilege and frame himself as a victim who continues to be “harassed and intimidated on twitter in a coordinated attack” as a result of this incident. McDonald states that while the members of SambaFunk will “call me names and accuse me of racism and white privilege,” that he would like everyone to know that he is from “a broken home to an unskilled mother,” and that he scrubbed toilets to pay his way through college. In addition, McDonald states that he has “spent years donating time and thousands of dollars of [his] own money” to at-risk kids in the Bay Area, so if “that sounds like white privilege, ok, I guess you’re right⁶.” McDonald’s statement goes on to conclude:

I ask you though: Who is it that is making statements about someone based on the color of their skin, you or me? Who is it that is continually using their own disregard for the members of this community, and their own bad behavior, to advance a false agenda of over policing and racism? Who? *This is only about being a good neighbor, and nothing more*⁷.

The degree of entitlement that McDonald reveals in his rebuttal is astounding. He offers evidence of how he couldn’t possibly possess the elusive white privilege he’s accused of in this situation, because of the alleged hardships he has lived. He dismisses the possibility that he could be playing the role of gentrifier since he is from Torrance, CA, and not a place as distant as Boston, MA. McDonald’s final attempts to frame the ordeal are especially revealing, positioning himself as a

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. Emphasis added.

rational actor who never mentions the race of the people he pressed charges against—so, therefore, how could his actions be racist?

Clearly McDonald is fluent in the language of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva 2003), and uses the classic defense mechanism of insisting he is not the one who brought race into the matter, that it was the drummers who were being racists and spreading their “false agenda of over policing and racism”. He scoffs at the idea that this encounter, and the role of the police in this encounter, has anything to do with race, even while he perpetuates a discourse of criminality that targets the drummers of color. McDonald’s degree of white entitlement enables him to disrupt a space of collective celebration and joy, use his privilege to criminalize the black and brown bodies present, and then disregard the entire encounter as being about nothing more than “being a good neighbor.” As many other commentators on the article noted, Lake Merritt has been a public space for musicians to practice their craft for decades—if McDonald didn’t like the noise that went with living alongside the lake, perhaps he should have sought out housing elsewhere. Instead, McDonald, as a resident of the neighborhood, chose to have the law uphold his rights as a white-bodied property owner (or at least a dweller of a pricey lake-front apartment), with no regard for how calling the police and bringing the law into the dispute would affect the lives of the Black and Brown drummers he pressed charges against (Cacho 2012).

When artists engaging in a celebratory exchange of rhythms are assaulted and prosecuted for their presence in public space, what does this say of the shifting meanings of this city? When acts of public joy are deemed hostile and offensive, worthy of policing, what does this say about the place Oakland is becoming? When artists of color are deemed guilty until proven innocent, how does the law defend the rights of one white property-owning body over multiple bodies of color bearing nothing but drums? How does this moment reflect the greater struggle of how Oakland has become a borderland, and how art and artists are intertwined in the gradual dispossession of Oakland’s Black and Brown geographies?

CREATIVE ERASURES

Decolonial ruptures of the city walks a complicated line. As one Oakland art-activist stated, “artists make great fertilizer for redevelopment.”⁸ Such is the narrative we are accustomed to—where artists are the initial gentrifiers of low-income urban neighborhoods and communities of color. Artists move in, open up galleries and coffee shops, and make the neighborhood trendy enough to be put on online top-cities lists. And then it is only a matter of time before developers catch on, higher-income earners move in, the neighborhood gentrifies. This is the rep that art and artists typically get in discourses of gentrification (Zukin 1987, 2008).

But that is not the only role that art and artists play in this viciously cyclical process. When artists are thought of as a homogenous group, as with most anything under racial capitalism, the absence of an identifying category implies they are white, since whiteness is signified by its neutrality or invisibility (Frankenberg 2001). In the case of Oakland, there is a long history of artists of color playing an active role in the culture and politics of the city. And this cultural and political history continues to this day, with art-activists leading struggles to defend communities of color being threatened by displacement and other forms of state-sanctioned violence across Oakland. While art and artists are often seen as a monolithic form of fertilizer for gentrifying processes, artists of color in Oakland complicate this notion. Art-activists of color are generating political momentum to actively resist gentrification in the city, to keep their homes, their families’ homes, their communities, and their culture rooted within the city of Oakland. This research project bears witness to a particularly tumultuous time in the city of Oakland, California, when the most recent and most violent wave of the tech boom engulfed the San Francisco Bay Area, and lower-income residents of the Bay struggled to remain afloat amidst a sea of intense speculation, inflation, and development.

⁸ Oakland Creative Neighbrohoods Meeting, 10/14/15

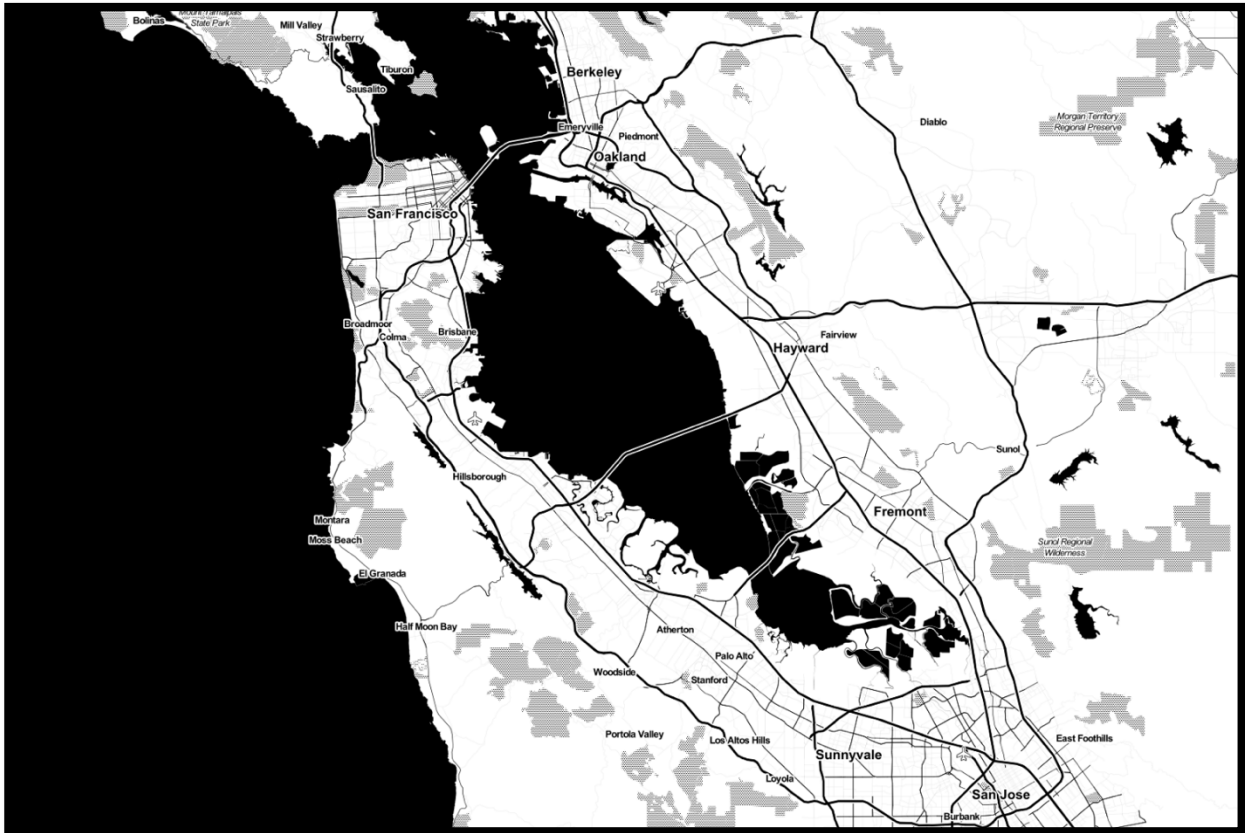


Figure 2: Map of the San Francisco Bay Area

The San Francisco Bay Area has seen vast racial and economic restructuring since the mid-1990s, when the tech economy emerged as the major force of the local economy and came to dominate the whole region (Walker 2006). The Silicon Valley was already considered the epicenter of electronics and computing in the 1980s, but when the internet took off, the dot-com boom truly began, and the region became the national leader of information technology as well (Walker 2006). It was in the late nineties that San Francisco and the greater Bay Area became “the cultural capital of the virtual world” (Walker 2006), attracting tech talent from around the world to take part in the “new gold rush” of dot-commers who wanted to create technological revolutions and get rich doing it (Lowenstein 2004). Silicon Valley tech companies worked hand in hand with specialized investment banks in San Francisco’s financial district, with venture capitalists pouring accumulated wealth into the industry, peaking at \$33 billion of venture capital investment in 1999 (Kenney 2000). This peak was followed by the dot-com crash, the speculative

boom busting with the Bay Area as the epicenter of the financial implosion of 2000, with 90% of dot-com companies vanishing by 2001 (Walker 2006).

This first bubble of the tech industry was paralleled by a housing bubble that matched its rising values and subsequent crash precisely. Between 1996 and 2000, San Francisco housing rental prices rose by more than 225%, with a two-bedroom apartment in the city renting at a rate three times what it had been in 1993 (Beitel 2003). As Rebecca Solnit wrote, “the earthquake that has come at the millennium has been a temblor of capital and its unstable distribution, altering San Francisco far more than any natural disaster” (2000: 34). Despite the dot-com bust, the housing bubble continued to rise in the region, and the Bay Area boasted prices nearly four times the national average when the housing market reached its previous peak in 2006 (Bardhan & Walker 2011: 312). The housing bubble thus coincided with mass out-migration of low-income communities from the Bay Area, particularly people of color (Stelhin 2015), creating starkly unequal urban geographies that have suburbanized poverty as low-income residents move to the Central Valley seeking less expensive housing (Schafran 2013). When the 2008 financial crisis hit, the housing bubble exploded like a balloon. “The great recession laid waste to the fringes of the Bay Area’s inland empire and to the dreams of tens of thousands of families [with] California being the chief locus of the housing bust with one million foreclosed homes” (Walker & Schafran 2015: 24). Despite the economic recession that shook the nation, the tech industry was not substantially damaged, with the tech sector in San Francisco proper growing faster since 2008 (Stelhin 2016). Indeed, while the housing bubble burst for most of California, housing prices in San Francisco and Silicon Valley only took a slight dip, with housing prices surpassing previous 2007 highs by 2014 (Stelhin 2016). The Bay Area’s tech industry has been rising in economic dominance since the mid-1990s, and despite the dot-com bust of 2000 and the stock market crash of 2008, the tech industry has steadily continued to grow, coming to not only dominate the

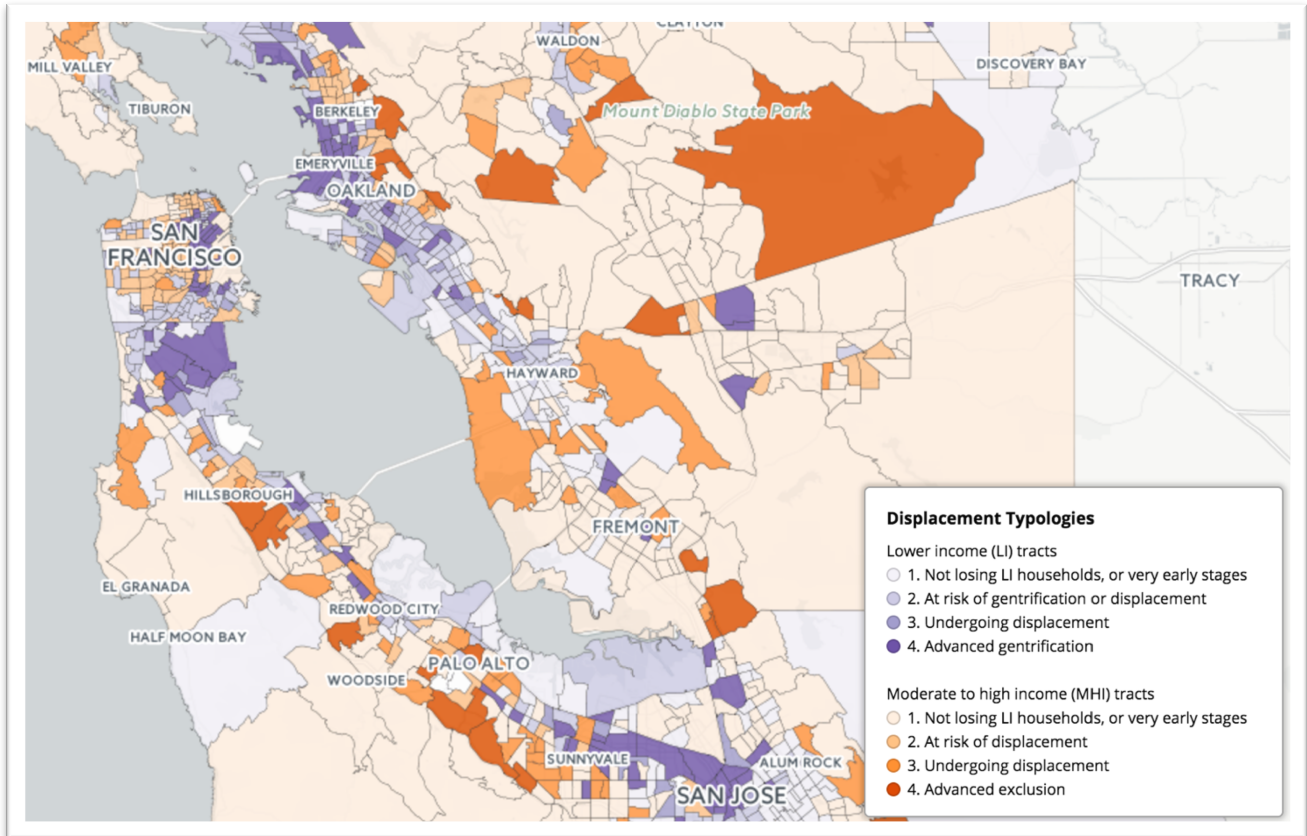


Figure 3: Map of Displacement in the San Francisco Bay Area. Zuk & Chapple, 2015

region’s economy, but to dramatically restructure the region’s social, cultural, and racial geographies (Walker & Schafran 2015).

When I first returned to the Bay in late 2013, local media were transfixed by activists disrupting the service of “Google buses”—private shuttle buses, paid for by big tech companies in the Silicon Valley, that enabled their employees to live in San Francisco and commute to tech campuses in the South Bay, some 40 miles away. The activists sought to call attention to the way that these buses enabled affluent tech workers to live in the iconic city, which was convincing techies to move in en masse, increasing no-fault evictions in the rent-controlled city, and causing housing prices to increase dramatically.⁹ While there are many other factors at work in the cycles of dispossession in the Bay Area, the “Google buses” are emblematic of the ways that cities and

⁹ Anti Eviction Mapping Project, Accessed 2/10/17: <http://www.antievictionmap.com/tech/>

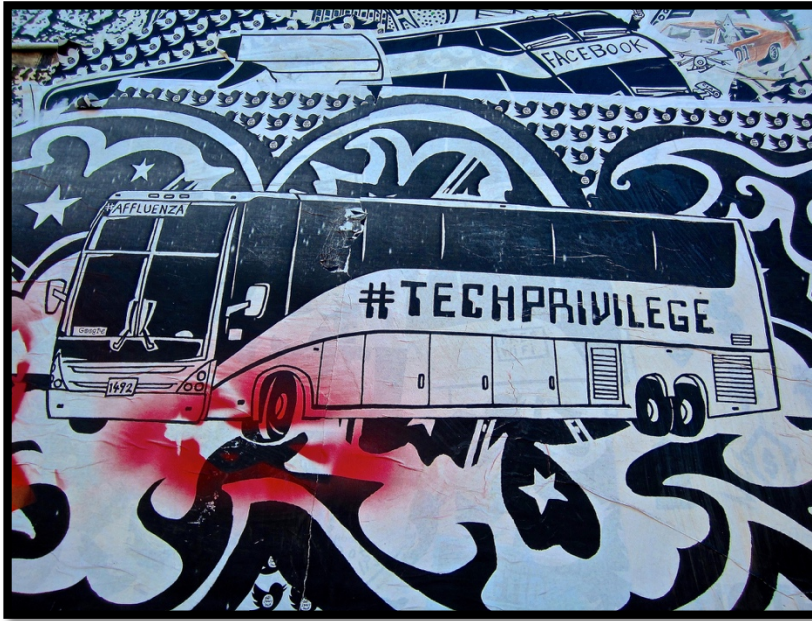


Figure 4: 'Techprivilege' street art. Photo by author.

tech companies are bending over backwards to keep tech talent content, creating a “shadow transit system” that has transformed an already affluent San Francisco into “a veritable playground for the instant wealth of the tech industry” (Stelhin 2016: 1). The private shuttle services demonstrate how tech

companies act with little regard for existing residents and with limited awareness of how these shuttles exacerbate inequality (De Kosnik 2014). In addition to the shuttles, larger tech firms have begun to set up shop in San Francisco since 2008, with the city’s tech employment growing by 90% between 2010 and 2014 (Stelhin 2016). As long-term San Francisco residents are evicted, they are often unable to afford to move elsewhere in the city, and thus displaced from the city they call home (Anti Eviction Mapping Project 2014). The housing shifts of one city affect neighboring cities relationally, and as San Franciscans get priced-out of their neighborhoods, they look for less expensive cities nearby. Cue Oakland.

I returned to Oakland in late 2013 with no idea what I was walking into. While I’m not from Oakland, I lived there from 2002 until 2008, and felt I had some degree of native status, having grown up in the San Francisco Bay Area. Little did I realize that in the five years I had been gone, Oakland had become a battleground. Oakland-born residents own their status defiantly, and sneer at any newcomers. Rightfully so, because in the time I was gone, Oakland had become labeled the new “hip” place to be in the Bay Area. As San Francisco was increasingly colonized by affluent types with a polished hipster aesthetic, Oakland became known as the “Brooklyn of the

West,” a comparison that Oaklanders loathe¹⁰. Oakland was seen as rebellious, creative, unique, diverse—a place where the counter-culture blossoms. The mainstream imaginary surrounding Oakland had been shifting—no longer was the city being seen as a “dangerous” place of gang violence and crime, but rather an “exciting” place where the local culture was innovative and thriving.

When I say the mainstream imaginary of Oakland was shifting, I should be explicit about what I mean. This is to say, the white spatial imaginary of Oakland was shifting (Lipsitz 2011). Whereas the white spatial imaginary of Oakland from the 1990s and early 2000s equated the city with Blackness and criminality in a violently interchangeable way (Cacho 2012), this new rebranding of Oakland represented a city more palatable to a white imaginary. The sort of imaginary that places Oakland on the radar of *New York Times* style, food, and travel bloggers. This young, hip, and creative imaginary of Oakland gave an appearance of diversity, but really it was kind of diversity that sits well with the white hipster aesthetic, diversity as accessory. The diversity that white folks are comfortable with, where the dominance of their spatial imaginary remains unchallenged. This imaginary is representative of a small slice of Oakland, one that is characterized by the Uptown and Temescal neighborhoods, epicenters of the city’s “creative city” rebranding, where the aesthetic of white gentrifiers is most pronounced. Indeed, these neighborhoods didn’t even exist 10 years ago; the names Uptown and Temescal were invented or revived as the neighborhoods underwent demographic shifts. Art and the cultural producers of this new imaginary were, as Sharon Zukin has written in depth (2008), at the epicenter of the gentrifying forces sweeping Oakland. Artists had begun to take root in Oakland, building creative

¹⁰ See “Oakland Brooklyn By the Bay”, *NY Times*, May 2, 2014. Accessed 1/20/16: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/fashion/oakland-california-brooklyn-by-the-bay.html>

And its retort, “Oakland wants you to stop calling it the next Brooklyn.” *Next City*, December 15, 2014. Accessed 1/20/16: <https://nextcity.org/features/view/oakland-gentrification-libby-schaaf-tech-industry-inequality-foreclosures>

spaces and businesses in the aforementioned Oakland neighborhoods, and in these same areas developers began to appear—and a new, more affluent breed of Oakland resident began to move in. These residents were often ex-San Franciscans, lured by lower rents and sunshine, or they were tech workers that came from elsewhere who could conveniently take their free Google bus from the MacArthur Bart station each morning.

But this narrative is too simple, this classic case of gentrification in urban North America, where the artist declares a neighborhood “hip” and subsequently changes its aesthetic, laying ground for development and for more affluent residents to move in (Zukin 1987; Smith 1996; Ley 2003; Lees 2003). While there is significance to these studies of gentrification, the trope of the artist becomes overused and oversimplified, often furthering the processes of erasure that accompany gentrification narratives. What of the residents who existed in a place before gentrification was unleashed – were there no artists there before? Within gentrification studies and creative city conceptions of place, it appears that the artist trope almost always plays the part of gentrifier. By framing the artists who ‘move in’ as surveyors at the onset of gentrification, drawn to the ‘blank canvas’ of the landscape, the cheap rents, and the ‘gritty’ aesthetic of neighborhoods of color, the only artists rendered as active players in this narrative are already presumed to be white gentrifiers. These narratives of gentrification not only omit the possibility that existing residents could also be artists, but it denies their capacity to be creative actors within their home cities.

The imaginary of the North American city depicted in these gentrification discourses becomes a facet of the white spatial imaginary, in which an impoverished and blighted place and its residents are invaded by artists, and later, by wealthy developers who wish to capitalize on the property values that increased in the artists’ creative wake. Oakland as a city refuses this narrative of gentrification. While it is most certainly true that the latest tech boom has unleashed unprecedented forces of dispossession and development upon the city, the process of

gentrification taking place in this city is much more complex than this narrative allows. Oakland has never had one imaginary defining its geography, and no narrative of this city could be written without recognition of its deeply embedded Black geographies, which have been a major influence on the city's landscape for the past 80-plus years—nor its Indigenous, Latino, and Asian geographies that are often overlooked. These alternative geographies of Oakland and their differential spatial imaginaries are often not recognized by the white spatial imaginary, and integrated only as multiculturalist visions of diversity that give Oakland the 'flavor' so desirable for white consumption. If discourses of gentrification and the creative city see Oakland as a place that can be so easily re-imagined, they are furthering technologies of erasure that disregard the city's Black and Brown lives and cultures. What of the geographies and imaginaries of the artists of color, of long-term Oakland residents who have been creating art in their neighborhoods for decades? How does the presence of artists of color disrupt creative city and gentrification narratives of place, and whose geographies are considered creative and valuable?

This project documents a pivotal moment in Oakland's history—the post-recession boom of 2014–2016 and its effects on low-income Oakland residents of color. I seek to make sense of these effects through an engagement with art-activism, led by artists of color against displacement and other forms of racialized dispossession. My intentions in examining this moment, in this manner, are threefold:

One, that the low-income residents of Oakland, and of the Bay Area more broadly, are in a dire position as the third and most ferocious wave of the tech boom engulfs the Bay Area. Housing prices are rising at a rate never seen before, and the ferocity of this racial capitalist bubble has left people clambering for ways to survive. However, this moment is not to be disconnected from the processes of racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and white supremacy that have violently dispossessed people of color across geographies for generations. Therefore, I argue that a study of gentrification should be deepened with a broader analysis of racialized dispossession

that transverses place and temporality. I incorporate Chicana Feminist theories of the borderlands to exemplify how gentrifying cities have themselves become borderlands, intertwining these theorizations with those of Black geographic theories of space and racial capitalism, as well as decolonial theorizations of settler colonialism.

Two, that the geographies and imaginings of Oakland art-activists push theorizations and empirical studies of the creative city, complicating these genealogies. Over the past decade, spatial imaginaries of Oakland began to shift, as the city has been re-imagined as a space of diverse social movements and creative spaces. This shift from imaginaries of blight to creativity presumes that, prior to the current boom, the city was a place of un-creative disorder, its residents residual and languishing. This, however, is far from the case. The geographies of artists of color in Oakland are abundant, yet they are not often articulated amidst discourses of the creative city Oakland has become. Oakland is known for its activism—from the Black Panther Party to the Oscar Grant protests—but is lesser known for its generations of artists of color, many of whom use their art to exude an explicit politics. The art-activism emerging from Oakland consists of explicitly political art forms with an intention to make injustice visible, and to build political consciousness. This project demonstrates how much of the art practiced in Oakland is deeply intertwined with social justice activism; that is to say, much of the city's social organizing is intertwined with art.

Three, that the art and activism of Oakland artists of color create decolonial geographies of Oakland that rupture the racial capitalist and settler colonial order of the city in decolonial moments. Through their art practice, artists of color call attention to the intersecting forms of dispossession that continually seek to eviscerate their lives and erase their presence from the landscape. The spaces, performances, and forms of resistance being created by art-activists of color are actively decolonizing the increasingly violent spaces they live in, by creating openings to envision decolonial futures. These openings, or spatial and temporal ruptures, possess a decolonial spirit that re-envision society, and through the decolonial assemblages produced by

arts and culture-centered organizations, art-activists work to gradually disassemble colonial and racial capitalist power structures and create autonomous alternatives.

In the following document I explore these three major threads, embedding them into the place and peoples of Oakland. Ultimately, this narrative reveals the multifaceted uses and meanings of art practice in activism, and how decolonial art practice can be a powerful political and spiritual act. This project complicates common narratives and tropes that frame art and artists in urban geography. Artists often become over-romanticized as holding the solutions for our troubled society, either through their innovative and profitable imaginings in the cultural economy and their much-desired creative capital (Florida 2002), or for their potential to shatter capitalist norms and create a post-capitalist society (Novy and Colomb 2013; Buser et al. 2013; Youkhana 2014; Barbero 2015). In the sphere of critical urban studies, artists are often vilified and essentialized through the trope of the gentrifier, an invasive species that connotes the inevitable bulldozing of neoliberalism (Zukin 1987; Smith 1996; Ley 2003; Peck 2005).

Rarely, if ever, are artists considered in a nuanced way, such that their work and presence is not glorified or vilified outright. My work not only complicates these imaginaries, it focuses on the arts practice of the artists themselves, digging into the specifics of place and the nuances of local artist communities. This project focuses specifically on the arts practice and organizing of artists of color who are long-term residents of Oakland. I focus on artists of color in particular because of their explicit investment in fending off displacing forces of the city, and for the ways that they have utilized their arts practice to call attention to the ways that displacement intersects with other forms of state violence and dispossession. Over the three years I have spent embedding myself into the art-activist spaces of Oakland, I have found that artists of color are more likely to address gentrification in this intersectional way. While there are undoubtedly white artists who are long-term residents of Oakland organizing around displacement, when I did come across these individuals they were working in tandem with groups led by art-activists of color. The lived and

embodied experiences of artists of color facing racialized state violence has affected their art practice and activism in particular ways, and their alternate experiences of place and violence therein produces art forms that perceive space and oppression differentially (McKittrick 2006). Therefore, it is the art practice and experience of the city of artists of color that interests me most in this project, for it is by centering alternative spatial imaginaries and geographies of the city that we create ruptures for decolonial futures.

My focus on art-activists in particular is another means of complicating how artists are framed in social science literature. The aforementioned glorification and/or vilification of artists often occurs when artists are essentialized with a broad brushstroke, and to trouble this framing I am intentional in framing artists here as art-activists, who are explicitly political in their work and their intentions. They do not allow their work to be seen as benignly open to interpretation – they are explicit in their politics and in what effect they intend their work to have. The practice of art-activism is intersectional in nature, overlapping and feeding into other forms of resistance and healing. In the case of Oakland, anti-displacement efforts led by art-activists are simultaneously about excessive policing and criminalization of black and brown communities, access to fair housing and educational opportunities, and ultimately the struggle to survive in low-income communities of color in Oakland. One hesitation I have in this framing, however, is that not all of the artists I have engaged with would necessarily identify as activists. As one artist, José Navarrete, told me, “I am an artist, more than a political person. I feel that I’m not an activist. If you really want to be an activist you need a lot of time.”¹¹ Despite this, José was one of the principal organizers behind an event titled *Artists in Response to State Violence and Gentrification*. The labeling of art-activist is therefore complicated, and the text imperfectly weaves between the terms “art-activist” and “artist of color,” depending on the moment being engaged.

¹¹ José Navarrete, interview, January 7, 2016

Perhaps the most influential reason why this project focuses on artists of color in particular stems from my own epistemological leanings. Drawing intellectual, personal, and political inspiration from the writings of Black, Indigenous and Chicana feminists, I find that the testimonies and epistemologies of oppressed peoples offer a decolonial spirit to the art practiced. By this I mean that the ephemeral yet political dimensions of the art create openings for political and social transformation in which the decolonial art works to dismantle “colonialism intellectually and materially” (Delgadillo 2011: 150), and create openings for “a postcolonial, postnational consciousness” (Pérez 1999: 26). Art allows us to engage with facets of our consciousness that otherwise remain solitary, and art-activists of color infuse this multidimensional engagement with their own decolonial vision of the world. Artistic engagement enables self-awareness to bloom into a collective consciousness, a decolonial imaginary that takes our embodied struggles and envisions a space and time beyond the present injustice. The space created through decolonial art practice, however momentary, exists as a space of shared engagement. It is a decolonial space that pushes the limits of our realities and struggles, where transformation waxes and wanes with possibility. It is through our embodied struggle that we kindle the flames of decolonial possibility. Ultimately, to decolonize is to, as Tuck and Yang (2012) insist, repatriate indigenous land. While decolonization is entangled in conflicting decolonial desires, particularly among the many geographies of Oakland, I believe that the art practices witnessed in this project are embodying decolonial visions in how they seek to dismantle the colonial present and envision alternate futures. This road is fraught with negotiations of solidarity and justice, and yet this work explores what a reconceptualization of land might look like under the decolonial assemblages created by Oakland art-activists, and what this reveals about differential forms of decolonization in practice.

To begin the journey that is this dissertation, the following chapter traces my own winding path uncovering this work. Gleaning from Irene Lara’s articulations of a *madre serpiente* (serpentine) methodology, and Gloria Anzaldúa’s prolific writings on the Coatlicue state, I

position this research by locating my own relationship to decolonial work. This tracing proves useful, not just to set the stage, but also to cultivate a *madre serpiente* methodology that reveals the intersections of the spiritual and political in not only my research themes but also in the methodology itself. There are no defined borders between this dissertation and the other facets of myself these days, and this blurring becomes a method of its own right. From there, I consider what a decolonization of research methods and vigor might look like in the social sciences.

In the second chapter, I consider recent calls to “decolonize gentrification studies” (Lees 2012), suggesting that this decolonization requires a more thorough engagement with racial capitalism and settler colonialism. I urge that for urban geographers to decolonize theorizations of gentrification, it is also necessary to centralize the geographies of oppressed peoples in a particular place, and suggest that a conversation on racialized dispossession better accounts for the complex histories that produce displacement in cities. From there, I trace histories of dispossession in Oakland, developing the term “diaspora of dispossession” to highlight the spatial and temporal patterns that repeatedly dispossess certain populations under colonial-racial capitalism. Lastly, this chapter draws connections between subprime lending, policing, and gentrification to illustrate the ways that Black life is equated with waste and how this is then transferred to property value.

The third chapter disrupts notions of the creative city, looking to Oakland’s art-activist movements led by people of color to get a sense of how alternative geographies, which I follow Roberto Bedoya in calling the “*rasquache* spatial imaginary,” produce creative landscapes that are the cultural lifeblood of Oakland. From there, I delve into the creative city practices of Oakland’s current mayor, and how the creative city discourse negates the creative resonance that Black and Brown people instill into the landscape. Then I consider the white spatial imaginary of Oakland, and how as white imaginaries of Oakland have shifted over time, displacement and redevelopment have followed suit. Lastly, I consider how the hipster functions as the hegemonic

figure of white millennial urbanity, and how the hipster's desire for "authentic places" fuels gentrification in Oakland.

In chapter four, I engage with a series of events I have attended over the past three years to illustrate the ways that art-activism produces spaces of decolonial rupture in the city. These events are channeled through a series of vignettes, each given dates and geographic locations in the city, and weave in and out of lucid descriptions of artistic performances and practices. This chapter begins with a reckoning, introducing literature to frame my conceptualizations of art and the decolonial and how they are intertwined in this project. From there, I consider the ways the art practiced evokes a decolonial spirit, rupturing spaces of the city to grapple with colonial traumas and envision decolonial futures. Lastly, I consider the possibility of a decolonial assemblage, drawing upon the work of two art-activist organizations to reveal the ways that art-based social movements are resisting racial capitalist structure and creating autonomous alternatives.

In the conclusion, I finalize this research by addressing the Ghost Ship fire that occurred in Oakland in December 2016, and how this event has shifted the landscape of art and activism in the city. This research seems to have no end – it only seems to gain more resonance as time goes on. Yet an ending it must have, and so I conclude by considering what resonance and possibility decolonial art-activism carries as we enter the autocratic regime of Trump and mass resistance seems to be burning brighter than before.

CHAPTER ONE: SERPENTINE METHODOLOGIES

ser·pen·tine (adj.) a. winding or turning one way or another
 b. subtly wily or tempting¹²

My path through this project has been anything but linear. Unlike the prototype of social science research, I did not complete my exams, set off to do fieldwork with research funding in pocket, complete fieldwork, return home, analyze research, and begin to write. My vision and enacting of this project have been constantly in flux. Now, four years after I began envisioning this project, my project looks very different from what I initially proposed in my qualifying exam statement. As time has gone on I have realized the value of this non-linear process, and how this in itself has been a methodology in the making. I tell my experience in depth here, for I feel that my weaving path through this project speaks to the work itself. And so I use my testimony to cultivate a methodology that is in itself an attempt to decolonize the doctorate and research more broadly. I begin by recounting my wandering path through the doctoral program, and from there will delve into my research ‘failures’ and how these dead ends led me to a more decolonial path of qualitative research.

MADRE SERPIENTE

“A non-linear engagement with knowledge; serpents do not move in straight lines.”

– Irene Lara (2014: 116)

¹² Serpentine. (n.d.). Merriam Webster Dictionary Online. Retrieved from: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/serpentine>

When I first found out I was pregnant in early 2012, I had been deciding whether or not to continue pursuing my PhD. I had been in a space of paralysis following the completion of my Master's thesis in June 2011, unable to envision what was next and overwhelmed with a feeling that this was not the path for me. But I also couldn't envision another path, and so I had been waffling back and forth for months, trying to decide whether or not to continue. This self-deprecating indecision shifted almost immediately upon finding out I was pregnant. Whereas days prior, the thought of having to choose geographic subfields that define me seemed oppressively soul-crushing, the reality of having a child growing in my *matriz* made the task seem suddenly simple. This was merely a step in the disciplining process that needed to be overcome, and to walk away from a paid teaching assistant position guaranteeing income and medical benefits for fear of a 10-page document would be ridiculous.

My realization of mamihood suddenly shifted my priorities, anxieties, and fears into a frame of understanding that didn't rest solely upon my own sense of self-doubt. Regardless if I were to end up an academic, a decision that I had been struggling with since entering the program in 2008, the immediate security of my body and my baby were my priority. Ethical anxieties over my future would have to wait. And so, in a matter of days I wrote the preliminary statement defining my geographic subfields – a statement I had been unable to even draft over the previous six months. I submitted it to my advisor, and in a matter of weeks I was taking my preliminary exams. I was determined to complete these tasks before my pregnancy became obvious, before the faculty would gather in April to allegedly rank the grad students according to their worth to our department. I had not known of another pregnant grad student in our department, and so I was unsure of how my pregnancy would be received by the faculty at large. I knew that my incredibly empathetic and supportive adviser would have my back no matter what, but as for the rest of my department, I was unsure how news of my pregnancy would be taken. Would I be deemed unproductive or unworthy of further departmental support, since my body had suddenly

overstepped my mind? It is one thing to get pregnant with the security of tenure in hand, something else entirely during the already-uncertain purgatory of graduate school.

So in late March, during my third month of pregnancy, I wrote my preliminary exams, and defended them a few weeks later. My ideas were scattered and sprawling, but it was done – I had leapt over a hurdle that ensured my relevance in the program for at least another year, long enough for my baby to be born. I took one quarter off in the fall of 2012, and my daughter was born in late October. That summer and fall was a rich time, enabling me to step away from grad school for a period and relish in becoming a mother. While I didn't realize it at the time, the months I spent dedicated to my body, my daughter, and my mamihood shaped my consciousness profoundly—not only re-prioritizing my aspirations in life, but shifting the very epistemologies that I brought into my work.

The years since my daughter's birth have been an ongoing process of *becoming*, and I mean this in a way that involves my whole self. Not only am I constantly evolving in my understanding of what it means to be a mother, but this is very much intertwined in my becoming as a woman, as a scholar, as a soul wandering her way through this lifetime. It is only in recent months, when I have had the time and space to dedicate to my own intellectual and spiritual growth for the first time in many years, that I have come to realize that these past four years have seen the gradual creation of my own philosophy of self. Of my own decolonial geography. Drawing inspiration from the words of Irene Lara and Gloria Anzaldúa, I have been weaving my own *madre serpiente* methodology of work and life.

Reading Lara's essay *Sensing the Serpent* in the 2014 collection, *Fleshing the Spirit*, was a therapeutic experience for me. I was struggling to get my dissertation off the ground, and had been feeling like a terrible failure; not merely that I had failed at being an academic, but that I had failed my own high standards of what scholar-activist research and practice was supposed to resemble. When reading Lara's essay, I saw my own struggle mirrored in her words:

It sometimes takes me a long time to turn to my bodymindspirit toolbox, open it, discern what is needed, and proceed. Or simply, to trust the process, which entails trusting myself. It is never a linear and not always a logical path, at least as framed within dominant western worldviews. Instead, like Anzaldúa who embraces ‘the snake [as] a symbol of awakening consciousness – the potential of knowing within, an awareness not grasped by logical thought’ (2002a, 540), I am learning to accept and welcome a more serpentine process of creating decolonizing feminist knowledge and art....Hand in hand with the important work of developing culturally rich erotic-spiritual epistemologies and pedagogies, this essay explores the empowering significance of holistically theorizing *and* living one’s *conocimientos*. (2014: 114, emphasis original)

Lara’s articulations resonated deeply with me – the empowering acknowledgement of how my journey to the PhD, or journey through life more broadly, did not have to follow traditional linear paths to be deemed ‘successful’ or worthy. And this included not only the expectations or models that I interpreted the academy expected of me, but also the expectations I had built for myself to measure the validity of my own work. Instead, as Lara suggests above, there was a method to my madness, to the winding serpentine manner that I found my way down the road to my PhD.

This winding method is what Lara calls “a serpentine *conocimiento*,” or knowledge/awareness. Lara draws upon Anzaldúa’s writings on the serpent, where it represents a sacred indigenous figure of ‘divine consciousness’, “to analyze some of the ways I have worked to sense and give birth to the serpent in me as a whole being – mother, daughter, lover, spiritual activist, teacher, and writer” (115). The serpent in this *conocimiento* comes to represent not only a greater consciousness, but also the process of reaching this greater awareness, and how the road to achieve *conocimiento* winds and spirals like the serpent itself. This is to say, that the road itself is part of the *conocimiento*, and to understand and accept its winding path is to embrace one’s method and empower one’s self.

Throughout my journey through grad school, there have been many times when I have doubted my knowledge, my methods, the very ways I go about my work. I am not incredibly organized, I do not easily recall the names of authors, and I often find myself the lone voice of objection amongst a room full of ‘reasonable’ thought. And because I do not fit the rational mold

or imaginary of what it takes to be or to thrive as an academic, I often question my legitimacy in this profession. Serpentine *conocimiento* has helped to liberate me from these waves of self-deprecation, for such an embodiment allows room for me as a whole person, it does not ask me to confine my identity or live up to the standards of what a rational academic should be. Thus, what I have come to realize and develop over these past few years, is that by embodying a serpentine *conocimiento* I am practicing a *madre serpiente* methodology.

I take up this idea of a *madre serpiente* methodology as a means of liberating my practice from the mechanisms of the academy that tend to paralyze me. Naming this practice a methodology also serves to legitimize the many facets of self that I invest into my work, as a woman of color and as a mother. For me, my work is not simply researched, analyzed, and theorized; it is embodied and visceral, and extends beyond the limits of this keyboard or a paragraph composed. As I have built this project through its various iterations, I have struggled with the confines and expectations of academia, but most of all I have struggled to live up to my own high standards. Through my previous activist-research, I built a theory of practice that I came to live and breathe – that research should be not merely extractive, but rather an exchange of skills and knowledge that blurs the line between researcher and participant. This theory of practice was built out of my deep engagement with the food justice organization I worked with throughout my years in Seattle, where my research and activism blurred boundaries and existed well beyond what was written for my master’s thesis. So when I returned to Oakland in early 2014 to rebuild a life for myself here and begin making my doctoral research a reality, my intentions were to embed myself in a similar organization, where my abilities would be of some use to the folks I was working with and eventually interviewing. I wanted to be personally invested in the research – I wanted to push the boundaries of research and praxis, to push the academic community to expand how we define and enact research.

Returning to Oakland, my struggle with my project and my own expectations began, and I realized rather quickly that many of my idealized visions of how my research project would go were going to be difficult to fulfill. The first reality that hit me in the face like a ton of bricks was how much the cost of living in the Bay Area had risen in the five years I had been away. I had so badly wanted to return home and be close to my family and friends, that I hadn't really considered how much more challenging it would be to make ends meet in Oakland versus Seattle. My partner, daughter, and I left Seattle without any jobs secured in the Bay Area. I walked away from a paid teaching position and paid medical insurance for my family, and it wasn't until I arrived here that I began to realize the consequences of my hastily idealistic actions. Whereas in Seattle we could survive on my partner's salary alone, in the Bay this was out of the question. I quickly realized that if we were to be able to afford all of our basic living expenses, not even including childcare, I would need to bring in at least some income. So I started applying for part-time jobs, and fortunately was hired for the perfect internship, as the Arts, Culture and Economic Development Intern at a social justice policy organization called PolicyLink. I knew absolutely nothing about policy, but I knew a lot about social justice work, and fortunately this 10-week internship turned into a part-time job that I was able to mold to my schedule. The job gave me a lot of relevant connections, and it reintroduced me to Oakland's local politics, but most valuable of all it enabled me to put my daughter in part-time day care so I could start to get my dissertation off the ground. However, I only had about 10 hours a week to focus on my own research, and I quickly realized that at this pace, it would take me years to finish my PhD. I started to get discouraged, and as my bosses at PolicyLink kept encouraging me to apply for full-time positions, I began to wonder if this stretched-thin lifestyle was worth a PhD in the end.

Meanwhile, my research-activist ideals were proving hard to live up to after my return to Oakland. For one, the many roles I was playing made it difficult to invest myself into any organization with the depth I had been able to previously. But perhaps more pronounced was the general feeling of mistrust I perceived from many of the organizing circles I was encountering.

Because Oakland had become a borderland, a battleground of displacement and gentrification, there is a tremendous sense of skepticism—and at times, outright hostility—for any unfamiliar faces, particularly for non-natives of Oakland. Social organizers, activists, and people of color more broadly were feeling Oakland shifting under their feet, and they were fiercely defending their city from speculators and anything that represented a demographic shift. Despite the fact that I was from the Bay and had lived in Oakland beginning in the early 2000s, the fact that I had been gone for five years left me on the fringes of many organizing circles, and I found myself needing to make connections again from scratch. Add to this the fact that I was wearing the hat of a grad student/researcher, and I could practically see the doors shutting in my face. So I stepped lightly, and struggled to make meaningful connections with folks. Whenever I thought I had a lead to a meaningful collaboration with an organization or group, it proved difficult to get the collaboration off the ground.

There have been three instances over the past three years when a collaboration began to come into existence. I had met with the leader of an organization, discussed our mutual interests and what I could bring to the table, and they told me to write them more about it and we could work to get something started. I thought of myself as a resource at their disposal – someone with a lot of time and a collection of abilities that they could use as they saw fit. I had visions of mapping projects to document the organization’s efforts so as to help them secure further funding. But I was not completely tied to this idea, and offered to be of service however the leadership saw fit. These discussions got drawn out for more than six months each time, with a series of email exchanges that kept me in a holding position and yet nothing ever came of them. I remained patient, open, but after six months I would stop reaching out, for I assumed that it was due to a lack of desire, lack of time to follow through, or else it was my positionality as researcher or outsider that made them not want to engage. I became down on myself, down on my project. If I had to be pushing this hard for a collaboration with folks, clearly my project or positionality wasn’t worth a damn. Clearly I wasn’t adding anything to these conversations or struggles. I began to

consider walking away entirely. If this project or my voice or my abilities weren't deemed valuable by the art-activists I sought to center in my work, then what was the point of doing it at all? Plus, I was working so hard just to make time to think about this work – why was I pushing myself to continue a project that no one seemed to value, not even me? Then, in the spring of 2015, I found out I was awarded a Ford Foundation dissertation fellowship, which was both validating and terrifying. Some people, somewhere, believed in what I was trying to accomplish! Now I had to believe in it and make it a reality. I had to be honest with myself and with my expectations, to accept what I was and was not going to be able to do, and to do it well.

I ended my year at PolicyLink in mid-2015, enrolled my daughter in preschool, and slowly peered into the abyss that was my dissertation project. Now the only thing keeping me from getting my project off the ground was myself – I needed to figure out how I would grapple with my own high expectations to make the research a reality rather than an illusive possibility. A great deal of my paralysis with this work has had to do with continually not being able to execute the vision I had for this research, and coming to terms with my own advice that if a community doesn't want to do the work or collaboration that you propose, you respect that and don't do it (Ramírez 2015). I had to own this truth and accept that not all of my research engagements would take the form of a scholar-activist collaboration. Despite my repeated intentions to make a collaboration happen, things were not developing organically, and I had to take this as a sign that this project was not meant to exist in the way I had initially envisioned. Ultimately, this work was not about me, and in order to move beyond the blockages I had built, I needed to get over my own idealized perceptions of research and of myself as a scholar-activist.

This process of developing my dissertation and learning about my own positionality within my work was the very process of becoming what a *madre serpiente* methodology is about. It is allowing ourselves to follow non-linear paths, to screw up, to accept that things will not always go as planned, and to trust that there is meaning and *conocimiento* in that uncertainty. To practice

such a methodology is to allow ourselves to enter what Gloria Anzaldúa called the Coatlicue State. Following Anzaldúa, Coatlicue was a Mesoamerican serpent goddess of creation, the “goddess of birth and death, [she] gives and takes away life; she is the incarnation of cosmic processes... Coatlicue is a rupture in our everyday world... We need [her] to slow us up so that the psyche can assimilate previous experiences and process the changes.” (2007: 68) As such, the Coatlicue state is that which “disrupt[s] the smooth flow (complacency) of life... [which] propels the soul to do its work: make soul, increase consciousness of self. Our greatest disappointments and painful experiences – if we can make meaning out of them – can lead us toward becoming more of who we are.” (2007: 68) Anzaldúa goes on to demonstrate the decolonial potential of the Coatlicue state, exposing vulnerable pieces of her consciousness in the beautifully agonizing way that she does, in the passage “The *Coatlicue* State Is A Prelude To A Crossing”:

Voy cagandome de miedo, buscando lugares acuevados. I don't want to know, I don't want to be seen. My resistance, my refusal to know some truth about myself brings on that paralysis, depression – brings on the *Coatlicue* state....Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing....Knowledge makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious. ‘Knowing’ is painful because after ‘it’ happens I can't stay in the same place and be comfortable....Why does she have to go and try and make ‘sense’ of it all? Every time she makes ‘sense’ of something, she has to ‘cross over’, kicking a hole out of the old boundaries of the self and slipping under and over, dragging the old skin along, stumbling in it. It hampers her movement in the new territory, dragging the ghost of the past with her. It is a dry birth, a breech birth, a screaming birth, one that fights her every inch of the way. It is only when she is on the other side and the shell cracks open and the lid from her eyes lifts that she sees things in a different perspective. It is only then that she makes the connections, formulates the insights. It is only then that her consciousness expands a tiny notch, another rattle appears on the rattlesnake tail and the added growth slightly alters the sounds she makes. (2007: 70-71)

By entering the Coatlicue state, we lean into the darkness, the self doubt, the obstacle that needs to be overcome. We accept the winding, spiraling, at times seemingly unwieldy manner in which events transpire in our lives, and the way that they may foil our predetermined plans and assumptions. It is a reminder that we do not “have it all figured out,” and we never really will – to think that we do is a clumsy sheath of ego that will only hold us back, and to shed that skin will

enable us to carry on, seek other routes, and struggle elsewhere. It is a lesson for the researcher, and a lesson for the soul. Allowing ourselves to enter the Coatlicue state, to be vulnerable to uncertainty, to be open to learning from our slippages, to shed the skins that no longer suit us, is to practice a madre serpiente methodology of transformation. And after the darkness of self-doubt and ego can be faced, the rattle in your tail becomes even more powerful and *capaz* than before.

To engage in this methodology is, in itself, a decolonial practice. A decolonization of self that creates alternative geographies of and within the academy, serpentine paths carved out by women of color in the academy that seek to decolonize the institution from within. All of these geographies bleed into one another, and I find myself both studying and theorizing decolonial geographies, while living my own in the process. Becoming the Madre Serpiente.

Dando a luz esta Madre that I am and *Madre Serpiente* that I am becoming has been filled with a struggle for language. I desire more courage to truthfully express myself without self-censorship...a springboard into a decolonizing, self-loving, other-loving action. I have found that *dando a luz a la Madre Serpiente* means birthing your own 'healing spirit guide' (Lara 2014: 121-123).

Giving birth to the mother that I am and the mother serpent I am becoming has been filled with a struggle for language, Lara tells us. As Christina Sharpe writes in her brilliant work, *Into the Wake*, "I am struggling to find the language for this work, find the form for this work. Language and form fracture more every day" (Sharpe 2016: 19). This project too has left me with more questions than answers for what methodologies I ascribe to, what language I have to give words to this work, what form it takes to most resemble my vision of it. This, to me, is part of my succumbing to the serpentine methodology, of rolling into the unknown as I write, as I piece together methods, without always having a clear sense of where I'm going. A madre serpiente methodology is a state of growth and transformation that is ongoing and at times uncertain. But being open to what the process has in store for us, not being fixed to a linear tract or set of assumptions of how things should go, is also liberating. It is, like Lara explores above, a process of giving birth to one's self, or bringing one's self to light. Rather than trying to fit our complex

selves into the expectations of academia, or a white supremacist and patriarchal society more broadly, it is a matter of introducing our full selves to these systems, and insisting that they accommodate us. That is a decolonial act, and the formation of a decolonial geography.

I suppose this is where mamihood connects to a madre serpiente methodology, and why I am reluctant to call this a ‘serpentine methodology’ alone. Becoming a mother is not something that occurs at the moment of giving birth; it is a state that I feel I will be experiencing for the remainder of my life. As Lara said, “becoming a mami still feels like being in a world of continual (re)generation” (2014: 131). It is a state of expanded consciousness in which the interconnections of life itself have acquired a more multi-faceted sense of clarity. It feels like another dimension was added to my perspective of the world, or I cultivated an additional sense that goes beyond sight, touch or smell. Catalyzed by the birth process itself, mamihood took me to a space where the spirit and the body coalesce, and it is in this transformative space that I see the potential of the decolonial. And the potential of resistance. As Amara Tabor-Smith, an Oakland artist and Yoruba priestess, said, “mothers are the teachers because without that birth experience, none of us would be here. Everything amazing and transformative is born of a moment of tremendous pressure¹³.” Amara sees this political moment we’re in, as I write this a few days before Trump’s inauguration, as a moment of great pressure on all sides that we will have to resist, and out of this pressure comes the possibility of transformation. In childbirth, it is the moment that you consciously feel that you can no longer take the pain of the contractions, the moment you begin to doubt your ability to give birth to the life inside of you, that our bodies enter the stage of transition – the moment of calm before the new life is born.

The burdens of colonialism, white supremacy, and racial capitalism are putting tremendous pressure on us these days as we enter the Trump regime. We must resist. We must

¹³ Amara Tabor-Smith, interview, January 11, 2017.

decolonize. I see the generations behind us and beyond us, and the need to transform our traumas and struggles into regenerative actions of love. This is the potential of decolonial work, to create spaces of interconnection and interdependence that lead towards liberation. Liberation in honor of our ancestors, and liberation for our children and the generations not yet born. For this purpose, we create decolonial geographies. For this purpose we resist.

TAKING ON THE R-WORD

“Refusal turns the gaze back upon power, specifically the colonial modalities of knowing persons as bodies to be differentially counted, violated, saved, and put to work.”

– Tuck & Yang, 2014: 241

My struggle in developing this project has pushed me in ways I did not anticipate. As previously mentioned, I went into this work convinced that I would do similar participatory, collaborative, and accountable research as I did when working towards my Master’s degree. However, as time went on, my conception of the practice of research itself began to shift. Part of this shift was an acceptance of the serpentine nature of the work and how this in itself was a methodology, and the other part was about what constitutes ‘rigorous’ research in the social sciences; how part of decolonizing the academy means confronting the idea of rigor straight on. I say this here because of the different forms of refusal I encountered in my efforts to ‘do research’ in Oakland. After several attempts at collaboration fell through, I began to realize how much I still needed to learn. While I stepped away from doing a collaborative project, and instead focused on getting informal interviews wherever I could, I realized more and more about the research fatigue and distrust that is present in Oakland’s artist communities, particularly among people of color. And despite how I might like to see myself, I am still considered an outsider in many artist circles. But I continued to pursue interviews up until the bitter end of this project, for I have been trained that a rigorous qualitative research project must include interview data and lots of it. I don’t write

these lines to diminish the power of qualitative interviews or ethnography; I do so in an effort to question the idea of rigor in a qualitative research project, and the ethics behind pursuing this method at all costs.

Research fatigue is a very real phenomenon in marginalized communities (Kelley 1997; Tuhwai Smith 1999), and as I have encountered in artist and activist communities in Oakland, researchers are seen more as snoops or nuisance than as potential collaborators. Researchers are seen as extractors of knowledge that complete their research and move on, with little to no accountability to the communities they ‘study’. I often had people seem open to talking with me until they found out I was an academic, even when I paraphrased my positionality as that of a first-generation graduate student looking to decolonize the academy. Regardless, my intentions were seen ultimately as self-serving, and many conversations I had with people ended up being drawn-out email exchanges that never resulted in an interview. The few interviews I was able to conduct often took many months of me following up, up to six months in fact. I was incredibly grateful to those who took the time to speak with me, but it often left me feeling that despite my objections and critical awareness of my positionality, at the end of the day I too was an extractor of knowledge. So after many failed email exchanges, I began to refuse the process myself. I engaged with people who seemed willing and curious about what I was doing, but if I had to contact them more than twice, I let it go. To me, it wasn’t worth burdening people who were already stretched incredibly thin, hustling to make ends meet and to get their art out into the world. As Chicana artist and gallery owner Yadira explains, “artists are in survival mode, everyone is working two to three jobs, especially Black and Brown artists. They don’t have the time, money, or mental health to make a career out of their art. It’s the conditions we are in that keeps us from giving the work all our time and energy¹⁴”. There is so much artists are grappling with in the city of Oakland in its borderland state – I felt like an undue burden by asking for even an hour of their

¹⁴ Yadira Cazares, interview, October 13, 2016.

time. And so, I began to refuse to be persistent, refuse to follow through endlessly to embed their words on paper.

Refusals in research, according to Indigenous and ethnic studies theorists (Simpson 2007; Tuck and Yang 2014), “are attempts to place limits on the conquest and colonization of knowledge by marking what is off limits, what is not up for grabs in discussion and what is not known” (Tuck & Yang 2014: 225). Audra Simpson (2007) has theorized ethnographic refusal in the ways that the researcher, or the research ‘subject’, decides what are the limits of the project, what knowledge or experience goes undocumented. As Tuck and Yang elaborate, “settler colonial knowledge is premised on frontiers”, and this model presents the researcher as the incessant explorer of frontiers, of conquest, always seeking new research subjects in the manifest destiny of data collection (2014: 225). In the case of my project, I take up refusal in another way than Simpson and others do in their work. What if I refuse the expectations of what constitutes a ‘rigorous’ qualitative research project? If I refuse to further prod communities that are vehemently expressing research fatigue?

rig·or (n).

- a. harsh inflexibility in opinion, temper, or judgment;
- b. the quality of being unyielding or inflexible;
- c. an act or instance of strictness, severity or cruelty;
- d. a condition that makes life difficult, challenging or uncomfortable;
- e. strict precision¹⁵

If rigor requires me to be unyielding, inflexible, and strictly precise in my pursuit of data, I refuse. For if there is anything that this project and the art-activist communities of Oakland have taught me, it’s that if I must contact potential ‘informants’ unyieldingly to the point that it makes me uncomfortable in order for this project to be considered rigorous, then ultimately, this work is not

¹⁵ Rigor. (n.d.). Merriam Webster Dictionary Online. Retrieved from: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rigor>

worth it.

I challenge the notion of rigor here for I feel strongly that my three years of fieldwork have been incredibly rigorous. From early 2014 to early 2017 I have attended countless art and activist events: performances, gallery openings, organizing meetings, block parties, public forums, City council meetings, rallies, poetry readings, demonstrations, cultural gatherings, lectures, art sales, dance parties, and city planning charettes. I have attended these events alone, with children in tow, with friends and colleagues, with a pregnant belly, with an infant strapped to my back. Not all of these events, in fact very few of them, make it to the pages of this document simply for a lack of space, but I can say that regardless of whether or not they make an appearance, each event informed my thinking in some way. I did not travel to a distant place to ‘conduct research’ over a designated period of time. I lived and made my home in my research for more than three years. So when it comes to gathering qualitative data for this project, I went a route that may not be considered rigorous to the social sciences, but one that is familiar in the humanities. Following the wisdom of my dear friend and collaborator, Asha Best, I read each of these ‘events’ or ‘moments’ as text. And from these lived and embodied texts that I have witnessed, I have theorized this work.

I did conduct several interviews, in person or over the phone, over the past three years, seven in total. These interviewees were: two women of color artists who run art gallery spaces; one Chicano leader of an organization that uses arts and culture to empower formerly incarcerated youth; two artists/choreographers of color; one Black leader of a cultural center; and one Chicano arts commissioner. Four women, three men; all Black, Chicano or Mexican; some queer, some straight; all have lived in Oakland for decades or were born here. Additional quotes that appear in this document were drawn from the subjects’ public presentations, or from interviews they had done with other media sources. This recycling of quotes may not seem as rigorous to some as if I had conducted interviews myself, but here, again, I refuse. Might research be made more ethical

if we are able to draw from sources already out in the world rather than subjecting people to the same inquiries that lead to research fatigue time and time again? Particularly in Oakland, particularly around conversations on gentrification, people are exhausted. Not only are communities living and breathing the gradual violence of displacement, but a plethora of reporters and researchers want to know how they feel about it so as to document it, myself included. At what point does research become over-saturated? At what point will people refuse to be researched? I recognized this over-saturation in my own efforts to speak with people, and not wanting to place more of a burden upon those who are fatigued, I began to turn to already-published quotes from art-activists, rather than keep hounding them. Returning to Tuck and Yang, I have found myself falling into the category of research they identify as when “a researcher already has a very clear sense of what she wants her research to say or do...[and when] research is reduced to a performance of inquiry in order to acquire legitimacy, this is when research is the most cynical about inquiry” (2014: 236). Perhaps, as Tuck and Yang describe, this project has become a performance of inquiry, and this refusal is mere cynicism. I, too, have become over-saturated by these three years in Oakland, witnessing so many events that I have much to speak on, and yet I find myself hounded by notions of rigor nipping at my heels even as I write this. Despite this, again, I refuse. Like feminist geographers before me (Mullings 1999; Callard et al. 1999), I insist that we push at the limits of rigor, for this work is rigorous and yet never unyielding or inflexible.

To continue to push research and notions of rigor in the social sciences, this project takes on art not just as artifact but as theory. Again, following Tuck and Yang:

Theory works deliciously differently in the social sciences and in art... Engaging literature and art as theory—especially decolonial literature and art—intervenes upon modes of theorizing in the social sciences, *setting limits to social science research and also making those limits permeable to other forms of inquiry*. The relationship between research and art can be one of epistemological respect and reciprocity rather than epistemological assimilation or colonization. (2014: 237, emphasis added)

In its methods, this project engages with decolonial art forms as theory to extend the forms of inquiry considered rigorous in geography. Interviews and testimony are valuable in theorizing, but as I found in this project, there are instances when there are no words that do justice (as is the case with art) or where there is a fatigue in putting things to words. As such, I respect the refusals I encountered in my research that set limits to where this project traveled, and create openings where I was encouraged to let the art in all its forms speak for itself.

When interviewing artist Amara Tabor-Smith, for example, I asked her how she saw her co-performance rituals in the streets of Oakland speaking to the geographies of the places they performed. She responded:

We try to let the work speak for itself as much as possible, all of our perceptions when witnessing the performance come from our own experiences. This work is rooted in ritual, drawing the spirit into the space, so however someone perceives that spirit, I respect it. I want to end sex trafficking, I want to end displacement, and educating is a part of that but that is not the point of this work. This work is to create a vibrational shift that dismantles the power structure¹⁶.

Tabor-Smith gently refused to elaborate on her response. Instead she insisted that while the artists' intentions in their performance was to reveal the intersections between sex trafficking and displacement in Oakland, and how Black women were most likely to be subjected to both forms of violence, that the work speaks for itself. She gently refused to elaborate, instead encouraging me to make my own interpretations of the performance. As she mentioned, the conclusions I drew from the performance would be subject to my own experience, and I needn't seek out her confirmation in language. She had already said all that she needed to say on those intersections through the performance itself. By taking Tabor-Smith's performance as-is, by engaging with it as theory, while also recognizing that in many ways this text will not be able to fully capture its spirit, I follow her lead and take on the R-word. My interpretation of the performance may be considered

¹⁶ Amara Tabor-Smith, interview, January 11, 2017.

subjective in the eyes of Social Science, but since objectivity is a colonial tool of domination, my subjectivity then is an effort to engage the decolonial art witnessed with epistemological respect. Rather than a research project of the art, this work attempts to build a “dialogical relationship between research and art” (Tuck & Yang 2014: 237). This text is my decolonial art form. This is my dialogue with the geographies, moments, and art forms I have witnessed.

CHAPTER TWO: ‘HOW COULD YOU KNOW THAT THE TOWN EXISTED BEFORE YOU ARRIVED?’

“This is not gentrification. Why do you get such a nice word? This is urban economic and ethnic cleansing.”

– Willie (JR) Fleming of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Coalition¹⁷

“How could you know, lacking any hard evidence or native memory, that the Town existed before you arrived? That there were people and restaurants and careers and movements and ways of being that did not include you? We had a life here — a life rich in culture, politics, art, and friendship, if not always in capital.”

– Chinaka Hodge, *The Gentrifier’s Guide to Getting Along*

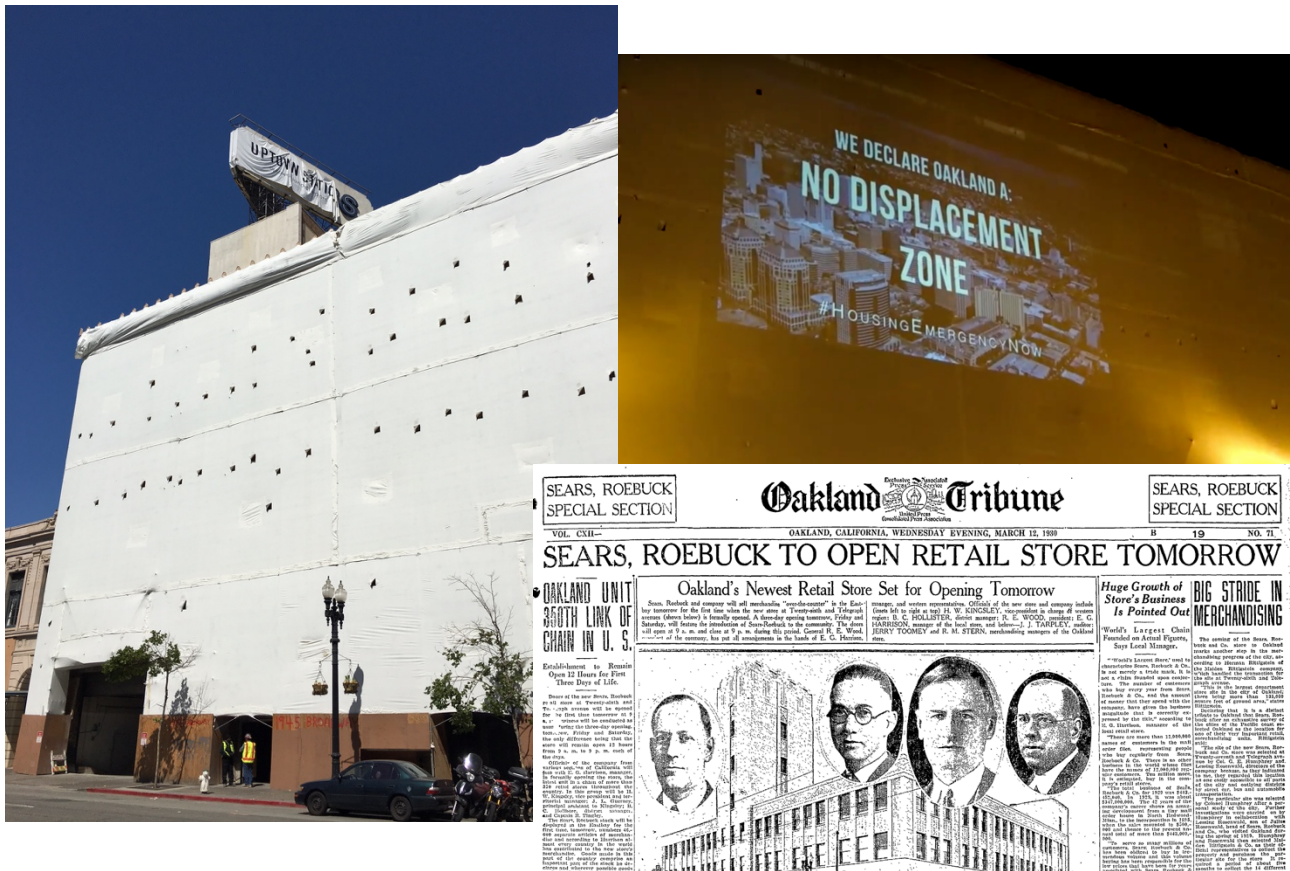


Figure 5: Photos of Uptown Station, Uber’s new Oakland Headquarters, 2016. Photos by Author. Sears, Roebuck to Open Retail Store Tomorrow, Oakland Tribune, March 12, 1930.

¹⁷ Quoted from a panel Fleming was on in Los Angeles on February 3, 2016 as part of UCLA Luskin’s Urban Colorlines Event

We are home. We won't go. We are home. We won't go. A few hundred people marched along Broadway Avenue in front of a shrouded white building. Drummers from Samba Funk played as people chanted, while above them tech firm Uber's logo and the words 'Stop Uber Displacement' were projected onto the building's smooth white surface. Statistics of Uber's low wages and anti-union tactics flickered across the building, along with renderings of what the building under the white shroud would look like after Uber opened its new headquarters on site in 2017. *Ain't gonna let nobody steal my house, steal my house, steal my house.* People stood in a circle and sang as others took turns at the megaphone, expressing their concerns around the housing crisis in Oakland and how little was being done to keep mass displacement at bay. *I'm tired of seeing my people in this community made homeless. I'm tired of seeing us struggling. We need to stand up and go to city hall and say your racist exclusionary policies have no place in Oakland.* The images showed how, when tech corporation Twitter's headquarters opened up a similarly massive headquarters in San Francisco, evictions more than doubled in the surrounding SOMA neighborhood, and how similar increases in commercial and residential displacement were expected when Uber opened its doors. *We want to keep our homes. We are tired of being evicted. We are tired of being displaced. We are tired of a city council that does nothing. No more evictions. No more rent increases.* The activists called for a moratorium on evictions and rent hikes in Oakland, drumming and dancing to their demands. They declared Oakland a no-displacement zone, and planned to present their demands to the City Council on April 5, 2016.

The building had been shrouded since the fall of 2015 when it was announced that Uber had bought up the five story building at 20th and Broadway. This building had only one previous life since its construction in 1930, that of a Sears Roebuck Department Store. Standing in the middle of downtown Oakland, the building's transformations over the past 80-plus years are deeply symbolic of the ebb and flow of racial capitalism in Oakland, symbolic of the processes that

have produced displacement in this city. The activists protesting Uber's arrival in Oakland and the forces of displacement that indicate its arrival were that indicate its arrival are targeting the Oakland city government's embrace of gentrification to bring investment into the city. And yet, what is happening in this building and this city has happened before – gentrification is nothing new to Oakland, nothing new to the settler-colonial state more broadly. The founders of the Sears building worked for decades to uphold their investment in downtown Oakland. As capital left Oakland from



Figure 6: A business shut down, directly across the street from the site of the new Uber Headquarters, 2016. Photo by author.

the 1950s onward, executives from Sears and other capitalist forces such as Wells Fargo, Kaiser, and the Oakland Real Estate Board created the Oakland Citizen's Committee for Urban Renewal (OCCUR). From this committee the Oakland Redevelopment Agency was formed in 1956, and within a few years the agency began to clear 'slums' in West Oakland, the red-lined African American neighborhood adjacent to downtown (Rhombert 2004: 125). To the committee led by Sears and banking and real estate executives, to 'save' downtown, to protect their property investments, the Black slums had to be extinguished. Between 1960-1966 more than 7,000 housing units were destroyed in Oakland in the name of urban renewal, with 5,100 demolished in West Oakland alone, displacing around 14,000 residents (Rhombert 2004: 125). This phase of

urban renewal in Oakland during the 1960s was largely deemed to be a failure, as capital continued to leave the city, and Black social movements resisted the planned erasure of their communities. The Sears Department store on 20th and Broadway remained open until 1993, and although the store closed, Sears maintained ownership of the building. After quietly renovating the building in 2002, they waited it out. Waiting for Oakland's revival. Waiting for their 1930 investment to pay off.

Gentrification is nothing new; it is simply a contemporary name for a form of colonial violence that has played out across the globe for centuries. Uber's pending arrival is made of the same processes of racial capitalist expansion, dispossession and erasure as Sears' urban renewal. So how is gentrification different than racialized dispossession? How might the analytic of (accumulation by) dispossession better encapsulate the complex processes that produce displacement in Oakland, California? To move the conversation of dispossession forward, I would like to take up Loretta Lees' call to "decolonize the gentrification literature" (2012: 164). Lees pushes urban scholars to diversify their understanding of gentrification by considering how postcolonial or global south contexts produce distinct forms of gentrification from those of the global north. Towards the end of her piece, Lees asks "what new, indigenous or cosmopolitan theorizations can be brought to bear on gentrification in the global south, and in turn the global north?"; concluding that "only a truly comparative urbanism of gentrification will tell us how and why gentrification has emerged around the world" (2012: 166, 167). Geographer Asher Ghertner responded to Lees' call, suggesting that to 'decolonize the gentrification literature' is to acknowledge that "all theory is geographically specific," (2014: 1568) and therefore we must be wary of applying theories and analytics that may work 'here' to 'over there'. As Ghertner suggests, perhaps the analytic of gentrification itself does not adequately address the issues at hand in the global south, and other theories "more attentive to the processual dimensions of urban change...[that] focus on causes and mechanisms, rather than events and outcomes, make them relatively better suited than gentrification to attend to geographies of displacement across diverse

political economic contexts” (2014: 1556). As an alternative, Ghertner suggests that “accumulation by dispossession is a means-specific analytic that ‘invites comparative research into its conjunctural economic role and political outcome in different times and places’” (2014: 1568; citing Levien 2012, 942). In this project, I would like to carry Ghertner’s intention and suggest that perhaps gentrification is not sufficiently attentive to urban spaces and peoples in the global north either, considering the case of Oakland and the processes of racial capitalism that have actively dispossessed Black lives here for decades.

If “geographies of gentrification” are to be decolonized, it is going to take more than comparative urbanism to do so. As Ghertner suggested, accumulation by dispossession is an analytic that focuses on the causes and mechanisms of displacement, and opens the conversation for a more structural and intersectional analysis that transcends spaces and temporalities. I am not calling for the complete dissolution of gentrification, for it does carry substantial theoretical weight and resonance, but rather pushing for urban theorists to move towards a broader conversation of dispossession that is attentive to, as Ananya Roy (2017) points out, not only capital accumulation but racial banishment. By considering racialized dispossession or banishment in my analysis of Oakland, eviction and the mass displacement of Black and Brown residents are tied to “forms of racialized violence such as slavery, Jim Crow, incarceration, colonialism, and apartheid, that cannot be encapsulated within sanitized notions of gentrification and displacement” (Roy 2017: 3). Here, Roy’s use of the term “sanitized” seems especially useful, for the term gentrification has become so over-utilized in academia and popular media that it becomes self-aggrandizing in its illusion of inevitability, disconnected from other structural inequities that co-produce and trigger its effects. Its overuse also has made gentrification a stand-in for more complex analysis and conversation of structural inequities in urban studies, allowing historical and spatial practices of dispossession to be explained away by the mere mention of gentrification. As Bench Ansfield has explained, “the deconcentration of poverty can be more appropriately conceptualized as an exercise in spatial and bodily *purification* than an exercise of

gentrification” (2015: 128, emphasis original). When the problem is framed as gentrification alone, we do not fully address the complexities of the issues at hand, and instead are left grasping for solutions to the elusive specter of gentrification as entrenched forms of racialized dispossession barrel onward. As cited in Roy’s writings, she was called upon by Pete White of Los Angeles’ Community Action Network to create a theory of banishment, for “we are telling you that what we are experiencing cannot any longer be explained as gentrification” (Roy 2017: 10). Gentrification is an insufficient term for how it sanitizes the complexities behind dispossession – to decolonize gentrification, then, perhaps requires a shift of framing altogether.

This research then seeks to move beyond a conversation of gentrification alone. Dispossession is a more appropriate framing for global south and north contexts, more attentive to differences between places in comparative urban analysis, and more effective in addressing the racialized histories and geographies of displacement. I am swayed by Roy’s call to reframe dispossession and possession, asking “If certain subjects are always necessarily dispossessed, or constituted as property owned by others, how do they claim property? Do such claims also rework claims to personhood?” (2017: 3). And so as I grapple with dispossession in Oakland, I consider what it means to live in a continual state of dispossession, what this says of the lives who once were deemed property themselves, and what it means to build a decolonial ontology of dispossession. By using the analytics of displacement, dispossession, and racialized violence, I build a decolonial understanding of current urban crises that highlight how the current wave of evictions and displacement is an intrinsic component of ongoing colonial violence that falls disproportionately upon poor people of color. Shifting the analytic as such enables for more complex geographic comparisons across cities and continents, as well as deeper histories of displaced peoples. A more intersectional analysis traces the ways that racialized diasporic and Indigenous peoples have been deemed disposable and repeatedly denied a rooted-home place, particularly in the last 500-plus-years period of European colonialism and empire. This shifting analytic thus also helps to build an understanding of the historical traumas that uprooted peoples

carry, and how these traumas intersect with existing burdens of impoverishment, disproportionate degrees of criminalization and incarceration, and other forms of structural racism and state violence.

To understand what a decolonial reframing of gentrification and dispossession signifies, it is necessary to turn to Indigenous theorizations of colonialism and decolonization. Theorists Eve Tuck and R. Wayne Yang name two distinct processes of colonialism: *external* colonialism, the extraction of fragments of Indigenous worlds such as land, plants, animals, and human lives to build the wealth of the colonizers, and *internal* colonialism, “the biopolitical and geopolitical management of people, land, flora and fauna within the ‘domestic’ borders of an imperial nation...[with] particular modes of control – prisons, ghettos, minoritizing, schooling, policing – to ensure the ascendancy of a nation and its white elite” (2012: 4-5). In the context of the United States, *settler* colonialism operates through both of these modes simultaneously, requiring “a mode of total appropriation of Indigenous life and land” in which settlers create homes on the land, which requires that the land be “recast as property and as resource. The Indigenous peoples must be erased, must be made into ghosts...[and] at the same time, settler colonialism involves the subjugation and forced labor of chattel slaves, whose bodies and lives become the property, and who are kept landless” (2012: 5-6). Under settler colonialism, the dispossession of Indigenous lives and land occurs simultaneously with the enslavement of Black lives, in which Black lives and Indigenous land are commodified into property. And, as Roy explored, what does colonial dispossession become for those whose “personhood was once property”? Decolonization under the settler colonial state is, therefore, fraught with contradiction because “empire, settlement, and internal colony have no spatial separation. Each of these features of settler colonialism in the US context - empire, settlement, and internal colony - make it a site of contradictory decolonial desires...settler colonialism and its decolonization implicates and unsettles everyone” (Tuck & Yang 2012: 7). When attempting to theorize dispossession in Oakland and develop a decolonial notions rights to land and home, there are multiple geographies at stake, and they are often not

complementary or easily bound in struggles of solidarity. Struggles for a right to remain in one's home and not be further dispossessed often exist in uneasy opposition to Indigenous peoples' rights to their native land, with "the ontology of decolonization uneasily sutured to politics of emplacement" (Roy 2017: 7). Therefore, when theorizing a decolonizing of gentrification and of bringing a decolonial ontology to reframe dispossession, notions of land and home become fraught and at times contradictory. The current moment of dispossession is thick with geographies of racial banishment and colonial occupation: Gentrification alone does not do justice to the rapid mode of predatory dispossession underway in urban centers such as Oakland.

In the present historical conjuncture, for the purposes of this project the time period of 2014 to (early) 2017, Oakland has become a borderland. My conceptualization of a borderland here is drawn from Chicana theorist, Gloria Anzaldúa:

A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition...The only 'legitimate' inhabitants are those in power, whites and those that align themselves with whites. Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger. (Anzaldúa 1988: 25-26)

I turn to Anzaldúa's theories here in an effort to make sense of the spatial tensions that exist in the city of Oakland as historical patterns and geographies of dispossession are underway. Unmarked boundaries have been created in Oakland neighborhoods, characterized by shifts in architectural and commercial aesthetics, a shift in bodies occupying street spaces, and freshly-painted bike lanes replacing neglected streetscapes. Anzaldúa's marcation of those considered legitimate and illegitimate inhabitants of the borderlands is notion that is felt in Oakland, as native Oaklanders of color reference how their neighborhoods are being transformed into spaces 'not meant for us'. While Anzaldúa's writings refer to the borderlands between colonial nation states, the tension, ambivalence, and unrest she describes offer a lens to understand the instability of cities gripped by rapid racialized dispossession.

This work seeks to reframe the way that gentrification is documented and analyzed in academic texts. Oakland in 2017 is a borderland, a battleground even, and this research seeks to bear witness to the ways that art-activists of color are actively resisting the various forms of state violence their communities are facing. Gentrification is the form of violence that is on the tip of everyone's tongue in Oakland, the neighborhoods are changing under our feet and people are being displaced at a rapid rate. These writings focus on the people most affected, center their stories, their resilience, and practices of survival. These writings seek to tell a more nuanced tale of the effects of gentrification on the ground, to remind academia of how gentrification displaces in a very real and painful way that reverberates with generations of dispossession.

In the following, I conceptualize how what is being called gentrification in Oakland at present is in fact a diaspora of dispossession. I do this work by first delving into major threads of gentrification literature, and then outlining how a diaspora of dispossession enables a more nuanced understanding of what is at play in Oakland. To support this conceptualization, I then look to the political economy of Oakland over the past eighty years, reflecting how the shifting imaginaries of the city have affected the forms of dispossession as development that are enacted. From there, I consider how notions of home, waste, and ledgers are enforced under racialized dispossession. One of the goals of this dissertation is to push geographers toward a more structural and intersectional analytical approach to urban displacement. To do so, I consider the utility of the hyper-prevalence of studies on gentrification¹⁸, and how the overuse of the term “gentrification” in academic, policy-based, and popular conversations may have watered down the structural conditions and intersecting processes that fuel gentrification. Perhaps the best way to make sense of the political work that gentrification does is to hold its lens to the site of Oakland.

¹⁸ As an example of the hyper-prevalence of gentrification-themed articles, 4016 publications cited Neil Smith's 1996 classic book, *Revanchist City*, often considered a major entry-point of gentrification literature, as of 3/2/17.

COLONIALITY OF DISPLACEMENT

“Behind every great American city is a great crime. Oakland was founded on occupation and land theft. In 1850, a coterie of Yankee businessmen began building a port in what would become Oakland’s Jack London Square, developing and selling land unbeknownst to landlord Luis Peralta, who was granted 48,000 acres for his service to the Spanish army. Indeed, the Native Ohlone still lived in the land ‘owned’ by the Peraltas, as well as Miwok and other Indigenous people who had migrated as a result of historic relationships between tribes and efforts to escape the Mission system. The Peraltas sued, and in 1856, the US Supreme Court upheld their claim, but maintained that it was too late to reverse – as deeds and titles had exchanged hands so many times that there was no undoing – and because Oakland was now occupied.”

– La Paperson, 2014: 122

The process of gentrification has been a long time coming in Oakland. Like many ‘classic cases’ of urban crisis and gentrification, the current crisis has deep roots, and low-income peoples are continually dispossessed as racial capitalism works its course. The urban crisis that Oakland finds itself in today has origins far before the stock and housing market crash of 2007, and extends beyond the city boundaries to its place within the greater Bay Area region (Schafran 2013) and in the global economy (Smith 2002). To unpack Oakland as a site of gentrification, I first ask what is the utility of gentrification as an analytic? What aspects of the immense body of work on gentrification in geography and urban studies is useful in conceptualizing what Oakland is undergoing in its present moment? To decipher gentrification’s analytical value, I will first delve briefly into some of the major contributions of gentrification studies, and then consider how decolonial theories of the land can inspire a true decolonizing of urban studies.

Oakland fits rather easily into Neil Smith’s now-classic model of the gentrifying city as the urban frontier, in which “hostile landscapes re-regenerated, cleansed, re-infused with middle-class sensibility; real estate values soar; yuppies consume; elite gentility is democratized in mass-produced styles of distinction” (1996: 12). As Smith explains, the “frontier discourse serves to rationalize and legitimate a process of conquest” (1996: xvi). Drawing connections between

pioneer imaginaries of lands inhabited by Native Americans, Smith explains how the gentrifier's imaginary of urban space suggests a city not yet inhabited, carrying ideological weight that "displaces poor households, and converts whole neighborhoods into bourgeois enclaves. The frontier ideology rationalizes social differentiation and exclusion as natural, inevitable" (1996: 16). Gentrification here is reflected by the changing consumer and commercial landscapes in neighborhoods (Zukin 1987; Lees 1994, 2000; Ley 1996; Bridge & Dowling 2001), and is often sold by city governance as a form of urban renewal that results in localized inequality and displacement of low-income residents (Wyly & Hammel 1999; Hackworth & Smith 2001; Smith 2002; Newman & Wyly 2006). These forms of urban renewal are also often tightly bound to neoliberal creative city projects that are intended to attract a creative class of gentrifiers to tame the frontiers of 'blighted' urban centers, which will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter Three (Peck 2005; Markusen 2006; McCann 2007).

Often, gentrification is described in temporal waves: the first 'sporadic' wave taking place in the 1970s, the second 'expansionist' wave taking off in the 1980s after the economic slowdown of the late 1970s, and the third wave commencing in the mid-1990s as the globalization of finance and real estate began to play active roles in identifying and conquering housing markets (Hackworth & Smith 2001). Loretta Lees terms this third wave 'super-gentrification', in which displacement doesn't occur solely in its 'classic' form of individuals moving into a neighborhood, but instead has become a mega process that is supported by national and local policies and development plans (2003). In this sense, gentrification has become a means for global finance capital to reach the scale of the neighborhood – a global urban strategy for neoliberal capitalism (Smith 2002; Lees 2008; McCann 2011). This distinction between modern modes of gentrification and earlier forms emphasizes the role of finance capital, making gentrification a process systematically produced by state and transnational capital, in addition to the whims of individuals and consumer tastes. This focus on the global reach of gentrification has increased dramatically in recent years, as urban theorists push for theories of planetary urbanism, arguing that there is

a need for gentrification to be addressed as a global phenomenon that is rapidly consuming urban centers worldwide (Atkinson & Bridge 2004; Lees 2012; Lees et al. 2013; Brenner 2014; Brenner & Schmid 2015; López Morales 2015; Lees et al. 2016). These pushes to theorize planetary urbanism demonstrate that the term gentrification is only gaining momentum, with calls for a term that was born in London neighborhoods in the 1960s (Glass 1964) to now be applied at a planetary level.

These calls for planetary and universal theories of urbanization and gentrification have been met with resistance from postcolonial and feminist critiques, with some resisting the ‘regulating fiction’ of gentrification and Anglo-geography’s ‘attachment’ to the term (Maloutas 2012; Ghertner 2014, 2015). Others, perhaps most vocally Ananya Roy and Jennifer Robinson, have critiqued planetary urbanism, urging the need for urban studies to “articulate new geographies of urban theory” by “dislocating the EuroAmerican centre of theoretical production” (Roy 2009: 820; Robinson 2002, 2011, 2016). Roy has gone on to even challenge proponents of planetary theory with her provocatively-titled article, *Who’s Afraid of Postcolonial Theory?*, in which she questions “the anxiety generated by postcolonial thought, and how this anxiety requires a defense of universal history and universal form to be mobilized against arguments about historical difference” (2016: 207). Feminist geographers Natalie Oswin and Linda Peake also critique planetary urbanism, pointing out how the current trend toward universal urban theory requires them to raise critiques that are all too reminiscent of the critiques Cindi Katz and Rosalind Deutche raised of Marxist urban theory in the 1990s (Oswin 2016; Peake 2016; Buckley & Strauss 2016; Shaw 2015; Derickson 2015; Katz 1996; Deutche 1991). As Oswin explains, it is not enough to have a ‘new epistemology of the urban’ that focuses predominantly on capitalist exploitation and class dynamics, for what is needed is a Marxist approach that is informed by “queer, feminist, postcolonial and critical race theories” (2016: 3). As Roy elaborates, “it is postcolonial theory that that enables me to understand the racialized regimes of labor and capital through which such transnational urbanism is constituted and represented...to think relationally

about cities...[to think about] the relationship between place, knowledge and power” (2016: 207). If we rely on planetary urbanism and conceptions of gentrification that are modeled off of places and theorists of the Global North, conceptions that focus on capitalism and class before all else, what is lost in using gentrification as the primary analytic in understanding urban crisis?

When considering gentrification as an analytic of dispossession, its value lies in its focus on the role of transnational finance and state actors in the mass displacement of low-income people to further capital accumulation for the capitalist elite. However, using gentrification as the sole analytic to discuss Oakland in its present moment is insufficient. Gentrification alone does not allow for a thorough analysis of the historical and geographic role of racial capitalism, white supremacy, and coloniality in the vast dispossession of people of color in Oakland. By example, while Smith’s conceptualization of gentrifying landscapes as frontiers is a valuable metaphor, and despite the overt colonial/imperial expansionary tones of this narrative, his model of gentrification remains tied to the temporality of 20th century urban centers. Perhaps then, to decolonize the gentrification literature as Lees (2012) has called for means to take up decolonial theory in analyses of urban crisis and push beyond the ‘inevitability’ that gentrification studies evoke. I argue that in order to grapple with the complex and intertwined processes at work in Oakland, it is necessary to turn to additional analytics, and to consider a broader theory of racialized dispossession that accounts for the colonial and white supremacist forces at work under racial capitalism. To decolonize urban studies in a true sense then also means centering decolonial and postcolonial theory; it means theorizing from the land, and centering Indigenous conceptions of land in analyses of urban crisis.

To decolonize gentrification studies, then, requires an understanding of the coloniality of gentrification and an understanding of settler colonialism’s relation to racial capitalism in the United States. Settler colonialism is a structure of power with an objective to invade and occupy land so that settlers can permanently reside there (Wolfe 1999; Veracini 2010). To accomplish

this, the indigenous peoples must be eliminated from the land so as to establish settler sovereignty over all things in the domain (Tuck & Yang 2012; Glenn 2015). Under the settler colonial structure:

Land is what is most valuable, contested, required. This is both because the settlers make Indigenous land their new home and source of capital, and also because the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence. This violence is not temporally contained in the arrival of the settler but is reasserted each day of occupation...land is remade into property and human relationships to land are restricted to the relationship of the owner to his property. Epistemological, ontological, and cosmological relationships to land are interred, indeed made pre-modern and backward. (Tuck & Yang 2012: 5)

Under settler colonial ideology, land is a resource for extraction and occupation, a source of capital to own, exploit, and make profitable. Implicit in this ideology is the assumption that since Indigenous ontologies of land were not exploiting the land for profit as settlers intend, they are rightfully displaced since their relationship to land is unproductive. When placing settler colonial ideologies in conversation with ideologies of gentrification, the similarities are all too profound. When Neil Smith speaks of the frontiers of gentrification in urban centers, it is painfully obvious that the frontier myths of gentrification bear striking resemblance to settler colonial myths of manifest destiny (Smith 1996). Sara Safransky has shown how pioneer discourse abounds in Detroit as the city seeks to attract 'homesteaders' to rehabilitate 'blighted' urban landscapes, pointing out how "the racialized dimensions of settler colonialism" emerge in the racial geographies of cities (2014: 239). Settler colonial ideologies justify and incentivize gentrification in how they disavow the rights of the existing racial geographies of the landscape, not seeing their claims to place as legitimate or worthy enough to consider them rightful residents of that place. Drawing explicit connections between settler colonial ideology and gentrification in urban centers weaves geographies of dispossession that are attentive to historical patterns of displacement, extraction and occupation, and make plain how the structure of settler colonialism continues to be "reasserted each day of occupation".

Returning to how geographies of gentrification might be decolonized, I argue that it is necessary to center Indigenous decolonial conceptions of land. As Glen Coulthard argues, capitalism and colonialism are ongoing social relations, and so the dispossession of Indigenous lands must be considered in the settler colonial context as well as a capitalist context; and political economic analyses alone do not fully articulate colonial dispossession (2014). Coulthard explains that in Marx's Capital, colonial dispossession was seen as an object of critique in understanding the capitalist social relation between the worker and the means of production, rather than seeing colonialism as a social relation in itself (2014). By downplaying the role of colonial dispossession, Coulthard argues, "critical theory and left political strategy not only risks becoming complicit in the very structures and processes of domination it sought to oppose, but also risks overlooking what could prove to be invaluable glimpses into the ethical practices and preconditions required for the construction of a more just and sustainable world order" (2014: 12). Here is where gentrification and urban studies interested in a decolonial project need consider the true meaning behind the language of the decolonial – evading colonial and racialized dispossession in an analysis of urban crises at present produces insufficient structural analyses. For if urban studies and urban space more broadly are to truly be decolonized, then this political project will not solely utilize the decolonial as an empty signifier but instead actively pursue the repatriation of land in the settler colonial context (Tuck & Yang 2012).

Ultimately, to decolonize urban studies and urban political strategies, it is also necessary to center Indigenous ontologies of land in our analyses, for these ontologies "can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in non-dominating and non-exploitative terms – and less around our emergent status as 'rightless proletarians' (Coulthard 2014: 13). Decolonial notions of land offer liberatory conceptualizations of urban space, and consider how relations between land, people, and power could be radically reimaged into more sustainable futures. As Michelle Daigle has theorized, "everyday geographies of self-determination rooted in Indigenous ontologies help us understand that, in some instances,

relational responsibility starts with renewing those with the land. These responsibilities are learned, cultivated, and transmitted through a direct and intimate relationship with the land” (2016: 3). While Daigle here is referring to the everyday practices of resurgence of Indigenous peoples, how might an Indigenous ontology of land also create openings for how we envision decolonial futures of place, relation, and collective responsibility?

In the subsequent section, I carry these threads of coloniality into a conversation on the diaspora of dispossession. I consider how the decolonial ontology “necessarily reframes the history and obligations of property and thus the meanings of possession and dispossession,” and how this creates uneasy frictions when the diaspora enters the frame of the city (Roy 2017: 7). Indeed, as Paperson writes, the colonial racial capitalist present “collapse[s] Native land and black space together, leading once again to re-settlement” (2014: 117). How might this collapsing be addressed and complicated by decolonial activism in Oakland? The Ohlone peoples indigenous to the East Bay and their rights to land are largely overlooked in conversations of gentrification that take place in Oakland, something that needs to be remedied. While I largely focus on the Black and Latino diaspora in what follows, I want to remain cognizant of the Ohlone and the forms of violence and erasure that have worked to disappear their presence from the landscape of Oakland.

DIASPORA OF DISPOSSESSION

“One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history precedes. History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives. Where one stands in a society seems always related to this historical experience”

– Dionne Brand, 2001: 24

While the Indigenous peoples in the settler colonial state have been systematically erased from the landscape, in the case of the diaspora, dispossession began in lands far from Oakland.

Diaspora studies have been largely influenced by the writings of Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, who have theorized the Atlantic crossing as a space of movement, interconnection, and subordination where the Black diasporic identity and culture was born. As Katharine McKittrick has theorized, if the Black Atlantic is read through its material sites, it draws explicit “genealogical connections between dispossession, transparent space and black subjectivity” (2006: xxi). Unlike Indigenous ontologies that are rooted in the land, the Black Atlantic according to Gilroy “directs us not to the land, where we find that special soil in which we are told national culture takes root, but towards the sea and the maritime life that ringed and crossed the Atlantic Ocean bringing more fluid and less fixed ‘hybrid’ cultures to life...the Black Atlantic opens out theories of diaspora culture and dispersion, memory, identity and difference” (1995: 11). For the Black diaspora, many of whom came to the Americas as enslaved peoples, colonial dispossession began with the Door of No Return. The Door of No Return is the entrance into a world of colonization that enslaved Black peoples of the diaspora, that, following Christina Sharpe’s elaborations, became an “optic and a haunting that continues to construct and position black people in the ‘new world’...that un/known door is the frame that produces black bodies as signifiers of enslavement and its (unseeable) excesses; it is the beginning, the ontology, of the black” (2012: Lateral). The Door represents the threshold to colonial dispossession, an entrance into the system of racial capitalism where lives became marked as black, where lives became property.

In this work I theorize the diaspora of dispossession for it offers an embodied sense of dispossession, referencing the generations of dispossession that Black lives carry in their daily existence in the United States. As Brand elaborates, the un/known door is the optic that produced black bodies as signifiers of enslavement, a generational dispossession that Black lives continue to carry in histories, geographies, and in bodies themselves. Christina Sharpe further articulates these themes, introducing her analytic of the wake:

Living in/the wake of slavery is living the ‘afterlife of property’ and living the afterlife of *partus sequitur ventrem* (that which is brought forth follows the womb), in which the

Black child inherits the non/status, the non/being of the mother. That inheritance of non/status is everywhere apparent now in the ongoing criminalization of Black women and children. Living in the wake on a global level means living the disastrous time and effects of continued marked migrations... Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence...Living in the wake means living in and with terror in that much of what passes for public discourse about terror we, Black people, become the carriers of terror, terror's embodiment, and not the primary objects of terror's multiple enactments; the ground of terror's possibility globally. (2016: 15)

Sharpe's powerful theorizations of the wake demonstrate the reverberations of dispossession that become embodied by the Black diasporic subject. The terror that Black lives have had to endure generationally is transformed into a racialized marker that criminalizes the Black body by virtue of its blackness. To be in the wake is "to live in the no-space that the law is not bound to respect, to live in no citizenship" (16), and yet, as Sharpe insists, to do wake work is to "see and imagine responses to terror in the varied and various ways that our Black lives are lived under occupation; ways that attest to the modalities of Black life live in, as, under, and despite Black death" (2016: 20). This project seeks to place Oakland and the Black diasporic lives that reside there within the choppy waters of the wake. To be attentive to the forms of dispossession that are ongoing reverberations of the wake of slavery that are mapped upon Black lives, while still attesting to the creative modalities and forms of resistance that are produced by wake work. If Black lives in the American racial capitalist context live in the wake of the initial and ongoing dispossession of passing through that un/known door, what does claiming possession look like for the diaspora of dispossession?

The diaspora of dispossession has affected not only Black lives, but also the lives of Brown migrants who have emigrated to the United States over the past century or more. I utilize the framing of 'Brown' to describe diasporic peoples who have emigrated from Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East, as this is a commonly utilized term of solidarity for populations encountering racialized discrimination as people of color in the United States. In this project I focus primarily on Latin American migrants, for in the case of Oakland, Latino migrants make up the majority of

the city's Brown geographies and are more frequently subjected to racialized policing practices than other Brown peoples (Herrera 2012). The use of the term diaspora to describe Brown migrant populations in the U.S. seemingly reached a peak in the late 1990s when the celebratory tone of cultural hybridity in diaspora studies was widely critiqued (Mitchell 1997; Ong 1999). I am reviving the Brown diaspora here for it draws a valuable thread of solidarity between dispossessed peoples that were either forcibly extracted from their homeland and enslaved (Gilroy 1995), forced to leave their homeland due to state violence and war (Wright 2006, 2011; Valencia 2014), or structurally dispossessed from their homeland due to deteriorating political economic shifts that produced severe poverty (Bacon 2008; Nevins 2010). All of these structural dispossessions could have made members of the diaspora migrate and find themselves a racially marked 'other' in the settler colonial state of America. For many migrants the racial 'othering' is coupled with the precarious socio-spatial condition of 'illegality', that is lived through a palpable sense of deportability (DeGenova 2002). While illegality is tied to legal classifications, it is bound to discourses, politics, and practices that police migrants' place in the city, becoming tools of domination that racialize particular immigrants (Nevins 2002). Illegality becomes "incarnated on the immigrant body through processes of racialization, regardless of national origin, and actual legal status...and because many [white] Americans do not differentiate between one brown body and another, illegality involves the criminalization of all brown bodies" (Hiemstra 2010: 79). Here the perceived illegality of the brown diaspora adds another layer of racialized dispossession, leaving migrant peoples in constant fear of further dispossession and displacement, with their alleged legal status translated onto their brown skin.

Gentrification is only the most recent iteration of racialized dispossession that follows the diaspora. I return to Roy here in considering that, "if we work with an expanded notion of dispossession, with attention to the subject who cannot thus claim possession, not even possession of personhood, then we have to rethink the idea of loss" (2017: 4). What does possession look like for the diaspora of dispossession? I raise this question and thread it through

my writings here, returning to it in Chapter Four when I dig deeper into sites of decolonial geographies. While Roy is referring to possession in terms of property and land rights, she also enters a conversation on personhood. Here I want to be wary, as McKittrick explains:

Black self-possession and self entitlement cannot be read as feasible geographic processes in the terms laid out by traditional geographies because the close ties between the body and the landscape around these bodies (traces of history) refuse such a reading, and arguably translate black geographies as sites of dispossession...[it is] so tightly bound to the idea that dispossessed black bodies are naturally in place. (2006: 4)

I center McKittrick's words here so as to avoid replicating this tendency to frame Black geographies as sites of dispossession alone, which risks framing blackness as "ungeographic". The subsequent section outlines the dispossession of Oakland's Black geographies so as to orient the reader with the effects of racial capitalism in Oakland and how these processes have worked to lay waste to Black geographies. I write these pages of histories to give context to how, despite all efforts at dispossession, Oakland's Black residents continue to produce rich geographies of resistance built out of an oppositional consciousness. I find it necessary to outline the vast forms of state violence that seek to maintain Oakland's Black geographies as sites of dispossession. However, as I will show in this chapter and to a larger extent in Chapter Four, Black activists and geographies resist violence on many fronts and produce alternate conceptions of the place that is Oakland.

In what follows I introduce Oakland within this frame of the diasporas of dispossession – highlighting the rapid displacement of Oakland's Black population as well as the increasing displacement of the city's immigrant population. I focus on the dispossession and resilience of Black and Latino peoples of Oakland in particular, as they are the most populous communities of color in the city (Census 2010), and also those most affected by forces of dispossession such as the policing and gentrification in Oakland at present (Rios 2011; Causa Justa 2014). In recent years, there have been a growing number of alliances built between these two communities in Oakland for their shared oppression and activism, and thus I intend to further analyses of multiple forms

of state violence so as to build alliance and solidarity between Black and Brown peoples (Loyd et al 2012; Johnson 2013). I do not wish to erase the presence of Asian and Indigenous peoples in Oakland, and I include accounts of their efforts whenever possible, but to outline these communities' geographies in depth is beyond the scope of this project.

In the following, I weave an account of how Black and Latino peoples have been dispossessed for generations and across geographies, focusing on how gentrification is only one of many forms of dispossession these populations face at present in Oakland. Therefore, when analyzing the gentrification occurring in a place, we must center the geographies of those being displaced to gain a fuller sense of the dispossession unfurling. The histories to follow demonstrate how dispossessed diasporic people are repeatedly denied the right of possession, the right to create a stable and safe home. The following traces Oakland's tumultuous economy, shifting racial demographics, and particularly the effects of political-economic shifts on the city's Black peoples and geographies: how the dominant imaginary of Oakland held by outsiders has fluctuated over the past 70-plus years, and how the Black and Brown geographies of the city have produced counter-geographies of resistance against all odds.

DISPOSSESSION//*PROPERTY*

“Dispossession works through violence and precarity to continually sort those who are permitted to take place and those who must take their proper place, a proper place of ‘non-being’. Yet the opposite of dispossession is not possession and property.”

– Morill et al. 2016: 13, citing Butler and Anthanasiou 2013

In some ways, Oakland fits into classic models of gentrification, following patterns of industrial booms followed by devalorization of the urban center. In what follows I outline these political economic patterns of Oakland to give a sense of the processes of capital flight and

reinvestment that have taken place over the last 70-plus years, but what interests me is how these shifts have affected and been affected by the Black geographies of Oakland in particular. In this sense, I engage with Oakland through a lens of racial capitalism, not through one of capitalism alone (Robinson 1983). I find it necessary to apply the frame of racial capitalism to Oakland, a place that is profoundly shaped by racialized histories and geographies, for, as Laura Pulido reminds us, it “requires greater attention to the essential processes that have shaped the modern world, such as colonization, primitive accumulation, slavery and imperialism...by insisting that we are still living with the legacies of these processes, racial capitalism requires that we place contemporary forms of racial inequality in a materialist, ideological and historical framework” (2016: 3-4). Since Oakland has been a largely Black city for the past 70 years, the geographies of Black residents are essential in understanding the place that is Oakland. Black geographies are “the terrain of political struggle itself” (McKittrick 2006: 6) and are inherently tied to the booms and busts of the city, with racist structures ensuring that Black Oaklanders have been hit the hardest by the city’s crises through the years (Self 2003; Murch 2011). The following builds a brief history of Oakland’s post-industrial landscape of structural disinvestment, enclosure, and impoverishment of the city’s Black community to give a sense of the forms of dispossession endured. However, I would like to enter this history by centering the decolonial visions of the West Oakland-born Black Panther Party, and how their resistance wove Black geographic futures.

As Donna Jean Murch has demonstrated in her writings on the birth of the Black Panther Party (BPP) in Oakland, migration “laid the foundations for many radical social movements”, and the histories and geographies of Black Oakland’s Great Migration “became integral to the local and ultimately national history of Black Power and Black radicalism” (2010: 4). As Murch reveals, the Black radical movements of Oakland in the 1960s were composed largely of southern Black migrants under the age of 25. Black Panther Party co-founder Huey Newton wrote in his autobiography how the Panthers were born out of a history of flight and exile:

The great exodus of poor people out of the South during World War II sprang from a hope for a better life in the big cities of the North and West. In search of freedom, they left behind cruelty and oppression...The Black communities of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Newark, Brownsville, Watts, Detroit and many others stand as testament that racism is as oppressive in the North as in the South. Oakland is no different. (Newton 1973: 10)


This pursuit of freedom and a better life out West that Newton describes, and the eventual realization that structural racism would deny Black migrants such freedom even after distancing themselves from the geographies of the plantation (Woods 1996), deeply shaped the Black radical movements that emerged from the youth of the Great Migration. As Murch explains, “the rich culture, historical memory and expectations that the Bay Area newcomers carried with them” deeply influenced the Black Panthers’ organizing, as the organization’s membership largely “consisted of recent migrants whose families traveled north and west to escape the southern regime only to be confronted with new forms of segregation and repression” (2010: 6). These frustrations and desires were “interpreted through the transnational lens of decolonization and state socialism sweeping the globe” and as a result the Panthers produced a liberatory imaginary that was deeply decolonial in nature.

In October 1966 the BPP released their 10-point party platform and program, in which the Panthers declared their revolutionary demands to begin building decolonial futures. As these 10 points demonstrate, the Black Panthers sought Black autonomy and to decolonize the racial capitalist system that denied them basic rights. The Panthers called for autonomy, for employment, for an end to capitalist robbery of the Black community, for decent housing, for education that told a true history of the United States and of Black history. They demanded an exemption from military service, an end to police violence, for all Black prisoners to be freed, for fair trials with Black jurors, and lastly, for land. Ultimately, what the Black Panthers sought was a vision of sovereignty not unlike the Indigenous struggle for decolonization. As Clyde Brooks articulates, “the intellectual traditions and social organizations through which working class African Americans lived, understood, and changed their reality have typically emerged in spite of

and in opposition to plantation powers” (Woods 1996: 29). Indeed, Woods explains, the plantation is not only central to the formation and domination of the American racial capitalist state, but the “plantation complex is central to both the construction and destruction of African American identity and aspirations” (Woods 1996: 31). Thus while the plantation complex is the foundation of the continued racial capitalist domination of Black Americans, as the “penultimate site of black dispossession” (McKittrick 2013: 8), the construction of a decolonial alternative is born out of the destruction of the plantation logic, for it is also the site where Black resistance was born. As McKittrick articulates,

**October 1966
Black Panther Party
Platform and Program**

What We Want What We Believe



*Huey P. Newton Minister of Defense
Black Panther Party*

- 1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.**
We believe that black people will not be free until we are able to determine our destiny.
- 2. We want full employment for our people.**
We believe that the federal government is responsible and obligated to give every man employment or a guaranteed income. We believe that if the white American businessmen will not give full employment, then the means of production should be taken from the businessmen and placed in the community so that the people of the community can organize and employ all of its people and give a high standard of living.
- 3. We want an end to the robbery by the CAPITALIST of our Black Community.**
We believe that this racist government has robbed us and now we are demanding the overdue debt of forty acres and two mules. Forty acres and two mules was promised 160 years ago as restitution for slave labor and mass murder of black people. We will accept the payment in currency which will be distributed to our many communities. The Germans are now aiding the Jews in Israel for the genocide of the Jewish people. The Germans murdered six million Jews. The American racist has taken part in the slaughter of over fifty million black people; therefore, we feel that this is a modest demand that we make.
- 4. We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings.**
We believe that if the white landlords will not give decent housing to our black community, then the housing and the land should be made into cooperatives so that our community, with government aid, can build and make decent housing for its people.
- 5. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.**
We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else.
- 6. We want all black men to be exempt from military service.**
We believe that Black people should not be forced to fight in the military service to defend a racist government that does not protect us. We will not fight and kill other people of color in the world who, like black people, are being victimized by the white racist government of America. We will protect ourselves from the force and violence of the racist police and the racist military, by whatever means necessary.
- 7. We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of black people.**
We believe we can end police brutality in our black community by organizing black self-defense groups that are dedicated to defending our black community from racist police oppression and brutality. The Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States gives a right to bear arms. We therefore believe that all black people should arm themselves for self-defense.
- 8. We want freedom for all black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails.**
We believe that all black people should be released from the many jails and prisons because they have not received a fair and impartial trial.
- 9. We want all black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their black communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States.**
We believe that the courts should follow the United States Constitution so that black people will receive fair trials. The 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution gives a man a right to be tried by his peer group. A peer is a person from a similar economic, social, religious, geographical, environmental, historical and racial background. To do this the court will be forced to select a jury from the black community from which the black defendant came. We have been, and are being tried by all-white juries that have no understanding of the "average reasoning man" of the black community.
- 10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace. And as our major political objective, a United Nations-supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the black colony in which only black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate, for the purpose of determining the will of black people as to their national destiny.**
When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.
We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and, accordingly, all experience hath shown, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But, when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.




Figure 7: October 1966 Black Panther Party Platform. Source: <http://www.anorak.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/October-1966-Black-Panther-Party-Platform-and-Program.jpg>

The forced planting of blacks in the Americas is coupled with an awareness of how the land and nourishment can sustain alternative worldviews and challenge practices of dehumanization...it is through the violence of slavery, then, that the plantation produces black rootedness in place precisely because the land becomes the key provision through which black peoples could both survive and be forced to fuel the plantation machine (2013: 11).

Placing Oakland's Black geographies in conversation with McKittrick's theories of plantation futures, land becomes a site of the Panther's decolonial visions as well as a means of continued dispossession. Returning to the question raised earlier (what does possession look like for the diaspora of dispossession?) it is clear that the Panther's decolonial demands lay the groundwork for a future of possession and humanity, an autonomous future that seems to begin with land. To give a sense of what social and economic factors were in place when the Panthers began to envision their 10-point program, I will now outline the racial capitalist scene that Southern Black migrants encountered as they made Oakland their new home.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Oakland was quickly becoming an industrial powerhouse, and as industry grew so did the city's population (Walker 1997). Increasing demands for labor in the shipyards during the Second World War recruited tens of thousands of African Americans from the South, with Oakland being one of the major receiving cities of the Great Migration (Self 2003). After the war, large numbers of Black workers were laid off as industries shifted their production, and white workers were re-employed after returning home (Broussard 2001). While some gains were made in Black employment after the war, by the mid-1950s industries began to relocate their operations to the suburbs where land was cheaper, with Oakland losing one-third of its manufacturing jobs between 1960 and 1975 (Lemke-Santangelo 2001: 349). Postwar economic decline in industrial Oakland devastated the city's Black community, producing pockets of Black poverty in a period of general prosperity for the white community (Lemke-Santangelo 2001). In 1964, Oakland was designated a "depressed area" by the federal government, which gave the city access to federal funding for economic planning, but also framed the city as a residual place in the midst of rapid economic growth throughout much of California

(Self 2003: 170). This reorganization of capital created crises of unemployment and poverty in Oakland, affecting Black Oaklanders in particular, with Black male unemployment jumping from 28 percent in 1950 to 50 percent in 1970 (Lemke-Santangelo 2001: 349). The deindustrialization of Oakland during this period is unequivocally linked to the shifting imaginary of Oakland to that of a residual Black place.

As capital left the city, Black workers who had made up an intrinsic part of the industrial workforce were also left behind. While white industry workers were able to relocate to new subdivisions built to accommodate the industrial plants relocated to Bay Area suburbs, Black workers were denied access to such housing due to racially restrictive housing practices. Some Black workers initially commuted when their jobs relocated, however, industries preferred to recruit white workers from the suburbs, deeming them to be “more loyal, more cooperative, more productive workers than those in big cities” (Johnson 1994: 211-212). This imaginary of Black workers being less cooperative and productive than their white suburban counterparts is intertwined with the imaginary of Oakland being an ‘economically depressed’ Black place that only grew more widespread as the 1960s went on. And as the previous quote notes, it was at this time that the “big city” or “urban” itself began to become racially coded. As industry and capital evacuated from Oakland, so too did the city’s white residents; Oakland’s white population declined 21 percent between 1960 and 1970, while the outlying suburbs of San Leandro, Fremont, Newark, and Union City grew dramatically, with non-white populations of less than one percent (Lemke-Santangelo 2001: 350). As white residents fled the city, the Black population of Oakland nearly tripled between 1950 and 1970, growing from 55,000 to 125,000 by 1970 (Self 2003: 160). While white workers were granted the mobility to leave Oakland as industry relocated, the Black working class of Oakland was confined to the “depressed” place, and left without sufficient employment options. It was the Black working-class residents and neighborhoods of Oakland that were scapegoated in the hegemonic imaginary of the city, despite the fact that the Black middle class expanded across the Oakland flatlands at this time, while Oakland Hills residents remained

white and affluent. This imaginary of Black impoverished Oakland reinforced the capital flight from the city, which in turn co-produced a vision of urbicide, “the deliberate death of the city”, in which “specific human lives and their communities are rendered waste” (McKittrick 2011: 951-952). Racial capitalist devalorization of Oakland, therefore, produced what would come to be known as the ‘ghetto’.

Deindustrialization hit Oakland hard, but the capital flight wouldn’t have been as devastating for Black residents if they had not been confined to Oakland’s urban core due to racially restrictive housing covenants. As Black families sought to buy homes, racism was rationalized as an economic calculation, with major avenues of the city acting as redlines of racial and class boundaries. Despite the fact that Black Oaklanders constituted one-third of Oakland’s population by the end of the 1960s and owned 25 percent of the city’s homes, “the combination of demolition in West Oakland, patterns of white resistance to integration, suburban flight, and industrial restructuring threatened to reduce much of the city’s working-class flatlands, west and east, into isolated racial ghettos” (Self 2003: 170). Since Black Oaklanders lacked the financial and political resources to be adequately represented in



Figure 8: What remains of Esther's Orbit Room, a longtime Black-owned music club along West Oakland's 7th Street Corridor. The club closed down in 2011 when Esther passed away. Photo by author, 2017.

Oakland's political structure, major policies and redevelopment projects were pushed forward in the 1960s that actively dispossessed Black Oakland. West Oakland in particular, a predominantly Black neighborhood that was the center of Black cultural life at the time, had its thriving business and cultural district razed as BART train tracks were constructed (Self 2003: 150). West Oakland was widely represented as a 'ghetto', "a spatial concatenation of mechanisms of ethnoracial closure and control" (Waquant 1996: 343), targeted for redevelopment by corporate leaders wanting to salvage downtown Oakland's commercial center. The construction of several major freeways and the BART train line had disastrous effects on the geographies of Black Oakland. Three separate freeways were built enclosing West Oakland, with the 980 freeway serving as a border wall between the neighborhood and downtown, demolishing entire blocks of homes and displacing predominantly Black residents (Rodriguez 1999). These massive transit development projects were built to connect San Francisco to East Bay suburbs, reinforcing San Francisco as the major corporate and consumer center of the region, and allowing suburban dwellers to bypass Oakland altogether, be it on freeway or train (Self 2003: 152). These redevelopment projects



Figure 9: Esther's Orbit Room across from the BART tracks that divide 7th Street in West Oakland. Photo by author, 2017.

further disconnected Black neighborhoods from the economic growth of the greater Bay Area, pummeling through predominantly Black neighborhoods and dispossessing Black home and business owners (Self 2003).

The imaginary of Oakland as a place of poverty characterized by Blackness is not something that appeared out of thin air; it was co-produced by the political-economic abandonment of the city, reinforced by local and federal policies, and catalyzed by media representations of the city and its people. Oakland was not alone in this imaginary, as many cities across the U.S. facing similar forms of deindustrialization were also imagined in a similar light, with the structural disenfranchisement of Black residents producing a vision of poverty that was reduced to a cultural trait (Wilson 1987; O'Connor 2002; Lawson et al. 2017). Federal policies played a hugely influential role in shaping the imaginary of Oakland, with the Ford Foundation's designation of national Gray Areas in 1961, marking Oakland as the first city to undergo an experimental project to address the causes of poverty and blight in cities. Supplying federal 'community action grants' to five cities nationwide, the 'Gray Area' referred to "the decay noticed first in the near-downtown sections...spreading ring-like toward the boundaries of the central city and suburban fringe. Slums, skid-rows, etc. form a dark inner ring; from there out, the 'gray' grows lighter but moves more swiftly as obsolescence of housing and industrial plant accelerates" (The Gray Areas 1963:1). Despite the fact that no humans are mentioned in the description of how gray areas were deemed to spread, the major purpose of the program was to transform areas of decay into sites of the cultural assimilation and social transformation of the poor (Roy et al. 2015). Returning to McKittrick, "the 'cleaning up' of slums, the forceful displacement of economically disadvantaged communities, the deliberate destruction of city buildings, bridges, houses, shops, roads, and parks—are always inhabited with disposable 'enemies', impoverished dwellers, those 'without'" (2011: 952). These structural redevelopment measures waged war on the Black poor of Oakland.

The coordinator of the Oakland Interagency Project, the guiding agency implementing the Gray Area project in Oakland, defined this work as the “renewal of people”, addressing “human problems in the city” by funding community-level organizations to address ‘problems’ specific to the place and community (Roy et al. 2015). For Oakland, the Gray Areas project “exemplified a twin concern with economic development and security” and intended to “reverse the process of social disorganization now characteristic of many neighborhoods and which lies at the root of many pathological manifestations such as delinquent behavior, school failures, and neighborhood deterioration” (Regal 1967:6 cited in Roy et al. 2015: 299). The Oakland Interagency Project focused its efforts on students at Castlemont High School, addressing social disorganization through high school programming that sought to manage Black youth by teaching them ‘values’ that the program deemed “positive, exogenous cultural influences, which had a middle-class or upper-class white valence” (Roy et al. 2015: 299). Thus this project reinforced an imaginary of Black migrants and youth as an “urban pathogen; young Black men as violent and ungovernable delinquents” and that “built-environment blight” was tied to Black and rural cultural deficiencies that could potentially be reformed if addressed in time (Roy et al. 2015: 300). Despite the program’s efforts to ‘better’ Black migrant communities through colonial ‘culture of poverty’ educational programs, reminiscent of residential schools’ intentions to assimilate Indigenous peoples across North America (Nakano-Glenn 2010), the program further reinforced the imaginary of Oakland as a place of blight produced by its Black residents.

The Ford Foundation’s social experimentation in cities across the U.S. was the precursor for the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the official inauguration of President Johnson’s War on Poverty. The Gray Areas project became institutionalized at this time, as it became Oakland’s Department of Human Resources, forming a task force led by Black middle-class leaders, called the Oakland Economic Development Council. The War on Poverty programs continued to fuel the imaginary of blighted Black Oakland as program administrators chose to focus primarily on Black Oakland, intentionally overlooking Oakland’s array of immigrant communities, for “they were not

perceived to symbolize the threat that Blacks did” (Herrera 2012: 380). Thus other immigrant groups were largely erased from the imaginary of Oakland at the time, despite the fact that Latinos, Asians, and other immigrant groups made up more than 10 percent of the city’s population in 1970. Poverty researchers played a key role in this focus as well, with Dr. Wilson Record of UC Berkeley, the research director for Oakland’s Gray Areas project, insisting that a focus on “Negro” poverty was the most pressing issue, since “Negros...have a salient conspicuousness, their semi-rural traits standing out even more sharply against the Bay Area urban backdrop because of their color” (Record 1963: 1). Poverty researchers also saw Black Oaklanders as representing the biggest threat for social unrest since the Black population of the city was estimated to double by 1980, and Dr. Record anticipated this would become the most critical racial tension due to the “social and political militancy of Bay Area Negroes, in contrast to the passivity or mild protest of the Chinese, Japanese, Indians and Mexicans” (Record 1963: 2, quoted in Herrera 2012: 380). Such research and policy focus furthered the imaginary of Oakland as a site of Black disorder, blatantly ignoring other racial and cultural groups in the city, furthering the culture of poverty theory, and equating Oakland’s poverty to an issue of Blackness.

After Los Angeles’ Watts rebellion in 1965, policymakers in Washington kept a close eye on Oakland for fear of another uprising, the Wall Street Journal proclaiming Oakland to be a “racial tinderbox” (Murch 2010: 121). Policymakers and researchers toiled over the “urban crisis” and “ghetto revolts” that seemed to be subsuming cities across the nation, and in 1966 President Johnson formed a confidential Task Force on the Cities to discuss the “spectre of civil discontent and potential of guerilla warfare...spreading all over the land” (Task Force on the Cities 1966: vii), determining that the “overriding problem in American cities was segregation by race and income” (1966: i). While in West Oakland more than half the population lived below the poverty line and unemployment was rampant, Oakland never erupted as federal policymakers feared (Rodriguez 1999). Instead, West Oakland birthed a form of radical Black activism that held major political influence far beyond the city’s limits when the Black Panther Party was formed in 1966. The ‘urban

crisis' of Oakland produced the conditions that made the demand for Black freedom necessary, and the inception of the BPP made Oakland synonymous with Black activist geographies. The Black Panthers created an alternative imaginary of the strength and resilience of Black Oakland, and brought police violence into the national discourse. While they ultimately did not bring their decolonial visions into existence before the party's dissolution in 1982, they had a huge influence on the civil rights movement and national policy. In Oakland, many of the Black Panthers continue to hold prominent roles in resistance movements, with Bobby Seale and Emory Douglas being founders of East Side Arts Alliance, a multiracial coalition of artists and activists that built a cultural center in East Oakland and provide arts programming and cultural space for low-income residents of color. East Side plays a major role in Oakland organizing, and as I will articulate in Chapter Four, creates openings for decolonial art practice in the city. The Panthers, thus, continue to envision decolonial futures, now 50 years after the BPP's founding.

In the following section I return to the historical context of Oakland in the 1970s and 80s, paying particular attention to the ways that Black, and increasingly Brown, youth were abandoned by the education system and funneled into California's expanding prison system. As unemployment continued to rise in Oakland throughout the 1970s and 80s, particularly among Black and Brown youth, the culture of poverty narrative thrived and fueled violent imaginaries of Black criminality and disorder. In what follows, I trace the structural disinvestment, increased policing, and imaginaries of disorder that encroached upon Oakland over this period.

DISPOSSESSION//LEDGERS

“[The youth] pointed to this little, blighted space, what white folks call brown fields, but let's call them white fields since they're the motherfuckers that created the fuckin' conditions, you know what I'm saying. So these fuckin' white fields in the 'hood, they become magnets for illegal dumping, and this is in the injunction zone, on Mitchell and Foothill, and [the youth] are like 'in spots like this, this can be a community garden.' So we tested the soil, cleaned it up, and just

reclaimed the space. We found out that the negligent slum lord was the City of Oakland, the same entity that's targeting my young men, calling them the worst of the worst, calling them sociopaths, is the negligent slum lord creating blight in their hood, in the gang injunction zone.”

– George Galvis, Interview, January 21, 2016

As deindustrialization grew more severe in the 1970s, the Keynesian era of the American economy was at a breaking point, and the imaginary of Oakland as a place of obsolescence deepened. Industry continued to leave the city, and between 1979 and 1985 more than 122 factories shut down in Alameda County, eliminating 24,000 jobs that had sustained Black workers (Lemke-Santangelo 2001: 357). There were few employment options available in the county to replace these jobs, with much of any job growth occurring in the inland suburbs where Black residents made up only three percent of the population as late as 1990, and spatial mismatch kept low-income Black Oaklanders from accessing these jobs. The decline in industrial jobs continued through the 1990s as the federal government closed several military bases in Oakland and Alameda, laying off thousands of workers. Black Oakland was thus faced with few employment options, leaving “older displaced workers [who] were competing with their children and grandchildren for minimum-wage service jobs that were paying an average of \$8,840 per year” in 1995 (Lemke-Santangelo 2001: 358). The Black middle class of Oakland did expand at this time, thanks in large part to affirmative hiring policies created in public and private sectors, which caused the percentage of Black Oaklanders holding white-collar jobs to increase from 17 to 60 percent between 1970 and 1990 (Lemke-Santangelo 2001: 366).

The Black Panther Party's push led by Elaine Brown for Black local governance in the 1970s, while it failed at first, coalesced in the years to come, with Black mayors presiding over Oakland from 1977 to 1998. The majority of Oakland's city council and high-level offices also were led by Black Oaklanders throughout these two decades, and the city was declared the “most integrated city” in 1983 (Lemke-Santangelo 2001). Despite these gains in Black governance,

Oakland struggled to stay afloat financially, leaving Black city leadership with few options to improve the residents' plight due to the lack of industries and tax dollars. City government attempted redevelopment efforts focused on retail and corporate administration into the 1990s to attract business and investment, but most jobs created remained in the service sector. The lack of jobs that paid a living wage in Oakland left poor Black Oaklanders in a space of stagnancy, with limited social welfare and educational options that could provide opportunities out of poverty. This structural negligence allowed the informal economy, including the drug trade, to flourish in the city, bloating the imaginary of Oakland from a site of Black obsolescence to one of Black violence and crime. The city's newspaper, the *Oakland Tribune*, became Black-owned in 1983, providing an important voice for a city whose "character is often misrepresented by outsiders...as a sorry stepsister to San Francisco, a dingy place best known for cocaine, crime, and the cackle of assault rifles". This imaginary became synonymous with Oakland in the 1980s and 1990s, with nearly any national or regional media coverage of the city representing gang warfare, drugs, crime, or the murder rate.

The rise of incarceration from the 1980s onward and the growth of the prison system in California paralleled the financial abandonment of Oakland. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore demonstrates in her essential text Golden Gulag, the growing prison system in California was a technology of death and erasure that swept criminalized Black and Brown youth up off the streets and into cages, eliminating surplus labor from California's economy (2007). Essentially, as Oakland entered a political economic crisis alongside many other de-industrializing cities across the nation, California's vastly expanded prison industrial complex was built, absorbing the unemployed from the labor market. Between 1984 and 1994, as employment opportunities failed to match the labor force, the number of prisoners exploded (See Gilmore 2007: 72). In essence, "surplus land, capital, labor and state capacity congealed into prisons" (Gilmore 2007: 28). The expansion of the prison system from 1982 onward was a restructuring of state institutions not only to address the declining U.S. economy after Keynesianism was dismissed, but to become a

new mechanism of control after the Jim Crow era subsided. At the center of this congealment—the bait that catalyzed the entire incarceration system—was the infamous War on Drugs that caused arrests and convictions in communities of color to skyrocket.

Oakland’s residents, along with residents of other de-industrialized urban cores across the country, were an important component of this congealment, and the decades of culture of poverty discourses coupled with the discourses of the drug war made the city’s Black and Brown residents an easy target for hyper-criminalization. Nationally, these discourses made poverty synonymous with drug use and crime, and politicians pushed for “law and order”, with colorblind racial coding that created policies such as the three strikes law, enabling for more prisons to be built and filled while welfare programs were gutted (Alexander 2010). As Michelle Alexander seamlessly details, the federal government was radically restructuring the money spent on the urban poor, while drastically cutting aid programs for welfare and housing in the 1990s. Under the Clinton Administration, \$19 billion in funds were redirected towards the prison system (2010: 57). What was born of the post-civil rights crisis was a new racial caste system, under which 90 percent of those admitted to prison for drug offenses were Black or Latino in many states, and yet the race-neutral crime policies disguised this restructuring of racism. Gilmore’s often-cited theorization describes racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (2007: 28). What resulted for cities like Oakland was a form of ‘socio-spatial apartheid’ (Massey and Denton 1993) in which poor families, particularly Black and Brown families, were subjected to a number of factors that could lead to premature death. State neglect led to high rates of “intentional and accidental violence...and persistent but hostile interaction with state agencies, especially welfare, family services, courts and the police (W.J. Wilson 1987)” (Gilmore 2007: 74). Black and Brown peoples in Oakland and across the U.S. were thus left to fend for themselves, with a dire lack of employment opportunities and drastically reduced social welfare programs that treated their clients like criminals (Sklar 1995; O’Connor 2002). As a result of state reinvestment in carceral systems rather than social

services, Black and Brown communities developed alternative modes of social reproduction to survive, from extended childcare and family networks to informal economies that exchanged legal and illegal goods (Hartman 1996).

As in many cities where populations have been abandoned by capital, street gangs emerged in Oakland over the past 30-plus years, building extended family networks and informal economies that serve as support systems and a means of protection that “police and other authority figures...fail to provide” (Rios 2011: ix). As Gilmore explains, “gangs constitute territorially bounded rule-making bodies for a mosaic filling in vast regions that the legal state has abandoned except in the form of militarized occupation and social-services based surveillance” (2007: 274). Policing systems have made gangs one of their primary obsessions, with a discourse of gang violence being prevalent in urban areas suffering from neoliberal restructuring since the 1980s (Davis 1990; Gilmore 1993). In 1987 the California legislature declared a “state of crisis caused by violent street gangs whose members threaten, terrorize and commit a multitude of crimes against the peaceful citizens of their neighborhoods” (Rios 2011: 33). The Street Terrorism Enforcement Act (STEP) of 1988 mandated law enforcement agencies to “identify street gang members and enroll them in a statewide database,” ensuring that those listed would face additional charges due to their alleged status as gang members (Gilmore 2007: 107). The decade that followed saw a slew of strict state reforms that targeted youth convicted of gang-related crimes, and those labeled gang members in California were predominantly Black and Latino youth (Gilmore 2007). The system of policing born during this period extends beyond the actions of police departments alone; sociologist Victor Rios defines this system as a youth control complex, in which schools, police, families, community centers, the media, and other institutions treat young peoples’ behaviors as deviant and worthy of exclusion, punishment, and incarceration (2011: xiv). Youth within this complex are subjected to hyper-criminalization, in which their everyday styles and behaviors are treated as threatening and criminal across social contexts, causing a profound impact on their worldviews and life outcomes. The policing system seeks to

regulate the lives of criminalized youth, and from a young age they are constantly subjected to punishment, made to feel stigmatized and hopeless due to the onslaught of sanctions imposed upon them throughout their daily lives (2011: xv). According to Rios, criminalization is embedded in Oakland's social order, since many criminal justice policies first practiced in Oakland were later implemented on a national scale, and Black and Latino youth suffer the most severely from the spiral of criminalization and punishment. This vicious cycle often begins when Black and Latino youth are harassed, profiled, and disciplined from young ages, and Rios finds that often the policing leads marginalized youth to fulfill the destiny expected of them (2011: xv).

What resulted is a form of racialized social control in Oakland, in which marginalized populations are regulated through these forms of everyday policing. The amalgamation of systems of punishment targeting Black and Brown youth has origins in 1960s Oakland, in which racial anxieties about the city's rapidly changing demographics "led to an increasing integration of school and recreational programs with police and penal authorities...[and] the discourse of 'juvenile delinquency' took on a clear racial caste leading to the wide-scale policing and criminalization of Black youth" (Murch 2007: 337). What began as a list of 'juvenile delinquents' identified by Oakland schools and police in the 1960s has now become a database of gang members, in which youth are classified based on their suspected gang involvement so as to better surveil and restrict their actions. When youth are classified as gang members, it is not only police that identify them as such, but also schools, community organizations, and other local institutions. As a result, youth are constantly policed from all corners of their communities, seen as "irreparable risks and threats that need to be controlled and ultimately contained...[which] incapacitates them as social subjects, strips them of their dignity and humanity by systematically marking them and denying them the ability to function in school, in the labor market, and as law-abiding citizens" (Rios 2011: 88). This form of law and order serves to "keep the peace" by upholding white supremacist structures that criminalize Black and Brown residents before they even commit a crime. As Lisa Marie Cacho argues,

Targeted populations do not need to break laws to be criminalized. Their behaviors are criminalized even if their crimes are victimless (using street drugs), even if their actual activities are not illegal at all (using health care), and even if the evidence is not actually evidence (“looking like a terrorist”). Criminalization can operate through instituting laws that cannot be followed. People subjected to laws based on their (il)legal status — “illegal aliens,” “gang members,” “terrorist suspects” — are unable to comply with the “rule of law” because U.S. law targets their being and their bodies, not their behavior. They are denied not only the illusion of authorship but even the possibility of compliance (2012: 6).

These systems of policing and criminalization dislocate entire communities of Black and Brown Oaklanders, denying them the same rights and privileges as their white neighbors. Hyper-criminalization is a corrosive form of racialized dispossession that is psychological and bodily, controlling and detaining surplus populations to maintain economic ‘stability’ under white supremacist structures of power.

Gang member databases harken surveillance practices used to control and criminalize Black and Brown bodies that have existed for centuries. Simone Browne theorizes how “The Book of Negroes”, a ledger used in the late 1700s, was the first large-scale public record that was “an early imprint of how the body, the skin in particular, comes to be understood as a means of identification and tracking by the state...the tracking of blackness” (2012: 547-548). In the Book of Negroes, Black peoples living in New York were listed, their physical characteristics described in detail alongside their names and how they came to be un-enslaved. The physical descriptions within the text, Browne articulates, served as a “surveillance technology of the fugitive slave advertisement...to make the already hypervisible black subject legible...serving public notice of runaways by announcing ‘property as out of place’ (Hall 2006: 70), the subjective descriptions employed by subscribers in runaway notices often reveal the subversive potential of being ‘out of place.’” (2012: 548). When Black and Brown youth are identified as gang members, their names and identities listed in the ledgers of the database, they are registered as criminal often for being a Black or Brown body ‘out of place’ under the eyes of the law. As Lisa Marie Cacho articulates,

Law is dependent upon the permanence of certain groups’ criminalization. These permanently criminalized people are the groups to whom I refer as *ineligible for*

personhood — as populations subjected to laws but refused the legal means to contest those laws as well as denied both the political legitimacy and moral credibility necessary to question them. These populations are excluded from the ostensibly democratic processes that legitimate U.S. law, yet they are expected to unambiguously accept and unequivocally uphold a legal and political system that depends on the unquestioned permanency of their rightlessness (2012: 6).

The gang databases function as a surveillance mechanism for the state, permanently criminalizing the Black and Brown lives identified. Indeed, the lives listed in these databases are often entered in the database based on the subjective decision of a police officer, and they then become surveilled and marked as criminal within the criminal justice system. Black and Brown youth become out of place in their own neighborhoods, denied full personhood – they become dispossessed of their ability to simply move their bodies across space. These racialized ledgers became increasingly institutionalized forms of spatial surveillance when the city of Oakland initiated the gang injunction zones in 2010, demonstrating how these forms of criminalization were undoubtedly tied to other forms of racialized dispossession.

According to the city of Oakland, a gang injunction is a “public safety zone”. The 2010 gang injunctions effectively prohibited individuals listed in the gang member database from appearing in public with other “gang members”, being outside after the 10pm curfew, loitering, carrying drug or graffiti paraphernalia, or wearing colors that police associate with their gang affiliation. Despite the fact that the ACLU opposed the decision, two areas in the North Oakland and Fruitvale neighborhoods were declared gang injunction zones by Oakland’s Superior Court in 2010 and 2011, essentially placing 45 individuals under neighborhood arrest. According to the Oakland Police Department (OPD), the injunctions were part of a police ‘vision’ for Oakland, with the city’s Chamber of Commerce declaring that if the city wanted to keep or attract businesses, then they needed to improve public safety. This justification, however, has been challenged by many activists in Oakland, since if the police wanted to target areas with violent crime, OPD data shows that the city’s worst “hotspots” for violent crime are not located in injunction zones (Arnold 2011).

Area affected by gang injunction

An Alameda County judge indicated that he will approve a request to place a gang injunction in a defined area called a “safety zone,” shown in the map below.



Figure 10: Maps of Oakland's Gang Injunction Zones. San Francisco Chronicle, 2010.

George Galvis, founder of Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ), an Oakland-based organization focused on restorative opportunities for formerly-incarcerated youth of color, has been adamant that the neighborhoods chosen for the injunctions reveal a more insidious objective. Galvis insists that “gang injunctions are very effective tools for gentrification”, pointing to the fact that the two neighborhoods targeted either border gentrifying neighborhoods, as is the case of North Oakland, or are convenient to transit options for commuters, as is Fruitvale (Arnold

2011: 72). An expert declaration submitted to the Superior Court in an attempt to dissuade the implementation of the gang injunctions warned that the injunctions would result in “the displacement of poor and working Black and Latino families from their home communities,” identifying how a development strategy known as “privileged adjacency” utilizes a “pattern of using gang injunctions to benefit nearby affluent areas” (Arnold

2011: 73). The gang injunctions implemented in Oakland make it painfully clear how the violent policing of Black and Brown peoples is spatially targeted when there is a possibility of furthering a profit. In fact, since the implementation of the gang injunctions in North Oakland and Fruitvale, property values declined even further, accelerating the dispossession of Black and Brown families where foreclosure rates were some of the worst in the city (Arnold 2011: 73). As Galvis eloquently explains, “the policing isn’t about public safety as it is about bulldozing and displacing communities of color, about making them uncomfortable enough to want to move, to make room for the gentry to come in¹⁹”.

It is within the spaces of Oakland’s gang injunctions that “the human itself [becomes] a waste product at the interface of race and capitalism. Squandering and wasting Black lives has been an intrinsic part of the logic of capitalism, especially in the contexts in which race is central to the simultaneous production of wealth and superfluous people” (Mbembe 2011: 3). Black and Brown humans deemed waste from childhood, funneled into a system of punishment and criminalization run by schools and police, are then physically tied to their neighborhoods for greater “public safety”, only to then be threatened with the additional dispossession of gentrification. Following Lisa Marie Cacho, “the bodies and localities of poor, criminalized people of color are signifiers of those who are ineligible for personhood...they engender populations as not just racialized but rightless, living non-beings...to be ineligible for personhood is a form of social death; it not only defines who does not matter, it also makes mattering meaningful” (2012:6). Thus, when policing and gang member databases identify who is criminal, and in the case of gang injunctions, where is criminal, they are also identifying who matters, who possesses meaning. The terrorizing of marginalized peoples for the benefit of the racial capitalist state is seemingly endless; the pursuit of profit produces a racial caste system that is constantly reinventing itself to uphold white supremacy. Black and Brown peoples are policed and contained,

¹⁹ George Galvis, Interview, February 20, 2015

kept poor so that their labor remains profitable and disposable, and when their labor is in excess, they are incarcerated, detained, and deported to keep racial capitalism steady. Peoples deemed waste become transferable bodies, “displaced and used repeatedly”, and the Black and Brown peoples that fall into this category extend far beyond Oakland, with peoples dispossessed and constantly transferred from one place to another to survive and to be profited off of (Bejarano et al 2012: 30). George Galvis intertwined these processes of dispossession in his recounting of what happened to one of the youth he works with at CURYJ who was jailed after attacking someone in San Francisco’s Mission District, a Latino neighborhood that has undergone mass displacement over the past decade.

Because of all the gentrification push and pull, more push, his family got displaced [from the Mission] 80 years and moved to Oakland. And the homies are feeling it, they’re all feeling that pressure as a result of gentrification, that tech colonization of the neighborhood. They’re feeling a certain way, like me a long time ago, and don’t have the vocabulary to articulate it...him and some of the other homies from 24th [in the Mission] they ended up beating down a white tech employee, this was two years ago, they beat his ass, not that serious, well maybe it was serious but he lived, it wasn’t like he was hospitalized or anything but he took some lumps. When I was growing up we all took fuckin’ lumps. It’s part of growing up. It was about a week or two after his 18th birthday this happened. They told the white tech employee, you guys are fucking up the neighborhood. The so-called progressive District Attorney of San Francisco charged him with a felony strike. So he has a felony strike, he was released after almost a year, came out on probation, and then was violated for having a marijuana joint and did another year. He’s 20 years old now²⁰.

The trauma of these cyclical dispossessions ebb and flow, reinforcing one another. The youth that Galvis works with was thrown into the carceral system for acting upon his traumas, for attacking an individual who represented the demise of his home, its gradual erasure. At eighteen years old he was jailed, deemed waste and disposed of, pushed into a system that dispossesses personhood for giving a body allowed personhood some ‘lumps’. One life takes some ‘lumps’ while the racial capitalist state supports his role in the decimation of another life’s home, jailed for acting on the

²⁰ George Galvis, interview, January 21, 2016

traumas provoked²¹. Black and Brown peoples who migrated to Oakland and San Francisco over the last eighty years are now being forced to migrate yet again, their bodies transferred elsewhere by gentrification now that it is not their labor that is desired so much as their land. To make sense of how Black and Brown lives are laid waste so as to clear their land for gentrification, I now will look to the city's housing market in particular to understand how, when Oakland's imaginary began to shift, capital came a-calling for the land of Black and Brown residents.

(DIS)POSSESSION//*HOME*

“Everything I love is an effect of an already given dispossession and of another dispossession to come. Everything I love survives dispossession, is therefore before dispossession. Can we own or claim dispossession while resisting it? Can we resist it while embracing it? We make new life, we make our refuge, on the run. We protect the old thing by leaving it for the new thing. Refusal is only possible for the ones who have something, who have a form, to give away – the ones who ain't got no home anymore in this world except a moving boxcar full of the sound and scent of animate pillows, strangers, readers; except a built clearing in a common word they break and scar to rest and lay to rest; except Aunt Kine's. house which isn't hers, which is hers to hold and hand when we have no place to stay, and then they take it away, but she'd already given it away.”

– Fred Moten 2013: 242

Before Oakland was designated hip and desirable, Black and Brown people created homes in the flatlands of this city. In the mid-20th century, as capital and white residents left Oakland as if it were a sinking ship, Black and Brown families became homeowners in the neighborhoods White folks left behind. The notion of home is something elusive and fleeting for dispossessed people. When colonialism has displaced, dispossessed, disrupted your people for generations, denying your people a rooted sense of place, what does home become? The notion of home is

²¹ It is this vicious cycle of dispossession that Galvis' organization CURYJ seeks to disrupt, using ancestral teachings and cultural practices to heal and break this cycle, which I will delve into further in chapter four.

especially fraught in the colonized territory called the United States, where the presence of Indigenous people is one of near-complete erasure, particularly in the metropolis of the San Francisco Bay Area. Claims to land and home in Oakland have layers as deep as the shellmounds that once housed the ancestors of the Muwekma Ohlone tribe, now paved over by strip malls in Emeryville and a maze of highways along the waterfront. Many generations of people have settled in the San Francisco Bay after the Ohlone were first dispossessed of their ancestral territories. Yet in the United States, the binary of settler/native built into the analytic of settler-colonialism is no more sufficient than a purely Black/White binary of race relations. For all the peoples who have settled in the Bay, not all match the description of “settler;” thus there is a need to bridge the processes of settler-colonialism with racial capitalism to understand how the threads of dispossession are all intertwined (Glenn 2015).

For the Black community of Oakland, the Great Migration west held the potential to build a home on the west coast, in hopes that geographic distance from the plantation would allow some semblance of peace after generations of dispossession and trauma (Woods 1998; Graaf et al. 2001). The fact that the African diaspora in the United States were forcibly removed from their homelands across the Atlantic and enslaved made the diaspora home- and land-less (Gilroy 1995). Largely denied the possibility to own land in the Southern United States even after the abolishment of slavery, for many Black migrants migrating west, Oakland offered a possibility to build a home for their families (Woods 1998). While Oakland was at one time the frontier for Black migrants escaping the plantation economies of the South, because of the histories of dispossession the Black diaspora has faced, Black Americans could never be considered “settlers” in the same way that White Americans are. The enslavement of the Black diaspora in the United States is irrevocably linked to the same colonial forces of dispossession that exterminated the Indigenous peoples of this continent, and so while this land may not be ancestral to the Black diaspora, their forced landlessness does not fit neatly into the model of settler colonialism.

For many Latinos migrating from other parts of the Americas, their decision to settle in Oakland was never a mere choice. For many Latin American migrants arriving in Oakland from the 1970s onward, brutal dictatorships, disastrous economic policies, drug cartels, and human rights abuses often were the reason that migrants left their homelands in search of a path out of structural violence and poverty (Wright 2006; Fregoso 2006; Hiemstra 2011; Mountz & Hiemstra 2014). The violent conditions in their home countries too were products of colonialism, with the extractive and oppressive policies of colonial powers replaced by destructive national leadership in the decades that followed independence, the wealthy treating the poor as expendable, their needs irrelevant (Saldaña Portillo 2003). The decision to leave one's land, which may be one's ancestral homeland, is never an easy act; thus while immigration to the United States is a 'choice', it is often also a means of survival (Valencia 2014). These histories of displacement and dispossession have driven Latino migrants to create homes for themselves in Oakland, pursuing a better life for their children and often supporting family members abroad. The pursuit of a home in Oakland is also a fraught one for Latino migrants, for while many may have had ancestral connections to the land they leave behind, it is the political and economic forces of their home countries that displaced and dispossessed them. Latino migrants also occupy a fraught position as settlers within the settler-colonial model, not only for their forced migration but also for their mestizo racial positionality. The majority of Oakland's Latino migrant population is Mexican, with the second largest group originating from elsewhere in Central America. Migrants from Central America have a shared history of dispossession under colonial power with their indigenous neighbors to the north, yet the region's history of mestizaje complicates their racial identity (Moreno Figueroa 2010). For Central American migrants, particularly Indigenous migrants from Latin America, there is a general disregard for the national borders installed by neocolonial powers, and the sense that the continents of the Americas are all interconnected through their indigenous blood and shared histories of colonialism (Saldaña-Portillo 2016).

What unites all lives under the settler colonial and racial capitalist state is their connection to, or disconnection from, the land. As La Paperson has theorized, “land is a predominant concern in settler colonialism, and thus, people are arranged – raced, classed, gendered, sexualized, dis/abled, il/legalized – into triadic relations to land: the settler whose power lies in shaping the land into his wealth, the Indigenous inhabitant whose claim to land must be extinguished, and the chattel slave who must be kept landless²²” (2014: 116). The land thus carries tremendous meaning for the continued oppression and potential liberation of those denied right to land. This denial of possession mirrors a denial of personhood, and reveals the importance of land in Black and Indigenous ontologies. Paperson theorizes the connections between settler colonialism and what he terms “ghetto colonialism” under U.S. empire:

Ghetto colonialism takes place at this intersection between Indigenous displacement and black dislocation. For settlers seeking new frontiers, the ghetto serves as an interior frontier to be laid waste in order to renew...Not necessarily urban nor necessarily inhabited by people of color, the ghetto serves as a dislocation for blackness, intimate to and yet necessarily cast out from the great metropolises of the empire (Paperson 2010). If Native land is imperialism’s frontier, the ‘outpost, the fort and the port’ (Smith 1999, 22), then the ghetto is imperialism’s interior frontier: the outcast, the alley and the underground. It is empire’s outlawed life. Settler colonial eyes see the ghetto as sacred wasteland that may be re-inhabited by anybody, with impunity.” (Paperson 2014: 116-117).

Here Paperson draws explicit relations between the colonial dispossession of Indigenous peoples and the racialized dispossession of Black communities through gentrification. In what follows I delve into attempts at possessing home by Black and Brown peoples in Oakland, yet show how the settler colonial eyes on their homes have led to the foreclosure crisis that has continues to create waves of dispossession.

²² I value the interconnection that Paperson is making with this triad, but I wish to complicate it further with the presence of Latinx migrants.

As Black migrants settled in Oakland after the Great Migration, and Latino migrants began to arrive in greater numbers in the 1970s, many bought houses in the hopes that owning a bit of land would allow for the creation of a home after generations of dispossession (Woods 1998; Fregoso 2006). Capital flight made this possible in Oakland, for while there were fewer jobs after industry and white residents fled, home values were low and made homeownership possible. After the Community Reinvestment Act passed in 1977 (a federal law requiring commercial banks to better meet the needs of borrowers in low-income communities so as to reduce discriminatory lending practices), mortgage lending began to expand to underserved markets (Wyly et al 2006). While those formerly denied mortgages were now granted access to homeownership, banks' lending practices turned predatory beginning in the late 1990s, as affluent investors created a lucrative market from speculating on the subprime loans. This investment trend furthered the reach of housing lending to consumers with low or unstable incomes, and subprime lending exploded from \$35 billion in 1994 to more than half a trillion dollars in 2004 (Wyly et al. 2006: 106). People of color made up the majority of subprime borrowers, and some have argued that subprime lenders aggressively target people of color, exploiting a distrust of commercial banks due to a history of housing discrimination (Bradford 2002). Predatory lending also took the form of renovation and refinance loans pushed upon low-income homeowners, when the borrower already owns the home and is talked into giving up some of their home equity and extending the life of their debt (Wyly et al. 2006: 107). Thus when the housing market crashed in 2007 and interest rates spiked, foreclosures rose sharply and the extreme form of subprime speculation brought the stock market tumbling after (Crump et al. 2008). This domino effect of financial collapse caused millions to default on their loans nationwide, as foreclosures swept across low-income neighborhoods and displaced people at a rate previously unseen.

In Oakland, the foreclosure crisis was vast in its destruction. Long-term Oakland residents were preyed upon by subprime lenders, only to see their homes foreclosed upon when the housing bubble burst. In late 2007, at the height of the subprime crisis, Oakland had the tenth-highest

rate of foreclosures in the United States (Schafran 2013). Between 2007 and 2011, 10,508 foreclosures were completed in Oakland, and the median single-family home sales price declined 73 percent over this same period, from \$628,000 to \$169,000 (Urban Strategies Council 2012: 9). The vast majority of the homes foreclosed upon were located in the flatlands of Oakland, particularly East Oakland, whose residents are almost entirely Black and Latino. Alarming, investors acquired 42 percent of the homes foreclosed upon in Oakland, and these homes were either renovated, flipped, or rented out as-is (Urban Strategies Council 2012: 26). This increase in speculative housing sales raises various questions regarding the intentions of investors and banks in Oakland. As the local non-profit Urban Strategies Council reported:

The spike in non-local ownership and non-owner occupied housing presents concerns related to the extraction of wealth from low-income neighborhoods... Given the nearly exclusive focus of investor activity in Oakland's flatland neighborhoods, a range of apprehensions emerge regarding shifting tenure, neighborhood succession, and the displacement of residents. Embedded in all of these issues is the underlying question about the strategies and intentions of both banks and investors in Oakland. A bank's decision to sell a foreclosed property to a limited liability corporation as opposed to a working family produces a very different outcome for the community. This decision made repeatedly over thousands of transactions amounts to a sea change in the composition and tenure of neighborhoods. (2012: 5)

As this report highlights, the geographies of the Oakland flatlands have been and continue to be severely dispossessed and restructured. Subprime mortgage lenders targeted an untapped market to make a profit, and what resulted was a brutal dispossession of an entire generation of low-income homeowners. To make matters worse, the banks that put foreclosed homes up for auction enabled capital-rich investors to buy up large swaths of neighborhoods, often renting properties out until the market recovered enough to sell the houses for a profit. Two investor agglomerations in particular each purchased hundreds of homes in Oakland, some of which were purchased with tens of millions of dollars borrowed from a "wealthy network of hedge-fund investors" in 2008.

City of Oakland

Completed Foreclosures by Census Tract, 2007 through 2011

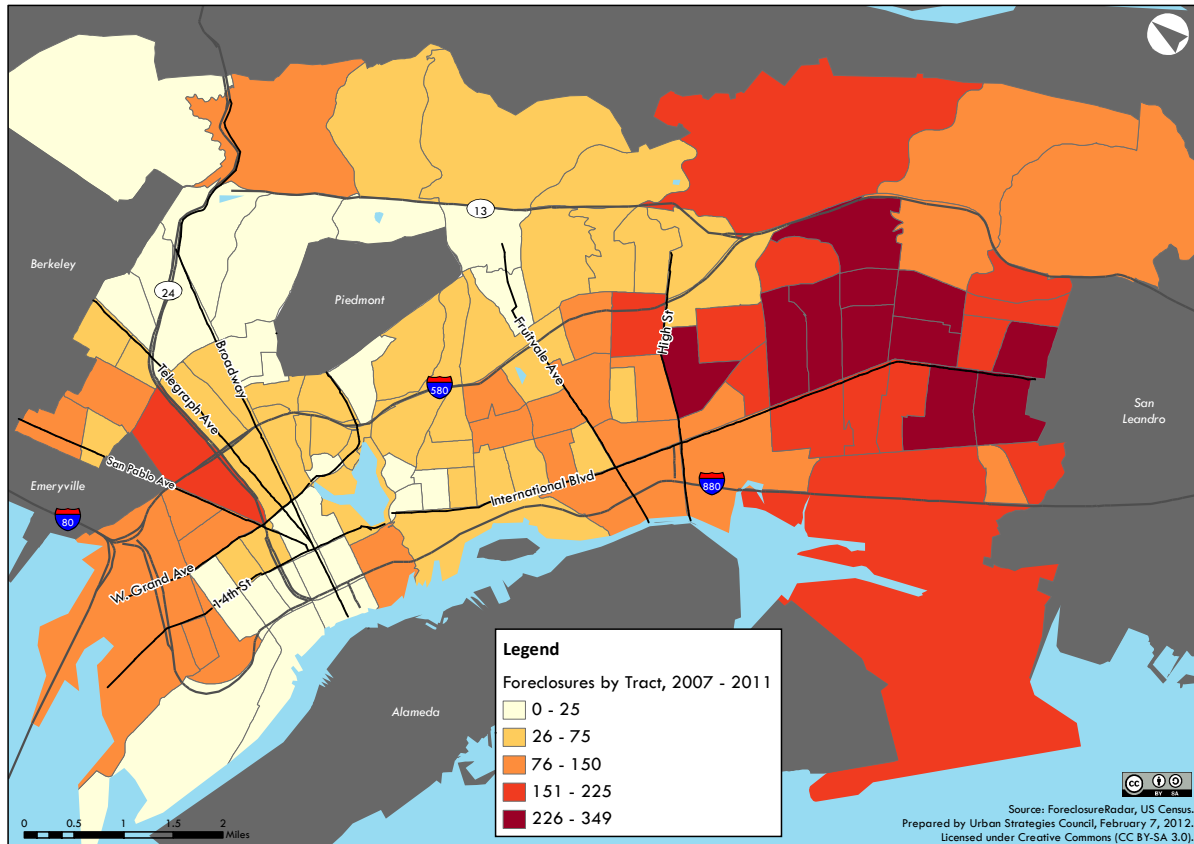


Figure 11: City of Oakland Foreclosures, 2007 - 2011, Urban Strategies Council.

This series of dispossessions and redistributions of land and capital made Oakland ripe for gentrification. As the Bay Area economy has emerged from the Great Recession, with the latest tech boom leading the ‘recovery’, these wealthy speculators can either sell the foreclosed homes they purchased at a ridiculous profit, or continue renting out the properties at exorbitant prices. Regardless, the culture and geographies of Oakland neighborhoods have been gutted, for the prices investors choose to sell or rent these homes for are far out of reach of any former residents. As Ananya Roy articulates, “the home – the American home – is a problematic object not because it will be lost in the future, through foreclosure or eviction, and not because it cannot be legally claimed through emplacement and occupation, but because it was always insecurely possessed by dispossessed subjects, those rendered outside the grid of white normativity” (2017: 4). If the

American home is imposs(ess)ible for dispossessed subjects to obtain due to their in/proximity to whiteness, what does this tell us about the dispossessed subject's relation to property? How might a disruption of property also disrupt dispossessed subjectivities?

Predatory lending is, undoubtedly, a continuation of racist processes of dispossession that have existed in the wake of the founding of the U.S. state itself. Structural barriers and discriminatory practices that prevent Black and Brown peoples from owning land exist to protect whiteness as a form of property, particularly after the abolition of slavery (Beeman et al. 2010; Harris 1993). Therefore, it is not sufficient to think of subprime lending as a capitalist process alone; we must be attentive to the calculated system of racial capitalism that controls most every corner of our society (Robinson 1983). As Cheryl Harris has argued, the slave trade and international banking system were founded simultaneously and are fundamentally intertwined, with human collateral being an essential piece of banking infrastructure (Harris 2016). These dual structures, Harris argues, thrive on Black precarity to make a profit, pushing Black geographies and people into subprime status. Subprime mortgages are only one piece of the high-

risk debt being chased by investors due to the high rate of return, a form of debt that disproportionately falls on Black people (Harris 2016). These dual structures, Harris argues, thrive on Black precarity to make a profit, pushing Black geographies and people into subprime status. Subprime mortgages are only one piece of the high-



Figure 12: Sign offering to sell homes in East Oakland, phone number slashed, 2016. Photo by author.

risk debt being chased by investors due to the high rate of return—a form of debt that disproportionately falls on Black people (Harris 2016). This subprime positionality functions as a form of Black subordination, since the subprime status in itself marks the limits of the democratization of capital, all while being marketed as a policy to uplift the poor (Harris 2016). This is due to the fact that Black people, according to Harris, are excluded from the market as subjects, instead entering the market as objects in the form of high-risk debt. The racial exclusion built into the housing and banking systems serve to uphold the economic value of whiteness, and since one of property's primary attributes is the right to exclude, Black and Brown peoples are



Figure 13: 'Cash for Houses' signs in East Oakland, the lower sign has been painted over. This was done to signs across the neighborhood, 2016. Photo by author.

excluded from the markets as subjects, only allowed to enter as objects in the form of debt to be bought and sold (Harris 2016).

When spaces are deemed to be waste by the racial capitalist lens, they become ripe for extraction. The 'market' has the chance to transform spaces deemed waste-ful and uninhabitable into spaces that are inhabitable for profit, a reproduction of settler colonial processes. When does the home of a subprime people become waste? If one's home is deemed to be waste, to be uninhabitable, what is to say of its inhabitants and the geographies they produce? This view of

particular homes as uninhabitable is tied to a white spatial imaginary with colonial origins, in which a colonizer deems a place unfit for habitation, thereby spatializing the peoples that live in this uninhabitable place as “not normal,” and spatializing social difference expressed through race (McKittrick 2007: 130-131). Waste is commonly understood to be a byproduct of humans, and can also refer to the tendency of capitalism to waste human and non-human lives. But perhaps, as Achille Mbembe argues, we should expand our notion of waste to include “the human itself as a waste product at the interface of race and capitalism. Squandering and wasting Black lives has been an intrinsic part of the logic of capitalism, especially in the contexts in which race is central to the simultaneous production of wealth and superfluous people” (2011: 3). Thus as places are deemed waste, they are in need of the colonizer’s touch to make them inhabitable, and the people that inhabit the uninhabitable are to be displaced for their own good (Paperson 2014). Objects for the market to move for the good of racial capitalism. Black and Brown people displaced are a byproduct of the market, superfluous objects to be moved and profited from elsewhere. But when do places deemed waste-ful become objects of desire to the white/colonial spatial imaginary? For it is not solely the displacement of marginalized peoples as waste-ful byproduct, there is a component of desire, in which the colonizer wishes to occupy the waste-ful space, to transform it, and by doing so become intimate with the racialized other. It is a lustfulness for the other, that drives the colonizer to displace the marginalized, living in spaces embedded with their presence, subsuming their essence that lingers, wearing their geographies like skin.

Gentrification is the latest end game in the dispossession of Black and Brown peoples’ homes; the process of dispossession is extensive, with many tentacles that wreak havoc on marginalized communities in gradual, calculated ways. As gentrification looms over Oakland, I wonder how might a disruption of the current triadic relations to land that Paperson discusses, a disruption of the same settler colonial and racial capitalist notions that once considered Black lives to be property, be decolonized? As Indigenous theorist Mishuana Goeman articulates, “deconstructing the discourse of property and reformulating the political vitality of a storied land

means reaching back across generations, critically examining our use of the word land in the present, and reaching forward to create a healthier relationship for future generations” (2008: 24). For, if we are to shift from colonial capitalist conceptions of property to Indigenous ontologies of land, we may realize that “land is not generalizable the way space and place are generalizable. Land is both people and place...[and] a poetics of land is, because outlaw life and outlaw land inherently disrupt propertied life and land as property” (Paperson 2014: 124, 128). How might adopting Indigenous conceptions of land, with all of the political implications of repatriation included, guide us toward creating meaningful homes by disrupting racial capitalist and settler colonial notions of property? How might creating home also be an embracing of the poetics of land? How might home be embracing the decolonial poetics of plantation futures (McKittrick 2013)?

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In what follows I trace the arc of Oakland’s geographies into the 21st century, looking to the racial capitalist structures that have driven development that dispossesses Black, Brown, and Indigenous Oaklanders. As I turn the lens to this latest phase of dispossession, I call attention to when hegemonic imaginaries of Oakland began to shift and what role art, culture, and creativity play in these shifting imaginaries. When did Oakland’s imaginary shift from one of Black disorder? When did Oakland become hip enough to gentrify? How does art offer an added dimension to a study of racial capitalism in Oakland in how it gets taken up in creative city discourses of dispossession and in forms of resistance?

CHAPTER THREE: (DIS)LOCATING THE CREATIVE CITY

“Complacency and empty homes, fragmented, lost hope, no hope. A city that’s forgotten them. I see the leftovers, only a handful of leftovers. Gun shells on the ground have created another art piece. Murals decorate empty walls making buildings, storefronts, and homes tell the story. Where have the people gone? Who’s going to save them when ghosts live here now? Who’s occupying space, making place, because we’ve been uprooted. Dragged, pushed and pulled...Our spirits will remain here until you listen.”

– Aqueila Lewis, Artist and Journalist, reading at the OCNC Rally, October 19, 2015

As I drove into the city, coming down the Bay Bridge off-ramp into the usual tangle of luxury car traffic, I noticed the police barricades blocking off Fremont Street leading towards Market Street. Philando Castile was killed the day before yesterday, Alton Sterling the day before that, and five police officers were shot in Dallas last night. The country seems to be hanging by a thread, with the media murmuring *race war*. Black Twitter is keeping me afloat, as is the knowledge that cities around the country continue to rise up against state violence despite the actions of a sniper in Dallas. The presence of people in the streets this Friday night brought a feeling of relief, that a sniper and the repercussions hadn’t snatched our spirit. I immediately realized those barricades must mean that San Franciscans, too, were seizing public space like Oaklanders had the night before, declaring Black Lives Matter and calling for resistance, reform, and abolition.

Driving past Market Street some blocks down, I saw the crowd of protestors in the distance. I was headed to see a play that was to be held at a small theater in the Tenderloin, a neighborhood in San Francisco known for its abundance of Single Room Occupancy motels (SROs) and shelters, one of the last remaining areas of the city where low-income and homeless people can find refuge. The Tenderloin is bordered by the city’s theater district, and as of a few years ago is also bordered by Twitter’s headquarters. Twitter’s arrival has drastically changed the landscape of the Tenderloin and Market Street, with niche restaurants and cafes now flanking the

tech giant's 'campus' alongside free clinics and liquor stores. I parked my car in front of an SRO, and took my two-month-old son out of the back seat, gathering my things to walk the two blocks to the venue. An older man in a wheelchair was seated out front, who smiled, remarking, "oh look, a baby". I walked by the venue, wondering if the bouncer would even let me in with a baby, and continued down the block to Market, hoping to catch a glimpse of the protest before they passed by. I caught the tail end of it, feeling my body being tugged down the road with them, but instead turned on my heels to return to the venue.

The show was called *Adventures in Tech*, and was advertised as a "blithe social commentary" on tech culture in San Francisco. The young, nearly all-white audience stared down at me as I walked into the small theater, with the disapproving gaze I have come to expect when I bring a child into spaces where babies are rarely seen. The lights dimmed, and the play began with a scene of eight cast members waiting for the Muni, the city's bus system. Seven of the eight were dressed in black and grey, clutching their smart phones, while a "drag queen" walked up to wait for the Muni in a miniskirt and bright red wig. The spotlight fixed on the "drag queen", the Muni riders averted their eyes behind their smartphones, and proclaimed in unison "that's what we moved to this city for!" after taking turns picking apart her appearance, a spectacle for their consumption. Appreciating their acknowledgement of this spectacle, the audience laughed, seemingly identifying with the scene, without any obvious trace of discomfort.

The play continued, with the bulk of scenes taking place in the office of a "startup" tech company in San Francisco. The company had recently relocated from the Silicon Valley to give its workers a shorter commute, and bit by bit the stereotypes of tech employees trickled in. The main character was a queer white artist who was uncomfortable to be "selling out" by taking a job as the startup's office manager to pay his bills. Over the course of the play, the artist came to appreciate his job and work space, accepting his place within the tech bubble. While these office scenes offered a bland look into tech culture, making light of their monotonous day-to-day, there

was little in the way of even “blithe” social commentary, as was promised. Mostly the play poked fun at techies, or millenials, or both, and was at times excruciatingly light-hearted. It was a live sitcom of a tech workplace, and the audience seemed more than happy to provide the laugh track.

The few scenes that took place at Muni bus stops or on the buses themselves were the most unsettling, in which tech workers exposed their discomfort in public space as they interacted with the ‘others’ of San Francisco. One scene featured the same monochromatic group of tech workers waiting in line to get on Muni, in which the sole Black actor was set apart, draped in a wool serape, angrily staring off into space. He was presented as a homeless man mumbling to himself. The techies attempted to dodge him to get on the bus, each adding their own awkward thoughts of how they could avoid interacting with him. They avoided acknowledging his humanity, averting their eyes, while again repeating the refrain, this time hesitantly, “isn’t this what we moved to this city for”? The scene made light of the techies discomfort with the homeless man’s presence, and was juxtaposed with their ability to occupy public space, and yet somehow remain apart from it. Yet all the while, their refrain serves to remind the audience that the homeless man’s presence too is part of the exoticism or spectacle of San Francisco, the ‘other’ they ‘must’ share public space with, en route to their various bubbles of privilege.

Another scene on a Muni bus featured an old woman in a kerchief, disturbed by the loud banter of the techies on the bus, shouting at them to go back where they came from. If the playwright meant to use these scenes as “social commentary”, the way that these encounters with the ‘other’ were flippantly dismissed by the techie figures seemed to give the audience an out. Audience members who might have identified with these encounters saw their own experience and reaction reflected on the stage: a nervous glance, followed by a trite comment that served to rid them of responsibility. The ‘others’ in these scenes were always presented as spectacle, representative of the ‘culture’ of San Francisco that made the city exotic and desirable, accessories to their otherwise insipid daily routine.



Figure 14: PianoFight, the venue in the Tenderloin where the Adventures in Tech performance took place. Photo by Brant Ward, 2011.

Adding dimension to the layers of spectacle, the theater itself is a bubble within the Tenderloin, with homeless, mostly Black, individuals inhabiting the landscape just outside the door. The playwright chose to make the one Black actor play the homeless man. The audience would laugh at the exchange on the stage, and then leave the venue to walk past so many other souls whom the character was based on. The living spectacle, the city becomes their playground, in which all that exists there is somehow for their consumption. The play seemed to reify this, rather than challenge it, and the audience was not pushed to implicate themselves or grapple with power and privilege whatsoever. Instead, the underlying message of the play seemed to be: We are a self-absorbed tech culture, all searching for meaning as we work our high-paying jobs. The end. So keep doing your thing, your comfort and existential crises are all that matters. There was no appeal to the way the techies moving to San Francisco, both inside and outside of the performance, may have anything to do with the plight of the homeless man or the old woman on

the bus. No allusions to the way the city is being reconstituted to meet their needs and desires, to the detriment of so many who simply can't afford to remain in the city they call home. The way rampant evictions of rent-controlled apartments to make space for high-income renters happened so this mostly white audience could have front-row seats to the spectacle. The more they move into the city, the more the 'exotic' traits they desire wither further away.

I left the theater feeling a bit sick to my stomach. I had done my brief ethnography of pandering techie art, and I was uneasy over, more than anything, the audience's laughter. While I have no idea where these audience members were coming from, it was clear they were laughing at themselves, the parts of themselves they saw reflected on the stage. It felt as if their laughter was a sort of communion. Sitting in the bubble of the theater, seemingly detached from the space of the city, the audience could laugh at their privilege, their implicitness, and move on. Exiting the theater into the nighttime streets of the Tenderloin, the "blitheness" of the play felt like a slap in the face.

The Tenderloin has become a borderland, "*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (Anzaldúa 1987: 25). An open wound, the Tenderloin has become flanked by tech corporations such as Twitter and other elite spaces of consumption. The few spaces in the city that welcome the most marginalized are increasingly made smaller, made to feel out of place (Cresswell 1996). The borderland of the Tenderloin is one of the most dramatic instances of dispossession in progress, where the most elite forces of the city are buying and developing spaces amidst the most impoverished residents of San Francisco. Anzaldúa's conceptualization of the borderlands fits almost eerily to the space of the Tenderloin: "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary...tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus" (1987: 25). A spatial theory of power and difference, Anzaldúa's borderland analytic reveals the ways that city spaces are violently restructured through forces of dispossession such as gentrification. The analytic of the

borderlands adds another layer to theorizations of what Tim Cresswell called contested landscapes, where “places are the result of tensions between different meanings” (1996:59). As Cresswell explains, “the meaning of a place is subject of particular discourses of *power*, which express themselves as discourses of *normality*...the meaning of a place, then, is (in part) created through a discourse that sets up a process of differentiation (between us and them)” (1996: 60). While Cresswell offers a valuable analytic of placemaking and the power bound in whose meaning is valued and considered ‘in place’, Anzaldúa’s borderlands offer an embodied sense of the violence committed as the meanings of places are contested. Cresswell focused on graffiti as a transgression on what he terms the “normalized” or “hegemonic geography” of a place, considering how graffiti transgresses the landscape and shifts the normalized meaning of a place. When it is the hegemonic discourse that is transgressing on marginalized space, the result is a process of erasure rather than a shifting of the hegemonic. As the hegemonic of the powerful infiltrates places of the diaspora of dispossession, their geographies are gradually vanished from the landscape.

The techie play in the Tenderloin is a moment that captures a sense of San Francisco’s borderlands, in which the city’s ‘legitimate inhabitants’ are able to attend a play within a closed space that makes light of the ways their presence has had tangible effects on the lives in the surrounding neighborhood. This moment of performance, both inside and outside the theater in the Tenderloin, offers a rough metaphor for the borderlands San Francisco and Oakland have become. The tech conquest of San Francisco has had a dramatic effect on the city’s culture. José Navarrete, member of EastSide Arts Alliance and co-creator of the NAKA performance troop, reflects upon how he has seen San Francisco’s culture changing since he first arrived in the Bay Area from Mexico City some 25 years ago. As Navarrete describes:

One of the big shifts I see over the last seven maybe ten years that I really see, really saw it happening. When I was going to the city [back then] it was this tremendous freedom in expression of your sexuality and experimentation, like do whatever you want and nobody gives a fuck... and then everything became kinda weird, all these people coming in, you

know the Mission was changing, and it was like what the fuck, what is happening? There's another city that used to be really welcoming, and now it's not like that. That's kind of the change that I saw. I think in terms of art, I'm feeling San Francisco isn't the place to create art, political art or art that has a voice anymore. Now it's turning with the mainstream, the newcomers, the people that have lots of money, even the titles of the people in the arts are changing. Now they're the CEO of the arts center, it's like what the fuck. They're getting really corporatized, and that's a reflection of what is really happening there. So that's what I feel that has been the big shift, that's a lost city in terms of the arts²³.

San Francisco has become a lost city according to Navarrete, and as he mentions, much of the cultural shifts he has witnessed have to do with the shifting demographics of the city, the infiltration of capital changing even the structures of arts centers themselves. As tech capital enters San Francisco, not only are low-income people and artists being pushed out, but the demographic shift is causing the entire arts and cultural landscape of the city to match the shifting cultural tastes as well. Therefore, when considering the widespread effects of the tech boom, it is necessary to consider the cities of San Francisco and Oakland, and the Bay Area more broadly, in relation to one another (Walker & Schafran 2015). Thus, the following chapter seeks to make sense of how, as San Francisco and the Bay Area more broadly have increasingly become colonized by tech culture, Oakland has become a borderland. The space of the city becomes saturated by conflicting spatial meanings and imaginaries, where the counter-geographies of the marginalized grate against the geographies of the gentrifier, and bleed.

This chapter demonstrates the array of spatial imaginaries at work in Oakland, and how racial capitalist structures work to redevelop Oakland through pandering narratives of the Creative City. To make sense of the Oakland borderlands, I look to the creative geographies of the city that often do not register as sites of the Creative City, Oakland's rasquache geographies. From there, I reveal the ways that the counter-cultural imaginary of Oakland was appropriated and utilized to re-brand the city for the development and gentrification of Oakland that is rampant in 2017. To do this I first consider the ways that "Creative City" and placemaking discourses frame

²³ José Navarrete, interview, January 7, 2016

the artist as a one-dimensional gentrifier, and how artists of color in Oakland complicate this imaginary. Then, I outline how Oakland’s hegemonic imaginary has shifted from one of Black disorder to one of white creative potential. I consider the ways that the spatial imaginaries of white millennials have become the dominant mode of gentrification in Oakland, and how the hipster has become the hegemonic figure of white millennial urbanity. This chapter serves to reveal how tightly bound discourses of gentrification are with those of the creative city, and how deeply racialized these discourses are. As such, this chapter sets the stage upon which art-activists of color are actively resisting state violence in Oakland at present.

RASQUACHE GEOGRAPHIES

“At a moment when cities are rapidly being transformed, I worry that the people proposing and implementing policies are not thinking about spatial justice. That the speech of the poor and of communities of color is not heard in part because of a devaluation of an expressive aesthetic—the speech of life in all its Rasquache glory, which is saying *I’m city* and which does not jibe with the entitlement of the white spatial imaginary that dominates the understanding of the public sphere.”

— Roberto Bedoya, “Spatial Justice: Rasquatchification, Race and the City”

In October of 2015 the Oakland borderlands seemed especially tense. Soundscapes of the city were being cited and silenced. The Samba Funk drummers had just been cited for noise complaints under the blood moon. That same weekend, the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in West Oakland was cited for noise violations because new neighbors stated that their choir practice was “too loud”. “The area we’re in now has changed drastically,” explained Pastor Thomas Harris. “It is quite unheard of for a church to be fined because of joyful noise²⁴”. Harris noted that the

²⁴ Swan, R. (2015, October 28). Oakland threatens to fine a church for loud music. *San Francisco Chronicle*. Retrieved from: <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Oakland-threatens-to-fine-a-church-for-loud-music-6573360.php>

new neighbors may not understand the culture of a 65-year-old Black church, explaining that the choir rehearses from 7 to 9 pm on Wednesday evenings and that they did not intend to change this practice. “We’ll try to work with the community,” Harris said, “We don’t want to disrespect them, but we don’t want to be disrespected²⁵”. The Church’s citation for noise violation seemed to mirror the debacle the drummers at Lake Merritt had faced, and news of these parallel events reverberated around the city. The city’s citations seemed deeply symbolic to many of the ways that cultural practices commonplace in Oakland were being made to feel out of place, their soundscapes offensive to new neighbors in the vicinity. As the police were called over noise violations, the policing system was enlisted to defend the property rights and tastes of the newly arrived. The soundscapes that have made Oakland hum have become criminalized, deemed unwelcome.

The creative geographies of Black and Brown people are often deemed out of place in the gentrifying city, nor are they seen as creative under the frame of the Creative City. Indeed, the creative and cultural practices of Black and Brown people are often not acknowledged as art: instead, those gentrifying a city are the artists, and residents already in place are framed as uncreative, stagnant, obsolete. If creative city fervor seeks to re-make places, it draws attention to not just who is considered ingenious and marketable in this process of remaking, but whose geographies are deemed to be wasting space and therein disposable. What was Oakland’s downtown, what were the neighborhoods now deemed ‘up and coming’, before the creative class arrived to re-activate these places for capitalist investment? If ‘inner-cities’ are spaces of blight and neglect, spaces that can be ‘activated’ by an ingenious creative class arriving from elsewhere, then what do these policies say about the lives that reside in existing ‘un-creative’ spaces? As Katharine McKittrick reminds us,

²⁵ Ibid

While place annihilation certainly differs according to time and place, the devastation, so clearly pointed to in the term urbicide – the deliberate killing of the city – brings into sharp focus how violence functions to render specific human lives, and thus their communities, as waste. This is to say that multitudinous urbidal acts –the act of ‘cleaning up’ slums, the forceful displacement of disadvantaged communities... - are always inhabited with disposable enemies, impoverished dwellers, those without (2011: 952).

These spaces of the city were deemed ‘dead’ before the creative class recognized their potential value. And, as many Marxist scholars of gentrification have shown, the arrival of the artists added value, drawing the attention of the capitalist class, and so the process of gentrification was set in motion (Zukin 1987; Ley 1997, 2003; Smith 1996). But rather than allowing these narratives to give the “artist presence = gentrification” prophecy more power than is due, and allowing for these narratives to fulfill the imaginary of urbicide in which “the dead and dying black/non-white body becomes the conceptual tool that will undoubtedly complete, and thus empirically prove, the brutalities of racism” (2011: 953), we must instead insist that cities are inherently more complex than this narrative allows. Black and Brown life is abundant in Oakland, and in countless other places deemed fallen victims of urbicide. Black and Brown artist life is also abundant in Oakland, and in many ways is the lifeblood of the city, with rich histories and geographies going back generations. Where do these lives exist in the narrative of creatives activating blighted vacant places?

Black and Brown geographies and their creative practices are deeply embedded in the place that is Oakland. Roberto Bedoya, an advocate of racial equity in the arts, reflects that when he tires of the common narrative of how art and artists fuel gentrification, he flips the script and instead raises the notion of how communities of color possess creative resilience that saturates their geographies. This resilience is displayed through a rasquache aesthetic:

A Chicano aesthetic with an ‘attitude rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability yet mindful of stance and style’...I think of repurposing a tire into a flowerpot...such an object signifies the imaginary structured by resourcefulness, and prompted by poverty, which is distinct from the imaginary imposed by the monetization of neighborhoods, a prevailing

objective in urban development. Rasquachification messes with the white spatial imaginary and offers up another symbolic culture—combinatory, used and reused²⁶.

As Bedoya speaks more about Rasquachismo, it becomes clear that he is theorizing rasquache geographies, the ways that Chicanx communities create space, give meaning to City, through their own aesthetic interaction with the landscape. Similar to Wilson and Keil's (2008) argument that it is the poor who are the true creative class, the rasquache spatial imaginary that Bedoya references offers an alternate reading of the city. The rasquache challenges what is considered 'productive' or an 'aesthetically pleasing' use of space – it is a spatial imaginary that exists in opposition to a white spatial imaginary of what a city 'should' look like. The word rasquache, or rascuache, has Nahuatl origins, and is commonly used disparagingly in Mexico and elsewhere in Central America to refer to things that are considered low class, poor taste or of little value²⁷. Chicano theorist Tomás Ybarra-Frausto reclaimed the term in his writings, conceptualizing rasquachismo as the radical creative and cultural practices of resilience that Chicanx communities utilize to survive daily forms of oppression, “an aesthetic representation that belongs to the barrio...it's an oppositional way of seeing things” (Ybarra-Frausto 2014: 220). Ybarra-Frausto locates resistance, creativity, and art within rasquachismo, and how the rasquache represents migrant and Chicanx “communities' ability to survive, resist, and thrive in the face of multiple oppressions by making do with whatever means are available to them and, in the process, producing legitimate and valuable theory, knowledge, and art” (Mendoza Avina 2016: 469). As such, the creative practices emerging from the rasquache of migrant and Chicanx communities offer an oppositional aesthetic, oppositional geographies of the city.

²⁶ Bedoya, R. (2014, September 15). Spatial Justice: Rasquachification, Race & the City. Creative Time Reports. Retrieved from: <http://creativetimereports.org/2014/09/15/spatial-justice-rasquachification-race-and-the-city/>

²⁷ **rascuache** (adj. coloq. El Salv., Hond. y Méx.) Dicho de una persona o de una cosa: De mala calidad o de poco valor. El Diccionario Real de la Academia Española. Retrieved from: <http://dle.rae.es/?id=VBHsCMu>

Aligned with how Katharine McKittrick and Clyde Woods have theorized Black geographies as “oppositional spatial practices” (2006: xiv), the rasquache geographies Ybarra-Frausto and Bedoya demonstrate emphasize a creative production of place by Chicanxs and other Brown geographies. As Bedoya elaborates, “rasquachification challenges America’s deep racial divide through acts of ultravisibility undertaken by those rendered invisible by the dominant ideology of whiteness... It is a call to hold on to the stories told on the streets by the locals, and to keep the sounds ringing out in a neighborhood populated by musicians who perform at the corner bar or social hall²⁸”. These rasquache landscapes are often not recognized as aesthetically pleasing by the white spatial imaginary, and yet the rasquache demands ultravisibility as Bedoya notes, challenging normalized or ‘proper’ aesthetics of whiteness²⁹. As the citation of Oakland’s drumming and Church choir soundscapes demonstrate, cultural and creative practices come to be policed and considered illegitimate, a nuisance or eyesore, as the landscape comes to be governed by a white spatial imaginary. As George Lipsitz theorizes, the white spatial imaginary “idealizes ‘pure’ and homogenous spaces, controlled environments, and predictable patterns of design and behavior...yet in order to have pure and homogenous spaces, ‘impure’ populations have to be removed and marginalized” (2011: 29). The rasquache upholds its right to place despite the whiteness of gentrifying aesthetics, it refuses to be deemed ‘out of place’. This insistence to remain makes rasquache a practice of resilience, resisting displacement through expressive creativity that serves as a technology of survival and refusal. Under this thread of rasquache

²⁸ Bedoya, R. (2014, September 15). Spatial Justice: Rasquachification, Race & the City. Creative Time Reports. Retrieved from: <http://creativetimereports.org/2014/09/15/spatial-justice-rasquachification-race-and-the-city/>

²⁹ Rasquache also bears resemblance to ratchet, a way of being that Black feminist theorist Brittney Cooper describes as being “about flamboyance...a kind of habitus though which (some) working class folks interact with every aspect of their lives” that rejects the demands of respectability politics on Black people. Source: Crunktastic. (2012, December 31). (Un)Clutching My Mother’s Pearls, or Ratchetness and the Residue of Respectability. Crunk Feminist Collective. Retrieved from: <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2012/12/31/unclutching-my-mothers-pearls-or-ratchetness-and-the-residue-of-respectability/>

resilience, drummers and churchgoers of color were refusing to be deemed out of place in their city, refusing to comply with the policing of a white spatial imaginary.

Two weeks after the citations of West Oakland churchgoers and Lake Merritt drummers, the fourth meeting of the Oakland Creative Neighborhoods Coalition (OCNC) was scheduled to take place. The coalition had been formed in the summer of 2015 with the intention of advocating for the city's art and cultural community to "Keep Oakland Creative, Affordable and Vibrant", and I had been attending the meetings to aid the coalition's efforts. OCNC is notable in that it is led by two women of color artists and cultural workers, and they stress at every meeting how racial and cultural equity are at the core of their organizing and that they center communities of color who they see as being the drivers of Oakland's culture. At the meetings that had taken place prior, the conversation was largely around how to create policy recommendations that would push the City to pay more attention to the intersections between cultural equity and affordability, so as to write policies that would benefit "creative communities". There had been a decent turnout of around 30 cultural workers from various sectors at previous meetings, and the conversation had been around how to work with the City on these issues – essentially how to get the mayor's administration to put its money where its mouth is, and to start funding arts and culture endeavors more extensively rather than solely heralding them.

After the two noise violations in late September 2015, however, the OCNC suddenly became center stage for the frictions arising in the city around whose soundscapes were being policed. The October 14th meeting was filled to the brim with a few hundred people, as well as TV news crews and reporters from across the Bay Area. Word had gotten out about the citing of the church choir in particular, and as a result not only had the artist community of the city been rallied, but a large group of predominantly Black churchgoers attended as well. As the meeting opened, there was a clamor in the room as people made comment after comment, concerned about how to get their voices heard and concerns addressed. One Pastor raised the question of how could

fight for the same issues that Black churches in Oakland were concerned about. Anyka Barber, the lead organizer behind OCNC and founder of Betti Ono art gallery, spoke clearly about the intersections between Black cultural life and Black churches in Oakland, and told the Pastor to rest assured the goals between these two groups are complementary in their urgent need to protect their sacred spaces and communities from being forced out. As one Black elder and neighbor of the church in question spoke at the event, “Maybe you don’t want to hear singing, but sometimes you need to hear it. You ain’t taking nothing away from us. I’ve lived here fifty years. I know how to protest. They ain’t going to run us out of here. If we’ve been here this long, we ain’t moving³⁰.” The overall consensus coming out of this meeting was that there was a need for unity, and a need for rapid action to ensure the City knew of their concerns so that the policing of community soundscapes would be halted.

The October 14th meeting concluded with a plan of action centered on an ‘Open Forum’ the city was holding the following week to collect public opinion on the new Downtown Plan the

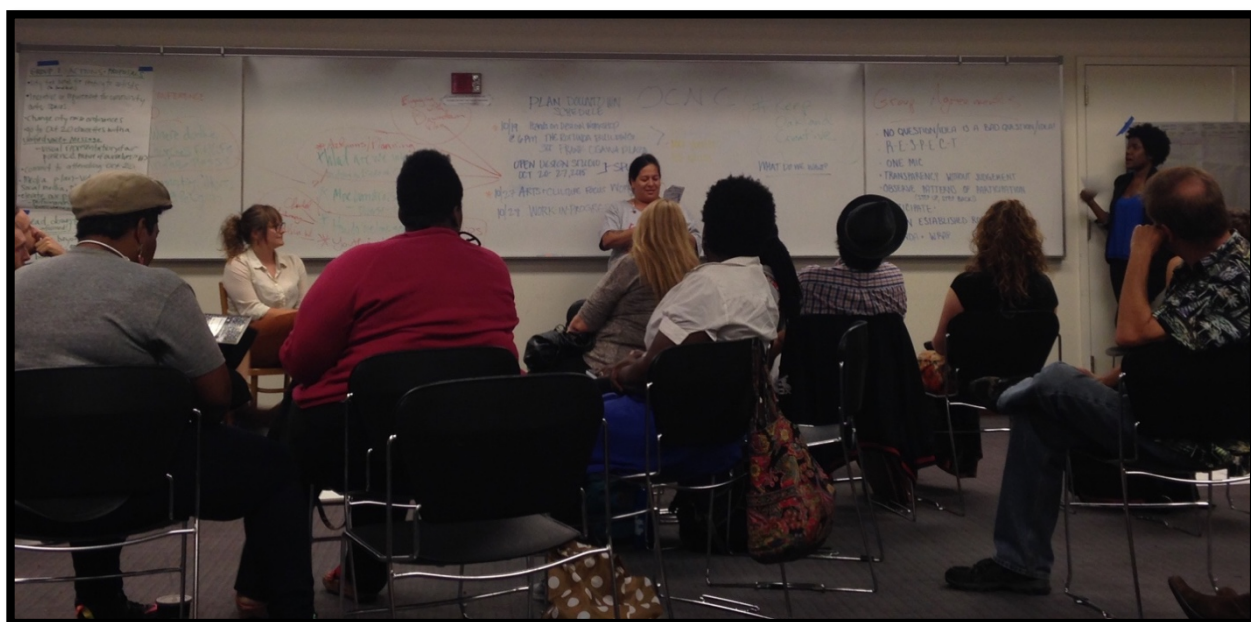


Figure 15: Oakland Creative Neighborhoods Meeting, October 14, 2015. Photo by author.

³⁰ Comment made in the OCNC general meeting, October 14, 2015.

city was proposing for Oakland. City Hall was to hold a weeklong series of ‘charettes’, presenting the Plan for Oakland’s downtown and inviting all Oaklanders to give their feedback before work commenced. At the OCNC meeting, it was decided that the coalition would hold a rally in front of City Hall the first day of the Open Forum, at which a number of artists would perform and the goals of the coalition could be declared in this public space. From there, the rally would enter the building and, given a number of talking points, participants could vocalize the needs of Oakland’s arts and cultural community at the charettes. At the rally on October 19th, about a hundred people showed up of all ages, listening to the presenters that read poetry, spoke truths, sang songs, and danced in front of the backdrop of signs that read #KeepOaklandCreative and *Cultural Equity*. As one of OCNC’s lead organizers, Katherin Canton, stated, “We were not included in this Downtown Specific Plan process, and we are going to insert our needs, our voices, our wants, our vision for the future into this plan. We want to see investment in all neighborhoods of Oakland, not just downtown³¹.” Paul Cobb, from the Oakland Post, the largest Black-run weekly newspaper in Northern California, expressed the need for unity and solidarity. “We want to make sure, that our



Figure 16: OCNC Rally at City Hall, October 19, 2015. Photo by author.

³¹ All quotes in this paragraph are taken from from the OCNC rally held on October 19, 2015

creative artists and non-profit organizations have a place to exist in this city to serve the population...we have a common concern, which is preventing the disenfranchisement of us as residents and organizations. They can develop, but we are not going to let them displace us.” Robbie Clark, an organizer for Causa Justa, a housing equity organization, declared “we need to keep Oakland Black, keep Oakland working class, keep Oakland about families, keep Oakland revolutionary, because that’s what they are trying to displace y’all, that’s what they are trying to push out”. The final performance of the rally was a group of all-Black singers and violinists, wearing shirts that read BLACK LIVES MATTER and KISS MY BLACK ARTS. The group, led by singer Valerie Troutt, sang ‘We Shall Overcome’ and ‘Oh Happy Day’, gospel songs that have deep connections to Black resistance movements. As they sang, they changed some of the verses in the songs’ refrain, making reference to Oakland, to gentrification, how ‘we will not be moved’. The songs were deeply political and poignant, and roused the crowds as the rally ended and everyone was encouraged to enter the City Hall and disrupt the ‘charettes’ taking place inside.

A broad coalition of Oaklanders had come together to disrupt the ‘Downtown Plan’ the

M.M. Ramírez



Figure 17: Oakland Downtown Plan Charettes inside City Hall. Photo by author.

City had formulated for Oakland. The series of ‘charettes’ the City held seemed more a charade, in which the plans were already prescribed and the City diligently asked for input from the “community” after the planning process was nearly complete. OCNC members walked proudly into City Hall, approaching the spread of tables taking up most of the rotunda, plastered with digital renderings of what Oakland’s downtown could look like. I wandered the room as some coalition members engaged with folks at the tables, others taking over the microphone on the floor, declaring the coalition’s needs on the loudspeaker. Others chanted ‘Keep Oakland Creative’ as they filtered through the room, commenting at the tables as they went. This rally was an act of resistance – a creative insistence that Oakland was full of rich cultural geographies that were being excluded from this new Downtown Plan. The rally asserted there is a need to recognize the Black and Brown geographies that have lived in Oakland for years, and insisted that these geographies are deeply creative, as was demonstrated in the poetry and music infused into the demonstration. The art here serves as a means of protest, but also as a means of depicting the vibrancy of the geographies that are at risk of being displaced, to show city hall that Oakland is not made of vacant or lifeless landscapes. Rasquache, in many ways, could stand for the visions and desires that the art-activists of color at the OCNC rally were conjuring – a city where people are free to root themselves into place, to weave rich relationships and meanings. To not have to fear that the specter of displacement and dispossession will come for them one day because their presence, aesthetic or music is deemed offensive by the white spatial imaginary.

Urban art- or cultural-activism utilizes creative practices such as performance and public art to “motivate social and political change in anti-capitalist movements” (Buser et al. 2013: 606). Elsewhere geographers have considered how creative acts of resistance are tied up in processes of urban place making, constructing new meanings of place and political openings (Ginsburg 1997; Buser et al. 2013; Boren & Young 2016). Creative actions and forms of art-activism produced are situated in broader struggles of urban belonging (Youkhana 2014), with collectives such as the OCNC emerging to stake claim of the city with an alternative imaginary of place (Leitner et al.

2008). Following David Harvey, OCNC, as well as other art-activists resisting racial capitalist development in Oakland, act as “dissident cultural producers” creating a new form of urban commons in their art spaces (89). Yet, Harvey warns, “the fact that culture is a form of commons and that it has become a commodity of some sort is undeniable...how can that commodity status be reconciled with their special character,” given that “urbanization is about the perpetual production of an urban commons and its perpetual appropriation and destruction by private interests” (2012: 90, 80). This appropriation is something Oakland artists, particularly artists of color, face as the City has actively embraced the creative culture of Oaklanders, folding ‘arts and culture’ into their city plans since “global capital values distinctive local initiatives of uniqueness, authenticity, peculiarity, originality” (Harvey 2012: 109). Indeed, this folding in of cultural practices is something I witnessed in real time, as the OCNC’s resistance to the Downtown Plan was quickly absorbed into the performance of the Downtown Plan itself. The rally and action got the City’s attention, and clearly city leadership did not like that the OCNC had positioned itself as working in opposition of the City’s Plan. As a result, the subsequent public event reflecting on the community comment period would have a very different tone.

On October 28th 2015, the City held a public event they called the “Work-in-progress Presentation for the Downtown Oakland Plan”. It was to be held at the Paramount Theater, a glorious art deco theater that has hosted some of Oakland’s biggest theater and musical acts over the years. As I walked into the lobby, I was expecting to be ushered into the theater itself, and to sit and watch some sort of PowerPoint presentation on the ‘Work-in-progress’. Instead, I wandered into an elaborate reception of cheese platters and tandoori chicken skewers, the Downtown Plan renderings blown up and displayed throughout the lobby, encouraging people to mingle, snack, and review the plans and comments left by community members. The Plans were divided by sectors of downtown, and featured illustrations of what was proposed for each sector. On separate posters, there were maps of downtown and the heading “What if...” with hand-written suggestions from community members of ways to improve downtown. One included creating a

‘makers space’ of Uptown, and others suggested affordable housing zones, access to the waterfront, and increased green spaces. But none of these ‘What ifs’ was clearly defined as a feature that was to be implemented in the plans. It was more a reflection and presentation of the feedback they had received from the charettes. The reception seemed to drag on, and I felt



Figure 18: Plan Downtown Oakland Presentation, OCNC singers on stage, October 28, 2015. Photo by author.

rather confused – was this the extent of the ‘Presentation’? OCNC had sent around an email to coalition members to attend, and so I expected a similar sort of rally and disruption as had occurred outside City Hall on the 19th, and yet there were no familiar faces from the coalition to be found. Thirty minutes or so into the reception, suddenly a quartet of violinists entered the lobby, single-file, leading the crowd to the auditorium as they walked. As they passed me, I noticed they were wearing black shirts that read #KeepOaklandCreative on the back. It was when I noticed this that I began to feel a sinking unease. Were these musicians representing the coalition that were now taking part of the formal presentation of the Downtown Plan, or had the City simply co-opted the slogan?

I wandered inside the auditorium and sat down, awaiting the start of the presentation. The crowd was mostly older white folks, although there were some people of color, and I recognized a few people from the OCNC, but not many. As the event was about to begin, the violin quartet took the stage, along with a dozen or so singers. I recognized them immediately – they were the same

musicians that concluded the OCNC's rally the week prior. As the musicians began to play, the singers proceeded to sing one of the same songs that they had sung at the rally the week prior – 'Oh Happy Day'. Whereas at the rally the singers had changed the song's refrain to be more political, on stage at the Paramount, they stuck to the intended lyrics and made no political references. I was waiting for the lead singer, Valerie Troutt, to make some concluding statements, to speak about the intention of the OCNC, to use this stage time to make a statement about cultural equity. That moment never arrived, however. They finished the song, and obediently exited the stage. The art had gone from being a political statement, from exuding a politics of resistance and opposition, from demanding justice, to being an accessory for the city's Creative City imaginary. The art became spectacle; it had been subsumed into the event itself, watered down, appropriated and co-opted.

I was speechless as I watched the events unfold – it felt like I was watching Gramsci at work in real time. In the space of one week, the artists had gone from organizing and demonstrating as a counter-hegemonic presence, to being completely subsumed into the creative city hegemonic of the city's plan. What happened? Obviously the city acknowledged their rally and invited them to have a presence at this work in progress, but what had gone down behind closed doors? How had songs of resistance and disruption outside City Hall been reduced to this? The artists were invited to perform, but not to speak, and that to me was deeply representative of the creative city hegemonic at work. The musicians were followed by poets. One woman also looked familiar, introduced herself as a teacher at Oakland's School for the Arts, and I realized she had also spoken at the rally. But she was not there to read her own poetry – instead, she introduced two of her students, two young white women, who read poetry that was completely apolitical, reflecting on nature, light, and teenage love. All I could think was, *What. Is. This.*

After the artistic spectacle was over, Oakland City Council President Lynnette Gibson McElhaney spoke. She told of how in the past planners trampled on the people instead of lifting

them up. We need to lift up the collective wisdom of the community and put our fingerprints into the fiber of these plans, she said, and have the discipline to make it true. She asked the crowd, *You guys are in love with Oakland, right? We have to make sure that we reflect Oakland's diversity in this plan and hold ourselves accountable.* She told us, if you don't hear your voice in what has been done so far, we need you to help translate the town into town business. If you're not included, she essentially said, it is on you. So make a ruckus, like the OCNC rally, and you too can be on stage stripped of your politics. Is this what it means to succeed at 'inclusion'? Is this what would become of the coalition's work – that it would be absorbed into the hegemonic and fade into the City's dominant ideology? Was the rally then a 'successful' form of resistance, because the coalition's needs were heard and subsequently included in the spectacle, or was it not ever intended to be resistance at all?

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More than a year has gone by since these events of October 2015 unfolded, and a lot has changed, yet nothing has changed. After the OCNC's actions of last fall, there were another series of actions organized in March of 2016, with intersecting calls from different factions of the coalition for the City to act upon. The first action demanded that Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts, a deeply-rooted cultural center in Oakland's downtown, be fully reimbursed for their enormous mural that would soon be covered by a new development being built adjacent to their property. Malonga Center is a Black-led arts space that teaches community classes of African diasporic dance including Congolese, Haitian, Guinean, Afro-Cuban, and Capoeira styles. After they spent years painting a brilliant mural that covered the walls of two brick buildings across the street, featuring imagery of the diverse cultural practices Malonga sustains, the parking lot adjacent to the murals was purchased in 2015, the new land owners to construct a 126-unit apartment building in its place. Soon after the March 4th action, The Malonga Center's demands were met by the developer, who wanted to avoid further negative press around the development.



Figure 19: Malonga Casquelourd Center and part of the mural, 2017. Photo by author.

The organizing by Malonga activists and OCNC members pushed Oakland City Council to mediate an agreement with the developers, who agreed to pay \$100,000 to replace the mural, as well as \$160,000 in renovations to the Malonga Center³².

The second OCNC action was connected to the ongoing struggles of the East 12th Street People's Coalition, fighting against the City's intention to sell public land along Lake Merritt to private developers. Initially, the City was planning on selling the public-owned land for \$5.1 billion to private developers, who intended to build a luxury high-rise apartment tower with no affordable housing options. The organizers of Save East 12th Street have demanded that a building of entirely affordable housing be built instead, introducing their own People's proposal that they describe as "an effort to uplift the character and longtime residents of the Eastlake neighborhood,

³² Li, R. (2016, April 7). In wake of mural fight, Oakland developer agrees to hundreds of thousands of dollars in concessions. *San Francisco Business Times*. Retrieved from: <http://www.bizjournals.com/sanfrancisco/blog/real-estate/2016/04/oakland-housing-bay-development-concessions.html>

while promoting development that meets expressed community needs without exacerbating displacement³³”. As the Save E12th coalition explains, median incomes in the Eastlake neighborhood where the public land is up for bid are \$38,363 for a family of four, with more than 75 percent of Eastlake residents being renters, and more than 75 percent being low or very-low income. In 2015 Save E12 held a series of actions during city council meetings, succeeding at getting the council to back down from selling to the initial developer. The East 12th Street struggle continues, with the development continually delayed in City Council thanks to a sustained and persistent effort by organizers. While this organizing may not have direct ties to the arts, the fact



Figure 20: Save East 12th Street altar on the land in question. Photo by author, 2016.

³³ Save East 12th Street Coalition, website. Retrieved from: <http://proposal.e12thoakland.org/>

that the Creative Neighborhood Coalition took up this cause shows how intertwined this movement is with broader struggles for racial equity.

The third issue that was demanded in OCNC's March 2016 action was the call for a revitalized Arts & Culture Commission in Oakland, a department that had been vacant due to budget constraints since 2011. This demand has been central to OCNC's organizing since their formation in 2015, and Anyka Barber along with other prominent cultural workers pushed this message in all their interactions with the City. The City responded by posting the call for applications for the Cultural Affairs Manager in April 2016, and in August 2016, Oakland announced a new Arts & Culture Commissioner: Roberto Bedoya. Born in Oakland, and having served as the Arts Commissioner of Tuscon, Arizona for nearly a decade, Bedoya is also a writer and cultural activist who situates artists and art as rooted and present in all communities. Bedoya is a creative figure who defies traditional societal boundaries; he riffs poetry, cites academic literature, and proposes policy solutions all in the same breath. His propositions challenge these culturally produced boundaries entirely, as he calls for more integrated ways of thinking about and organizing public space:

Policy and imagination condition each other, and a dialectical relationship between the two is necessary to preserve the vibrancy of our cities. Currently, urban policymaking is determined by the drive to accumulate as much capital as possible, and the effect is to destabilize our cities through the displacement of individuals, families and entire communities. But the people who shape communities from the ground up—the urban residents who practice the art of poiesis, or making in the sense of transforming the world—should have the real agency. Acts of imagination ultimately shape the public sphere, where we make meaning together, in shared space. Imagination produces a commons that is continually generated and mutated through our actions. Both the imagination that engendered the pink tire flowerpot and the policies behind zoning ordinances ultimately affect how a city speaks—the sounds of the city, the shape of its buildings, the unit of the block, the voices of the people who live there, their poetics. The poetics and praxis of a city bring into being livability (Bedoya 2014).

Bedoya's policy poetics seem like something from another dimension, his visions for the city weaving a futurescape where the most marginalized have a right to the city, a right to shape, own, and build resilient homes for themselves in place. Yet, as David Harvey warns, the commons

produced by dissident cultural producers inevitably become commodified, as “capitalist urbanization perpetually tends to destroy the city as a social, political and liveable commons” (2012: 80). So how will Bedoya’s vision of the commons produced by the imagination translate into his urban policy for Oakland? How can the poetics and praxis of the city create a more ‘liveable’ city through imaginative policies? If this queer Chicano poet-politic is the Commissioner to lead Oakland into its next era of city-ness, how might the City begin to put their creative city appropriations into play in real ways? As Bedoya explains,

There’s a whole language around cultural citizenship and how art can make claims - that’s poetic will. It’s those articulations via an aesthetics around civil society that people want, they want to deal with housing, they want to deal with queerness, they want to deal with feminism, and they’ll do it through the arts-a lot of people do. And that is claim making - to me, how do you organize, how do you understand those energies, and then how do you organize themselves around what I call poetic will... This is why I love artists because they’re always operating a bit outside the frames, new forms and new discoveries happen at the margins of what’s going on. You pay attention to the margins.... My job is to make the policy argument. And I’m not afraid, I actually enjoying making the policy argument via the employment of metaphor and imagery. The mayor loves place keeping, and that becomes a sticky word. Well good, you know, people are motivated by imagery, I’m motivated by that, you know, it has power. I’m not going to back away from that power. It’s a power base I know really well. So my job then becomes this, how do I turn that imagery, or hip hop, spoken word narrative about this placement into policy³⁴.

Time will tell if Bedoya is able to translate the artists’ imaginaries from the margins of the city into policy that sticks, that is able to shift the landscape of arts dispossession in Oakland. To see if a poetic will can create the policies the city needs and OCNC art-activists are demanding. In the subsequent section, I look to the way that artists and the arts have been taken up in Oakland’s projection of city-ness, and question if Oakland’s Creative City identity accounts for the rasquache geographies of the city as sites of creative life. I begin this consideration by looking to the politics and imaginaries conjured by Libby Schaaf, the current mayor of Oakland, and how her mayoral launch was in many ways driven by her commodified embrace of the arts. As Bedoya mentioned,

³⁴ Conversation with Roberto Bedoya, 2/6/17

Mayor Schaaf is “into place keeping”, but it remains to be seen if she will ultimately defend the places that Oakland artists and cultural workers call home as redevelopment surges onward.

RE-BRANDING OAKLAND: CREATIVE CITY APPROPRIATIONS

“What makes Oakland Oakland is our diversity and our incredible arts scene. Our gritty industrial flavor, as well as our long history of embracing social movements. We are an incredibly creative place.... I’m very aware that we cannot sell our soul for growth. Part of that soul is our artist community. That balance of growth and revitalization but preserving our Oaklandishness — our secret sauce — that’s an acute awareness I bring to this position.”

– Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf, on the eve of her inauguration, January 2015

“We are the ones that make Oakland a cool place to visit. We don’t need any more beer gardens. Without Brown and Black culture you have nothing here. Make sure that whatever changes and whatever plans get made that we need to be included, we need to be able to afford it. We are not only being forced out of our homes and businesses, but priced out of our culture.”

– Chaney Turner, Oakland Creative Neighborhoods Rally, October 19th 2015

When Libby Schaaf was inaugurated as Oakland’s mayor in January 2015, she rode around the city in a massive snail-shaped car that spat flames. After being sworn in as mayor, Schaaf threw a public inauguration party at American Steel Studios, an arts space inhabited by Jon Sarriugarte, the same artist who built the snail car and who had promised Schaaf that if she won the election, he would parade her around town in it³⁵. The site of American Steel Studios has seen many coats of Oakland’s geographies over the years. Prior to becoming an artist workspace in 2006, the six-acre West Oakland building had sat vacant for decades. Its walls were originally built to house the American Steel and Wire Company, a major industrial presence in Oakland that

³⁵ Schwartz, C. (2015, January 10). Oakland’s New Mayor Has Been Driving Around Town In A Giant Burning Man Snail Car. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/10/libby-schaaf_n_6444954.html



Figure 21: American Steel Building, 2016. Photo by author.

manufactured steel components which built the eight-mile long Bay Bridge connecting Oakland to San Francisco in the 1930s. After the bridge's construction, the company used the factory to manufacture an array of steel-based products, and the building housed one of American Steel and Wire's Cyclone Fence Divisions. The workers that inhabited this space built steel fences to enclose private property: *Reserving the right to determine who shall enter the property is not only a privilege but a necessity for industry*³⁶.

Who were the workers who built these fences? Where did the workers go when

the plant shut down in the 1960s? The American Steel building became a space in waiting. Specters of those displaced before, reverberations, the waves yet to come. In early 2016, almost a year to the date following Libby's inauguration party, the landlord of the six-acre property put the space up for sale for \$60 million dollars. In early November 2016, the property was sold to a property development company for \$29 million, half of the asking cost. Artist residents have told the media they are relieved that the building is off the market, and tentatively pleased with the new ownership, who seem to want to strengthen the building's existing infrastructure and raise

³⁶ "USS Cyclone Fence Division, catalog 107": American Steel & Wire Company, 1950. Retrieved from: <https://archive.org/details/USSCycloneFenceDivision>

rent marginally, but who are keeping the artists in place. “We really love old buildings,” said the new owners, a developer called 11 West, “we just like to invest in the infrastructure that is Oakland, and we want to see it grow³⁷.” The phrasing *we just like to invest in the infrastructure that is Oakland* sounds eerily distrustful to other American Steel tenants who have expressed concerns about the company:

From my point of view as a tenant there is every reason to suspect that they are implementing changes in a gradual way so as to make the place intolerable for the existing tenants with a view toward future higher-paying small businesses. This way they can empty the building of us one by one, avoiding all the bad press and protests that would occur if they evicted us en masse. Speculation, I know, but consider that the last property 11 West bought in west Oakland, right near by on Peralta st., was emptied of all its artists and tenants under the excuse of “safety”, after multiple promises to “find a situation that would work for all of us” somehow didn’t pan out. Some 26 year old idiot representative of theirs spoke at a meeting we had at Amsteel. There is no reason I can see to trust them at all, I have some very angry roommates who we absorbed after they lost their home of 15 years thanks to 11 West³⁸.

Like this tenant speculates, there is no way to know what long-term plan the developers have for American Steel – but sudden mass eviction isn’t in their best interests. The developers are invested in protecting their newly-acquired property, however, as they installed large safety gates within a week of their purchase³⁹. After all, *reserving the right to determine who shall enter the property is not only a privilege but a necessity for industry*. Echoing the building’s former uses, as the property is passed on, the lives inhabiting its space remain un-possessed, in flux.

Mayor Libby Schaaf was enthusiastic about the sale of American Steel Studios, stating “I’m so excited that the future for the incredible artists and makers who made that space is now

³⁷ Swan, R. (2016, November 8). Oakland’s American Steel Studios sold, artists relieved. San Francisco Chronicle. Retrieved from: <http://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Oakland-s-American-Steel-Studios-sold-artists-10598776.php?t=be4667bc8b&cmpid=twitter-premium>

³⁸ Post, G. (2016, November 7). American Steel has been sold: Here’s what it means for Bay Area artists. *The Burning Man Journal*. Retrieved from: <http://journal.burningman.org/2016/11/black-rock-city/participate-in-brc/american-steel-has-been-sold-heres-what-it-means-for-bay-area-artists/>

³⁹ Ibid.

secured⁴⁰". Elsewhere Schaaf has said she's working to use zoning regulations to protect the city's creative class, and to protect the artist space of American Steel Studios, saying "preserving industrial artistic uses is in the long term interest of the city⁴¹". The mayor's victory-lap around the city was meant to symbolize how she intended to center art and artists in her mayoral platform, smiling and waving to the crowds while holding the reins of an iron beast that once wandered the high desert at Burning Man. But this victory lap also revealed another layer of her political impetus: to present herself as a mayor as hip and 'authentic' as Oakland's new imaginary on the national and international stage. Her snail car, campaign slogan ("Libby Schaaf: Made in Oakland"), and sloppy attempts at 'Oaklandish' lexicon ("Because it's hella time for leadership in Oakland"), all display Schaaf's efforts to prove herself as an 'authentic' product of Oakland and its culture. The 'secret sauce' of Oakland's culture, according to Schaaf, was made up of diversity, gritty industrial flavor, social movements, and art, and candidate Schaaf built her campaign upon playing up her politics of belonging in Oakland⁴². The Mayor's campaign promises to Oakland's artist community became major tenets of her mayoral image, calcified in the vision of a snail car chugging down Oakland's streets. She held her inauguration party in a well-known artist loft space in West Oakland, "inviting the public to take part in a community event celebrating the diversity, creativity and maker spirit of Oakland"⁴³. Libby Schaaf campaigned as a hip Oakland native and won the mayoral race in 2014, and she can attribute some of her success to the way that she

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Swan, R. (2016, February 3). Oakland's American Steel arts hub may be razed for offices. *San Francisco Chronicle*. Retrieved from: <http://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Oakland-s-American-Steel-arts-hub-may-be-razed-6805130.php>

⁴² 'Schwartz, C. (2015, January 10). Oakland's New Mayor Has Been Driving Around Town In A Giant Burning Man Snail Car. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/10/libby-schaaf_n_6444954.html

⁴³ Libby Schaaf Inaugural Festival. (2015, January 11). City of Oakland Website. Retrieved from: <http://www2.oaklandnet.com/oakca1/groups/ceda/documents/marketingmaterial/oak050942.pdf>

utilized the artist community of Oakland to make her image seem more creative and authentic than the other 14 candidates on the mayoral ballot that year.

Mayor Schaaf's campaign platform was thick with creative city ideology. The ingredients of Oakland's 'secret sauce' seem to be taken directly from the Creative 100's Memphis Manifesto, a series of principles drawn up by 100 city leaders from 48 cities across the United States in 2003 with an aim to "help communities realize the full potential of creative ideas"⁴⁴. These principles included: "invest in the creative ecosystem", "embrace diversity – it gives birth to creativity, innovation, and positive economic impact", and "be authentic – resist monoculture and homogeneity"⁴⁵. This manifesto was written with the guidance of Richard Florida, the founder of the now-ubiquitous creative city movement, whose 2002 book The Rise of the Creative Class encouraged city planners and leaders to embrace the creative class, for they had become "the dominant class in society" whose presence and influence were deemed necessary by Florida in order for cities to ride the emergent creative wave toward economic prosperity (2002: ix). Indeed, Florida's ideology called for cities to do everything in their power to make themselves attractive to the creative class, even if this meant "adopting an entirely new analytical and political mindset, and, even then, learning to accept that creatives would not be pushed around, that their behavior would be difficult to predict, and that above all they need space to 'actualize their identities'" (Peck 2005, citing Florida 2002: 744). The spaces that creatives sought out, according to Florida, were tolerant and diverse communities where they could 'validate their identities', places with 'authentic' buildings and 'organic and indigenous street culture', which, as Peck points out, are "typical features of gentrifying, mixed-use, inner-urban neighborhoods" (2005: 745). Indeed,

⁴⁴ The Memphis Manifesto. (2004). Retrieved from:
<http://creativeclass.com/rfcgdb/articles/manifesto.pdf>

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Harvey's observation of the spatial repositioning of de-industrializing cities toward spaces of consumption rather than production (1989) seems to predict Florida's assertions (Peck 2005).

As Florida's ideas got picked up by policymakers across North America, urban planners Markusen and Nicodemus coined the term "creative placemaking," which quickly became a buzz word in the realms of policy, arts advocacy, and philanthropy. In theory, creative placemaking demonstrates how arts and culture-focused developments can utilize new and existing infrastructure to make cities more sustainable places by calling upon actors from "public, private, non-profit and community sectors to strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, tribe, city, or region around arts and culture⁴⁶". The practice of creative placemaking intends to generate jobs and income by supporting artistic entrepreneurs and cultural industries, therein revitalizing economically stagnant places by "activating space" (Markusen & Nicodemus 2010: 2). Practitioners claim that the long-term outcomes from creative placemaking endeavors "improve public safety, strengthen community identity, better environmental quality, increase affordable housing and workplaces for creative workers, and build more attractive and reliable transportation" (Markusen & Nicodemus 2010: 5). Creative city policies and language have been rapidly embraced by city governments in particular over the last decade (McCann 2007), which may be due to the prevalent use of ambiguous concepts such as 'livability', 'vibrancy', and 'creative placemaking' itself, "they flourish precisely because of their imprecision," giving creative policies wide appeal due to their political malleability (Nicodemus 2013: 214). Planning reports on the topic, such as one released by the American Planning Association in 2011, discuss the way that arts and culture investments can boost a region's

⁴⁶ Schupbach, J. (2012). Defining Creative Placemaking. National Endowment for the Arts Magazine. Retrieved from: <https://www.arts.gov/NEARTS/2012v3-arts-and-culture-core/defining-creative-placemaking>

economic vitality to “improve a community’s competitive edge, define a sense of place, attract new and tourist populations, and develop a skilled workforce”⁴⁷.

Despite the ambiguous appeal of these policies, what is implied in language used in planning documents like this is that the existing residents do not possess the skills to make them economically competitive, and that their sense of place is not valuable. This language infers that creative placemaking efforts can attract the type of people necessary for economic rebound, at the expense of the existing residents, who are framed as contributing to the city’s economic stagnancy. It is also implied that whatever artistic or creative talent that needs to be attracted to “define a sense of place” also comes from elsewhere; that the creatives sought to make creative placemaking effective are not already in place. If this is indeed the mentality of a city attempting creative placemaking, it becomes clear how “at its worst, cultural planning at the state and local level becomes captive of particular real estate interests, cultural industries, and cultural elites, and thus fruitful ground for consultants who promise great plans that turn out to be window-dressing” (Markusen & Gadwa 2010: 32).

In her creative city efforts, Mayor Schaaf is trying to capitalize on both the arts scene that has boomed in Oakland over the past decade, as well as the city’s ‘secret sauce’ of diversity (to be explored further in the subsequent section). Schaaf’s intentions seem to be plucked directly from creative city policy, in which a city is depicted as a unique and creative place, and its cultural spaces and populations are marketed to attract visitors and investment (Evans 2003; Peck 2005). This strategy promotes a city’s neighborhoods as distinctive spaces for consumption to attract tech and other knowledge industries, painting neighborhoods as cultural districts full of richly diverse and entertaining features to be consumed in their leisure time (Catungal et al. 2009: 1098). This form of marketing of the creative city privileges middle class attributes and

⁴⁷ American Planning Association (2011) Economic Vitality: How the arts and culture sector catalyzes economic vitality. Retrieved from: <https://www.planning.org/research/arts/briefingpapers/vitality.htm>

mentalities such as ‘self-indulgent overwork’ and conspicuous consumption (Mitchell 2003; Cantugal et al. 2009: 1104). Within this narrative, art, culture, and the artists themselves become a spectacle to be consumed by the creative entrepreneurs, A.K.A. tech workers, that have the real capital heft the city wishes to attract.

The difference between the original creative city plans that emerged in the early 21st century and Schaaf’s technique is that in 2017, city leaders can no longer un-critically roll with Florida’s disputed creative city thesis due to increased attention to and political awareness of gentrification and its consequences. Florida himself has even famously denounced his early strategies for their lack of attention to increased inequality in ‘creative cities’ and how creative city policies fuel gentrification⁴⁸. As Peck elaborates,

Creative-city strategies are predicated on, and designed for, this neoliberalized terrain. Repackaging urban cultural artifacts as competitive assets, they value them (literally) not for their own sake, but in terms of their (supposed) economic utility. In order to be enacted, they presume and work with gentrification, conceived as a positive urban process... it is now being proposed that these gentrification-friendly strategies should be evaluated, not according to hackneyed metrics like job creation or poverty alleviation, but according to more relevant measures like . . . increased house prices! (2005: 764)

Aware of these critiques to some degree, Libby has coupled her whole-hearted embrace of creatives with promises of equitable housing development to address the city’s affordable housing crisis. However, despite Oakland-specific policy reports advising a ‘Roadmap for Housing Equity’ (PolicyLink 2015), and how to conduct ‘Development without Displacement’ (Causa Justa 2014), as of early 2017, nearly two years into her term, the mayor’s housing cabinet has yet to produce significant actions to protect low-income residents as housing prices continue to rise.

In her ‘State of the City’ address from Fall 2015, the mayor stated that “15,000 housing units were in the pipeline” to be built in Oakland, yet only 1,000 of these units would be designated

⁴⁸ Florida, R. (2013, January 30). More Losers than Winners in America’s New Economic Geography. *City Lab*. Retrieved from: <http://www.citylab.com/work/2013/01/more-losers-winners-americas-new-economic-geography/4465/>

affordable housing units⁴⁹. Given the Schaaf administration's slow response to urgent housing equity needs, it calls into question how much the mayor really is intending to conduct 'Development Without Displacement'⁵⁰, a slogan that the city's planning staff has borrowed from housing equity organization Causa Justa to demonstrate how they were planning the city differently. Despite the political illusion that Schaaf's development of Oakland would preserve its "secret sauce", a recent study conducted by the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project found that one of Schaaf's key housing cabinet members, William Rosetti, is associated with more evictions (4068 as of August 2016) in Oakland than any other individual (AEMP 2016: 15). This conflict of interest raises questions: Is Mayor Libby Schaaf interested in preserving Oakland's 'secret sauce' by enabling long-term residents to afford to remain in the city, or is this preservation merely a means of bottling and commodifying the secret sauce before its ingredients are all displaced? To what extent has Libby Schaaf's administration appropriated the creative image of Oakland as a front to further develop and displace low-income Oakland residents? For as is apparent in Oakland, "despite the tendency for the creative city to be a racially unequal city, racial difference is actively appropriated in creative city policies and used as a marker of a vibrant urban economy" (Leslie & Catungal 2012: 119).



Figure 22: Anti Police Terror Project's #ByeLibby Campaign, 2016.

⁴⁹ Schaaf, L. (2015, October 28). State of the City Address. Retrieved from: <http://www2.oaklandnet.com/oakca1/groups/ceda/documents/agenda/oak055647.pdf>

⁵⁰ Lin, M. (2015, February 5). Oakland's International Boulevard Corridor—Igniting government + community change for development without displacement. *NHC Open House Blog*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nhcopenhouse.org/2015/02/oaklands-international-boulevard.html>

At first glance, the arrival of creative city policies may seem to be working in favor of the artist community, since the increased awareness of the value of arts and culture should mean increased investment in art and cultural programs. However, in Oakland, not only is there minimal funding allocated for public arts works, but as of early 2017 there is no explicit intention to fund artists of color or artists from Oakland in their public works projects. It is yet to be determined if the appointment of Roberto Bedoya will change this⁵¹.

Thus, the adoption of a creative city narrative like that which Libby Schaaf has taken up makes the artist's position in the local economy and his role in capitalist dispossession particularly precarious. Artists often have their work and presence appropriated to attract capital, which could eventually mean they are contributing to their own dispossession, as the land they reside on raises in value faster than they can afford. As Peck explains,

The insidious 'scalar narrative' (Swyngedouw, 1997) of creativity has it that the bodies — or perhaps more accurately, the souls — of creative individuals have become the preeminent carriers of economic-development potential, so the pursuit of economic growth becomes neatly synonymous with the publicly funded seduction of the Creative Class. This is a uniquely mobile factor of production, a supply-side counterpart to the footloose corporation, whose locational reach is wide and therefore whose locational preferences must be accommodated (2005: 765).

As a result, as one Oakland artist stated at a town hall meeting in October 2015, artists and the arts they infuse into the landscape are being used as 'fertilizer' to give value to land that was previously considered insolvent by the capitalist class. Such is the case of the recent invention of the Uptown neighborhood and 'arts district' of Oakland. The neighborhood never existed before the early 2000s when then-Mayor Jerry Brown labeled the area The Uptown, and it was deemed

⁵¹ When I spoke with Bedoya in February 2017 he mentioned how his immediate plan is to hold a series of community meetings to get a sense of the "state of the city's cultural facilities as a whole, what are artists' and workspaces' needs" so as to build a cultural plan for the city and propose a budget to the mayor. Ultimately, Bedoya said, he can only make these propositions, it is up to the city to allocate more funding to implement them.



**Figure 23: Uptown (aka Downtown) Oakland, 2017.
Photo by author.**

the first “Arts and Entertainment District” of Oakland in 2009⁵². This renaming was something that Mayor Brown had in his playbook for a while, and is deeply intertwined with the re-branding of Oakland as a place more friendly to the white spatial imaginary.

The election of Jerry Brown as Oakland’s mayor in 1998 marked a definite shift in the city, not only interrupting 20 years of Black mayoral leadership, but also driving a pro-development agenda that was determined to attract Silicon Valley’s, and hence capital’s, gaze. In 1999, at the height of the first tech bubble of 1995-2001, Mayor Brown announced his 10K plan to bring 10,000 new residents to

downtown Oakland. Brown’s focus was on the revival of Oakland’s downtown, and he thought that by subsidizing the construction of market-rate housing and commercial space downtown, tech workers and businesses would be lured to Oakland by the cheaper costs and easy access to BART transportation. As the *East Bay Express* reported in 2007, “the city was so intent on wooing dot-commers during the heady pre-internet bubble days...that it focused on building lofts

⁵² American Planning Association. Great Places in America: Neighborhoods – Uptown: Oakland, California. Retrieved from: <https://www.planning.org/greatplaces/neighborhoods/2014/uptown.htm>

working-class families couldn't afford". Mayor Brown's solution for Oakland's troubles is encapsulated in his 10K plan: rather than building more affordable housing options to assist the 24% of Oakland residents living below the poverty line while the Bay Area was in the midst of the dot-com boom (Census 2000), he focused on building housing and commercial spaces to attract capital and affluent workers from elsewhere. While this plan initially flopped after the first tech bubble burst in 2001, leaving many freshly-built condos downtown vacant for years, nearly two decades later we are seeing Brown's vision enacted as affluent workers move eastward and Oakland becomes the new playground for creative consumption.

While Brown's actions represented planning decisions on behalf of the city to attract capital, these redevelopment plans do not always come to fruition in the way that planners envision. Gentrification is without question a political and economic row of dominos awaiting their release, but it also is wrapped up in aesthetics, in desire, in the white gaze. Thus, sometime in the 2000s, the white perception of Oakland began to shift from one of violence and Blackness to be avoided at all costs, to that of a place exotic and gritty enough to be desirable to white outsiders. This shift will be delved into further in the subsequent section, but for now I will focus on how art has been taken up in this shifting white gaze, looking to how the 'Uptown' has been molded to extract property value from art. Urban planners are complicit in this, with the Uptown neighborhood being heralded by the American Planning Association as an example of 'planning excellence', that "incubates the home-grown, artistic, and entrepreneurial spirit unique to Oakland⁵³". Indeed, the city's intentions to 'revitalize' the area are explicitly tied to creative placemaking endeavors, having received a \$200,000 grant from the National Endowment for the

⁵³ Ibid.

Arts (NEA) to create a ‘public arts park’ in the center of the neighborhood at Telegraph Avenue and 19th Street⁵⁴.

The land the Uptown Arts Park sits on was previously going to be the site of an apartment tower, but with the 2008 economic crash, it had been left vacant. The creation of the arts park was celebrated by the NEA as an example of how a local economy facing economic downturn could transform “an undeveloped urban lot into an urban laboratory for public art and public space...creating a *temporary* use for the site⁵⁵”. Then-Mayor Jean Quan declared in the City’s press release that “the new Uptown Art Park further solidifies Oakland’s national reputation as a visual art mecca⁵⁶.” What is to be noted in these celebrations of Oakland as an urban arts mecca, is that the arts



Figure 24: The grassy area is the fenced-off Uptown Art Park. The sign advertises new condos being built, the white-shrouded building in the background is Uptown Station, the future site of Uber. Photo by author, 2017.

⁵⁴ City of Oakland. (2013, March 13). Oakland’s First Outdoor Sculpture Park to Open in Booming Uptown District. Retrieved from: <http://www2.oaklandnet.com/oakca1/groups/ceda/documents/pressrelease/oako40056.pdf>

⁵⁵ ‘Uptown Art Park’, National Endowment for the Arts. Emphasis added. Accessed 10/13/16: <https://www.arts.gov/exploring-our-town/uptown-art-park>

⁵⁶ City of Oakland. (2013, March 13). Oakland’s First Outdoor Sculpture Park to Open in Booming Uptown District. Emphasis Added. Retrieved from: <http://www2.oaklandnet.com/oakca1/groups/ceda/documents/pressrelease/oako40056.pdf>

park was always intended to be temporary—a means of riding out the economic crash until the land could be put to productive use once more, with value added thanks to the artistic infusion into the landscape. The arts park itself featured massive steel sculptures, which, as described on the NEA’s site describing the park, represent how “like the location itself, the sculptures in the exhibition speak to mutability and reuse: the materials have a memory. For a time, they exist as these forms; one day they may be recycled and recombined in new ways⁵⁷.” The steel sculptures, many made by artists with connections to American Steel Studios, here are meant to represent past and future transitions of city space, to represent the temporality of the sculptures and the site itself. Here the city is read through its artifacts alone, the temporality of place in a city of dispossession; the lives that have lived and died through the ongoing racialized dispossession of Oakland are nowhere mentioned in the reincarnation of steel and place. Instead, Oakland is re-imagined as an arts mecca, a place in creative flux, with those dispossessed disappeared from the creative landscape. This re-branding of Oakland as an arts mecca adds value to the city within the white spatial imaginary, signaling a shift in the city’s valuation within racial capitalist structures as well.

What does this all say about the creative city imaginary that Oakland leaders have been weaving for the last decade or so? In creative city plans, and in the way Oakland has begun to be marketed to an international audience, certain neighborhoods are framed as ‘up-and-coming’ by distancing them from other neighborhoods. The ‘up-and-coming’ neighborhoods of Korea Town-Northgate, now rebranded as Uptown, are juxtaposed against adjoining neighborhoods that represent a space of degeneracy, framing emergent creative spaces as having ‘come a long way’ from their more impoverished past (Catungal et al. 2009: 1105-07). In the case of Uptown, the artists that founded Art Murmur represented geographies of newly arrived Oaklanders, portrayed

⁵⁷ National Endowment for the Arts. Oakland, CA: Uptown Art Park. Retrieved from: <https://www.arts.gov/exploring-our-town/uptown-art-park>

as creative and active members of society, while ignoring the city residents who inhabited Korea Town and Northgate prior, framed as residual for not exhibiting a creative lifestyle (Peck 2007; Cantugal et al. 2009: 1104). The creative city ideology thus produces a narrative that relies on a binary between existing residents, seen as stagnant and undesirable, and incoming residents, seen as creative and desirable (Leslie & Catungal 2012; McLean 2014). Artists and creatives, once more, are framed as being exceptional and desirable, apart from ‘residual’ existing residents whose presence is framed as one that needs to be up-and-overcome (Leslie & Catungal 2012). The trope of the artist, of the creative ‘class’ indeed, is framed as one of a distinct cultural and even socio-economic class, which ignores long-time cultural geographies of the city (Leslie et al. 2012). Not only are existing geographies ignored, but they are painted in opposition with creative developments, with newly declared creative spaces often seen as needing to be policed to protect those visiting the space, reintroducing mechanisms of surveillance typical of neoliberal urban transformation (Mitchell 2003). If creative city policy is intended to benefit the places and peoples it seeks to uplift, city leaders need to adjust their spatial vision of cities to consider the ways that cultivating the creative class means making arts and cultural investments in low-income communities, “the true creative class” (Wilson & Keil 2008: 841).

Here is where the power of a simple statement such as “Keep Oakland Creative” lies - Oakland has been, still is, and will be creative if art activists of color have anything to do with it. The city’s rasquache geographies and struggles for racial and cultural equity demonstrate this, and in the subsequent chapter I consider how artists of color disrupt and even implode the false boundaries drawn between artist-as-gentrifier, and people of color as residual populations displaced. Before engaging with the plethora of Black and Brown artist geographies, however, I find it necessary to “watch whiteness work” in Oakland’s creative landscape. To do this, I now turn to the role of the white spatial imaginary in the re-branding and redevelopment of Oakland, and how the trope of millennial whiteness, the hipster, has come to represent the creative class of dispossession.

THE WHITE MILLENNIAL IMAGINARY: HIPSTERS, TECHIES & ARTISTS

“It’s hard to imagine that this area, just north of downtown Oakland, was abandoned and plagued with crime just a few years ago. Now it bustles with hip bars, places to hear music and interesting restaurants that have even lured San Franciscans across the bay.”

– NY Times, [Oakland Gets a New ‘There’](#), November 23, 2011

“Tensions have cooled since violence erupted at the recent Occupy Oakland protests...the city’s ever more sophisticated restaurants are now being joined by upscale cocktail bars, turning once-gritty Oakland into an increasingly appealing place to be after dark.”

– NY Times, [The 45 Places to go in 2012](#), January 6, 2012

In 2012, Oakland came of age⁵⁸. Came of age according to the white spatial imaginary, that is. The internet decided that the city was no longer solely a ‘violent’ place, but instead a desirable place to visit, or *maybe* even to live. It could be said that the *New York Times* opened the floodgates for broader bourgeois consumption of Oakland. A piece in the Times has the power to shift the popular imaginaries of a place, indicating the moment that the place has passed some sort of quantification of hipness, when it possesses the proper ratio of cocktail bars, foodie spots, and maker boutiques. Oakland’s mentions in the Times in late 2011 and early 2012 seem to proclaim the opening day for Oakland, that the city has finally become an “appealing place to be after dark”, even luring “San Franciscans across the bay”. Both articles allude to the popular imaginaries that ‘plague’ Oakland, with references to violence, crime, and grit, and then imply that if even hip San Franciscans make the effort to cross the bridge, it must be a place worthy of the reader’s white gaze. Indeed, it seems the ‘grit’ that is inevitably mentioned in popular media on Oakland is part of the appeal – a suggestion that ‘danger’ is lurking at the fringes of the visitor’s Oakland experience. The gaze that dominates New York Times articles such as these is that of a white spatial imaginary, in which the reader is presumed to be seeking places like Oakland to visit

⁵⁸ Cushing, E. (2012, December 19). The Year Oakland Exploded. *East Bay Express*. Retrieved from: <http://www.eastbayexpress.com/oakland/the-year-oakland-exploded/Content?oid=3417007>

and consume. Capitalism follows white bourgeois desire, determining which places are ripe for speculation to make a profit (Zukin 1991; Harvey 2006).

Indeed, within a year of the New York Times' features on Oakland, the city began to appear on a wide swath of 'Top Places' lists⁵⁹. Moving beyond lists of the [Top 10 most dangerous cities in 2011](#), in 2013 Oakland was suddenly proclaimed to be the [Most Exciting City](#), the [5th Most Hipster City](#), the [3rd Most Liked City](#) in the United States. One could almost study Oakland's rapid gentrification through these vapid accolades alone, for by 2014 Oakland was suddenly not only hip and exciting but for the first time it became one of the [ten least affordable cities](#) in the United States across various lists. Alongside this ranking, Oakland also became seen as the [5th Best City for Tech Entrepreneurs in 2014](#), with first and second place going to San Francisco and San José. In many ways, these online tributes punctuate migrations of young urbanites to Oakland, and trace this city's emergence as a Global Destination. Oakland was 'up and coming', transforming from a site of inexpensive housing for the Bay Area's labor force to reside, to a place deemed culturally worthy of visiting in its own right. But in this time of transition, Oakland was a borderland, and competing imaginaries of what Oakland was or should be began to grate against each other as each online accolade emerged. These shifting imaginaries were tightly wound to ideologies around culture and creativity, and what possibilities and presences made Oakland a desirable place to visit and to move to. And, in turn, the cultural tastes that were deemed desirable were often tied to tech culture, talent, and workers as a faction of the creative class.

To understand the whiteness inherent in narratives of the creative class, here I trace the emergence of two figures in the spatial imaginary of the white millennial generation: the techie and the hipster. I focus on the white millennial imaginary here because it seems to have a distinct way of imagining, interpreting, and desiring space from that of white spatial imaginaries of

⁵⁹ For a full list of Oakland's accolades, see the Oakland Wiki. Retrieved October 17, 2016 from: https://localwiki.org/oakland/Accolades_for_Oakland

previous North American generations. For instance, in George Lipsitz' (2011) book, How Racism Takes Place, he documents the ways that American society has built white entitlement around a relational framing of black undeservingness, and how this in turn has shaped spatial imaginaries and urban space itself. However, Lipsitz' articulation of the white spatial imaginary appears dependent on a previous iteration of racialized space in the United States, in which black space constitutes the "inner-city" and white space is that of the suburbs. I argue that these imaginaries are being troubled in the current moment we are living, in which poverty is becomingly increasingly suburbanized (Schafran 2013), and white individuals are increasingly moving to urban centers (Smith 1997). These spatial transitions are representative of a generational shift, and representative of a white millennial imaginary of urban space and of post-racial ideologies. Adding to theorizations of white middle class identity in relation to its opposition or distance to poverty and non-white spaces and identities (Lawson 2012; Lawson & Elwood 2014; Elwood et al. 2015; Elwood et al. 2017), a white millennial identity finds meaning in its proximity to non-white spaces and identities. Two of the major figures of the white millennial imaginary of the San Francisco Bay Area, who are almost equally reviled, are the hipster and the techie. The normalized narrative of gentrification in the Bay Area, it seems, is that wherever the hipster claims a space as his own, the techie is sure to follow. In the following I will explore the emergence of these two tropes, questioning the relationship between them, and how the elusive artist-as-gentrifier narrative may also play into the propagation of a white millennial imaginary. If one frames the hipster as a middle-class identity characteristic of the Millennial generation⁶⁰, and an identity that

⁶⁰ According to the Atlantic's 2014 article, "Here is when each generation begins and ends, according to facts" (where the author decided that since Sociologists told them the media wants generational boundaries, and social scientists stray from these, it is then up to the media to define the boundaries), Millennials are the American generation born between 1982 and 2004. Bump, P. (2014, March 14). Here Is When Each Generation Begins and Ends, According to Facts. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from: <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/03/here-is-when-each-generation-begins-and-ends-according-to-facts/359589/>

proliferates a post-racial discourse of whiteness, the placement of the hipster as an interlocutor in gentrification and ‘urban crisis’ becomes all the more profound.

To consider these figures, it is also necessary to briefly situate the role of the information technology economy, or tech sector, in the Bay Area, and how its rapid expansion has drastically influenced the demographics and population of the region. As other geographers have studied in depth (Walker 1996, 2001, 2006; Schafran 2013; Schafran & Walker 2015; Stelhin 2016), the Bay Area economy is dominated by the tech sector, with and the amount of venture capital invested in the region has now exceeded the peaks of the first ‘Dot-Com’ bubble of the 1990s (Stelhin 2016: 3). In fact, the San Francisco-Oakland region tops the list of a U.S. ‘geography of venture capital investment’, at \$8.5 billion as of early 2016, with the Silicon Valley region of San José-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara coming in second with \$4.8 billion⁶¹. While it has been rumored as of mid-2016 that venture capital investment in the tech sector of the Bay Area has peaked and is now declining slightly⁶², the tech bubble has undoubtedly drastically changed the geographies of the San Francisco Bay Area. The techie figure is essentially a young tech worker, who often has migrated from elsewhere in pursuit of the high-paying jobs the tech sector provides, and whose high-paying salary enables him substantial disposable income to utilize in his non-work hours. The techie, essentially, is the high-income consumer class of the Bay Area, and roving capital seeks to meet his desires with top-notch places and goods to be consumed (Peck 2005).

As a result of decreasing affordability in San Francisco, and the pervasive presence of consumer spaces oriented toward high wage earners, many middle-income San Francisco residents have been moving elsewhere, with 30% of people who left San Francisco between 2010

⁶¹ Florida, R. (2016, February 23). A Closer Look at the Geography of Venture Capital in the U.S. *City Lab*. Retrieved from: <http://www.citylab.com/tech/2016/02/the-spiky-geography-of-venture-capital-in-the-us/470208/>

⁶² Coren, M. (2016, April 13). Yes, startup funding really is slowing in San Francisco. *Quartz Media*. Retrieved from: <http://qz.com/660835/you-dont-need-to-be-in-california-to-build-a-lucrative-startup/>

and 2014 ending up in the East Bay⁶³. Popular documentation of the migration of San Franciscans to Oakland, lists such as [35 Reasons You Need to Move to Oakland](#) and [18 Reasons Everyone Cool and Creative is Moving to Oakland](#) emerged in recent years, seemingly catered to San Franciscans who were witnessing tech culture engulf their city. A lifestyle blog catered to hip San Franciscans, *The Bold Italic*, also came out with a series of pieces in 2013, [Why are all my friends moving to Oakland?](#) and [How I Came to Love Living in Oakland](#), offering a narrative that documents San Franciscan migration to Oakland – a demographic shift that has played a substantial role in the housing crisis that ensued. According to “Broke-Ass Stuart”, the author who questions why all his friends are moving to Oakland, people are moving because “San Francisco let them down. The douchebags are winning...Mark Zuckerberg bought a house in the Mission. The artists are leaving. The city is gentrifying...[In Oakland] you won’t get outbid for a room by some dot-com fuckface.”⁶⁴ The author composed this blogpost by asking all of his friends and “Facebook peeps” why they were moving to Oakland, and his narration of their reasoning reveals the idiosyncrasies of a wave of newcomers that could mark the limits and ideologies of a great hipster migration to Oakland, which is essentially the migration of white millennials to Oakland. Before deconstructing this piece, I attempt to locate the elusive figure and subculture of the hipster, to better understand the tropes of hipster, techie and artist in the white millennial imaginary.

The hipster of the present day revives a term that originally emerged in the mid-20th century, referencing a subcultural group also known as beatniks or bohemians. Iconized in Norman Mailer’s 1957 essay, “The White Negro”, Mailer framed the hipster subculture as possessing a sense of alienation after the Second World War that led white males to seek out an

⁶³ Uh, M. (2016, April 28). Priced Out: Big Cities Are Becoming Too Costly For Lower-Income Residents. *Trulia*. Retrieved from: <https://www.trulia.com/blog/trends/priced-out-migration/#sthash.oJBS4QpL.dpuf>

⁶⁴ Stuart, B. A. (2013, March 3). Why are all my friends moving to Oakland? *The Bold Italic* blog. Retrieved from: <https://thebolditalic.com/why-are-all-my-friends-moving-to-oakland-the-bold-italic-san-francisco-18a3a4739c6#.dytzuouu6>

“unstated essence of Hip” that would satiate the generation’s apathy toward the violence, totalitarianism, and cultural conformity they had lived. Mailer identified the “source of Hip [to be] the Negro because he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries”, and therefore possessed the ability to “live in the enormous present” as a survival skill. The hipster or beatnik subculture of the 1950s is characterized by these appropriations, yet the cultural memory of the beat generation is one brazenly remembered as being counter-cultural and anti-establishment in a broad sense, not as a subcultural movement that was deeply racialized, gendered, and classed. As Asha Best (2012) elaborates, the function of race in the beat generation’s hipster is to “obfuscate and hierarchically order cultural contribution before it becomes cultural memory”, and this obfuscation continues to play out in the 21st century iteration of hipster subculture.

The modern day hipster is often framed as devoid of racial and class characterizations, to the extent that the subculture has been framed as being made up of “post-racial twentysomethings” (Greif 2010). Indeed, the attempts to conceptualize the hipster subculture of the present tend to reproduce a narrative of the hipster as racially ambiguous and therein a product of post-racial multiculturalism. Mark Greif et al (2010) consider “hipsterism as an unidentifiable phenomenon”, struggling to identify what exactly hipsterism entails, given the “universal instinctive hatred of hipsters (even among hipsters!)” that keeps people from self-identifying with the label. Greif describes their pursuit of the hipster as an “intimate enemy”:

The hipster represents what can happen middle class whites, particularly, and to all elites, generally, when they focus on the struggles for their own pleasures and luxuries...rather than asking what makes their sort of people entitled to them, who else suffers for their pleasures, and where their “rebellion” adjoins social struggles that should obligate anyone who hates authority. Or worse: the hipster is the subcultural type created by neoliberalism...Hipster values exalt political reaction, masquerading as rebellion...and hipster anti-authoritarianism bespeaks a ruse by which the middle-class young can forgive themselves for abandoning the claims of counterculture...while retaining the coolness of subculture. (2010: 17)

This imprecise definition of a hipster becomes someone who is a consumer of subculture, always wanting to be ahead of the trends, who focuses on their own image and position within this culture with little attention to how their consumption habits and privilege(s) may affect or be interrelated to others in society more broadly. The last part of this passage seems to get at a deep vein in hipster culture, that of a general acknowledgement of injustice as it pertains to the image of subcultural consumer, yet a disinterest in implicating themselves in a way that would disrupt the racial capitalist system itself. Perhaps it is this trait of pronounced disinterest in moving beyond self-serving consumption that makes no one willing to self-identify as a hipster. It is an apathetic embrace of all the perks of neoliberal subculture, while flippantly dismissing one's own implication in structures of power, that makes the hipster such a dangerous and slippery character of the current era.

The hipster's role in perpetuating neoliberal regimes while flaunting an anti-establishment subculture rings true in how the hipster upholds white supremacist power structures as well. Indeed, while Greif et al. make a valiant effort to pin down the elusive hipster in relation to neoliberalism, their analyses leave the post-racial illusion of hipster subculture largely intact. Rejecting a politically benign characterization of the hipster, Best urges that the post-racial label should be read as "telling rather than pejorative" for it "wrests the amorphous figure [of the hipster] from the realm of the superficial to look at the importance of his/her tenuously de-politicized/de-racialized social location⁶⁵". Following Best's assertions, I argue that it is the illusory de-politicized and de-racialized positioning of the hipster that makes this figure so emblematic in the current moment of 'urban crisis'. It is no mere coincidence that the Millennial generation's "return to the city" follows the rise of 21st century hipster subculture, the massive redevelopment of urban centers and the rampant dispossession and displacement of low-income communities, particularly people of color, across North America (Harvey 2012). As Best

⁶⁵ Best, A. (2012)

goes on to question, “What then are the analytical possibilities of viewing contemporary hipsters as interlocutors in the post-race discourse rather than as the unfortunate result of the current moment?⁶⁶”. What, indeed, becomes of the hipster if they and their consumerist apolitical culture are seen as interlocutors in processes of dispossession as well? A post-racial discourse serves not only hipster consumption habits and technologies of cultural appropriation, but also fuels post-racial narratives of dispossession and gentrification as being products of multicultural capitalism.

The post-racial nature of hipster subculture raises the question of hipsters as interlocutors not only in neoliberal assemblages, but also in how the post-racial discourse stands in for a discourse of whiteness (Bonilla-Silva 2003). A post-racial discourse imagines society as being ‘colorblind’ or ‘beyond race’, which serves as a mechanism to perpetuate the invisibility of whiteness, and ultimately upholds white supremacist structures of power (Pulido 2015; Bonds and Inwood 2016). As the hipster subculture has gained in popularity, it has entrenched these politics of post-racial whiteness as norm, and thus the imaginary of the hipster itself becomes equated with whiteness. While not all hipsters are white, I follow Greif (2010) in his observation that hipsters are more often than not members of the white middle class. Much like how the middle class “is a hegemonic political fiction framed by neoliberal rationalities, national identities and consumer subculture”, the hipster subculture operates in a similar fashion (Elwood et al. 2015: 124).

As Elwood, Lawson and Nowak examine in their analysis of middle-class poverty politics, “how middle-class people consolidate (or transform) their identities through actions with poorer [and racialized] class subjects [is revealed] as they remake their neighborhoods” (2015: 124). Exploring the spatial imaginaries that are revealed by middle-class actors re-envisioning their neighborhoods, Elwood et al. discuss how “the [re]production of urban landscapes reinscribes

⁶⁶ Ibid.

middle-class norms and identities...[thus] *place-making* refers to the ways that residents enact their imaginaries of what a neighborhood should ideally be...normalizing middle-class values, tastes, and aesthetics” (124-125). The fascinating piece of this analysis is how a middle-class identity becomes spatialized through their relationship with and desire for particular landscapes, and how the desired middle-class aesthetic is defined in relation to the poor racialized ‘other’. This relational lens is useful in understanding the desire of middle-class hipster millennials to move to Oakland, and how the aesthetics they desire when ‘re-making’ neighborhoods are often formed by positioning themselves in proximity to the poor racialized ‘other’. Rather than defining himself as middle-class in disassociation to the poor, the hipster millennial seeks to live and therein define himself in relation to how ‘down’ he is with the poor racialized ‘other’, and one way of doing so is to live in low-income neighborhoods among people of color.

Gentrification is not only about the middle class seeking out cheaper housing, as Sociologist Sharon Zukin has explored in great depth – it is deeply intertwined with the desire for authenticity. What is considered authentic to ‘urban gentrifiers’, according to Zukin, takes a myriad of forms, but one of the most unsettling that she mentions is how gentrifiers “claim to admire – some say even make a fetish of – the ethnic diversity of their neighbors” (2008: 727). Sociologist Richard Lloyd describes the gentrifier’s desire to be familiar with the ‘other’ as part of the experience of the city they are seeking: “sharing the streets with working-class and non-white residents, even if the interaction remains superficial, is part of their image of an authentic urban experience” (2006: 77-78). These accounts frame the gentrifier’s desire, and, I argue, the white hipster imaginary of urban space. Inherent in this desire for authenticity, the hipster millennial imagines the ideal urban experience to be one in which they share space with the ‘other’, therein seeking out places that fulfill this imaginary. The hipster then becomes the hegemonic figure of white millennial urbanity – the young white urbanite whose urban desires shape the way that capital infiltrates and redevelops city spaces to gain their affection. This is where the hipster and white spatial desires become entangled in creative city planning and discourse, furthering colonial

expansionist visions of Oakland as a blighted place of possibility, the new frontier where the white actor can channel his ‘inherent’ creativity.

Returning to the Broke-Ass Stuart piece we began with, questioning “Why are all my friends moving to Oakland?”, a consideration of the white millennial imaginary helps make sense of the commentaries encapsulated in Stuart’s writing. While many of the reasons to move to Oakland listed in this piece involve the availability of cheaper rents and more living space than the densely populated San Francisco, the other desirable traits mentioned are entangled with imaginaries of race, art, and the frontier. It is useful to engage with lengthy excerpts of this piece to understand what the white millennial imaginary of Oakland has come to entail:

My friends say they’re moving to Oakland because the rent is cheaper. The landlords aren’t looking for ways to kick you out. You won’t have to have six roommates. You won’t get outbid for a room by some dot-com fuckface. You won’t have to be a mildly well-known writer just to get invited to interview for an affordable room. When you break up with your girlfriend, you won’t have to keep living with her for two months since neither of you can afford to move out. They say they’re moving to Oakland because it’s the town that could, not the city that already did.

My friends say they’re moving to Oakland because it has heart. Because it’s less cynical and less self-conscious. Because it’s more diverse and more friendly. Because you actually get to know your neighbors instead of just nodding to them in passing on the stairs. Because there’s no one from the Marina. They say they’re moving to Oakland because it has art. The kind that Murmurs as a monthly street fair. The kind that shapes late at night in underground warehouses, in community work spaces, as wheat paste in the streets, as protest in Oscar Grant Park. ...

My friends say they’re moving to Oakland because they can. They say they’re moving because it feels like something special is happening there. They compare it to Brooklyn because of the bridge and the tunnel and the exodus of artists and working-class people. They say it’s like Portland but with way more black people. Some of them say they are moving to Oakland like they think they’re some kind of pioneer settlers. Just like some kind of pioneer settlers, they’ll realize there were people there before them. They’re moving to Oakland so they can rep it, wearing shirts that say, “I Hella ♥ Oakland.” ...

My friends say they’re moving to Oakland because it’s edgier and imperfect. The robberies, the gunshots, the Oakland PD. The rioting, the protests, the Oakland PD. They say they are moving because they see the writing on the wall, the beginning of a gold rush. They want to set roots and grow with Oakland as it grows too, creating a community and actively participating in it. Raising kids in it. Owning property. Helping shape what might be the next great American city.

My friends say they're moving to Oakland because all their friends seem to be moving there. They say San Francisco is done. That Oakland is now like the San Francisco they remember, or the one they wished they lived in, or the one they imagined when they moved here from wherever it was they came from⁶⁷.

This piece is dense with references, imagery, and imaginaries. I find that this piece encapsulates a white millennial imaginary of Oakland, and that of a white hipster desire for authenticity more broadly. The 'authenticity' or desirability that Oakland is perceived as possessing, according to the voices in this piece, is tied to the racial character of the city. This is made apparent in the references made to "diversity", the description of Oakland being "like Portland but with way more black people", and the romanticizing of the city as "edgy and imperfect", with a clear fetishizing of the Blackness of the city and the association of Blackness with danger. This language, along with the idealizing of "robberies, gunshots, Oakland PD, rioting and protests" codes the viewer as naïvely white, perceiving racialized violence to be an "authentic" city experience, thrilling in its "edginess". Oakland becomes desirable to the white millennial figure because of its proximity to and erasure of blackness. As Bench Ansfield writes:

The postmodern city, that hypersexualized, creative core identified as much by its exotic imaginary as by its commerce, is fashioned out of the blackness that embodies these same constructions. The cultural footprint of a 'ghetto specific' black presence now displaced (in order to generate pure[r] communities) renders this space trendy and alluring. Hypervisibilized and celebrated in the form of commodified culture, low capital blackness is only tolerable when its physical threat is erased, deconcentrated, regulated, and invisibilized. (2015: 128)

The creativity and authenticity of Oakland itself to the white millennial imaginary is fashioned out of the gradual erasure of Black lives from the landscapes, making creative meaning from the hauntings of Blackness that remain.

Oakland then becomes a racialized frontier in this imaginary, a wild place in need of taming, and therefore in need of settlers. This urban frontier discourse "treats present inner-city

⁶⁷ "Why are all my friends moving to Oakland?", *The Bold Italic* blog, Accessed 7/20/2016
<https://thebolditalic.com/why-are-all-my-friends-moving-to-oakland-the-bold-italic-san-francisco-18a3a4739c6#.dytzuouu6>

populations as a natural element of their physical surroundings,” as Neil Smith argues, and the “term ‘urban pioneer’ is therefore arrogant...in that it suggests a city not yet socially inhabited...[and] serves to rationalize and legitimate a process of conquest” (1996: xvi). The presumption that the incoming ‘pioneers’ will help “shape what might be the next great American city” implies that Oakland is in need of revitalization, that something is deeply not-great about it, but a wave of earnest and creative settlers can make Oakland everything it was meant to be. An imaginary is built in which San Francisco is seen as “the city that already did”, a place past its prime creative years that is now populated by “dot-com fuckfaces” and “douchebags”, that has become “cynical”, “self-conscious”, and heartless. Oakland, “the town that could”, is on the verge of a “gold rush”; it is a place that, according to the register of white urbanity, is entering a moment of becoming. In all the ways that San Francisco has become corporatized and therein made ‘in-authentic’, implicitly by the tech industry and its culture, Oakland has come to represent a place of authenticity and possibility for the white millennial imaginary to settle. A city in which ‘authentic’ relationships can be built, a place where your neighbors are “more diverse and more friendly”, where there is “art” and “protest” and “imperfection”. According to this lens, San Francisco is now the place of uniformity, of corporate wealth and bourgeois culture and consumption, where the authentic has been pushed out by the extreme cost of living. Perhaps entwined in the belief that San Francisco is “done”, is a sense of millennial distrust and dissatisfaction with the tech economy, and American political economy more broadly, after the turmoil of 2008⁶⁸. But it seems to go beyond the cost of living, for it is not solely the cost that is driving out the actors in this piece, for, after all, they are moving to Oakland “because they can”. It is the association with the “douchebag”-ery that San Francisco has come to represent as tech

⁶⁸ See Johnson, K. (2016, August 18). Debt. Terror. Politics. To Seattle Millennials, the Future Looks Scary. *NY Times*, Retrieved from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/19/us/seattle-millennials-economy-student-debt-politics.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=second-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&r=0>

culture has taken over that drives white hipster millennials elsewhere. “San Francisco was done” and thus Oakland became the new place of desire for the white hipster exodus; Oakland became “like the San Francisco they remember, or the one they wished they lived in, or the one they imagined when they moved here from wherever they came from”. The white hipster subculture becomes a roaming beast of consumption aligned with racial capitalism despite whatever anti-establishment ideologies purported: seeking out “up and coming” places to land, transforming the landscape to their tastes, dispossessing previous residents, and finally attracting the “supergentrifier” which causes that place to be “done” (Lees 2003; Ley 2003)⁶⁹. White urbanity becomes the newest settler colonial ideology of conquest.

Part of this notion of authenticity is entangled in the imaginary of Oakland as ‘creative mecca’. Here I wish to weave these notions of white millennial urbanity, the hipster and the creative, to illustrate how creative geographies were not only drawing the hipster’s gaze to Oakland but how the City works to control creative public space. Related to the city’s efforts to redevelop the ‘Uptown district’, the area was also the site of informal artist organizing, particularly the actions of the collective of art galleries called Art Murmur. In late 2005, eight art spaces located adjacent to the Telegraph Avenue corridor in Oakland joined forces to garner more attention for their galleries, holding concurrent arts receptions on Fridays and calling themselves Art Murmur. Simultaneously, one of Art Murmur’s founding galleries, an artist collective called Rock Paper Scissors located on Telegraph and 23rd Street, started a monthly gallery walk called the “23rd Street Fair” on the first Friday of the month. Over the years, Art Murmur and the 23rd Street Fair gained more and more attention, growing to become a street festival of food, vendors,

⁶⁹ Another piece in *The Bold Italic* blog from early 2015, “Moving to Oakland Expressed in Charts and Graphs”, seems to show an additional shift in the white millennial imaginary of Oakland, alluding to Lees’ (2003) concept of the ‘supergentrifier’, in which the reasons people are leaving SF for Oakland now also have to do with becoming homeowners and having children. Crawford, A. (2015, March 20). Retrieved from: <https://thebolditalic.com/moving-to-oakland-expressed-in-charts-and-graphs-the-bold-italic-san-francisco-32645dbeb379#.vtrouq9no>

and music taking over a large swath of Telegraph Avenue between 27th Street and Grand Avenue: a neighborhood known as Korea Town – Northgate, that makes up a large section of what has now been labeled ‘Uptown’. The eight founding galleries of Art Murmur unleashed a cultural force to be reckoned with, and as the gallery circuit became more popular, more galleries opened up in proximity so as to be included within the initial geographic borders of Art Murmur (Heil 2010). As word of the event grew, so did attendance, and starting in 2010 First Fridays required street permits to accommodate the crowds, and security guards were also hired to keep the event “safe, clean and promoted” (Heil 2010: 22). As of 2017, Art Murmur now includes more than 40 galleries and mixed-use spaces, and is run as a 501c3 non-profit organization, with full-time staff and an advisory board. The 23rd Street Fair has become known as Oakland First Fridays, and is now run under a community benefit non-profit organization. Art Murmur and First Friday events now attract up to 20,000 visitors on the first Friday of any given month—however, the organizations’ path to formalized attraction has been anything but smooth.

Much like how 2012 seemed to represent the moment that Oakland ‘came of age’, the year also seemed to mark a tipping point for Oakland’s First Fridays. September 2012 was the moment when Art Murmur transitioned from an anarchic art carnival in the streets to a formalized, and city-endorsed, street fair. Following the incorporation of Art Murmur in late 2010, in summer 2012 the newly formed non-profit iteration of Art Murmur announced that the event would formally close a large swath of Telegraph Avenue and require proper city permits to sell onsite. As the *East Bay Express* reported, “what began in 2005 as a small, simple, scrappy event devised in a coffee shop...bloomed this year into a sprawling, roiling street party that requires extensive street closures and significant city and private resources to contain...an estimated 25,000 people



Figure 25: Art Murmur circa 2012. Photo by Matt Werner.

are now packing the streets of downtown Oakland each month⁷⁰.” In response to Art Murmur’s decision to formalize the event, a communiqué was released by ‘Oakland Street Party’, a subset of Art Murmur participants, posted on the Occupy Wall Street website in August 2012, voicing disapproval of the direction that ‘Art Murmur Corporation’ was taking the event. The communiqué read that Art Murmur is “supposed to be about art, culture and community. But all that it represents to....city administration is an opportunity for commercial expansion and business development, a tool to further their agenda of gentrification⁷¹”. The authors go on to express that “recent months have seen Art Murmur explode with spontaneous energy...Rather

⁷⁰ Cushing, E. (2012, December 19). The Year Oakland Exploded. *East Bay Express*. Retrieved from: <http://www.eastbayexpress.com/oakland/the-year-oakland-exploded/Content?oid=3417007>

⁷¹ Occupy Wall Street. (2012, August 4). Communiqué from Oakland Street Art Party. Retrieved from: <http://occupywallst.org/article/communique-oakland-street-party-art-murmur/>

than a controlled spectacle and disciplined promenade of compliant consumers, it has become a truly communal gathering...the night in Oakland when everyone is out and about in the streets...the community coming together to socialize and share public space, above & beyond the call of consumption⁷².” The authors go on to disapprove of the fact that the ‘Art Murmur Corporation’ will begin enforcing city permit restrictions, stating “we’re sick of getting pushed out of our own space...we are spontaneous, insurgent, uncontrollable. These are our streets and we are here to take them⁷³”. There is a clear parallel in this statement to the narratives being propagated by Occupy Oakland contingents at the time (Werth & Marienthal 2016), and Uptown was a site that revealed the intersections between Art Murmur, Occupy, and the white millennial imaginary of creative spaces. One could even argue that the predominantly white-led Occupy movement not only attracted more white millennials to Oakland, but also shaped the art gallery scene that became Uptown and Art Murmur⁷⁴. The ‘Oakland Street Party’ organizers’ attempts to keep Art Murmur from formalizing, and by virtue diversifying, could also be read as a possessive investment in the whiteness of their art spaces (Lipsitz 1997).

As Art Murmur gained in popularity and people began to take over the streets around Telegraph Avenue, Art Murmur’s leaders sought to reel in the event, and a group of volunteers led an effort to create a more ‘sanctioned’ festival and organization. The group of volunteers who sought to formalize Art Murmur wished to “redefine the event as an inclusive site of local culture and economy,” and indeed, come September, “many residents and onlookers marveled at the diversification of the event, which seemed to soothe anxieties, however momentarily, in a context

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ There is a whole other conversation to be had on activist movements that have emerged in Oakland over the past decade, and how Occupy Oakland and Black Lives Matter movements have embodied and enacted different racial imaginaries of liberation. As tempting as it is to go down this road, this analysis is beyond the scope of this study.

in which people had come to expect spaces to become more uniformly White and fancy, rather than less.” (Werth & Marienthal 2016: 723, 728). The event grew even larger as it became more formalized, attracting residents from across Oakland and visitors from elsewhere who came to see the huge cultural event that First Fridays evolved into⁷⁵. This struggle between Art Murmur imaginaries became one of who represented the ‘real Oakland’, with organizers drawing and re-drawing boundaries over who qualified as the deserving public (Werth & Marienthal 2016). To the new organizers of Art Murmur, “the increased visibility of diverse bodies took on particular meaning in relation to local anxieties about ‘gentrification’ as a process of displacement and cultural homogenization...the presence of young people of color appeared to attendees and organizers as proof of the event’s qualitative difference from more overtly exclusionary forms of urban redevelopment” (Werth & Marienthal 2016: 730). While the aforementioned authors are dismissive of how Art Murmur was opened up to the “real Oakland” and the “deserving public” by distancing themselves from Occupy-infused leadership, there is validity to the shift that Art Murmur took on by seeking to be curated by Oakland’s artists of color in particular.

As musician Kev Choice noted, “I remember when it was just a little small, you know, Art Murmur, people having a little wine and cheese at these little art galleries that were popping up, and then it got broader, encompassing more people. The energy was just tremendous. It was diverse, it was all type of music going on.⁷⁶” As Art Murmur evolved, it became a destination for more than 20,000 people on any given First Friday, bringing tremendous energy to Oakland’s streets. This is where the notion of ‘taking back the streets’ of Oakland becomes messy. Whereas the ‘Oakland Street Party’ branch of Art Murmur declared ownership of ‘the streets’ and a

⁷⁵ Cushing, E. (2012, December 19). The Year Oakland Exploded. *East Bay Express*. Retrieved from: <http://www.eastbayexpress.com/oakland/the-year-oakland-exploded/Content?oid=3417007>

⁷⁶ Youth Speaks. (2013, February 20). Reality Hits Oakland First Fridays. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFHONrn2Pds>

frustration with being pushed out of their ‘own space’ by the formalizing of First Fridays, other Oaklanders saw the shift in leadership and formalizing of the event as a means of opening up the event, making it appeal to Oakland residents that aren’t interested in having “a little wine and cheese at little art galleries”. The moment of Art Murmur’s expansion in 2012 was reflective of competing Oakland imaginaries. On the one hand, the formalizing of the event may have made Art Murmur more susceptible to capitalist and cultural appropriation, in which the City could claim the event as a creative referent to push Oakland onto an international stage. On the other hand, the formalization and shift in the event’s leadership expanded the audience of who Art Murmur represented, and as a result created a space more reflective of Oakland’s population. This is not identity politics – this is Oakland’s populace taking ownership of the event, this is racial and cultural equity. This broader public, however, also made Art Murmur ripe for the City’s creative city appropriation, in which the First Fridays events came to reflect what Mayor Schaaf would later call Oakland’s ‘secret sauce’.

If Art Murmur were reflective of Oakland’s ‘secret sauce’ of diversity, grittiness, and creativity, however, the tragic events that unfolded at a First Friday in early 2013 also revealed Oakland’s complexity, and how the City’s need to address layers of dispossession embedded in its geographies cannot be erased by a veneer of creative city-ness. On February 1st 2013, 18-year-old Kiante Campbell was shot and killed amidst a crowd of people on Telegraph Avenue less than an hour after Art Murmur festivities had officially ended. As Jesus El, the founder of an organization focused on empowering youth of color called High Altitude Pro, stated in an interview not long after the Art Murmur shooting, “what happened at First Fridays, this is, metaphorically speaking, a direct reflection of Oakland. One minute you could be having fun, everybody laughing...and *pop-pop-pop*, you don’t know who gets shot. That’s Oakland neighborhoods at your doorstep⁷⁷.”

⁷⁷ ‘Youth Speaks. (2013, February 20). Reality Hits Oakland First Fridays. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFHONrn2Pds>

Immediately after the shooting, then-Mayor Jean Quan formed a taskforce to determine how to revive Art Murrmur, how to keep the event going yet ensure that it would be a 'safer space'. Would Mayor Quan have put forth the same efforts to ensure that a festival occurring in East Oakland, for example, where the bulk of shootings occur, be considered a 'safe space'? Whose geographies are worthy of safety with an urgency necessitating city taskforces? Indeed, just during the months of February and March 2013, there were 16 homicides reported in Oakland, and 81 assaults with a firearm⁷⁸ - yet the shooting of Kiante Campbell is what mobilized City leaders to ensure Art Murrmur continued.

As several artists and community leaders mentioned raised in the short interviews done by Youth Radio, an award-winning journalism project led by Oakland's youth, the City needs to do more to address violence across Oakland, and to not condemn the Black youth involved in Kiante's shooting. Hip Hop artist y.t.f.l.i.n.s.t.o.n.e spoke on how "First Fridays needs to come up with something for the youth to do, and they need to stop trying to strip the youth from being involved in activities where it's open to the public. We still are the public at the end of the day and we still are a big majority of Oakland, and there is still problems in a big majority of Oakland⁷⁹." Dnas, the host of *Streets Are Talking* radio program, reflected "a lot of people thought that First Friday would be secluded from the hood, and the kids, and so when they see the homies out here, it's kinda like 'Oh we knew this was going to happen. We shouldn't have done this in Oakland'⁸⁰." Despite any efforts by Art Murrmur or City leadership to 'curate' First Fridays, the realities of Oakland seeped through. One cannot simply dabble in Oakland's 'secret sauce' and not deal with the realities that many Black and Brown Oaklanders face on the daily. For, as the voices from Youth Radio's broadcast reveal, the Black and Brown geographies of Oakland that are thought to

⁷⁸ Ibid,

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

be relegated to ‘the hood’ when Oakland’s creative city-ness is on display are always present, they are the public of Oakland, even if their geographies aren’t legible to the City’s marketing campaign of places to visit. These geographies are so illegible to the City that on the city-sponsored tourism website VisitOakland.org, the link for East Oakland leads to nothing⁸¹. The City hasn’t even woven an imaginary of East Oakland worth marketing – East Oakland geographies are completely absent from the map.

The City’s efforts to curate or frame the Uptown as the creative district of Oakland are thick with a desire to please the white spatial imaginary. Bent on attracting white millennial capital, the City pounced upon formalizing Art Murmur once they realized its popularity, and spent extensive energy to revive the event after the shooting of Kiante Campbell. When are Black lives killed worthy of the City’s energy, and is it really the Black life lost, or is it the proximity to property and non-black lives that made the shooting so troubling to City leaders? Given the sheer number of Black deaths that occurred in the months prior, it is clear that particular sites of Black death are deemed more concerning than others. Kiante Campbell’s death was disruptive to the white spatial imaginary of Oakland that has been carefully cultivated in recent years – it demonstrated that being in the gentrifying space of Uptown did not mean that the white millennial urbanite was ‘safe’ from witnessing Black death that remains commonplace in Oakland. The city’s reaction to Kiante Campbell’s death was more concerned with how the shooting would be interpreted by the white spatial imaginary than it was with the instance of Black death itself, since “squandering and wasting black lives has been an intrinsic part of the logic of capitalism, especially in those contexts where race is central to the simultaneous production of wealth and superfluous people” (Mbembe 2011: 3). The shooting demonstrated that the Black and Brown geographies of Oakland are not disparate from the creative city imaginary Oakland leaders work hard to maintain. That Black and Brown lives are not merely a token of ‘grit’ to give ‘character’ or

⁸¹ Visit Oakland Website. Retrieved from: <https://www.visitoakland.org/explore/neighborhoods/>

'authenticity' to Oakland as a creative place to be consumed. The shooting of Kiante Campbell revealed how Art Murmur exemplifies Oakland's borderlands, and how the creative city forces of gentrification amplify and intersect with other forms of state violence on Black and Brown lives.

In the following chapter, I introduce the art and activism of Oakland artists of color. I argue that the work of these art-activists troubles creative city discourses that frame people of color as existing residents and not as creative actors themselves, and actively rupture the white millennial spatial imaginary of Oakland. People of color, artists of color, are not tokens to give 'flavor' to the white millennial's consumption of Oakland. Recent writings attend to the complex role that artists play in gentrifying cities, not only as creative city actors but also as activists resisting gentrification, calling for a more nuanced vision of artists (McLean 2014; Boren & Young 2017; Pradel-Miquel 2017). This project adds to this nuancing of the role of artists in spaces of urban crisis –urban scholars must not only nuance the role of the artists in processes of urban redevelopment, but it is necessary to pay attention to the racial and cultural identities of artist populations and their situated-ness in said place. As the OCNC artists of color and other art-activists reveal, artists of color are abundant in Oakland, and their decolonial activism will not be neatly subsumed into white spatial imaginaries of the creative city.

CHAPTER FOUR: DECOLONIAL GEOGRAPHIES

“This country is in trouble. Everybody is in trouble – not only the people who apparently know they are in trouble, not only the people who know they are not white. We are in trouble. But there are two ways to be in trouble. One of them is to know you are in trouble. If you know you are in trouble you may be able to figure out the road.”

– James Baldwin, *In Dialogue to Define Aesthetics*, 1980

9 November 2016 – 14th & Broadway

My daughter and I huddled over a sandwich outside the Fruitvale Bart station. I was heavy with the same uncertainty that had held me in its grasp all day, a mixture of paralysis, fear, and unbridled rage. I was questioning whether or not to bring her downtown for the rally, not knowing what sort of energy would be there, not knowing if it would be a place for my 4-year-old child. Yet I felt a ferocity in my gut that told me there was no place I needed to be more than in those streets on this night, and that my daughter needed to witness it. I felt powerful despite the uncertainty, and the same energy that was driving me out of the house would drive me to protect her at all costs.

I tried to explain to her why we were going to the streets after the sun had set, waiting for the train high up on the Bart platform. *Te acuerdas del hombre malo, mija? El hombre de la piñata?* Her birthday had taken place the week before, and we had bought a Trump piñata, complete with red hat and smug bulging eyes. I had told her the piñata was of a bad man, and since she didn't care what the piñata was as long as there was candy in it, I had chosen it a week before the election to give the parents joy as the children beat it to the ground. I don't want to raise her to think of people as good or bad, but how else do you explain to a 4-year-old why we need to resist. *El hombre malo va a ser el nuevo presidente de este país, y él quiere hacer daño a nuestros amigos. Por eso vamos a una marcha para decirle que no lo queremos como presidente. Qué no le vamos a dejar hacernos daño.* She looked at me, concerned, but mostly

confused, trying to understand why a piñata would be able to do us harm. *A dónde vamos, mami?* she asked me, eagerly awaiting the train as she ate fries, holding them out for me to squeeze a thin line of ketchup upon each one before popping it into her mouth. A woman nearby was drawing up her impromptu sign for the rally, writing large letters in sharpie on the back of an election placard, 'NOT MY PRESIDENT'. *Vamos a tomar el tren hasta la marcha, y vamos a caminar un rato.* She was mostly excited about taking the train at night, and the fact that I told her she could ride on my back when we got to the march. Soon enough, the RICHMOND BOUND TRAIN was announced as it squealed into the station, and we got on.

At first I didn't notice the numbers when we emerged at 14th Street. Oscar Grant Plaza was crowded, but not unbearably so. I was worried the Occupy folks were leading the rally, that they had taken the energy from last night's election to push Oakland to rise up a la 2010. There were signs of this, the rally on the plaza punctuated with white men in ponytails wearing 'Socialist Alternative' shirts, eagerly thrusting flyers about. I had no desire to be part of a second coming of Occupy, but I waited to see how things would coalesce. A huge flatbed truck was parked in the plaza, and sure enough, one of these same men was at the helm, telling the crowd how hard the resistance was going to be, how we are going to need to organize and move past our differences to unite. His message was saturated with the same Bernie Sanders-style 'put aside identity politics' rhetoric that would emerge in the weeks to follow. But after he spoke for nearly 10 minutes with no sign of stopping, a woman from the crowd shouted, "You need to move, you need to know we don't need to hear from you right now...we have been waiting, these are dreams deferred, people of color are dying, pass the mic, I'm begging you." The crowd chanted in support of her words, *pass the mic, pass the mic*, and, rather hesitantly, he did. One of the founders of the Anti-Police Terror Project, a Black-led group organizing against police oppression, took the mic, and spoke. "Anybody who knows me, knows I'm out here in these streets 24/7 all day everyday, with the people, and right now we don't need white men telling us what's happening. We speak for ourselves. And nobody can speak for our pain." Many in the crowd roared, while others stood in

a daze, absorbing his words. “If you don’t acknowledge the race contradiction, you ain’t saying shit. I’m not saying you can’t speak, but if you don’t center the race contradiction, you duplicate the same dynamics under different banners, because white supremacy is the most predatory power system on the planet.” The



Figure 26: Anti-Trump march passing in front of the future Uber headquarters, November 9, 2016. Photo by author.

flatbed truck pulled out of the plaza with organizers perched atop it, beginning chants to lead people down Broadway Avenue. *Whose Streets? OUR STREETS. Whose Town? OUR TOWN.*

What had seemed like a sparse crowd began to accumulate, people emerging from the various side streets to join the mass. Drummers got in formation, and I swung my daughter onto my back to follow suit. She was suddenly ecstatic to be amidst the drumming, bouncing in time on my back, and her lightness lifted my spirits, as did the energy of the streets. Young women walked defiantly, wrapped in Mexican flags with signs declaring NO TENEMOS MIEDO. Others held signs blurting PUSSY GRABS BACK, AMERIKKA WAS NEVER GREAT and FIGHT FASCIST SCUM. Young men wore ski masks and shirts that read OAKLAND VS. EVERYBODY, watching from the sidelines for the second stage of the rally to unfold. Some masked individuals stood guard, fending off anyone with their cameras pointed, as others quickly tagged up walls in the shadows of the streetlight. In their wake I admired their calligraphic scrawl of FUCK TRUMP

and NOT MY PRESIDENT. They rolled onward down the street, strutting distrustfully yet thick with intention, disappearing into the crowds.

The truck stopped a few blocks down, where Broadway met Grand Avenue, and it was then that I realized the enormity of the rally. It took me a few minutes to narrow my senses to the voice being projected from the sound system on the truck, and when I did I quickly realized it was the voice of Cat Brooks, a leading force of Oakland's activism. A co-founder of Anti Police Terror Project, Cat Brooks is a resonant presence in Oakland who blurs the lines between activist and artist. Her voice always commands attention and respect, as Brooks speaks truth to power like none other, and on this night her words brought a sort of bittersweet relief to the anxious uncertainty I had been fraught with all day. "Thank you Trump for bringing us together," Brooks called into the crowd, and the energy of many roared. "We are at war, it is an attack on the poor, on the queer, on gender non-conforming, an attack on Black folks, an attack on resistance, Oakland, stand up!" *When the people are under attack, what do we do? Stand up fight back.* "I need y'all with me at city hall, we need to tell not only Trump, to all the fascists, all the capitalists, that are trying to say we need to remake Oakland, we need to shut it down." At this point we had rounded the corner from Grand Avenue, and were stationed on Webster and 21st. As Brooks spoke, the hum of helicopters became louder and louder. "We need to push back with everything that we are because we are at war. Oakland, I love y'all. Let's be the protest capital of the rest of the country." *When immigrant rights are under attack, what do we do? Stand up fight back.*

One can sense when the energy starts to shift at a rally, when people start to disperse, when others groups emerge. When the police start to get more on edge, when being on the streets feels less freeing and more enclosing. It was 7:25 p.m. and the streets were dark thanks to daylight savings a few days prior. I had already asked my daughter some 30 minutes before if she wanted to go home, thinking she would be tired of the monotony of marching, but to my surprise she wanted to continue on. With the helicopters beginning to whirr in my ears, and the crowd growing

seemingly tighter, I started to feel the need to leave before the true energetic shift came to pass. The organizers had begun to warn people to stay behind the truck, and it was clear the police were starting to build fronts on all sides of the crowd. I checked in with my daughter and eased my way out of the crowd. As I weaved my way to the side streets to get back on Bart, a crowd wearing ski masks and black bandanas were on their way to join the larger mass. This more disruptive crew of folks seemed to always appear towards the tail end of rallies, and despite their small numbers, it was their actions that would inevitably make headlines on the news later that night. Less than an hour after I left the rally, I heard word on Twitter that Oakland police had tear gassed the crowd on Washington and 8th shortly after declaring the rally an ‘unlawful assembly’. Many children were still present at 8:10 p.m. when the tear gas canisters were tossed into the crowds. For police to throw tear gas at that hour was unprecedented for rallies in Oakland. Home safely with my daughter, I watched clips of that same crowd we had walked amongst being tear gassed on my Twitter feed. This is only the beginning.

DECOLONIAL//RECKONING

Decolonial politics & performa(n)tics – MacArthur Blvd & Loma Vista

This chapter takes various forms, weaving between Oakland sites to thread together a contemporary archive of Oakland art-activism. As I write these lines from a café on MacArthur Boulevard, I place my own narrative amidst the scenes re-iterated here, cramped typing on wobbly tables, using written language to embed these moments onto the page. The scene described in the previous vignette may seem to more closely resemble activism, and is perhaps less familiar in the gradients of art. I entered this chapter in the space of the rally with a few underlying intentions. One, the election of Donald Trump took place just as I was beginning to write this chapter, and his election completely shifted the vision I had for these pages. The art spaces I entered seemed

thick with an extra layer of weight, and many folks expressed how ‘the game had been upped’. Resistance, artistic and otherwise, was about to get real, as was the need for self-care in communities of color in the face of the overt institutionalization of racism and patriarchy. Two, this rally on November 9th 2016 was being led by multiple activists who also worked as artists. Cat Brooks, in particular, is a powerful voice against state violence on multiple fronts in Oakland, and also creates powerful monologues that she performs throughout the Bay Area. My point in this is that it is often difficult to discern where art ends and activism begins in the work of many art-activists in Oakland. It can be difficult, if not outright profane, to draw limits around what quantifies as art. One could argue that an impassioned speech atop a flat bed truck is an art form in itself. Indeed, Judith Butler has argued that public rallies register as forms of performative action, making visible the body in politics (2015). I make no attempt to conjure borders around what is or is not art – this is not the intention of this project, nor do I think such clearly defined borders exist. I can, however, give a sense of what art forms reside within the scope of this project.

What is implied in a conversation on art-activism is an interrogation of the intersections between art and politics. When it comes to political art, in my experiences in the art-activist spaces of Oakland, it is often difficult to delineate between art and politics. Yet these differentiations are something I will attempt to tease out in this monograph, attempting to do justice to the political art spaces I have witnessed. First, it seems, we need reckon with the complicated relationships between art, aesthetics, and politics. Nigerian author Chinua Achebe reveals how art, politics, and aesthetics have a different set of entanglements. In Achebe’s 1980 conversation on aesthetics with American author James Baldwin, Achebe argues that aesthetics cannot be viewed as fixed or immutable, but rather it is constantly shifting along with the demands of human civil society. According to Achebe, one cannot detach art from the social, political, and economic situation from within which the artist is creating, and therefore he challenges the idea that art could be neutral or detached from politics:

Art has a social purpose, art belongs to people. It's not something that is hanging out there that has no connection to the needs of man. Art is unabashedly, unembarrassingly, if there is such a word, social. It is political; it is economic...Those who tell you 'do not put too much politics in your art,' are not being honest...They are the same people that are quite happy with the situation as it is. What they are saying is not don't introduce politics. What they are saying is don't upset the system. They are just as political as any of us. It's just that they are on the other side. Now, in my estimation, art cannot be on the side of the oppressor....Art is in the service of man. Art was not created to dominate and destroy man. Art is made for man for his own comfort. (1981: 74-75)

Achebe, here, troubles the question that I too confront in this project: How might one define the difference between political art and non-political art if all art indeed has its politics? If art can also not be on the side of the oppressor, according to Achebe, perhaps then art is either overtly political and 'of the people', or invested in a politics of indifference. As Baldwin stated in this same conversation, "the poet is produced of the people because the people need him...I am here to try and say something that perhaps only a poet can attempt to say...we are trying to make you see something" (1981: 76-77). Achebe then replied, "yes, there is something we are committed to of fundamental importance, something everybody should be committed to. We are committed to changing our position in the world...I think you see it is important to me. You may not see that it is important to you but it is...We have followed your way and it seems there is a little problem at this point. *And so we are offering a new aesthetic.*" (1981: 77, emphasis added). The new aesthetic that Achebe alludes to here seems to be one of liberation. An aesthetic and a politic that exists in opposition to the dominant aesthetic of racial capitalism and patriarchy, articulated through art.

It remains elusive how to differentiate between 'political' and 'apolitical' art, so perhaps those labels are not ones that should be attempted. For this reason, I lean more towards the term of 'art-activism' for it seems to straddle the blurry boundaries of art and politics rather well and also distinguish the types of art I am engaging. As artist Favianna Rodriguez notes, "culture proceeds political change. You can't change politics until you change culture...and the artists are

the ones that are going to lead a shift in consciousness⁸²". The works witnessed in this archive take up the political in forms that bleed into realms of art and activism. However, the term art-activism too is not without its inadequacies, for not all of the artists I have engaged with would identify themselves as art-activists. Some even strayed from my inquiries of how art might function as politics or the notion that their art could also be a form of activism. So this too is not particularly salient. Perhaps, then, the potential and potency of liberation is where I can land this project and the art and artists engaged.

This liberatory aesthetic Achebe conjures harkens the work of Clyde Woods, in his formation of a blues epistemology, a Black ontology emerging from the rural South and its diaspora that "provides a sense of collective self and a tectonic footing from which to oppose and dismantle the American intellectual, cultural and socioeconomic traditions constructed from the raw material of African American exploitation and denigration" (1998: 29). As Woods explains, the blues emerged after the overthrow of Reconstruction, becoming "an alternative form of communication, analysis, moral intervention, observation and celebration for a new generation who had witnessed slavery, freedom, and unfreedom in rapid succession" (36). For the Black diaspora, the creative practice of the blues became a mechanism for grappling with the meanings of freedom and unfreedom, of existing in the aftermath of slavery, and of envisioning the future.

During the last three hundred years, the African American working class has daily constructed their vision of a non-oppressive society through a variety of cultural practices, institution building activities, and social movements. By doing so, they have created an intellectual and social space in which they could discuss, plan, and organize this new world. The blues are the cries of a new society being born. (1998: 39)

⁸² Rodriguez, F. (2016, December 6). East Oakland artist Favianna Rodriguez on the Ghost Ship fire. *KPFA Radio*. Retrieved from: <http://kalw.org/post/east-oakland-artist-favianna-rodriguez-ghost-ship-fire>

The blues offer an ontology and an aesthetic of liberation – through music and lyric futures are envisioned, other worlds rupture the oppressive present.

rup-ture (n.) 1. a breaking apart or the state of being broken apart⁸³

In this project I have witnessed many instances of hegemonic rupture in which creative practices conjure alternative visions of place, of humanity, of the future. Through this work, I would like to consider how through “creative acts we might find the scientific poetics of our future” (McKittrick 2015: 160). The art forms witnessed here extend beyond the canvas, the art gallery, the stage; they bleed into the streets of the city, into the political rally, the organizing meeting, into people’s homes. They are not neatly folded into spaces defined as public or private, and so I reject attempts to wrangle them as such. What is consistent in the art forms witnessed in these pages is that they all channel an aesthetics of liberation, which is activated through a decolonial language and practice. To consider how art activates the decolonial, I turn to Indigenous, Black and Chicana⁸⁴ theorists to make sense of what the decolonial is and what space art occupies within it.

In a discussion of the decolonial, it is necessary to begin with Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s article ‘Decolonization is not a metaphor’. As Tuck and Yang caution in their title and throughout this piece, “there is a long and bumbled history of non-indigenous peoples making moves to alleviate the impacts of colonization” and one has to be wary of adopting decolonizing tropes that “problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity” and instead grapple with the interruptions that recognize the “incommensurability” of decolonization (2012: 3). This makes decolonization in a settler colonial state such as the U.S. especially fraught, for, “empire,

⁸³ rupture. (n.d.). Merriam Webster Dictionary Online. Retrieved from: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rupture>

⁸⁴ Chicana is a term of identity that stands in for Chicano/Chicana, in which the X is a means to un-gender the Spanish language and make the identity inclusive of female, male and gender-non-conforming identities.

settlement, and internal colony have no spatial separation...[which makes] settler colonialism in the US context...a site of contradictory decolonial desires” (2012: 7). As the authors explain, the settler colonial state functions to uphold white supremacy, and has been formed through the enactment of Indigenous dispossession and Black landlessness. Therefore, the liberation of oppressed peoples, the enactment of their decolonial desires, requires the dissolution of the state, and yet there is an unease to this solidarity for as Tuck and Yang insist, decolonization ultimately requires the repatriation of land. And this means “all of the land, and not just symbolically. This is precisely why decolonization is necessarily unsettling, especially across lines of solidarity. ‘Decolonization never takes place unnoticed’ (Fanon 1963: 36). Settler colonialism and its decolonization implicates and unsettles everyone” (2012: 7). This is why, as Fanon tells us, “In decolonization, there is therefore the need of a complete calling in question of the colonial situation” (1963: 37). Therefore, when decolonization becomes metaphor, contradictory decolonial desires of oppressed peoples are allowed to co-exist, which makes decolonization an empty signifier.

Now, as I position this project within the framework of decolonization that Tuck, Yang, and many others have conjured (Alfred & Corntassel 2015; Goeman 2013; Simpson 2014; Coulthard 2014), I must remain cognizant of my tendency to lean into the decolonial framings from which my writing draws much inspiration. By this I am referring to Chicana Feminist theory, a body of work that has cultivated rich decolonial theories of liberation, which also bears signs of Tuck and Yang’s warnings of slipping too deeply into metaphor. The challenge of Chicana theory and Chicanx/Latinx positionality situated within the settler colonial state, as discussed previously, is in their mestizo positioning, and their differential experiences of settler states. Gloria Anzaldúa’s writing, from which I take a great many inspirations, has been critiqued as appropriating and at times over-simplifying Indigenous knowledge systems. Yet, as Keating contests in Anzaldúa’s posthumous publication, *Light in the Dark*, “Anzaldúa does not claim an authentic indigenous practice but instead develops a decolonizing ontology” in which she

articulates how our imagination and our situatedness in in-between spaces enable us to re-invent reality (2015: xxxiii-xxxiv). In this sense, the decolonial ontology that Anzaldúa and many Chicana scholars have taken up, channels the landlessness that Anzaldúa reflects upon, takes up the space of in-betweenness that Chicana navigate, and sculpts a space of transformative possibility from this placelessness. And this is where efforts to build solidarity amidst decolonial desires may face an uneasy, but healthy, friction: in conversations of the repatriation of land, where do the settlers of color reside? If one is of mixed blood and has long-lost tribal affiliation, or if one was violently extracted from his home, generations prior, and enslaved, or if one has been forced from his home due to economic or political oppression, where is home under (de)colonization?

This project straddles these pools of decolonial thought and desire, as I consider what land, home, and a right to the city become for Oakland residents facing displacement. There is a need to recognize that Oakland, along with much of the East Bay, consists of traditional Muwekma Ohlone Territories, and that the artists and arts collectives I have witnessed rarely acknowledge this geography nor engage with Ohlone peoples. These are truths I continue to reckon with as this project has evolved, and as I continue to cultivate what the decolonial (re)presents in my work⁸⁵. There is danger in the appropriation, co-option, and domestication of the decolonial, something we are witnessing in the social sciences and in geography as of late, and it is urgent that this domestication of the decolonial be fended off with fervor. However, I also feel strongly that there is tremendous potential in the decolonial for liberatory work, if this work is done with respectful acknowledgement to the Indigenous origins and materiality of decolonial theory, with rooted intention one's intersectional position in the world, and an awareness to the interrelationships that the decolonial surfaces. As Tuck and Ree (2013) explain, the decolonial requires going beyond the metaphoric and conceptual level, and "at some point we're going to have to talk about

⁸⁵ This is an ongoing conversation I am having with Michelle Daigle, a Cree colleague and geographer, as we have shared many years of conversations and space sharing on decolonial geographies and what solidarity looks like within the decolonial.

returning stolen land...[since] as Fanon (1963) told us, decolonizing the mind is the first step, not the only step” (647). In the space of my project, I’m not sure if we have moved past the decolonization of the mind; the decolonial is seeping in, rupturing, but it hasn’t reached this next phase of liberation. As with all conversations around solidarity and coalition building, the conversation will be uneasy, complicated, infuriating at times. But there is something here, something powerful, yet to be uncovered.

To return to where art meets the decolonial in Oakland, allow me to return briefly to Anzaldúa. She writes, “my job as an artist is to bear witness to what haunts us, to step back and attempt to see the pattern in these events (personal and societal), and how we can repair el daño (the damage) by using the imagination and its visions. I believe in the trans-formative power and medicine of art” (2015: xxxiv). The oppression of racial capitalism and colonialism haunts us. As Dionne Brand wrote, the Door of No Return of the transatlantic slave trade “casts a haunting spell on personal and collective consciousness in the Diaspora. Black experience in any modern city or town in the Americas is a haunting” (2001: 24). The haunting of colonialism is something that lingers, spectral, in the places we reside, in our very bodies. And the layers of its haunting are manifold, from slavery to genocide, colonialism seeps from the land, haunting emerging as a “relentless remembering and reminding.” It is the “cost for subjugation...the price paid for violence and genocide” (Tuck & Ree 2013: 642-643). The land remembers, as do our bodies, our psyches – the haunting of colonialism is passed on until it faces a reckoning. The role of art in this, as Anzaldúa mentions, is art’s ability to bear witness to the ways colonialism haunts body, mind, and space, to reveal its entanglements, its dark specter upon our lives. And through the revelations that art brings, how might the beginnings of decolonization take root.

Decolonization must mean attending to ghosts, and arresting widespread denial of the violence done to them. Decolonization is a recognition that ‘a ghost is alive so to speak. We are in relation to it and it has designs on us such that we must reckon with graciously’ (Tuck & Ree 2013: 647, citing Gordon 1997: 64).

The art that this project seeks out, that this archive bears witness to, is art that attends to the ghosts of colonialism that haunt us. It is art that traces our relations, past present and future, that allows us to grapple with how these ghosts are one and the same, and enables us to do the work that leads toward liberation and, hopefully, eventually, the full decolonization of the settler state. This decolonial work is internal, beginning with a decolonization of self and relation, but it is not confined to the scale of the body or individual. It is witnessing the hauntings one carries within that gives us the strength and wisdom to take part in the political struggle to decolonize the state.

Art that embodies an aesthetics of liberation is thick with the essence of transformation. This art – be it visual (painting, photography, sculpture, mixed-media, collage, print-making, film, etc.), performance (theatre, dance, monologue, spoken word, political rally, ritual, etc.), audio (music, film, etc.), written (poetry, monograph, essay, etc.) or some combination of these – pushes the witness to confront the specters of colonialism and racial capitalism, past, present, or future. These art forms evoke a decolonial aesthetic of liberation by creating ruptures in the day to day of coloniality. In Sandoval, Aldama, and García’s writings on *Borderland Performance Studies* (2012), they identify a method of artistic techniques they define as a de-colonizing performativity, or, when enacted, de-colonizing perform-antics – the ‘antics’ of the oppressed (19). As the authors explain, this artistic methodology “understands and deploys ‘acts’ in order to intervene and arbitrate among sign systems...[and] such acts work as de-colonizing, interventionary deployments...as an effective means of individual and collective liberation. De-colonizing performativity generate a pause in the activity of coloniality; their activity discontinues its ethos” (2012: 2-3). To be clear, *Borderland Performance Studies* builds theorizations focused primarily on the decolonial work of performance, not on art broadly writ.

As a Nishnaabeg scholar and artist Leanne Simpson elaborates, other art forms too can have decolonial potential, whatever the performance aspect, in which the “individual and

collective experience [works toward] the goal of lifting the burden of colonialism by visioning new realities...is most powerful in terms of transformation in its original cultural context [of performance] because that context places dynamic relationships at its core” (2011: 34). While I am in complete agreement with Simpson, I do think that de-colonial performativity can be extended to other art forms, particularly when there is a collective experiencing of the art forms present. However, identifying the rupture created by the art becomes more challenging, since Sandoval et al.’s theorizing takes on the temporality of performance to identify an instance of decolonial rupture. Perhaps this elusiveness is only to be expected, since art, in itself, defies categorization, defies intentions to locate it with data points and figures. Or, as Anzaldúa wrote, “my ‘stories’ are encapsulated in time, ‘enacted’ every time they are spoken out or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as ‘dead’ objects (as aesthetics of western culture thinks of art works)” (2009: 67). The art itself sparks a performance in one’s mind as we engage with it. Is that not also a moment of rupture? Perhaps, then, bringing geography into a consideration of performance and art more broadly, can build a theorization of how art conjures the decolonial in a spatial sense.

Spatiality of decolonial art/practice – Rawson & Birdsall Streets

The art that I have witnessed in Oakland over the past few years has taken on particular spatiality. Be it paintings, film or other forms of visual art, it was on display in an arts space. Same goes for the written; much of the poetry witnessed here was spoken aloud or displayed⁸⁶. To weave these decolonizing performativity then, I’ll return here to Sandoval et al. and work outward:

⁸⁶ There is another conversation to be had about the spatiality of decolonial art practice and performance on the internet and social media. It is very tempting to wander down this path now, but it will have to be pursued in future work.

Decolonizing performatives/antics are the specific manufactured components, no matter how small or how large, of a greater mind-body-affect and social circuit that is aimed towards the decolonization of meaning. Understood as a methodological approach, these antics can be recognized as the components of an aesthetics of liberation, part of a larger methodology of emancipation meant to transform the world (Sandoval et al. 2012:6-7)

This theorization takes us beyond an understanding of art as artifact – instead it is a method of the political, the liberatory and the decolonial in its own right. It weaves a spatial aesthetic of resistance and liberation that creates ruptures in the day to day of coloniality, ruptures in the space of the settler colonial city itself. Performance Studies scholar Diana Taylor defines performance as “vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory and a sense of identity” (2003: 2). Performance and art conjuring an aesthetics of liberation is not only summoning a temporal rupture, in which memory, history, and the spectral are called forth, but this conjuring also has a very tangible location in which geography itself is ruptured. These artistic transfers push the witness beyond his current temporality and geography, which, in that moment, decolonizes time and place.

Geographers in the burgeoning field of visual and creative geographies have theorized the place/art dialectic (Dear et al. 2011), the need to consider art and the visual as a method in its own right (Rose 2007; Hawkins 2013), and pushed an understanding of art as “a form of ‘politics in action’ offering modes of resistance, points of contestation” that is placed on the landscape (Hawkins 2011: 473). In my project, the decolonial and liberatory aspect of the aesthetic cultivated here branches from these theorizations, taking on a more spectral dimension that the hauntings of colonialism conjure. Before I engage these intersections in greater depth, I want to acknowledge a wariness of how the decolonial gets taken up in geography as of late. There are many instances that could be referenced⁸⁷, but here I want to narrow the lens to the specific corner of geography this project dances around and not quite among. This is the corner of social-cultural geography

⁸⁷ See Michelle Daigle, forthcoming

engaging with the creative, artistic, and aesthetic aspects of politics, particularly in the emergent subfield of the Geohumanities. Several cultural geographers have paved roads to a deeper consideration of art and aesthetics in geography (Hawkins 2011, 2015; Yusoff 2012; 2014; Dixon et al. 2012; Hawkins & Straughan 2015; Jackson 2016), particularly the ways that art and aesthetics are being recognized as means to conceptualize resistance and how they “are important for translating, imagining, and performing new collective ways of understanding being with others in the *polis* of worlds” (Jackson 2016: 9). What is valuable in these conversations is how aesthetics is being recognized as “a means of understanding an experiential mode of subjectivity,” (Jackson 2016: 14) and how “art works can offer us a means to destabilize Cartesian subjectivity...in favor of intersubjective, relational way of understanding art work and world” (Hawkins 2011: 473). Hawkins in particular has pushed the subfield to develop rich understandings of not only the politics of art practice, but also the ways that creative practices intervene in “the becoming of places” (2015: 252). This geographic attentiveness to the ways that art and place diffuse meaning onto one another offer a valuable starting point into a conversation on a decolonial geography of art practice.

What I contest in this corner, and I will use as example the aforementioned work of Mark Jackson, is ways in which the effort to ‘decolonize’ aesthetics runs aground. One, and this is not exclusive to Jackson, is the way that aesthetics gets positioned on the shelf of Knowledge Production as a “formal category” to sit and gather dust alongside the other formal categories of “historically determined concepts” (2016: 10). In Jackson’s intention to upset the way that aesthetics is taken up, and to “reconstruct” the term, he continues to rely on the “colonizing” ontologies that view aesthetics and politics as separate classifications. This use of aesthetics remains rigid, and as such doesn’t have the same fluidity as aesthetics in the ontologies woven by Achebe, Baldwin, Sandoval, or other writers situated in the humanities. Two, Jackson suggests that the “formal category” of aesthetics can be decolonized by invoking “Indigenous and decolonial critiques...as a way of provincializing aesthetics” (2016: 11). While I agree that

Indigenous and decolonial critiques should be engaged in this corner of geography, I find the suggestion that Indigenous and decolonial critiques could be utilized as a way of “provincializing” aesthetics to be outright offensive⁸⁸.

- pro-vin-cial (adj.)
1. limited in outlook: narrow;
 2. lacking the polish of urban society: unsophisticated⁸⁹

Jackson goes on to engage with excerpts of the work of prominent North American Indigenous scholars Leanne Simpson, Taiaiake Alfred, and Jeff Corntassel, but in an anecdotal sense, rather than engaging with the whole of theories woven in their writings. Indigenous thought, once more, is framed as peripheral and provincial to the “Euro-modernist tradition” of “universalizable human subjectivation” (18). This use of the decolonial, ripped from the context and theory of Indigenous scholars, effectively de-politicizes the work of decolonization and again recreates an ephemeral imaginary of Indigenous cultural practices as useful footnotes for Modern Theorists to observe at their leisure.

I am not as concerned with decolonizing the term aesthetic, although a disruption of its use would be welcomed, for I see the value in utilizing terminology that resonates across disciplines and methodologies. The term aesthetic won’t resonate with everyone, but I don’t believe that it excludes entirely. It is more about how the term gets taken up, and what resonance is created through that enactment. In this project, I am interested in how an aesthetics of liberation and decolonial art practice works towards decolonial futures. How the art practice of people of color in Oakland, those who carry bodily and spectral memory of their ancestors

⁸⁸ This offense is magnified by the realization that Jackson had attended the first Decolonial Geographies Session that Michelle Daigle and I organized at AAGs in 2015. How provincial our work we must have seemed.

⁸⁹ Provincial. (n.d.). Merriam Webster Dictionary Online. Retrieved from: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/provincial>

formerly-enslaved, massacred, displaced, create decolonial ruptures in the geographies of the city. These ruptures acknowledge state violence, past and present, while creating openings for decolonial futures. As Chrstina Sharpe tells us, “In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present” (2016: 9). By emphasizing the art geographies of people of color, I don’t wish to essentialize and presume that all artists of color in Oakland have this decolonial potential by nature of their positionality. However, my focus on artists and art-activists of color in particular lies in the way that so many of the artists I have encountered not only make addressing state violence explicit in their work, but they also summon the past, present, and future in their artistic vision and intention. As Christina Sharpe articulates, “we live in the knowledge that the wake has positioned us as no-citizen. [But] if we are lucky, the knowledge of this positioning avails us particular ways of re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining the world” (2016: 22). Creating art from the position of no-citizen, the dispossessed are able to view the system they are denied access to in ways that conjure a liberatory aesthetics. There is also a spatiality to the work of artists of color, in how it is grounded in and of Oakland, and also a fluid temporality that causes their practice to create ruptures in the city-scape itself.

The decolonial ruptures of the art-activism I have witnessed are often momentary. And yet despite their fleeting nature, decolonial “moments [can be] conceived as points of rupture, of radical recognition of possibilities and intense euphoria” that disrupt the colonial-racial capitalist city (Lefebvre 1991: 429).

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| mom·ent (n.) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. a comparatively brief period of time 2. a time of excellence or conspicuousness 3. importance in influence or effect 4. a stage in historical or logical development⁹⁰ |
|--------------|---|

⁹⁰ Moment. (n.d.). Merriam Webster Dictionary Online. Retrieved from: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moment>

As Karma Chavez writes, “a moment also has a spatial dimension as a ‘turning point’ or a ‘juncture’. A moment thus possesses both temporal and spatial qualities, and the specific nature of the spatial dimension to a moment implies a coming together or connection whereby there is possibility for change” (2013: 9). The decolonial can emerge in a moment, altering the space it inhabits, however temporarily. The actors engaged in this moment of rupture experience the futures envisioned in that space: “for an hour that day we create a space and a place where the impacts of colonialism were lessened, where we could feel what it feels like to be part of a united, healthy community, where our children could glimpse our beautiful visions for their future” (Simpson 2011: 13). Decolonial art/practice disrupts the landscape of racial capitalism, disrupts the wake of coloniality that we reside in. This practice draws from violence lived past and present, making their atrocities visible, and then from these atrocities weaving a future for humanity to live differently. As Katherine McKittrick articulates, “creative texts are simultaneously lived and assembled (rather than lived *and then* socially produced), with creative brain activity opening the door to rethinking how humanness might be imagined” (2015: 156, emphasis original). Through decolonial art/practice, the power hegemonic is ruptured momentarily, and the decolonial is simultaneously lived as it is assembled on the stage.

The following weaves in and out of these decolonial ruptures, at different moments and sites of the Oakland landscape. To thread these moments of decolonial rupture, the following is divided into two sections: Spirit and Assemblage. The intent behind these subsections is to reveal the different ways the decolonial emerges through art practice. The first rupturing is one of spirit, and harkens the ancestral, the embodied, the emotive. The second rupture is one of assemblage, in which the decolonial actions seek to disrupt the hegemonic ordering of space and power. While this division is imperfect, many of these moments I have witnessed and bring to these pages could fall into both sections. This is my attempt at combing through the array of decolonial ruptures witnessed to weave a thread throughout these decolonial geographies of Oakland.

DECOLONIAL//SPIRIT

“The truth is coming out – good, the spirit is working on you.”

– Amara Tabor Smith, conversation January 11, 2017

“Spirituality denotes, on one hand, a connection to the sacred, a recognition of worlds or realities beyond those immediately visible and respect for the sacred knowledge that these bring and, on the other hand, a way of being in the world, a language of communication and interrelation embodying this understanding and one’s response to it”

– Theresa Delgadillo, *Queering Spirituality*, 2011

“My job as an artist is to bear witness to that what haunts us, to step back and attempt to see a pattern in these events (personal and societal), and how we can repair el daño (the damage) by using the imagination and its vision. I believe in the transformative power and medicine of art.”

– Gloria Anzaldúa, *Let us be the healing of the wound*, 2009

8 November 2015 – 23rd & International Blvd

Let us pray...

The Prescott God, how will this poem stop a multi-national company from stealing our land

Ralph Bunche’s⁹¹ God, will this poem’s family ever really be left without a home

West Oakland is crying out to you

She is having her Black children ripped from her arms by gentrification

Make this poem a cease and desist letter to hipsters and speculators

They say there was nothing here when they arrived

Show them that the movement in the poem is an inherent strategy

They say West Oakland was godless

They pounce on foreclosed homes and erect fences as tall as Babel

So put a poem to their throats and make them beg for their lives

They hired police to keep us out God

And now this poem needs to keep our tax dollars from financing their oppressive regimes

Do something God

Make this poem the key witness

Send them back to where they came from

No poem should ever have to give up its youth to fight for its people

Keep your promise to every Black family from Louisiana who moved to West Oakland for a job

Show them that this poem is your medicine working, your will being done

⁹¹ Prescott and Ralph Bunche are neighborhoods within West Oakland

Do not let them turn Esther's Orbit Room⁹² into a Whole Foods
Especially when you know they will never sell us mauve, or fatback or lard

– Marvin K. White, opening prose, November 8, 2015,
Artists in Resistance to State Violence and Gentrification

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- erase (v).
1. to rub or scrape out
 2. to remove from existence or memory
 3. to nullify the effect or force of⁹³

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Cat Brooks summoned Natasha McKenna into the room that night. In her monologue, *Tasha*, Brooks portrayed McKenna as she spent her final hours of life locked in a jail cell. Natasha McKenna was a 37-year-old Black woman, the mother of a 7-year-old girl. McKenna suffered from schizophrenia, and had called the police in Virginia after she had been assaulted, and when the police came to her home they took her to the hospital. Later, at the hospital, they arrested her, reportedly for assaulting a police officer. Brooks channeled McKenna in the darkened theater, the crowd silent as she spoke under one spotlight in the center of the room. *There was nothing I could do, they put this mask over my face so I couldn't see. It was so dark, I couldn't breathe. Every time I took a breath the mask would move into my nose – I was suffocating.* While McKenna was being kept in a jail cell, she suffered a schizophrenic episode. Six police officers dressed in hazmat

⁹² "The "Grand Lady of 7th Street," Esther Mabry, owned Esther's Orbit Room, one of the great blues and jazz clubs in West Oakland. Esther's Orbit Room, which opened in 1959, was last of the "Harlem of the West Coast" jazz clubs in West Oakland. The club was located on 1724 7th Street and closed in 2011." Accessed 1/9/17: [https://localwiki.org/oakland/Esther's Orbit Room](https://localwiki.org/oakland/Esther's_Orbit_Room)

⁹³ Erase. (n.d.). Merriam Webster Dictionary Online. Retrieved from: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/erasing>

suits tazed her to death when she couldn't calm down. *The first time they tazed me it felt like I'd stuck my whole hand in a socket, and it was only for a couple of seconds but it felt like the electricity ran through my body for a year. I kept opening my mouth to say something, to beg him to stop, but he wouldn't.* Brooks conjures anecdotes from McKenna's life: memories, fears, regrets. She brings the audience into that jail cell, a temporal gash into McKenna's life and death. *Please, you promised you wouldn't kill me. I didn't do nothing. Please, I just wanna go home and see my baby. YOU'RE KILLING ME.* The room is completely still, heavy, as Brooks screams, sobs, and flails on the ground. The final agonizing moments of Tasha's life splayed out in front of us.

Brooks says Natasha came to her one night in bed, speaking to her really loudly in her head. She got up at 3am to write it all down. Initially Brooks was planning to create a series of monologues in tribute to several women killed by police violence, but in the urgent way that McKenna's story came to her she felt the need to shift her direction. From there she watched the sickening video of McKenna's killing that the Fairfax County sheriffs released. Brooks pieced together bits of McKenna's life and death and brought them into the room that night. The power of her performance was deeply unsettling – there was no way to witness the monologue without grappling with the injustice committed. “I hope people walk away with Tasha's humanity,” Brooks has said. “She was a real person with real feelings who experienced this horrific, horrific crime. She was a person, right? She's not just a name on a placard or hash tag, she's a human being⁹⁴”. The event I and everyone else in the room witnessed, Brooks' channeling of McKenna's truth, was a powerful rupture in the time and space we were living. There was no temporal logic to what we were witnessing. Brooks' skill was such that it truly felt as if she took this woman's spirit into her own body, and projected those moments and those emotions out into the world, to be witnessed.

⁹⁴ Brooks, C. (2015, November 6). On 'Tasha, a Monologue'. *Anti-Police Terror Project Blog*. Retrieved from: <http://www.antipoliceterrorproject.org/new-blog-1/2015/11/5/cat-brooks-to-perform-tasha-a-monologue-about-police-terror-victim-natasha-mckenna>

The life of Natasha McKenna became legible to the audience in a way that perhaps it wouldn't have been otherwise, for "the process of deciphering itself is a performative act of registering blackness as visual manifestation. Blackness and black life become intelligible and valued, as well as consumable and disposable...blackness, in this sense, circulates" (Fleetwood 2011: 6). There was an urgency to her performance, these moments had to be witnessed – the public could not look away from the black life and death depicted in that room. As Rosa Linda Fregoso has written on performances that call attention to femicide along the U.S.-Mexico border, "artists have taken up the task of re-humanizing the body and being of women, reclaiming their subjectivity by recognizing and making present their value, their worth, and identities as human beings. Their artistic interventions open up a space for ethical witnessing as a counter to the death force of gender-based atrocities." (2009: 9). Brooks' monologue intended to do just that, to make present the value of Natasha McKenna's life as a Black woman. As Fregoso elaborates, "like other practices of dehumanization, femicidal terror is meant to undermine and destroy subjectivity" (2009: 9), and the performance as well as the witnessing of it is meant to counter dehumanization through the interrelationship of performance and witness. In a sense, Brooks created an affective economy with the audience, in which, as Sarah Ahmed writes,

Emotions *do things* – they align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments... We need to consider how [emotions] work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective...emotions work by sticking figures together (adherence), a stick-ing that creates the very effect of a collective (coherence) (Ahmed 2004: 119).

Brooks powerfully built this interrelationship with the audience to provoke emotion, to insist that they could not look away, to push them to see the truth of Natasha McKenna's life and death. This performance conjured an emotive reaction from the audience that sought to decolonize the meaning of McKenna's death, rupturing discourses of incarceration, of mental illness, of Black life and death.

“Tasha, a Monologue” entangled the audience with these ruptures in meaning through the emotions evoked – the performance reveals the powerful political capacity of art practice. But this performance is not the entirety of the political action, for Brooks’ position as artist and activist are deeply intertwined. In 2015 Brooks decided she needed to “focus on being an artist and activist and merging those two worlds together...to focus specifically on telling the stories of those whose stories don’t get told⁹⁵”. As she explains,

Artists are the conscience of the community. We just are. I’ve always believed that my entire life. I’ve always felt that I’m supposed to use my talent or my gifts or this calling to make the world a better place, to say things that can’t be said in other places, to challenge the status quo, to force people to think and to take risks. To be an unapologetic truth teller. To me it goes hand-in-hand, particularly in the Bay Area every single major movement that we have has this beautiful cultural parallel path that happens: Murals and music and poetry and dance. It’s one of the things that I love about being here⁹⁶.”

The words of Brooks show how her art and activism bleed into one another, and that this is characteristic of broader activist movements in Oakland and the Bay Area. There is power in the emotion that Brooks summons in her monologue, and this emotion extends into spaces of political resistance. “We need to consider how [emotions] work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective” (Ahmed 2004: 119). There is something evocative of the emotions rallied while witnessing Brooks’ performance and the other forms of art expressed that night. The art conveyed summoned an emotional and political urgency in those bearing witness – a need to react, an inability to remain indifferent. The political permeates the art, the audience complicit, affected.

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⁹⁵ Cat Brooks on “Tasha, a Monologue” November 6, 2015. Accessed 1/9/17: <http://www.antipoliceterrorproject.org/new-blog-1/2015/11/5/cat-brooks-to-perform-tasha-a-monologue-about-police-terror-victim-natasha-mckenna>

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Huddled in disparate corners of the room, they stand or squat, grieving. Bodies hunched, faces contorted, seemingly unaware of one another. Agony drips from their faces, reverberates through their bodies. Black southern hymns echo through the air as they stand, a polygon of figures dislocated from one another in their own solitude. Two women kneel, hands deep in bowls of wet white clay. They smear the clay across their faces, slather it onto their arms and bodies, leaving thick white residue on their brown skin. One figure begins to pronounce the names of Black and Brown lives murdered by the police over the last year. *Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Dantre Hamilton, Eric Garner, John Crawford III, Tamir Rice, Denisha Anderson, Dante Parker, Tony Robinson, Walter Scott, Rekia Boyd, Eric Harris, Freddie Gray, Natasha McKenna, Emmitt Till, Andy Lopez...* As the list of names unfolds, the figure speaks their names at a more rapid pace, with increasing urgency, shouting them, and then slowing once more, with a tone of exhaustion and defeat. The figures begin to wail in desperation, a chorus of howling, sobbing fills the room. The figures stomp their feet and moan, flailing their bodies, sobbing. Others stand, heads bowed, or lay paralyzed, eyes wide open, cathartic. The music fades out, and a sound clip of Dave Chappelle comes on. *If you're an American you're a racist. You're brought up from the beginning to think in generalizations...* The clip played out and was mixed back into somber beats, with Chappelle repeating over and over *If you're an American you're a racist*, while the same figure pronounces the names of lives lost again. And slowly, slowly, the music transitions, the beat more intense yet with more energy.

The figures begin to connect with one another as the music picks up, pulling each other in and out in an intimate tangling of bodies. The women with the bowls of clay reach out to the audience, handing out small fistfuls of clay and staring upon you with intensity. One woman comes forward to speak, forlorn but powerful: *Michael Brown, I wonder what your mother's last words to you were...I wonder how one grieves the loss of a child. Stopped and frisked before he ever got to battle...More chalk outlines of sons shot by police than ever swung from trees. That was somebody's baby...Your melanin was carried by ancestors that built this country...Mothers*

who brag unbreakable creation stories, their love is what has the planets suspended in space. Michael, they cannot take that away. Nina Simone begins to play...*Sun in the sky you know how I feel, Moon driftin' on by you know how I feel, It's a new dawn, It's a new day, It's a new life for me...*And the music picks up in an intense electronic elation. All the figures suddenly awakened, dancing in unison in tightly jubilant movements. Jubilant rapture. The dancers' reckoning with grief spills into an eruption of joy, the figures energized, determined, free.

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This collection of performances, *Artists in Response to State Violence and Gentrification*, engaged the audience and the space itself from many directions. Poetry of displacement read aloud, dance coupled with audible creations and testimonies to honor the dead, monologue to bear witness to suffering, the recreation of a border crossing with beat-boxing and dance, spoken word that bound nursery rhymes of Columbus' galleons with slave ships. The methods and content were distinct yet tightly woven into a narrative that made visible the intersections between state violence and gentrification. Natasha McKenna and Michael Brown may have not been killed in Oakland, and yet the violence befalling upon their lives was mirrored by the state violence unfolding outside the cultural center's doors. This showcase was thick with the "antics of the oppressed" – and the ruptures created in this space not only laid bare the injustice of the city and American society broadly rote, but generated fleeting glimpses of futures. Despite all of the despair channeled, the performance ended in a space of joy, an opening. One of the artists that performed that night, Amara Tabor Smith, explains what is summoned through dance:

Dance is a way to move things, to move energy, move the experience through. It is an expression of all that we are holding, all the people that have touched us, stained us, impacted how we move. Our culture values the brain, not the body, and so the body becomes the closet for our experience. We bring all we carry in our closet of unconsciousness, release it through our body, all that goes unrecognized for our survival.

All that we are unable to articulate – our body is able to speak uninhibited. These truths are not something that can be put in the King’s language⁹⁷.

What was enacted and witnessed that night in the space of EastSide Arts Alliance, exactly one year before the election of Donald Trump, was a decolonial rupture in the city of Oakland. Truths were spoken, embodied, and made audible in ways that cannot be fully expressed in the King’s language on this page. The bodies that threw themselves into the performances grieved and celebrated Black life, the lives of those displaced, the lives of those who cross borders, the lives that grapple with state violence daily. They drew from their closets of unconsciousness and released it onto the stage: the trauma, the anger, “histories are re-narrated, kinships are reimagined, and a different mode of representation is performed, heard, repeated, enjoyed” (McKittrick 2016: 90). This moment of decolonial rupture offered a glimpse or opening into a different kind of humanness that doesn’t require racial violence (McKittrick 2016: 90), an alternate future, an alternate interrelationship of humanity. The showcase mourned lives lost, made visible the deaths that are erased or normalized by the hegemonic, and intentionally ended in a moment of elation.

“Enthusiasm and exaltation are the uncolonized flow of desire that expresses liberation from societal codings” (549). Enthusiasm, I want to suggest, radically refuses the dominant order: the feeling of exaltation, emerging as a form of knowledge that is necessarily collaborative praxes, cites and sites black joy and love. For it is in the waveforms of music—beats, rhythms, acoustics, notational moods, and frequencies that intersect with racial economies and histories—that rebelliousness is enunciated as an energetic (neurological, physiological) affection for black culture as life. (McKittrick 2016: 90, citing Sylvia Wynter, unpublished)

The site where these performances took place was a “productive site of resistance that [is] relational to revolution and the affirmation of black life”; a site of “collective cosmic unity between the self and social body” (McKittrick 2016: 90). This was art enacted, but it was also an act of

⁹⁷ Amara Tabor Smith, interview, January 11, 2017

resistance, and a rupturing of space that offered a glimpse of a decolonized future, of humanity free of state violence.

2 November 2015 – 18th Avenue and E 12th Street

Massive papier-mâché skulls bob above the crowd as they wander down International Boulevard. A crowd of a hundred or so people, mostly Latino families, take part in the procession for Día de Los Muertos – Day of the Dead. José Navarrete, co-founder of the NAKA dance group and one of the lead members of East Side Arts Alliance, helped envision this procession. Navarrete was calling



Figure 27: Día de Los Muertos procession down International Boulevard. Photo by EastSide Arts Alliance.

the event the anti-Día de Los Muertos, objecting to how the sacred celebration from Mexico had become a pop culture reference in recent years, with others appropriating the symbolism and cultural significance of the ritual. The procession intended to take back the occasion, and to politicize it, honoring the lives lost to police violence in the United States and Mexico, honoring the 43 students that had been “disappeared” in Ayotzinapa along with Michael Brown and Sandra Bland. There was no advertising for the procession, information was all spread through word of mouth. José

mentioned it to me in passing when we ran into each other at a forum organizing against gentrification in Oakland. *You should come by*, he told me, *bring your family*. Artists at East Side Arts Alliance constructed giant papier-mâché skulls for people to wear on their heads during the procession, and on November 2nd people left East Side's cultural center at 23rd and International just after sunset to walk to Amor Eterno Art Gallery on 18th and E 12th Street. As people walked, they sticker-bombed fences and electrical boxes along the streets with stickers that read *HIPSTER ALERT: stealing our culture colonizing our hood*. They held posters that read *Rent has doubled since 2009, has your income?*



Figure 28: Graphic by EastSide Arts Alliance.

Arriving at Amor Eterno, the procession added their photos and items to the altars that greeted them. Glass prayer candles that are typically wrapped in images of patron saints, such as La Virgen de Guadalupe, were wrapped in the now-familiar imagery that Oakland artist Oree Originol creates after lives are killed by police. The art is always the same: the person's image portrayed in black and white, with "Justice For..." with the victim's name written along the top of the image. Black and Brown lives are so commonly taken by police violence that Originol's #JusticeForOurLives imagery is seen all over the country, in Black Lives Matter rallies, in art galleries, on social media. Tonight his images became patron saints on prayer candles, burning at the altars honoring those killed by police violence. In the courtyard a taco stand was set up and people gathered to eat as cumbia played. Inside the gallery was an exhibition, *From East Oakland with Love*, featuring linocut imagery by the gallery's owner Chamuco Cortez and poetry from East Oakland natives. Amongst the crowd wandered Danzantes Aztecas, a dance troop of Aztec dancers

M.M. Ramírez

that were decked out in huge feathered headdresses and elaborate ceremonial garments. Danza Azteca is an indigenous Mexican dance that has been practiced for centuries and has been revived in Mexicano communities in the United States as well. As George Galvis, an attendee that night and founder of Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ) explains, in the Chicane community “these maestros from Mexico were bringing Danza over in the 70s...they were also bringing with them the indigenous philosophy and worldview⁹⁸”.

After eating and mingling around the gallery, the Danzantes led everyone outside to hold a ceremony in honor of the dead. Burning copal⁹⁹ and standing in a circle, the crowd took up the width of 18th Street, a powerful ceremony and action of taking back the streets to honor those



Figure 29: Día de Los Muertos altar at Amor Eterno Gallery, 2015. Photo courtesy of Unity.

⁹⁸ George Galvis, Interview, January 20, 2016

⁹⁹ Copal is an Indigenous Mexican incense, the equivalent of frankincense.

killed by state violence. Galvis sees Danza as being part of a broader set of teachings within the Chicano community in Oakland called La Cultura Cura (Culture Cures):

La Cultura Cura is, for one, about reconnecting: reclaiming, relearning our traditional ways. Our ancestral ways that kept our families and communities healthy since time immemorial, that's part of it. There's ceremony, learning the songs, the danzas, and the traditional ways and values, the way of being with each other. That's part of the foundation. But it is also recognizing our movements. The Chicano movement was a cultural renaissance; it was an affirmation of who we are in resistance against assimilation. Because we had our own colors and images through the cultural arts - the mural arts, through dance, through song, through poetry, through flor y canto, through music...and that was affirming of our identity because everyone had such a forced assimilation pushed on them before that. And to identify with your own culture if it was non-white before that was shamed. To be seen as less than. So there is something empowering about that¹⁰⁰.

As Galvis expresses, Danza and other forms of ceremony in Chicano communities have become a means of healing through cultural reconnection that had been stifled through previous generations of cultural assimilation. The rituals practiced on Día de Los Muertos are something that Chicano/Mexicano communities have been reintegrating since the Chicano movement of the 1960s-70s. This cultural revival can be blended with Mexican and North American Indigenous ceremonies, for as Galvis mentions, “as a people that have been disconnected from our own tribal lineages, we've adapted some of the Native traditions and ceremony that we've been adopted into,” mentioning the teachings he has learned from the Fort McDermitt Paiute and Shoshone Tribes. The ceremonies and relational belief systems are something that Galvis sees as holding the possibility for decolonial healing and transformation among the formerly incarcerated youth he works with. As he explains,

We talk about historical intergenerational trauma, right, but there's also historical intergenerational memory and wisdom that emerges. That bone memory that our ancestors talk about, that emerges also in the contemporary ways that we find creative expression. And so there is something very healing and cathartic about that too. And it's also a way of transforming energy into beauty, you know what I mean. It's like what Che Guevara said, it can seem corny as hell, about the true revolution being guided by a great feeling of love, but it is true. All that anger, when I first started learning my history, when I started reading all those books, it's very doomsday, it gets very angry. And that anger can

¹⁰⁰ George Galvis, Interview, January 20, 2016

be like a cancer in your body, it can consume you. So how do we transform that. We transform it – we always stand up and we always fight, we do it with integrity resisting, Not for the hate of our enemy, but for the love of our people. And those are teachings that were passed on to me. So the concept of La Cultura Cura became a big part of the work that we do¹⁰¹.

Galvis spoke from experience about intergenerational trauma and memory, he himself having been incarcerated as a Chicano youth in San Francisco. He moved to Oakland in the 1990s and began to transform the trauma and frustration he felt into healing through the intergenerational wisdom he was taught by his mentors. La Cultura Cura has since become a central principle in the work he does with formerly incarcerated youth in Oakland, mentoring and employing former defendants of the Fruitvale gang junction zone. The bone memory that Galvis mentions drives this healing work, finding memory and wisdom that helps one decolonize their position within the violent state system. Many of Galvis' CURYJ compañeros were present that night at Amor Eterno Gallery as a decolonial spirit was invoked in the Día de Los Muertos procession, gathering, and ceremony. Art and spiritual/cultural practice served to disrupt the forms of state violence all too common in Oakland, allowing for a moment of rupture as the copal traveled the circle, smudging all present, a moment in which the ancestors and the living shared space across generations.



Figure 30: Amor Eterno Art Gallery exhibit, From East Oakland With Love, 2015. Photo by author.

¹⁰¹ George Galvis, Interview, January 20, 2016

This event was as much political as it was spiritual. As Chicana feminist scholar Laura E. Pérez writes, “the politics of the spiritual for many Chicana/os is linked to a politics of memory. This tacit of remembering has been understood...not as a politically paralyzing nostalgia for the irretrievable past but as a reimagining and thus, a reformulation of beliefs and practices” (2007: 23). Pérez looks at the art of Chicana artists and how the spiritualities in their work map “cultural and geographic (re)territorializations” – an “essential place of wholeness, communal interdependence, and purpose in the social, global and cosmic web...[work that is] part of a broader attempt to interrupt unbridled capitalist and imperialist visions of reality that benefit crucially from our exile from the spiritual discourse” (2007: 22-23). These decolonial imaginings are created by what Pérez calls the “spirit work” of Chicana visual, performing, and literary artists, in which cultural and artistic practice is utilized to heal the cultural *susto*, or the “frightening of the spirit from one’s body-mind in the colonial and neocolonial ordeals” (2007: 21). This healing of the *susto* begins with (re)membering, which is exactly what George Galvis describes in the



Figure 31: Danzantes at Amor Eterno gallery, November 2, 2015. Photo courtesy of Unity.

recovery of intergenerational wisdom to address the intergenerational traumas of coloniality. As Chicana artist Amalia Mesa-Bains writes:

It is through memory that we construct the bridge between the past and the present, the old and the new. The spiritual memory reflected in the works of contemporary Latino artists is a memory of absence constructed from losses endured in the destructive project of colonialism and its aftermath. This redemptive memory claims a broken reality that is made whole in the retelling. In this context, contemporary art is more than a mirror of history and belief, it is a construction of ideology. Art becomes a social imagination through which essential worldviews and identities are constructed, reproduced, and even redefined. Memory becomes the instrument of redefinition in a politicizing spirituality. (1993: 9)

The Día de Los Muertos procession was a political act of memory, remembering the lives lost to police violence, rituals displaced, bringing these memories into being once more. The rituals enacted, the inhabiting of street space with processions and Danza, these are artistic, cultural, and spiritual acts that resist the racial capitalist appropriations of Mexican communities' rituals and spaces of home. Memories of homes from generations or decades prior, and of the homes made in Oakland, these memories cultivate a cultural politics of place that continues to inscribe meaning into the city that Chicano activists have built here since the 1960s (Herrera 2016). Decolonial acts use memory to make erasures visible – these are spiritual practices of resistance and resilience that have existed in Mexico for generations, brought into the space of Oakland to animate the landscape with their spiritual politics. These are cultural and geographic (re)territorializations of Oakland, decolonial ruptures in the city as borderlands¹⁰².

¹⁰² I am struck by the gaping hole in this sentence yet I leave it be to call attention – where are the Ohlone peoples in this reterritorialization? As Chicano/Mexicano peoples bring ritual to the streets to denounce displacement, where is the connection to or conversation with Oakland's Indigenous communities?

6 May 2016 – Telegraph Ave and 19th Street

A dozen Black women adorned in white antebellum gowns traipse along Telegraph Avenue in Downtown Oakland. White lace veils cover their faces, white-gloved hands clasp white parasols and painted white lanterns. Some carry bundles of white roses, others hold white-framed mirrors that they hold up to their faces, the mirrors gazing outward. The moonlight makes these figures glow, eerie, as they slowly wander the streets, specters of another time. Passersby absorbed in smartphones look up, startled, mouths agape, uncertain of what reality they have stumbled into. Some snap photos, which later appear on Twitter and Facebook, prompting a conversation of comments and likes and befuddlement. The figures hold up their lanterns and peer into windows, silent, conveying their presence through body movements alone. At times they gyrate through the streets, other times walking stoically in procession, stopping in crosswalks, meandering through gas stations. At one point they gather in a circle and begin to cackle with belly laughter. The



Figure 32: A House Full of Black Women episode, 2016. Photo courtesy of Amara Tabor-Smith.

women wander off into the night, while pedestrians stop in their tracks, trying to make sense of this ethereal presence they happen to cross paths with on the streets of Oakland.

Amara Tabor-Smith is one of the organizers of this wandering art practice that takes over public space. *A House Full of Black Women* is a multi-year series of public episodes, and as Tabor-Smith describes she uses that word “in its multi-definition of the episode, as in a psychotic break and also in a section of the work that is a piece of the larger story. The work is addressing the displacement, wellbeing and sex trafficking of Black women and girls in Oakland¹⁰³”. Intersecting displacement and sex trafficking is meant to draw attention to the fact that Oakland is a West Coast hub of sex trafficking, and how these exploitative practices disproportionately affect Black women. The episodes take place in different locations in the city that are known to be “hot spots” for sex trafficking, and as Tabor-Smith explains, “we choose the route spiritually on what we’re trying to evoke. These issues could be anywhere, but it is located in Oakland...each geography has its own culture and experience so when we’re choosing a ritual procession or performance action, we consider what prayer or energetic shift to bring to that space¹⁰⁴”. As the episodes unfurl in the streets, no words are spoken, no signs held to notify witnesses of the intention behind it, the rituals are meant to speak for themselves. When I asked Tabor-Smith if the actors ever spoke with the public during or after the episodes to let them know of the political inspiration, she explained to me that because the work is rooted in ritual, the intention is to “draw the spirit into that space – however someone perceives that spirit, I respect it. When we’re out in the streets, I value the person that says ‘Ashé’ as much as the person that says ‘nigger’. The truth is coming out – good, the spirit is working on you”.

¹⁰³ Stanford University Lecture, Accessed 1/6/17 :
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5OT1OgPVQU&t=3532s>

¹⁰⁴ Amara Tabor-Smith, interview, January 11, 2017.

In the episodes of *A House Full of Black Women*, I see the spirit that Tabor-Smith and her collaborators invoke to be a decolonial spirit that ruptures the spatial and temporal fabric of the city. The performers choose to conduct these episodes in the streets of Oakland because of the layers of energy and history present, channeling that intensity into the performance ritual and thus rupturing the organization of public space by disrupting its mundaneness. Tabor-Smith sees these rituals as something that can only be done in public space in an improvised fashion because the public's blind entrance into the performance has a different effect on all involved. As Tabor-Smith explains,

In our most recent episode I had one of the most powerful moments of exchange. There was nobody on the street as we walked, and we passed by a restaurant that was closed and there was a man working alone behind the counter. I could see in his eyes that he was impacted in a way that he needed to be. That moment was made for him. This exchange isn't made for theater because in theater there is a relationship in which the audience is prepared to witness in a certain way, there is a kind of cloak of protection you have when you are expecting a performance. On the street, you don't have that. The kind of interaction changes when you go to different places, and the spiritual energies on the street are more chaotic. (Conversation 1/11/17)

The organic or improvisational nature of these episodes create powerful spatial disruptions. By engaging with people who have no idea they are about to encounter a performance ritual on the street, the performers channel the surprise into the performance's rupturing of space, producing a momentary energetic shift within the temporal and spatial structure of the city. While not overtly political besides the initial intention, the spirit the performers invoke provokes an energetic shift that evokes the decolonial. As Tabor-Smith describes,

As an artist I'm less concerned with how do I shed light on an issue but rather how do we change the vibration on it. I'm not here to give you the statistics on this, you can find that elsewhere. I want to end sex trafficking, I want to end displacement of Black people. Educating is a part of that but that is not the point of these rituals. The intent is to create a vibrational shift that gradually dismantles the power structure. (Conversation 1/11/17)

This decolonial spirit that *A House Full of Black Women* evokes is this vibrational shift to dismantle the power structure. Through the organic interactions that the performers have with the public, the colonial vibrations of the city are disrupted, temporalities ruptured, and the space

itself reconfigured. Art has this ability to create these decolonial ruptures for it stretches the limits of human consciousness, always pushing at the margins, stretching our conceptions of what is logical, true, or possible.

A House Full of Black Women not only ruptures the city, but it provokes temporal and spatial ruptures of Black geographies. Black women cloaked in ghostly antebellum clothing draw the witness *Into the Wake* (Sharpe 2016), bringing the Oakland pedestrian of 2017 into a bodily dialogue with specters of Black femininity. The ritual performance could be read as an example of what Sylvia Wynter describes as the way that “making black culture reinvents black humanity and life” (McKittrick 2016: 85). As McKittrick elaborates,

The affirmation of black humanness is enunciated through an “alienated reality” that is rooted in antiblack plantocratic histories, practices, and geographies. This alienated-reality status does not provide a New World cosmogony that situates the black enslaved as settlers or property holders or autochthonous; the alienated-reality status, instead, draws attention to black diaspora activities as geopolitical responses that unsettle antiblackness and objectification. This means the affirmation of black humanness is both relational to and in contradistinction to the dominant order of consciousness because rebellions—which are activities! not identities! not places!—honor black life as an ongoing struggle against what is truthfully represented as and believed to be preordained dysselected objecthood and placelessness. It is the process of creating blackness anew within the context of antiblackness that shifts our focus away from perceiving a range of New World inhabitants as differently occupying resolved knowable and distinct noun-places (settler/property holder/autochthonous/labor unit) and toward the politics of being human as praxis. (2016: 85)

A House Full of Black Women's creative practice disrupts the anti-black practices of displacement and sex trafficking that exploit Black women in Oakland. By channeling antebellum specters of Blackness, the performers evoke a ritual that makes these ‘anti-black plantocratic histories, practices and geographies’ visible while simultaneously creating Blackness anew. This decolonial rupturing of space and time refuses the placelessness and non-humanness forced upon the Black subject by racial capitalist, colonial and white supremacist structures. The Black women performing thus occupy public space in a way that acknowledges these histories while also insisting upon Black humanness. The performance ritual thus affirms Black humanness as act of rebellion that is relational, requiring the witness to engage in whatever way the decolonial spirit

provokes them. As McKittrick illuminates, this is a shift towards a politics of being human praxis – a decolonial future enacted.

DECOLONIAL//ASSEMBLAGE

“What does it mean for me to say I’m not going anywhere until I want to. Not only that, but how do I use my art to say I’m not going anywhere and if I have to leave it’s not because I’ve been pushed out. The Black diaspora is one of dispossession, so in a way our response is *here it goes again.*”

– Amara Tabor-Smith, conversation 1/11/17

- as·sem·blage (n).
1. a collection of persons or things
 2. the act of assembling : the state of being assembled
 3. an artistic composition made from scraps, junk, and odds & ends¹⁰⁵

Assemblage alludes to the ways decolonial art-activism seeks to re-envision structures, working to disassemble them and assemble something anew. The events centered in this section are part of broader organizational or coalitional struggles that utilize art to further social justice activism. Thus I am situating these decolonial moments differentially from those in the previous section, for these are trying to rupture the city not only through moments of artistic practice, but through forms of resistance that systematically take on the state and push for structural change. The decolonial thus takes on different forms in these iterations of art practice – it is less about a

¹⁰⁵ Assemblage. (n.d.). Merriam Webster Dictionary Online. Retrieved from: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/assemblage>

spiritual rupture and more about structural autonomy. The creation of decolonial alternatives. Thus I am following Tania Li in my use of assemblage, being attentive to the ways that “situated subjects do the work of pulling together the disparate elements” of a decolonial assemblage (2007: 265). I also cautiously draw on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) weaving of assemblage, thinking of how assemblage functions as a “constellation” of elements: a machinic assemblage of desire of qualities and relations, and a collective assemblage of enunciation made up of languages, words, and meanings. I say cautiously for I am wary of the can of philosophical worms that an engagement with Deleuze & Guattari and assemblage brings. However, I find potential for theorizing the decolonial in the language of assemblage as a constellation that works to re- and de-territorialize.

Art-activists use art and cultural practice as a means of creating decolonial assemblage in Oakland, in the ways that the city is re-envisioned, creating alternate visions and geographies of Oakland in the process of becoming. I argue that the movements I outline in the following section are engaged in re-territorializing and de-territorializing efforts that create decolonial assemblages, seeking to decolonize the structures that dispossess communities of color in Oakland. In some instances, like the work of East Side Arts Alliance, the decolonial assemblage seeks to create autonomous institutions for communities of color to prevent further dispossession as Oakland gentrifies. In other instances, the decolonial assemblage is more one of recognition, in which art-activists seek to alter the city’s governing practices to center the needs of people of color in their policies and practices. In all instances, the decolonial assemblages consist of alternate geographies of Oakland – projects and spaces led by Black and Brown art-activists who use their art to push the racial capitalist system, and to envision decolonial futures.

23 March 2016 – Broadway & 15th Street

Our people have been scattered and for centuries been battered, we ragged and we tattered but our lives still matter. We not satisfied with livin' since there's things that cannot be forgivin', when the spirituals be risen, will you be with those who listen. Which side are you on, are you with me, do you stand on the side of YGB, 'cause Black Lives Matter, yeah, Black Lives Matter. Seven young Black women graced the small space of the Betti Ono gallery, members of the Black Sheroes, an all all-female iteration of the local youth cultural arts repertory group Young Gifted and Black. Mixing spoken spoken-word style with song, the Black Sheroes performed tonight in support of Betti Ono, one of the few Black-owned art galleries in Downtown Oakland. Anyka Barber, the founder and curator of the gallery, opened the space in 2011 after returning home to Oakland and realizing the need for art spaces that are dedicated to people of color. To



Figure 33: The Black Sheroes performing at Betti Ono, March 23, 2016. Photo by author.

Barber, in her mission as a “curator and artist and cultural producer, this meant transforming the perspective around who can create and who can lead¹⁰⁶”. As she explained further, having been born and raised in Oakland, where “social justice and activism are embedded in the culture”, Barber also wanted to recognize the “disenfranchisement in our communities [and to] lift up the voices of women of color artists who really help to transform and shape popular culture in ways that people have not recognized...folks whose art and voices might not be amplified in a gallery space¹⁰⁷”. This centering of voices and art of people of color, particularly women of color, within a gallery space in downtown Oakland is something that makes the very existence and resilience of Betti Ono in the midst of a rapidly gentrifying downtown a powerful act of resistance.

However, Barber’s insistence to shift perceptions of artists and cultural leaders, to make visible the creativity and leadership of artists of color, has been consistently challenged. When Barber decided to open Betti Ono in 2011, she explained that “part of my intention in opening up in downtown, is that as the center of the city, it is a place that attracts everyone...and historically, growing up here, people would gather downtown for so many reasons¹⁰⁸”. The building where Betti Ono is located is in fact owned by the City of Oakland, being located just around the corner from City Hall. From the beginning, Barber has been requesting a long-term lease from the city, but has only received one-year leases with rent hikes year after year. In December 2015, however, Barber received notice that the gallery’s rent would be increased by 60 percent, or \$22,000 a year, and was forced to go month-to-month while she determined if the gallery could afford such high rent.

We don't have a lease, which means we don't have a home. That's a really, really hard thing to say about a space that has been intentional about creating space for people of color in

¹⁰⁶ Mohamed, O. (2016, October 17). Anyka Barber on Art in times of resistance. *Blavity*. Retrieved from: <http://blavity.com/anyka-barber-art-times-resistance/>

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

Oakland, especially Black people, to feel like they belong and that they have just as much access to downtown and can celebrate themselves in public and be seen and be accepted and be protected just like any other group in the city should be able to do¹⁰⁹.

As a result, Barber began to organize a fundraising campaign to keep Betti Ono in its space. The result was the Power, Love, Resistance campaign, which was kicked off by an event in late March of 2016: SPEAKING POWER//SPEAKING TRUTH. The Black Sheroes were just one of a lineup of women of color artists who had showed up to support Betti Ono, a space they all proclaimed as one of the few havens they had to share their art and feel welcomed in Oakland. The night was a



Figure 34: Betti Ono gallery, 2017. Photo by author.

¹⁰⁹ Burke, S. (2016, February 17). Will Oakland Lose its Artistic Soul? *East Bay Express*. Retrieved from: <http://www.eastbayexpress.com/oakland/will-oakland-lose-its-artistic-soul/Content?oid=4679618&showFullText=true>

benefit for Betti Ono, but it was also a space in which the intersections between art, violence, and displacement were once more laid bare.

Poet Chinaka Hodge read aloud a piece of hers that had been published in *San Francisco Magazine*—a magazine catered to more upscale ‘cultural tastes’ of the city—titled *The Gentrifier’s Guide to Getting Along*. The nuance in Hodge’s voice as she read the piece aloud made its echoes of Oakland’s past even more powerful. Words shaped the geographies now lost, existing now only in the memories of those who remain. *Festival at the Lake, was where all of Oakland strutted its stuff...It was our annual reminder of how amazing our city was, even when no one else agreed, when the rest of the world talked about our violence, our blight, and our losing sports teams. In those days, it took realchutzpah to say that you were proud of being from here and really mean it. Being from Oakland wasn’t something that you could put on or take off at whim... Esther’s, Alvita’s, Dixon’s, Della and Norm’s/Al’s, T.J.’s, Festival at the Lake: They are all gone now. All of them. That’s why I say to you, new neighbor, that I understand. How could you know, lacking any hard evidence or native memory, **that the Town existed before you arrived?** That there were people and restaurants and careers and movements and **ways of being that did not include you?** We had a life here—a life rich in culture, politics, art, and friendship, if not always in capital¹¹⁰. Weaving in and out of memory and Oakland geographies, Hodge broke down the political economic history of Oakland’s Black neighborhoods with concise elegance. She told the listeners why Oaklanders are frustrated, and what it is about gentrifiers that insults them. Told them how they might better ease themselves into the city in ways that paid mind to those in shock from the rapid transitions. *We are hurt, confused, angry, and disillusioned. We lost people, we lost homes, we lost agency, we lost our favorite eateries—we even lost the ability to name our**

¹¹⁰ Emphasis added

'hoods. Nobody used to call North Oakland "Temescal," and Uptown only became Uptown after developers courted by Mayor Jerry Brown dubbed it so. It's still Downtown to us.

How could you know the town existed before you arrived, Chinaka Hodge asks. The past temporalities of Oakland are something that have become incoherent to its present. Or rather, the city's past, the geographies of Emma's, Alvita's, and Dixon's that Hodge describes vividly, are illegible to those moving in. The moment that people lose the ability to name their own 'hoods, when North Oakland becomes Temescal, when Uptown coalesces from a development plan, is this when Oakland becomes incoherent to its own residents? *All of the things that folks point to now as cool or worthwhile, things that few of us had a hand in creating, institutions that drive property values so high we can't afford to live here anymore. Can you imagine how frustrating that is? How entirely disorienting it is to be in a city that you've always loved, against all odds, and to feel like you don't belong?* Dispossession comes in waves. When your neighborhood gets renamed under your feet, is that the warning call that you will soon lose your home? It is the *against all odds* that gets at the refusal of Black and Brown Oaklanders to go quietly. For years Oakland has been reviled, portrayed as someplace off the map, illegible and without hope. "Redevelopment schemes have recurrently precipitated widespread displacement of the lowest-capital black residents living in sites deemed concentrations of poverty...Residents bodies and places serve as the ground for visions of a *rehabilitated* space: the purification and redemption of entire geographies rest upon their erasure" (Ansfield 2015: 128, emphasis original). Amidst these processes of erasure, Oaklanders have loved their city, against all odds, lived richly in *ways of being that did not include you*. This pride and love for Oakland pushes people to resist displacement – Black and Brown Oaklanders are not willing to go quietly. And one of the ways that people are rallying to resist displacement is by rallying around existing cultural anchors so that they too are not wiped from the map.

The struggle against displacement is deeply entangled with culture, and is exuded in the resistance and survival of spaces like Betti Ono. “The same way our bodies are being criminalized so is our culture. And that shows up in how you might invest dollars in certain neighborhoods and what neighborhoods get policed for certain events”, Anyka Barber explains. “When we think about the level of investment of art in communities of color, the investment is not there...the mainstream has not valued our histories and stories in a way where there is an equitable level of investment. So we don’t have enough art spaces to tell the stories we need to¹¹¹”. To combat this lack of equitable investment, Barber has led the creation of the Oakland Creative Neighborhoods Coalition (OCNC), which, as discussed in the previous chapter, pushes the city to recognize the need for cultural equity in its policies and investments. While Mayor Libby Schaaf has announced efforts to protect artists from displacement, those promises have been without much concrete financial support, nor targeted investment in artists of color. The fact that Betti Ono’s rent was raised by 60 percent, by city government itself, does not bear well in terms of messaging where the city’s development priorities lie.

Betti Ono and OCNC are representative of a city-wide arts movement that configures a decolonial assemblage. Weaving a conversation about cultural preservation, the underlying thread is that there is a need for arts and cultural spaces run by and for people of color if Oakland’s cultural landscape is to survive. These spaces are not only spaces to practice and experience art but spaces of collective resistance and survival. As Oakland-born artist and cultural organizer Favianna Rodriguez explains:

Arts and culture is a way to bring people together in a dialogue, to help us solve the issues that are in our neighborhoods... many Black and Latino artists have been at the forefront of making sure we have the spaces, because our histories are here, our people are here. Displacement is not just of where we live, it’s the displacement of culture, of how we gather

¹¹¹ Mohamed, O. (2016, October 17). Anyka Barber on Art in times of resistance. *Blavity*. Retrieved from: <http://blavity.com/anyka-barber-art-times-resistance/>

and build power. Arts and culture is such an important part of our survival, as people of color who are living in literally, war times¹¹².

Because the practices of cultural erasure by dispossession are so ferocious, the need for arts and cultural spaces in the gentrifying landscape of Oakland is more necessary than ever. Networks of cultural organizers such as OCNC are being led by artists of color to decolonize structures of the art world, challenging how their funding is allocated, and demanding that the geographies of how the city funds its neighborhoods and programs be restructured. As Rodriguez elaborates, artists need to demand that the City fund artists of color, particularly in East Oakland:

We need to demand those resources for our community, just as resources are being put into downtown Oakland, we have 100 blocks, 100 blocks [in East Oakland]. I think we need to look at an arts and culture agenda that addresses inequality. By addressing inequality we will also address communities that are not included, and that includes transgender communities, that includes queer, of course communities of color, but young people too¹¹³.

This demand to restructure how the city and its people are funded is an argument for a re-territorialization of resources, a redistribution of assets that seeks to disrupt how the state furthers racial capitalist patterns of possession and dispossession. I argue that these efforts, led by artists of color in Oakland, are features of a decolonial assemblage, in which art and culture are central in efforts to reallocate city resources and disrupt processes of erasure and dispossession. Anyka Barber's efforts within Betti Ono and OCNC are one wing of this assemblage, and another major player is East Side Arts Alliance, which enters the scene in the next section.

¹¹² Rodriguez, F. (2016, December 6). East Oakland artist Favianna Rodriguez on the Ghost Ship fire. *KPFA Radio*. Retrieved from: <http://kalw.org/post/east-oakland-artist-favianna-rodriguez-ghost-ship-fire>

¹¹³ Ibid.

1 August 2015 – Seminary & International Blvd

You need to think of everything as yours, Da’Juan Carter-Woodard told the crowd grouped in folding chairs strewn across the pavement. There are people who don’t look like you movin’ in, ridin’ their bikes, raisin’ your rent. The crowd murmured and nodded in agreement as Carter-Woodard continued to emphasize the need to stand firmly in defense of their neighborhood. The only way we’re going to keep ours is by doing it together. People gathered outside the Rainbow Recreation Center, listening and chatting as a steady stream of speakers and musicians took the stage. A huge mural by Emory Douglas, the former Minister of Culture of the Black Panthers, straddles the wall of the rec center. The silhouette of the Black Panther emblem stands proud, filled with a collage of images of Black resistance in Oakland, flanked by the words SERVE THE PEOPLE. Douglas was also one of the founding members

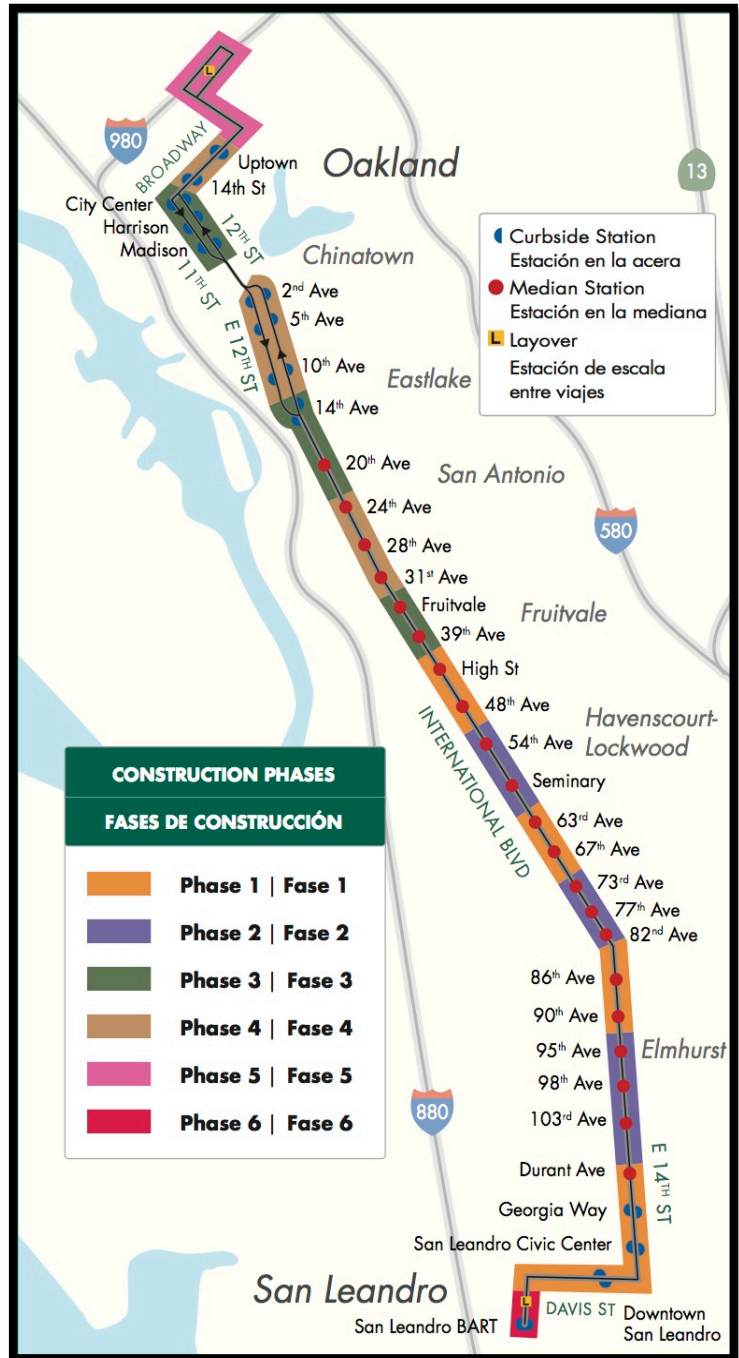


Figure 35: Map of Bus Rapid Transit line under construction along International Boulevard. Map courtesy of AC Transit.



Figure 36: A stretch of International Boulevard in East Oakland. Photo by author, 2016.

of EastSide Arts Alliance, the lead organizer of this event, to raise awareness of how the eight-mile-long International Boulevard was up for redevelopment and what changes this could bring to the neighborhood.

A rapid Rapid Bus Transit line (RBT) is being built from the city of San Leandro to Downtown Oakland, with seven miles of the four-lane boulevard to be torn up and made into two car lanes with a designated bus lane in the center. International Boulevard, renamed as such in 1996 to reflect the ‘international’ cultural diversity of its residents, is one of the longest corridors in the Bay Area, running the entirety of East Oakland. International stretches across the array of racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the city, and despite being one of the most disinvested business corridors in the city, a multitude of small businesses subsist and create essential consumer districts for migrant and communities of color in East Oakland. Many East Oakland residents look suspiciously upon the BRT to be installed, for how it will affect traffic, and parking, and ultimately what wave of redevelopment it could be foreshadowing. EastSide Arts Alliance, a collective of Black, Latino, Asian, and Native artists who run a Cultural Center in the San Antonio neighborhood along International Boulevard have been particularly wary of the pending development, and have been actively organizing to spread awareness throughout the East

Oakland community. As Elena Serrano, Director of EastSide explained, East Oakland residents need to take ownership of their neighborhoods and act preemptively to prevent processes of displacement from taking hold as the BRT is installed:

We need to claim as much public space as possible, for cultural events, for the community to come together. There's a lot of things about to happen in our neighborhood, a big development project, with AC Transit coming down the middle of the street. We want the community to know if there's going to be affordable housing, if there's going to be opportunities for small businesses. This is the time to get plugged in and claim your neighborhood¹¹⁴.

To spread the word of the developments unfolding along International, EastSide began to organize a series of block parties in late 2014, activating 'cultural plazas' in collaboration with other community partners based along the corridor. The block parties served not only to inform



Figure 37: Oakland is Proud, chain link fence adjacent to EastSide Cultural Center. Photo by author.

¹¹⁴ KTOP TV10 (2014, October 25). Local Press Events – Oakland EastSide Community Block Party. Retrieved from: <https://vimeo.com/111017576>

residents and organize around the upcoming shifts, but also, as Elena explained, to claim as much public space as possible.

‘Oakland is Proud’ was woven into the chain link fence along EastSide’s Cultural Center for the kick off event in October 2014, with two murals painted in a vacant lot adjacent. Low riders paraded down 23rd Street, eventually parking in elegant formation to be admired. Large papier-mâché skeletons were propped up alongside vendors’ booths, one dressed as a Black Panther, another as a Chicano Brown Beret. This block party was celebrating 50 years since the founding of the Black Panthers and Chicano Arts movements, with some of EastSide’s founding members being Black Panther leaders and Chicano muralists who had been practicing in the Fruitvale neighborhood since the 1970s. Artists painted murals in real time, musicians and dancers took the stage, and local artists sold their work. This one-block stretch of International Boulevard, that didn’t often have a great deal of foot traffic, was awakened for an afternoon, demonstrating the cultural intricacies present in the neighborhood. As another active member of EastSide, Maisha Quint, noted,

At EastSide we really believe that culture is the most important weapon that we have in terms of dealing with issues in our community. We wanted to do events like this, the Block Party as a way to bring our neighborhoods together, our allies together.... A way for people to understand how political activism and cultural work are really key in getting necessary changes made in our neighborhoods. The cultural plazas are about celebrating our neighborhoods...our strength and the culture we have is a lot. Oakland has been known for generations as one of the most culturally diverse and dynamic cities in the country. We feel like that’s something to celebrate. This is a chance for us to gather with our neighbors and figure out how as a group to make the changes that we need. We can’t rely on anyone else, we need to do it for ourselves¹¹⁵.

This event, along with the block parties to follow, took up creative placemaking language to ‘activate’ spaces, with the Oakland is Proud series even being funded by the National Endowment for the Arts among other arts foundations. EastSide leaders did this very consciously, well aware

¹¹⁵ L KTOP TV10 (2014, October 25). Local Press Events – Oakland EastSide Community Block Party. Retrieved from: <https://vimeo.com/111017576>

of how to work systems of funding in their favor. EastSide Arts Alliance, however, is different from many efforts to ‘activate space’, for they do not see the vacant lots as ‘blight,’ the way actors from outside the neighborhood might see them. The neighborhoods lining International Boulevard are full of life, culture, and resilience, as Maisha explained. They are not vacant geographies of blight and desolation, as outside developers might see them. What EastSide does see is how, in order to prevent displacement in East Oakland, as the BRT is being built and Oakland housing prices continue to rise, East Oakland residents need to “get plugged in and claim their neighborhood”.



Figure 38: EastSide Art Alliance's Malcolm X Jazz Fest 2015, sign for Black Cultural Zone. Photo by author.

In August of 2015, the third block party was being held at the Rainbow Recreation Center, straddled by Seminary and International. Free plates of food were available, and as people lined up to grab a plate, one of the organizers hollered at the crowd: *This food is for community members. If you don't live here, if you don't work for EastSide or the other orgs, this food isn't for you.* This event, like many others across Oakland, aggressively defended the borders of who qualified as community member. The violence of

the Oakland borderlands made people suspicious, protective of their neighborhoods and people against the imminent threat of dispossession, and EastSide does not shy away from defining these boundaries. On occasion in 2015 flyers for their events would read NO HIPSTERS ALLOWED.

While others have felt threatened by the policing of ‘deserving publics’ (Werth & Marienthal 2016), seen here in the way EastSide vocally defends East Oakland from threat of appropriation and exploitation, I see this defense as part of their possessive investment in the decolonial assemblage they are building. This is a direct response to the way a possessive investment in whiteness hoards white social, cultural, and economic capital (Lipsitz 1995). EastSide has spent more than 30 years organizing around the needs of communities of color in East Oakland, culminating in the creation of their cultural center, which, as EastSide Director Elena Serrano explains:

The way that we got that building is by being a part of the neighborhood, listening to the neighborhood’s concerns, around housing, police, jobs – these are the issues that we were facing in the neighborhood. And a cultural space was presented as what was needed. The disinvestment of the neighborhood shaped those types of demands because culture was seen as a strength. This is a neighborhood that was suffering from a lot of weaknesses, not having funds, not enough jobs, not having enough housing, yet we were rich in culture¹¹⁶.

As Favianna Rodriguez, another of EastSide’s founding members, further elaborates:

In the late 90s, I met a group of artists, Black and Asian artists, and we came together saying how could there not be any cultural centers between Lake Merritt and 101st. And yet this is the concentration, when they talk about Oakland being one of the most multi-racial centers in the country, the concentration of that is along the International boulevard corridor. So we came together to organize to demand a cultural space and cultural centers and an eventual plan for the city to address inequality through the arts¹¹⁷.

The years that EastSide has been organizing around equity in East Oakland, they have been building social and cultural capital for communities of color, offering programming for youth as well as a space for arts practice, performance and social organizing. As the only cultural center at present in East Oakland, they have become the cultural epicenter and voice of the 100 blocks of East Oakland in many ways. Therefore, when EastSide defends its who it gives free plates of food

¹¹⁶ Elena Serrano, speaking at the Oakland Creative Neighborhoods Meeting, January 25, 2017

¹¹⁷ Rodriguez, F. (2016, December 6). East Oakland artist Favianna Rodriguez on the Ghost Ship fire. *KPFA Radio*. Retrieved from: <http://kalw.org/post/east-oakland-artist-favianna-rodriguez-ghost-ship-fire>

to, I see it as a possessive investment in hard-earned capital, rather than the policing of a ‘deserving public’.

Returning to the event, Da’Juan Carter-Woodward, a member of EastSide who has a major role in the Anastasio Project, began to tell the crowd about one of ESAA’s latest political efforts – to create a Black Cultural Zone to occupy a long-vacant building right across the street. *I want everybody to look across the street, see that temple right*



Figure 39: Vacant building at 57th and International that EastSide strives to build into a Black Cultural Zone. Photo by author, 2017.

there? That right there is prime real estate. What we’re trying to think about is a Black business hub. The building he referred to is a huge terracotta brick structure, two stories with a tower in the center, once a clock tower that has since been taken down. It once was the headquarters for Safeway supermarkets, and originally was built in 1928 to house Mutual Stores, an early version of a supermarket that was named by the owner, for he thought the supermarket style of shopping would be ‘mutually beneficial’ to customers and the store owner. At 250,000 square feet, the space is enormous, and EastSide has been actively organizing to lease the building, making a Black Cultural Zone for Black businesses and artists before it gets bought up by outside developers. Kevin Akhidenor, another artist collaborator with EastSide, took the stage and added to Carter-Woodward’s comments. *Right now in Oakland they are building a lot that is not for us. That*

downtown, quote unquote uptown, it's not for us. They are moving us out of Oakland. So we need to have our own cultural zone in the city, the chocolate city. Especially in East Oakland. As Serrano explains,

The work we're doing right now in deep East Oakland is trying to build a black cultural zone, looking at it not just as a cultural district but as a cultural preservation district. Recognizing the community that's there, the richness of the community that's there, and putting things in place to make sure that community can stay put. And culture is going to be a big part of it¹¹⁸.

Another leader of EastSide's collective, Greg Morozumi, spoke further on the value of building a Black cultural hub:

One of the things that is happening in Oakland is that 25% of the black community has already been pushed out in the last 10 years. This is a Black city culturally, historically. One of the things about this black cultural zone is about black community cultural empowerment. Building a foothold - cultural competency is something that we'll need to support. ...Oakland is culturally rich with artists. Culture comes from communities, it doesn't come from the importation of artists into communities. Artists are in communities. Cultural empowerment is about community empowerment¹¹⁹.

The Black cultural zone and hub would serve as a cultural space, but also as a foothold in deep East Oakland for Black employment, education, collective organizing around issues pertinent to the Black community as dispossession looms. Serrano elaborates, "Black people need places to live in Oakland, places to work in Oakland, and places to gather and celebrate. It's not just about making money, it's about building social capital¹²⁰." The decolonial assemblage that EastSide has been building for more than 30 years is invested in creating spaces that can re-territorialize communities of color in Oakland as a means of building greater autonomy. Under territorialization, everything becomes mobile under racial capitalism (Deleuze & Guattari 1987).

¹¹⁸ Elena Serrano, speaking at the Oakland Creative Neighborhoods Meeting, January 25, 2017

¹¹⁹ Greg Morozumi, speaking at the Oakland Creative Neighborhoods Meeting, January 25, 2017

¹²⁰ Bay Area News Group. (2016, May 10). EastSide Arts Alliance and Building a Black Cultural Zone in Oakland. *East Bay Times*. Retrieved from: <http://www.eastbaytimes.com/2016/05/10/oakland-voices-eastside-art-alliance-and-building-a-black-cultural-zone-in-east-oakland/>

These territorialization forces have produced space in Oakland, displacing and dispossessing the city's Black community in particular for generations. Efforts to de- or re-territorialize construct a social space where immanent relations can be produced, thus recast desire to reconstruct space around these immanent relations (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). EastSide's vision for autonomy and re-territorialized relations draws tremendous influence from visions of self-determination of the Black Panther Party, building social and economic capital by owning the systems of production.

José Navarrete, another member of EastSide's collective and producer of EastSide-sponsored performances such as the *Artists in Response to State Violence & Gentrification* showcase and the *Anastasio Project*, spoke explicitly about the role of self-determination in EastSide's vision and assemblage. As Navarrete elaborates, the vision of self-determination that EastSide conduits emerges from their leaderships' roots in the Black Panther Party (BPP), and is inherent in the art practice and social organizing they do:

I believe art is a vehicle...art is to trigger and to make people activate something, a thought or something. But eventually, to really reflect and change their life...one of the things that is really interesting to me is thinking about self determination. Self determination is really powerful and deep to me, in how you have the right to live your life as you want to...When we talk about EastSide, we're not afraid to say the truth, we're not afraid to say these fuckin' mother fucker capitalist pigs, fuck that, fucking white supremacy, fucking racists, this is it. This is what it is. We don't sugar coat it. You know, that is self determination. Whatever you choose to do, whatever project you need to do, it needs to be for you or your community. The whole project about community policing at EastSide is really powerful. We don't need your fucking police. We have our own police, we're going to resolve our problems, get the fuck out of here. We don't fucking trust you – that's the legacy of the Black Panthers. Keeping that legacy is very important for us. As an artist, keeping that legacy and having this self determination, doing what you need to do even though perhaps you won't have the means to do it, they will find their way in the community, that's creativity. (Conversation 1/7/16)

EastSide's vision for their Oakland community, for communities of color in particular, emerges from the Panther's methods of self-determination, and thus EastSide's projects and organizing are largely based upon the Panther's models of autonomy and liberation. These visions intend to create an entirely alternate structure that rework unjust systems present under racial capitalism,

and a big part of this reworking requires land and space in order to be sustainable. EastSide's cultural center, which recently became fully theirs when they paid off their debt on the property in 2015, is a huge factor that enables them to organize and provide their services and cultural engagements. Art and cultural practice are central pieces of Eastside's model of decolonial assemblage, in how these creative mechanisms are utilized to activate a consciousness that drives the decolonial project towards self and community liberation, but the land itself is also essential in their efforts. When considering the decolonial possibility of the Panther's notions of self-determination, it is powerful to consider how self-determination has been taken up in Indigenous decolonial projects. As Michelle Daigle explains, "everyday geographies of self-determination rooted in Indigenous ontologies help us understand that, in some instances, relational responsibility starts with renewing those with the land" (Daigle 2016: 3). Here I encounter more questions than I have answers for. If EastSide is influenced by the BPP's 10-point program and they carry the ontology that the Black community of Oakland requires "land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, peace and people's community control of modern technology" to be free, what is their ultimate vision of land? And does the possession of land that EastSide envisions through the creation of cultural centers offer a decolonial re-envisioning of dispossession?

Assemblage//Possession?

"I am writing to you within this rushing roar of a cartography of our dispossession, we who are future ghosts, we who bury loved ones hoping they will get some rest."

– Morrill et al. 2016: 17

To shift from racial capitalist processes of dispossession to envision a decolonial assemblage, it is necessary to consider if possession is the ultimate goal. Returning to Roy, "if certain subjects are always necessarily dispossessed, or constituted as property owned by others,

how do they claim property? Do such claims also rework claims to personhood?” (2017: 3). Does property or possession hold the key to a decolonial assemblage? Perhaps instead it is staking claim to space under the existing racial capitalist paradigm as we work to disassemble it, but ultimately, a decolonial assemblage requires a disavowal of property and possession entirely. Following Angie Morrill, Eve Tuck and the Super Futures Haunt Collective:

In the sense of “being made” dispossessed: dispossession once referred only to land theft, but now attends to how human lives and bodies matter and don’t matter—through settler colonialism, chattel slavery, apartheid, making extra legal, immoral, alienated (Butler and Anthanasiou, 14). The opposite, the endgame of opposing our dispossession is not possession—not haunting, though I’ll do it if I have to; it is mattering. (2016: 5)

If the endgame to dispossession is mattering, how might decolonial geographies carve a path to making life and land matter differentially. A decolonial future of humanity, life, land and interrelationships. As McKittrick articulates,

The reinvention of black life, and the challenge to our collective consciousness, must be engendered outside the logics of accumulation, land ownership, and profit generation, regardless of racial identification, while also paying close attention to rebellious acts that indict and counterpoeticize a system of knowledge that venerates practices of antiblack racial violence as initiatory acts of humanization. ... It is the process of creating blackness anew within the context of antiblackness that shifts our focus away from perceiving a range of New World inhabitants as differently occupying resolved knowable and distinct noun-places (settler/ property holder/autochthonous/labor unit) and toward the politics of being human as praxis. (2016: 85-86)

The reinvention of Black life, of the lives of the dispossessed, goes beyond possession, beyond the racial capitalist logics McKittrick speaks of. A counterpoeticization of landscape and land, of life and relations, these push us beyond dis/possession and towards ‘the politics of being human as praxis’ – a decolonial praxis.

The streets of East Oakland are not “godless”, as Martin K. White described in his poem on the displacement of Oakland residents. The Black and Brown geographies of the city have deep roots and collective power. *You need to think of everything as yours*. The decolonial assemblage being cultivated by EastSide and others in Oakland is an ongoing process of decolonization. These are alternate geographies that have been present in Oakland, that are being revived and

strengthened as dispossession rounds the corner once more. I cannot say outright that the politics of EastSide are to rework claims to personhood, to shift towards a politics of being human as praxis. However, their energies are the most visionary of any arts-based organizations I have encountered in Oakland, in the sense that they connect the decolonial spirit summoned in arts practice with the decolonial assemblage and struggle for rights to the city and to land. And that to me is where the decolonial transforms from being moments of rupture in the city, to being a revolutionary energy that seeks to subvert racial capitalist assemblages, re-territorialize space, and envision decolonial futures.

CONCLUSION: GHOSTSHIP HAUNTINGS & FUTURES

“I am preparing my future haunting. A haunting born and unmoored from horror, before and beyond dispossession.”

– Morrill et al 2016: 8



Figure 40: Oakland MLK March, January 17, 2017. Photo by author.

We grillin' at the lake today Libby. We drumming at the lake today Libby. We are grillin and drumming at the lake today, Libby. Our lake, our streets, our space. They can't push us up out of here, our Oakland. Whose Streets? Our Streets. Whose streets? Our streets. Cat Brooks

again led the march from the flatbed truck, this time for the annual march on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. We were gathered in the streets to honor Black lives, and as with every march organized by Anti Police Terror Project, intersections were drawn between the Movement for Black Lives and the dispossession of Black peoples in Oakland. The march would end at Lake Merritt, the site where the Samba Funk drummers were cited a year and a half prior, the site where the City has imposed ordinances policing the soundscapes that are allowed to occur there. Grilling on the grassy knolls around the lake, once a common practice, has also been prohibited in recent years, leading many to complain that this too was a byproduct of gentrification that was overtly directed against Black picnickers¹²¹. Thus, the march on MLK day intended to ‘take back’ the lake, grilling and drumming in defiance of the city ordinances, while ensuring that this claiming of public space would ‘leave no trace’. The crowd was lively, and seemed unified and hopeful as we trailed behind the flatbed truck. There were many families present, drumming troops, and a diverse array of collectives representing. A group of Danza Azteca dancers walked behind my kids and me, burning copal and smudging people as they marched. It had the energy of a unified Oakland sharing space, enjoying the last MLK day with our Black president in office, uncertain of what was to come but determined to resist.

This moment of collectivity was refreshing for many Oaklanders, for the city had been in a space of shock over the last month or two. Not only were people still adjusting to the reality that Trump would be inaugurated four days later, but we were reeling from the loss of 36 lives in the Ghostship fire on December 2, 2016. The city seemed to be in shock in the days following the fire, which had gone ablaze just after 11pm on a Friday night in an artist’s warehouse dubbed the ‘Ghostship’ in the Fruitvale neighborhood of Oakland. The warehouse was zoned for industrial

¹²¹ BondGraham, D. (2015, May 19). Oakland Police Threaten to Cite Residents for Barbecues by Lake Merritt. *East Bay Express*. Retrieved from: <http://www.eastbayexpress.com/SevenDays/archives/2015/05/19/oakland-police-threaten-to-cite-residents-for-barbecues-by-lake-merritt>

use, but had been converted into a live/work arts space where a dozen or so artists lived. A DJ was playing in the upstairs performance space of the warehouse on the night of the fire, in a space that was accessible only via a staircase consisting of wooden pallets. Survivors of the fire say that the staircase went up in flames almost immediately, like kindling, leaving the party attendees trapped upstairs. 36 lives were lost, nearly all in their 20s or 30s, and for the days following the fire the city held its breath as the death toll



Figure 41: Memorial in front of Ghostship site. Photo by author, 2016.

rose and the names of the victims were released. I received text messages from friends across the city and even across the country, making sure I wasn't inside. I sent similar messages to my friends. It shook us. News crews arrived from all over the world, setting up a press station on 31st and International. Memorials were set up around the site and across the city, some left walls full of handwritten notes in the victims' workplaces. Altars to lives lost were set up around Lake Merritt, with dried flowers and photos remaining even now, three months later. The lingering scent of smoke in East Oakland, where I live, added to the haunting that overtook the city.

The Ghostship fire was a horrific event, and the tremendous loss of life produced a wide swath of critique across the media. The tenant who managed the arts space was critiqued for not ensuring the space was safe for the events it hosted and the lives that lived within. The property owner was critiqued for letting the building fall into disarray, and for refusing to comment on the event, seemingly unconcerned about the people who had lived inside. The City was critiqued for not having conducted proper fire inspections, for turning a blind eye to people living in a warehouse space zoned for industry. Articles emerged that broke down how the Ghostship fire was caused by the Bay Area's inadequate response to the housing crisis, with one tenant reporting he paid \$565 a month to rent the space when the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Oakland is more than \$2,000¹²². Other articles commented that the housing crisis pushed artists in particular into unsafe spaces, since they see affordable arts spaces as a necessity and a right, and yet the lack of options forces people into precarious living situations¹²³. Others contend that the informality of the warehouse space made it into a safe haven for a collective lifestyle that more conventional housing situations did not, despite its dangers, calling out the paradox of the creative city in theory and in practice:

The Ghost Ship represented a type of outlaw urbanism that has been at work for decades in those parts of cities that have been abandoned by capitalism...while local governments might apathetically ignore building and fire code violations, or only provide police forces who, rather than attending to the protection of the community, are focused on the management and containment of semi-employed surplus populations, these host cities continue to benefit in direct and indirect ways from these informal 'creative' zones¹²⁴.

¹²² Grabar, H. (2016, December 6). Blame the Bay Area's Housing Crisis for the Ghost Ship Fire. *Slate*. Retrieved from: http://www.slate.com/blogs/moneybox/2016/12/06/blame_the_bay_area_housing_crisis_for_the_ghost_ship_fire.html

¹²³ Lefebvre, S. (2016, December 6). After Ghost Ship Fire, Oakland DIY Grapples With a Broken System. *Pitchfork*. Retrieved from: <http://pitchfork.com/thepitch/1383-after-ghost-ship-fire-oakland-diy-grapples-with-a-broken-system/>

¹²⁴ Sholette, G. (2016, December 28). The Ghost Ship Fire and the Paradox of a "Creative City". *Hyperallergic*. Retrieved from: http://hyperallergic.com/347287/the-ghost-ship-fire-and-the-paradox-of-a-creative-city/?utm_source=sumome&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=sumome_share

The Ghostship was a vessel for containing surplus populations, precariously employed and housed, which not only provided an impermanent solution for the city's lack of adequate housing options but also helped to reap the value the artists provided the city. "By turning a blind eye towards such mixed-use cultural spaces, the municipality gains an inexpensive engine for the production of innovative cultural commodities and services that are central to the 'creative city' economic model" (Sholette 2016). The warehouse space itself could thus serve as an incubator for capital, temporarily housing the artists that add value to the city while enabling the property itself to gradually increase in value as the city continues to gentrify, thanks in part to the artists themselves. Over time the artists would eventually be displaced as property values increase and the warehouse is sold for redevelopment, serving racial capitalist regimes. The Ghostship, in theory, fit in quite well to the "artist as fertilizer" Creative City method.

Complicating what the Ghostship fire represents even further, is how artists of color have responded to the positioning of the artists in the discourse of gentrification in Oakland. Favianna Rodriguez, an artist and cultural worker who is native to Oakland's Fruitvale neighborhood, was invited to speak on the tragedy on a KPFA radio show the week following the fire. As Rodriguez explained, the Fruitvale neighborhood, where the Ghostship warehouse was located, is a predominantly Latino immigrant neighborhood:

This incident, and what it brings up, is a combination of a number of factors. It is gentrification – but when we use this word it is a bit oversimplified – in a way many of the artists that are coming in before the big wave of development, many of the artists are acting in a way that is gentrifying the neighborhood. Gentrification for me doesn't just happen along economic models, it happens along models of how the community is not engaged and integrated into a thriving relationship¹²⁵.

Rodriguez raises another level of the Ghostship fire, in which she critiques the way that the artists are being portrayed as victims of gentrification, when Rodriguez sees the tenants of the Ghostship

¹²⁵ Rodriguez, F. (2016, December 6). East Oakland artist Favianna Rodriguez on the Ghost Ship fire. *KPFA Radio*. Retrieved from: <http://kalw.org/post/east-oakland-artist-favianna-rodriguez-ghost-ship-fire>

as also playing a role in the gentrification of the Fruitvale neighborhood. On her Facebook page Rodriguez spoke about how her mother worked across the street from the Ghostship warehouse, and no one in the vicinity knew who the residents were because they were so disengaged from the neighborhood. *Eran güeros en ese espacio*, the neighbors told her, they were white folks in that space¹²⁶. What she is raising here is not only a critique of how warehouse residents were being framed as victims of gentrification by the media after the fire, but also how the artists in the warehouse were complicit in fueling the displacement of their Latino neighbors and their lack of engagement with the local community was to the detriment of both parties.

Rodriguez sees a connection between the lack of safety precautions present in the warehouse and the artists' lack of engagement and/or accountability with the local community.

As she explains,

When I see spaces that feel like fortresses, it worries me, because what that says is that there is little accountability being built. I also think that as artists, we have to understand that our spaces are public, our audiences don't come in one color or one age group, we have diverse audiences – as artists, that is our power, that we can speak to many people. And so, we need to understand that when we gather people, we have to think about them. Our consideration is around how do we not just make them have a great time and feel joy and feel the power of the art, but also keep them safe. And when I think about the question of safety that is built in, because I'm integrated to my community and I understand the impacts of what is happening because of police presence, because of gentrification, I understand that impact on my community¹²⁷.

Rodriguez takes issue with the way the artists running the Ghostship managed the space with disregard, not taking the safety of their residents and visitors into consideration, and ties this carelessness to a lack of integration into the local neighborhood. When the interviewer spoke to

¹²⁶ Facebook page of Favianna Rodriguez. Accessed 1/17/17: <https://www.facebook.com/favianna>

¹²⁷ Rodriguez, F. (2016, December 6). East Oakland artist Favianna Rodriguez on the Ghost Ship fire. *KPFA Radio*. Retrieved from: <http://kalw.org/post/east-oakland-artist-favianna-rodriguez-ghost-ship-fire>

how many articles were coming out saying the artists who managed the space couldn't be held accountable for the lack of safety, Rodriguez responded:

That's the same argument that is used when mostly white spaces are not working towards racial justice – it's this excuse that 'well that's just the way it is'. And for some spaces that's the way it is, but when you're coming into a community that's already been heavily impacted and gentrified, and we're dealing with a place where over 25% of Oakland's Black population has left, we have to understand the history, the geography of a place. And so for me it's not as easy as that – I've heard some artists in some interviews, saying well, we live in the margins, we're very DIY, we don't deal well with authorities. DIY means do it yourself, and I think that's irresponsible. I'm not saying to be in bed with the city, I'm just saying to take considerations of safety and accessibility, those things emerge when you work with the people. The people will demand it¹²⁸.

This carelessness, Rodriguez argues, not only led to the unnecessary loss of 36 lives, but extends beyond the warehouse space itself. She sees the lack of sensitivity to safety needs as being directly related to how the Ghostship residents lacked engagement in the Fruitvale neighborhood – that there is a general lack of accountability amongst the DIY artist culture that keeps it insulated from the neighborhoods and residents that they live amongst.

Rodriguez goes on to critique the way that displacement of artists is being framed in the media and how this has effectively erased the long history of how artists of color have organized against displacement in Oakland.

There is a narrative of displacement that is still very white. It creates this blanket narrative that assumes all artists are kind of trying to put together these programs and spaces, struggling, doing it as they go, and it's independent and unaccountable. Well that's not correct – there are a lot of folks who are getting it right. You know, displacement, it's not new. It's been happening since 2000 here in Oakland, and many of us have understood that for the long-term gains of our communities, we really needed to build people power to have changes. And many Black and Latino artists have been at the forefront of making sure we have the spaces, because our histories are here, our people are here. Displacement is not just of where we live, it's the displacement of culture, of how we gather and build power. Arts and culture is such an important part of our survival, as people of color who are living in literally, war times. And so I don't like that over-simplified narrative, it makes people think artists are just one way¹²⁹.

¹²⁸ Ibid

¹²⁹ Ibid.

Rodriguez locates artists of color to counter how the discourse around artists and gentrification that had emerged in Oakland after the Ghostship fire is one that effectively erases artist of color from the conversation and further displaces their needs amidst the housing crisis. Other artists echoed these sentiments when I attended the first Oakland Creative Neighborhoods meeting after the fire in January 2017: how the Ghostship has pushed the discourse around gentrification to highlight the plight of artists living in precarious warehouse spaces, and how this is effectively erasing the precarity that people of color have been living through in Oakland for years now. As one OCNC coalition member, Needa Bee, wrote on Facebook,

This push around affordable housing and access to artists spaces needs to be framed and centered around poor and working class people of color. I'm not getting behind a movement that framed and centered and led by gentrifiers demanding housing, I'm getting behind the long time oaklanders born and raised in The Town who HAVE BEEN demanding low income housing and developments for the poor and working class communities of color (that includes artists). I'm getting behind the formation of a Black Arts Movement Business District in downtown/west oakland led by black elders. and I'm getting behind the formation of a Black Arts District in deep east led by the East Side Arts Alliance. And if and when there is a push to preserve and expand and establish a Raza arts business district ill get behind that too. All the white new comers who are suddenly organizing themselves around housing in the wake of the ghostship fire need to get behind the black and brown folks who have BEEN ORGANIZING for arts districts and support those movements!¹³⁰

As Bee cautions, now that the Ghostship fire has raised attention to the intersection between the housing crisis and the precarity of artists, there is a need for people to put their energy behind organizations led by people of color who are already organizing around these issues, such as OCNC. And at the first OCNC meeting after the fire, on January 25, 2017, there was a good turnout with many new people in attendance. However, there are already new organizations popping up in Oakland that are trying to lobby the city to take action, such as Safer DIY Spaces Oakland, We

¹³⁰ Facebook page of Maowunyo de Asis. Accessed 2/11/17:
<https://www.facebook.com/needa.bee.5?fref=nf>

the Artists of the Bay Area (with one of its leaders being Jon Sarriguarte, the steel-work artist who created Libby Schaaf's fire-breathing snail car), and the Oakland Warehouse Coalition.

Within a week after the Ghostship fire, the Oakland Warehouse Coalition (OWC) had been formed, circulating a petition on social media to direct the city to make a greater effort to protect artists from displacement. On their Facebook page, the OWC self-defines as: “advocates for the rights of low-income Oaklanders who live and/or work in industrial spaces. All-inclusive and privilege-aware¹³¹.” The group has acted quickly, petitioning the city to prevent the closure of warehouse spaces in the city, as well as aligning themselves to address the rapid increase in homeless encampments around Oakland. By December 23rd, only three weeks after the fire, the OWC submitted an emergency tenant protection ordinance with the city administrator's office to temporarily halt evictions of residents from commercial properties and to prevent the red-tagging of buildings for violations that are deemed not life-threatening. As a result, Oakland City Council convened a special full council meeting to address the ordinance on January 23, 2017, and while the council agreed to make December 2nd ‘Ghostship Remembrance Day’, the ordinance was stalled by the council. City council wished to take the time to compare the OWC's ordinance with an executive order that Mayor Libby Schaaf had released on January 11th, titled “Improving Safety of Non-Permitted Spaces While Avoiding Displacement”, which allocated 60 days for several city agencies to address safety in warehouse spaces and to work with property owners to correct space issues in that time. While the order asks landlords not to displace tenants unless the conditions are found to be life-threatening, there is no language written into the order that explicitly prevents displacement.

While the OWC's incredibly fast and thorough response to the Ghostship fire tragedy is encouraging when it comes to protecting the housing situation of warehouse residents, their

¹³¹ Facebook page of the Oakland Warehouse Coalition. Accessed 2/11/17:
<https://www.facebook.com/OaktownWarehouseCoalition/>

ordinance does not extend much further than that – it primarily introduces amendments to protect residents living within commercially-zoned spaces. As the ordinance remains in a holding pattern until City Council moves it forward, the OWC turned their attention to assist the homeless encampments that have been rapidly increasing across Oakland, especially as San Francisco voters passed legislation making it illegal to pitch tents on sidewalks in the November 2016 election¹³². On February 10th OWN produced a budget request to the City Administrator for \$299,000 to pay for sanitary services for 27 homeless encampments across Oakland to “support basic human rights for our extremely low- and zero-income neighbors¹³³”. Returning to the points raised by Favianna Rodriguez and Needa Bee, despite OWC’s rapid and seemingly effective organizing, they appear to be acting with blatant disregard for the actions that Oakland activists of color have been organizing around for years. Responding to OWC’s announcement on Facebook, Needa Bee identified herself as one of the organizers of The Village, a semi-permanent housing encampment that took over a “neglected public plot of land known as Grove Shafter Park” in West Oakland as an action on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, January 21st, 2017. The Village organizers built small insulated homes and created a hot shower, a portable kitchen, a healing clinic, and a free shop with clothing, toiletries, and books. As they explain on their Facebook page, the Village:

Aims to demonstrate through their visionary encampment that housing is a human right. They also hope to demonstrate that, in the face of a city government that fails to meet the needs of its people, it is possible for the community to unite to serve those on the street in a dignified and humane manner. The group challenges the inaction of the City of Oakland, saying that the City has proven not been to be disloyal to its long term families displaced in this city-initiated housing crisis. The group also claims that the City has not implemented sufficient efforts to address homelessness, such as building permanent

¹³² Interestingly, a sit-lie ordinance was proposed in 2010 by then-SF Mayor Gavin Newsom and failed due to widespread public opposition. In 2016, the ordinance passed

¹³³ Facebook page, Oakland Warehouse Coalition, Posted February 10, 2017. Accessed 2/12/17: <https://www.facebook.com/OaktownWarehouseCoalition/posts/1816843515245872>

public housing, starting with for those who have been displaced by the housing crisis, particularly Black and Brown people¹³⁴.

After having more than 130 people sign up to have small homes built for them, and 16 elderly residents housed in the four small houses built thus far, the Village was razed by city officials on February 2nd, only three weeks after its emergence.

As organizers behind the Village continue to push the city to take immediate action to house the estimated three to four thousand unhoused people on the streets in Oakland, Oakland Warehouse Coalition presented its budget request to the City Administrator without consulting the Village organizers or other homeless advocates. Village organizer Needa Bee wrote the following in response to OWC's submitted budget request:

hey this is needa from #TheVillage aka #ThePromiseLand. we were told you turned this proposal in. just for your info, #FeedThePeople which is one of the organizations that started #TheVillage has been working in 4 dozen homeless encampments for more than a year. The meeting that the city held this past Tuesday that representatives from your group went to - a meeting spurred on by the bold direct action by #TheVillage - is where this funding was announced. did it occur to you to attempt to reach out to anyone from #TheVillage or #FeedThePeople? if you had, you would have learned we currently have a fundraising campaign to provide portapotties and handwashing stations to the 4 dozen encampments we serve. and our budget is NO WHERE CLOSE to the \$300K you are asking for. this feel very weird to myself and other folks (including homeless members of the promise land) cuz who are ya'll. **we thought you were a artist housing and space group? And, didnt your collective fundraising efforts bring in nearly \$2 million. whats going on? this is very similar to how yall grabbed a torch for "OAKLAND'S ARTIST COMMUNITY" without reaching out the artists that have been born and raised here. #FeedThePeople is made up of mostly black and brown folks from The Town. many of the homeless folks in the streets are friends, family members and loved ones who were born and raised in The Town. many of us have dealt with homelessness in oakland ourselves. this is the very same feeling as when this group started. i would highly suggest you figure out a way to work with the folks who have been on the streets putting in the work. its not a good look to jump in and grab up funding without talking to the very group that meeting on tuesday was supposed to be with: a meeting we were never invited to!** how ironic.the meeting was supposed to have been made because of #TheVillage and the SOLUTIONS we manifested with zero dollars in our broke ass pockets and ya'll just show up and swoop in on the public funds the second they are offered. good ole oportunism capitalism. and by the way - this is what co-optation of a movement looks like. this is what it looks like to thwart the attempt of a community

¹³⁴ Facebook page, The Village in Oakland. Accessed 2/12/17: https://www.facebook.com/pg/The-Village-in-Oakland-feedthepeople-731643677003021/about/?ref=page_internal

exerting its self governance, its self determination in the midst of modern day settler colonialism. i cant believe yall didnt even think or attempt to contact #TheVillage.

and just for the record #FeedThePeople is not a non profit. we are mamas and papas and grandparents and uncles and aunties and homies and comrads who cant stand what is happening to The Town. and #TheVillage is HUNDREDS of people of oakland housed and unhoused. wouldnt it have been principled to have reached out to us on some level?

this move sends this message: you would prioritize working with the city that has displaced Black and Brown familes before you actually work directly with the displaced Black and Brown families. deep shit right there.

once last thing - the entire movement that spurred the meeitng on tuesday to even happen in the first place had a call: #HomesForAll. that is what we have been calling for!!!! that money needs to go towards housing, especially since we are already fundraising for portapotties and handwashing stations. omg. what a totally upsurp of the movement! we want homes that have toilets and running water. you jump ahead and direct the money on sanitation and say fuck the housing. i cant believe this shit. thanks for changing the momentum of the movement from @HomesForAll to #ToiletsForAll. jeezus christ¹³⁵.

I quote this Facebook post in its entirety for it speaks to the complexity of Oakland as a borderland, particularly after the Ghostship fire. A select subset of Oakland's artist community was rallied after the Ghostship fire into taking action and making the city more accountable to the needs of people at risk of displacement by the housing crisis. However, as Bee has illustrated at length above, the artists behind OWC are acting without paying mind to the organizing that people of color have had underway in Oakland for some time. As a result, OWC has essentially 'coopted a movement' as Bee describes, not only making the #HomesForAll movement into a #ToiletsForAll movement due to their ignorance to or disregard of unhoused peoples organizing such as the Village, but they have also utilized the Ghostship tragedy to co-opt existing artists of color organizing around the housing crisis¹³⁶.

Writing these lines feels painfully reminiscent of lines I've written before (Ramirez 2011, 2015), in the ways that naïve and well-meaning white folks organize around an issue, attracting a

¹³⁵ [sic], emphasis added. Facebook page, Oakland Warehouse Coalition, Posted February 10, 2017. Accessed 2/12/17: <https://www.facebook.com/OaktownWarehouseCoalition/posts/1816843515245872>

¹³⁶ As of March 6, 2017, the Oakland Warehouse Coalition has yet to respond to Bee's comments on their Facebook page.

lot of attention and capital due to the social capital they bring to the table, effectively displacing existing movements run by people of color by attracting more resources to fuel their cause. Let it be known that this was never the intention of this research, to replicate this compare-and-contrast study of racialized organizing, and yet the crisis of the Ghostship fire has brought this theme to the surface once more. I suppose then that this final anecdote comes out of a space of necessity, for there is no way I could write about art and displacement in Oakland from 2014-2016 without including the Ghostship fire, and also as a means of putting a final nail in the coffin of this research to highlight the underlying thread of this work. As I stated in the introduction when I first started writing this dissertation, I focus on artists of color in particular because of their explicit investment in fending off displacing forces of the city, and for their lived experiences of racialized violence that occur in Oakland on a daily basis. When majority-white groups like the Oakland Warehouse Coalition emerge, claiming to act on behalf of all artists, they are not fully aware of the complexity of issues that are displacing people in Oakland, and how this displacement is deeply intertwined with other forms of dispossession and violence. They are not fully aware, as essentialist as this may sound, because their actions demonstrate a deep disconnection from the Oakland neighborhoods they live in. So while I am not arguing that a white-led organization or arts collective cannot effectively address displacement with the broader communities suffering in mind, I am arguing that organizations and coalitions led by Oakland residents of color tend to have a more acute awareness for these issues by nature of their positioning within the city.

Ultimately, as this project has highlighted, displacement and gentrification need to be addressed in tandem with other forms of racial capitalist state violence. Prominent Fruitvale graffiti artist, Peps 357, reacted to the Ghostship fire and how it altered the narrative of Oakland displacement in a way that is detrimental to the city's low-income residents and communities of color most affected by forms of dispossession:

I was asked to paint [the Ghostship] venue last year and I declined because it was clearly not a benefit to the neighborhood to push this mass influx of affluent burning man types

in my neighborhood since I've been in the Fruitvale uninterruptedly my whole life and now people have lost their lives due to negligence...the real mockery will be if no one is held responsible at some level or another. Because safety in low income people of color neighborhood always seems to be a non-existent priority which is why the alt-art scene is usually drawn to those places they gravitate to them because of low safety standards which furthers the displacement of people from their neighborhoods. Deaths are a daily occurrence in this neighborhood and anyone who lives in it and is connected to it knows that 99% of the time it's overlooked unless there is sensationalism attached to it. Watch the mayor milk all this attention and watch this be a rallying point for people to further gentrification and hurt community organizations.¹³⁷.

As Peps 357 explains, the focus on the Ghostship residents as victims of Oakland's housing crisis overlooks the complexity of the art warehouse's existence in the first place. He draws attention to the fact that the industrial arts space was attractive to artists not only because of lower property values common within neighborhoods of color, but also ties the lack of safety enforcement in neighborhoods of color to the devaluation of Black and Brown lives. As I argued in Chapter Three, the City appears to value lives lost in proximity to whiteness as property more than those occurring amongst Black and Brown geographies alone, which raises the question, would the deaths of the Ghostship fire have 'mattered' as much or would the tragedy had received the attention that it did if so many young white lives were not involved? Lives lost in catastrophe do get press, and yet certain deaths are deemed more grieve-able than others, more tragic, while others are simply rationalized as normative or self-imposed (Cacho 2012). Perhaps then, this is why the discourse of displacement in Oakland was so profoundly altered by the Ghostship fire, and why I must close up this project with additional questions. What was the value of the displaced in Oakland before they were made legible as white and creative? How will the Ghostship haunt the future of anti-displacement art-activism in Oakland?

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This project has woven a contemporary archive of art-activism in Oakland from 2014-2016. It is not meant to be an exhaustive archive, but rather a thread between those three years

¹³⁷ Instagram account of @357peps, posted December 8, 2016. Accessed 12/8/2016.

that makes these complex topographies legible, centering the geographies of artists of color amidst the borderland that is Oakland. Knitting together theories of racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and the borderlands, this project pushes urban studies of/around gentrification to expand their theorizations towards racialized dispossession. I argued that by considering dispossession, not only are sites of urban crisis in the Global North more easily put into conversations with sites of the Global South, but dispossession unravels temporal boundaries between ongoing forms of colonial dispossession. Dispossession thus enables a broader theorization of urban crisis across geographic and temporal variation, calling attention to the ways that the same racialized populations, which I called the diaspora of dispossession, are denied the right of possession, home, or even full humanity. If studies of gentrification seek to be politically attentive to ‘planetary urbanism’, I argue it is necessary to center the dispossessed in analyses of urban crises and draw connection to broader patterns of racial capitalism and colonialism. In the second chapter I attempted to do just that, delving into histories and geographies of racialized dispossession in Oakland, focusing on the city’s Black geographies in particular while being attentive to the city’s Indigenous and Latino communities that are often erased by a false Black-White binary.

In the third chapter I sought to disrupt normalized notions of the creative city, suggesting that analyses of creative city processes need to nuance their framing of artists within gentrifying cityscapes. I argued that creative city narratives frame the ‘creative class’ as an incoming population with the ability to transform the landscape, effectively framing existing populations as un-creative, their geographies un-meaningful. I demonstrated how Oakland does not fit neatly into this prescribed creative city formula, with the city’s artists of color disrupting the trope of the artist as white creative newcomer. Introducing the Oakland Creative Neighborhoods Coalition, I revealed the ways that longtime Oakland residents too are artists, and how they are using their art practice to resist redevelopment and gentrifying forces in the city. Employing the term *rasquache* geographies, I considered how Black and Brown spatial imaginaries too are creative

geographies whose aesthetics give meaning and life to the city of Oakland. I went on to critique the creative city ideology of the City of Oakland, and how the creative city imaginary that the City has been cultivating to attract capital to Oakland has appropriated the work of artists of color while doing little to keep them from being displaced as the city is rapidly being developed. Lastly, I consider the trope of the hipster as representative of white millennial urbanity, and how discourses of authenticity along with the outmigration from San Francisco during the tech boom have made Oakland the new frontier for white millennial desire.

The fourth and final chapter delves into how art-activism produced by artists of color are creating decolonial moments of rupture in the city of Oakland. Beginning by outlining the range of decolonial literature I am bringing to this conversation, I consider how the decolonial can create spatial as well as temporal ruptures. From there, I engage with the decolonial geographies in Oakland art-activism by considering the decolonial through a conversation of decolonial spirit, as well as decolonial assemblage. I weave these theorizations throughout a series of scenes or events that I witnessed over the past three years in Oakland, highlighting the ways that the art practiced by the artists and organizations engaged are creating decolonial moments and assemblages of possibility. Ultimately, this chapter strives to theorize decolonial geographies, and how the art practiced creates moments and openings for decolonial futures to be envisioned.

There are still loose ends here, considering that I am citing conversations that occurred as I finished writing this text, and as Black, Brown, Muslim, and migrant communities have already come under attack under the new regime, the uncertainty has bled into this document itself. What has become even more apparent in these early weeks of 2017 is that the borderlands are expanding, beyond the site of the U.S.-Mexico border—the borderlands are saturating the landscape of the entire United States. The theorizations I have woven into this text demonstrate how the forms of racialized dispossession this nation's sovereign border polices, have extended into the geographies of the city. While the surveillance of the border has always extended beyond

its tangible site for undocumented migrants, the violence of the borderlands now polices the space of the city, appropriating city space and making low-income residents and people of color uneasy, out of place. The hostile regime we now live under reinforces this racialization of space, and has re-asserted white supremacy as the dominant mode of governance, the meaning embedded in the mantra of Making America Great Again. The borderlands have now become normalized in space, be it in the “Liberal” gentrifying city, or the rural suburb—Black, Brown and Indigenous peoples have been notified that we must return to a state of submission if we wish to survive.

What might resistance look like, then, as we enter a new (or rehashed) phase of white supremacy? As I have argued throughout this text, people of color, particularly artists of color in the case of Oakland, are leading intersectional activist movements that are not only resisting present injustices but envisioning decolonial futures. Art is a key piece of this activism, of the broader Anti-Trump movement gaining momentum. While this regime is ominous and holds an unprecedented amount of power, leading this country towards autocracy and kleptocracy, the ruptures created by the resistance movement carry the seeds of revolution, of a future that dismantles the racist and patriarchal abhorrence being funneled into the state. Art cultivates these seeds in the ways that it pushes minds to the limits of their imagination, to the limits of what seems real or possible. And for this reason artists of color are crucial to the future of the resistance; the intersectional oppressions people of color face make them uniquely capable of not only addressing these knotted violences, but also imagining futures beyond the oppression in which liberation is a reality and not just a dream.

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