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Painting over precarity: Community public art and the optics of dispossession, gentrification and governance in West Oakland, CA

ABSTRACT

Large-scale arts-led urban regeneration strategies are typically distinguished from the grassroots authenticity of community art projects, but this article examines how the trope of community facilitates gentrification in Oakland, California. Community murals of the 1960s to 1990s played a critical social role by making visible minority concerns and galvanizing movements for social justice, but questions emerge about contemporary community art in relation to neoliberal values and urban precarity. The Black neighbourhood of West Oakland has been resistant to gentrification due to decades of disinvestment and through robust activism against displacement in one of the most progressive cities in the United States. Based on longitudinal ethnographic research and situated visual analysis,

I show how neighbourhood resistance was only overcome when change appeared to come from the 'community' itself, through the specific imagery and spatiality of community mural projects that resignify the neighbourhood to accommodate gentrification. I critique gentrification as a dualistic insider and outsider dynamic; such structural analysis elides 'community' as a contested category that may be complicit with urban restructuring. Real-estate interests also appropriate signifiers of 'community' to reshape neighbourhood identity, valorize property, and police public space. I argue that in West Oakland the 'community mural' is vertically integrated in municipal and capital logics that serve to dis-embed, rather than support, historic neighbourhood populations.

During a mural tour sponsored by an Uptown Art Gallery in Oakland, California, the professional artist and muralist who led the tour described the current period in Oakland as a 'mural explosion'. Uptown was the site of multi-million-dollar redevelopment projects in the late-1990s, but many impressive large-scale murals have been painted since 2011, the same period in which economic recovery has fuelled gentrification in Oakland. Curiously, international artists painted the majority of artworks. One mural by South African artist Ricky Lee Gordon featured a fine arts aesthetic, but the liberal-humanist sentiment of the piece seemed out of touch with widespread anti-racist resistance in the United States, including Black Lives Matter and the Anti-Police Terror Project in Oakland. A mural by Austrian artist Nychos stretched a full city block; his signature animal dissection imagery reassured hipster edginess during a market-rate construction boom. The guide ended the mural tour by stating, 'the art that the City is using to *promote* the city is also *erasing*…'.

This vignette foregrounds contradictions in the visual production of space in Oakland, California, a mid-sized city of 425,000 directly east of San Francisco, where rampant gentrification from the expanding information technology sector shapes one of the most unequal regions in the United States (Walker 2018; Maharawal and McElroy 2018; Tracy 2014). In contrast to the globally recognizable symbolic capital of Uptown murals, in this article I focus on public art in the adjacent district of West Oakland, a disinvested Black neighbourhood where recent community art projects aim for cultural uplift, but the specific imagery and location of these works raises questions about the role of community murals in contested neighbourhood space. The gentrification literature is dominated by a 'stages theory' through rent gaps and property speculation (Smith 2002; Slater 2017; Lees, Slater and Wyly 2010), but a teleological approach elides situated, contingent and historically specific approaches to urban restructuring (Brenner and Theodore 2002; McElroy and Werth 2019). This article contributes to analyses of gentrification by focusing on specific visual strategies and everyday processes through which decades of neighbourhood disinvestment transform into a site of capital reinvestment.

West Oakland has been resistant to gentrification for three main reasons: extreme disinvestment since the 1980s, robust anti-gentrification activism (including protests, direct-action eviction defence, and arson fires at new condo construction sites), and attachment to place since it was a primary destination for Black migrants arriving in California during the Second World War. People living in this impoverished neighbourhood experience high levels of violence, generational trauma, slow response times for emergencies, inadequate schools, little public safety, public dumping, streets strewn

with used needles, and a general sense of abandonment (De Giorgi 2017).[1] At the same time, Oakland has been described as the 'Last Refuge of Radical America' (Mahler 2012); its diverse demographics include Black, Latinx, Asian and white populations, and a history of activism including the founding of the Black Panther Party in 1966, international solidarity actions at the port by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU Local 10), and the militancy of Occupy Oakland. West Oakland is favourably located directly across the bay from San Francisco and yet Oakland's political radicalism, racial difference, and entrenched poverty – along with its 'hella' cool brand as a diverse, liberal city – encumber aggressive strategies of urban restructuring (Lynch et al. 2013).

Based on long-term ethnographic research in West Oakland, I show how neighbourhood resistance was only overcome when change appeared to come from the 'community' itself, particularly through community mural projects that remake the visual landscape to accommodate gentrification. Community public art tends to be viewed as a direct and unmediated expression of community as culturally homogenous, but scholars have critiqued definitions of culture as uniform, bounded and timeless, including the 'assumed isomorphism of space, place, and culture' (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 7; Appadurai 1990). In her recent book *Latinx Art*, Arlene Dávila emphasizes cultural heterogeneity and the need to problematize minoritarian identity categories in relation to place and class differences (2020). Critical approaches to 'community' emphasize its discursive power (Creed 2006; Clarke 2014), as claims of community representation may legitimize processes of urban restructuring. A pertinent example of political differences within a racial category occurred in the November 2020 election, when two Black women competed to be West Oakland's District 3 representative. Housing activist Carroll Fife won against an incumbent who held office since 2013, had ties to real-estate interests, and had done little to alleviate poverty and displacement.

California has a rich history of mural painting influenced by revolutionary Mexican muralists in the 1930s; community murals of the 1960s to 1990s emerged from civil rights movements and played an important social role by making visible minority concerns, producing alternative histories, and galvanizing movements for social justice. However, the highly imagined quality of 'community' can easily be claimed and manipulated, particularly with the neoliberal expansion of commercial interests into all aspects of life and culture (Brown 2015). Despite scholarly critiques of 'community' as a trope, in everyday life community art retains a powerful sense of grassroots authenticity, appears innocent through the involvement of children, and is rarely subject to critique – these same qualities make it an ideal 'Trojan Horse' for gentrification. My analysis of community murals critiques arts-led regeneration analyses that base the political content of public art on the point of production in socioeconomic structure, such as 'flagship' and state projects in contrast to community art, positioned as counter-hegemonic.

I argue that the imagery and spatiality of 'community public art' in West Oakland significantly changed the meaning of neighbourhood space to accommodate gentrification, and I thereby critique gentrification as an insider and outsider dynamic. Despite contentiousness in the gentrification literature, a consistent feature is the displacement of a lower-income group by a higher-income group (Lees, Slater and Wyly 2010), but this dualistic construction elides 'community' as a contested category through which various interests may be complicit in gentrification processes. West Oakland mural projects

1. 'Violence in Oakland: A Public Health Crisis', Alameda County Violent Death Reporting System 2002–2004, Alameda County Public Health Department, December 2006. In West Oakland, De Giorgi (2017) cites 48 per cent unemployment, 44 per cent of families below the poverty line and a 50–70 per cent probability of incarceration among Black men without a high school diploma.

create virtual presence of the Black community through depoliticized signifiers in the context of aggressive displacement; Oakland's Black population fell from 36 per cent in 2000 to under 25 per cent by 2015 and it continues to decline (Walker 2018: 207). Murals beautify disinvested areas, but dreamscapes and nostalgic themes demonstrate little engagement with contemporary concerns and instead produce invitational space against negative signifiers of blight. Real-estate interests also mimic community public art to enact the simulacra of community as a strategy for policing urban space and valorizing property. In West Oakland, I argue that the 'community mural' is vertically integrated in municipal and capital logics that serve to dis-embed, rather than support, historic neighbourhood populations.

METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT

West Oakland has three distinct sections and I research the area that borders Emeryville, in the neighbourhoods of Clawson and Hoover-Foster, known as Dogtown and Ghost Town in urban lore (indicated by rectangle in Figure 1). Ghost Town references abandoned houses and gang-related deaths; the name also describes the casualties of perpetual everyday crisis who wander, ghost-like, from heroin addiction. The mixed-use area near Saint Andrews Plaza at 32nd Street and San Pablo Avenue includes African American homeowners and renters, low-income artists living in self-converted warehouses, one loft development with middle-class urban professionals, along with a large street population of sex workers, people with drug addictions, and the homeless.

Methodologically, this project conjoins longitudinal ethnography and auto-ethnography, spatially informed visual analysis, and a multi-scalar political economic approach. My relationship with this neighbourhood is both personal and as a researcher. I lived in San Francisco for many years as a musician and activist (and graduate student in the late-1990s), until I was displaced during the first 'dot com' boom and moved into an affordable multiracial household
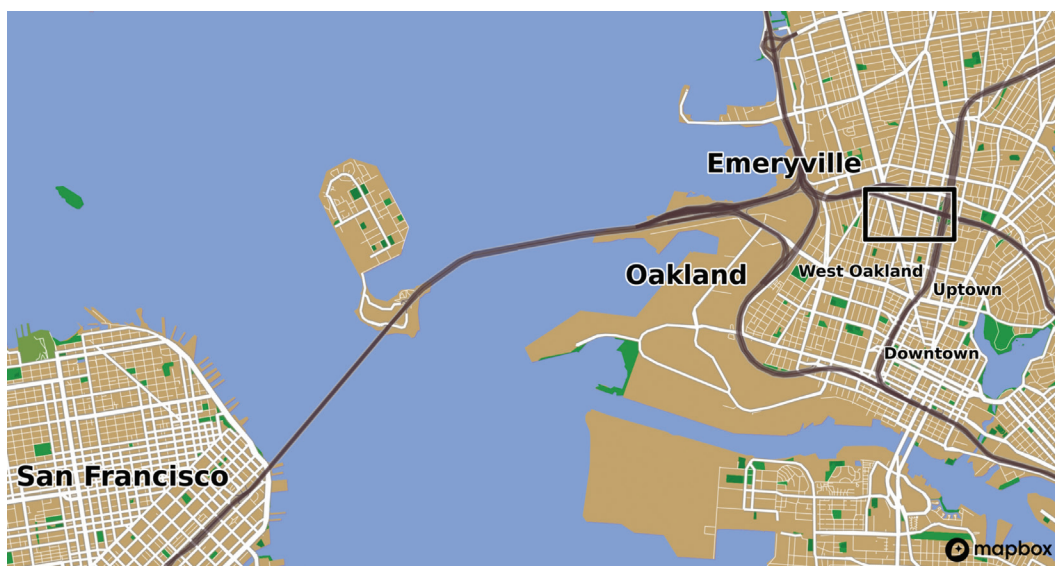

Figure 1: Map of San Francisco and the East Bay. ©Mapbox ©OpenStreetMap.

in Oakland in late-1999. Despite difficult neighbourhood conditions (or *because* of them), there was great camaraderie on the block; many residents shared phone numbers and practiced mutual aid because City services were slow or non-existent. People of different races or ethnicities living in precarious conditions often find commonalities that produce new social formations (Glick Schiller and Caglar 2016).

I only began formally researching the area after directly observing and experiencing extreme disinvestment. In addition to innumerable informal conversations in the neighbourhood for two decades, from 2014 to 2019 I conducted formal interviews with twenty people, including housed residents and street people in the immediate vicinity of St. Andrews Plaza, particularly on Filbert St. Through purposive sampling, the interviewees are representative of this mixed-use area, including long-term Black residents, small businessmen, street people, visual artists and musicians, middle-class loft-condo owners, and one real-estate agent active in the area. I have extensively photographed the neighbourhood over time, and I draw on real-estate data, City planning documents, research reports and archival information, and multiple media sources. The durational aspect of this project enables a unique perspective on extreme neighbourhood changes, including the sub-prime credit boom (approx. 1999–2006), foreclosure crisis (2007–12) and gentrification period (2013–present).

Seemingly straightforward terms such as disinvestment and investment obfuscate the lengthy, embattled process of dispossessing people of their home, heritage, neighbourhood, and lived culture. David Harvey describes 'accumulation by dispossession' as a central strategy of capital accumulation in neoliberalism, in which capital assets are devalued to be bought cheaply later; on a human level this is 'destructive of social well-being and of social institutions' (Harvey 2003: 155). Unlike the speed of financial markets, the decades-long process of changing property valuations is insufficiently addressed in the literature: 'Despite the emphasis of urban models on change, what is perhaps most startling about this literature is how slow neighborhoods are to change […] neighborhood transformation takes decades to complete' (Zuk et al. 2015: 5). Based on sustained engagement with this neighbourhood, my research provides insight into the complex strategies and the multiplicity of actors involved in transforming a neighbourhood from precarity to profitability. Painting over precarity, through particular renderings of the 'community', powerfully resignifies urban space for the benefit of state and commercial interests.

VISUAL POLITICS OF URBAN REGENERATION AND GENTRIFICATION

I situate this project in analyses of unequal urban geographies in global neoliberalism, particularly in debates about the role of visuality in the transition between urban disinvestment and revitalization (Smith 1996, 2002; Deutsche 1996; Low 2011; Harvey 2012; Florida 2014, 2008: Zukin 1989, 1995; Evans 2009). The early literature on artists as 'pioneer gentrifiers' in New York by Smith, Deutsche and Zukin was important for including symbolic capital in gentrification analyses, but this literature lacks empirical precision and inadequately parses differences among artists (a diverse subject category by race, class, political ideology, medium, professional status, etc.), consumption-oriented hipsters, and trendy businesses such as art galleries and up-scale cafes. Other analysis of New York's neoliberal restructuring into a global city

barely mentions artists (Sassen 2001; Moody 2007), and recent gentrification literature emphasizes large-scale economic influences rather than individual gentrifiers (Lees 2019). The concept of 'artists as gentrifiers' has remarkable endurance despite significant analytical problems; examples include Jan Lin's third stage of gentrification as 'neighborhood revitalization and reinvestment with incoming residential pioneers and efflorescence of the arts […]' (2019: 62) and in Pritchard's analysis, the subject category 'artist' is constructed outside and opposed to 'community' and 'local people' (2019: 147–48).

Artists often serve as scapegoats for urban structural change through gentrification and art is also deployed to improve poor cities through arts-led urban regeneration strategies, with varying degrees of success (Abu-Lughod 1994; Kratke 2012; Cameron and Coaffee 2005: Wu 2002). Richard Florida's influential concept of the Creative Class constructs the arts as a positive force for urban revitalization in the 'Creative City', but policy initiatives failed in poor rustbelt cities (Peck 2005) and in the Bay Area, middle-class professional 'Creatives' overtly contribute to gentrification and displacement (Florida 2008; Walker 2018; Schafran 2018). Promoting culture for urban regeneration is now commonplace, but this strategy emerges from European ideologies of developmental stages for classes and non-Western societies. Development and internalized reform are central themes in Foucault's theorization of power, through an historical transition from feudal power as primarily coercive, to modern power as productive, socially beneficial, and based in self-initiated improvement (Foucault 1979, 1991; Rose 2000) – central themes in the 'Super Hero' murals I analyse later.

The underlying theme of improvement through state and capitalist intervention is ubiquitous in contemporary discourse on arts-led regeneration. Hall and Robertson provide an overview of public art after the 1980s: 'The contributions of public art, it was argued, could be economic, social, environmental and psychological. Such advocacy was in line with a broader shift to "cultural" means to address the problematic legacies of deep-seated structural adjustment in cities' (2001: 5). While eliding the term 'neoliberal', Markusen and Gadwa Nicodemus (2019) write that 'Creative Placemaking' and 'ArtPlace' policy initiatives in the 1990s explicitly responded to a crisis in national arts funding in the United States by instrumentalizing the arts as a strategy of community and economic development, but later they admit these projects increased gentrification and displacement. Urban revitalization strategies range from large-scale, 'flagship' public art to display status, innovation and rebranding (described as the 'Bilbao effect') to place-based practices to revitalize disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Lacy (1995) and Lippard (1998) describe shifts in thinking from 'art in public places' featuring state monuments and outdoor abstract pieces, to 'art in the public interest' in which community art and various genres of activist art engage multiple audiences, are collaborative and democratic, and have a more organic relation to locale (Crehan 2011; Radice and Boudreault-Fournier 2017; Zebracki and De Bekker 2018). However, determining 'public interest' will always be ambiguous as public art is highly contested in 'perception, production, and implementation' (Pollack and Sharp 2012: 3064; Kwon 2004); the political meanings of 'public' and 'community' require greater explication.

Analyses of public art that assert a dualistic approach to flagship public art and community public art reproduce a structural politics in which 'community' represents *a priori* opposition to hegemonic agendas. However, 'public' describes a relationship of political authority that emerges with the public/

private division of modern space (Habermas 1989; Lefebvre 1974; Shabazz 2015). Bifurcating space served private property ownership in capitalism and produced gendered ways of being; more than defining public art as open accessible engagement, public includes a range of associations including public life, public purpose, public sector, and the state (Burton, Jackson, and Willsdon 2016). Heightened attention to the ways that public art affects urban space builds on the theatricality of power (Brown 2017; Bourdieu 1984) in representational practices, cultural imaginaries, spatial arrangements that shape behaviour, and how 'neutral' features of built environments are constructed within hegemonic relations of power (Lefebvre 1974; Foucault 1979; Knabb 2006; Mitchell 2002; Davis 1990).

Social practice art and community public art aim to revitalize civil society while intervening in dominant social relations (Thompson 2012; Helguera 2011; Borwick 2012), but social practice emerged within the fine arts, so debates centre on the status as art, critical efficacy, and 'dehierarchising rhetoric' (Bishop 2012: 16). In contrast, community art is positioned in educational or development discourse rather than 'art'. 'Murals are studied more by sociologists, political scientists, urban planners, and communications scholars than by art historians. They are often aesthetically disparaged; as ephemeral artworks […]' (Zorach 2020: 221). While Bishop claims that participation, creativity and community are no longer subversive, anti-authoritarian terms, she does not explain the enduring power and legitimacy of 'community' which derives, in part, from the historical context.

Mural painting in the United States was highly influenced by renowned Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros during the 1930s, as many artists learned techniques, served as apprentices, and gained an understanding of public murals to support revolutionary working-class solidarity (Drescher 1998; Thomas 2020). During the Great Depression, the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Program (WPA-FAP) funded numerous mural projects in public buildings such as Coit Tower in San Francisco. In Chicago, William Walker was aware of New Deal muralism when he painted the *Wall of Respect*, which is credited as the first 'community mural' in the United States in 1967 and heralded the Black Arts Movement, through which artists 'claimed space in and for the community […] and gave voice, directly or indirectly to community concerns' (Zorach 2019: 7).

In *Community Murals: The People's Art* (1984), Barnett describes community murals of the late 1960s through the 1980s as a movement for asserting concerns of community life that emerged in the anti-war and anti-racist politics of the era, and Latorre emphasizes indigenist imagery as a decolonizing practice (2008). While community mural historiography is typically divided by race or ethnicity, Ella Diaz (2017) details cross-cultural and transnational encounters among diverse muralists, and how Chicanx and Black 'community' artists often studied at prestigious art schools (and intervened in the fine arts canon). Patricia Rodriguez attended the San Francisco Art Institute and would have seen Diego Rivera's monumental mural there daily, and she co-founded influential mural collective Las Mujeres Muralistas. In 1983, muralist Ray Patlan initiated a block-long mural project along Balmy Alley in San Francisco's Mission District, which remains one of the most important community mural projects in the United States. A second major influence on community murals emerged from the New York hip hop scene in the 1980s.

Discussing street art and graffiti are beyond the scope of this article, but spray can 'style writing' has significantly influenced contemporary mural techniques.

Community murals in this period arose from social movements for civil rights, Black and Brown Power, and against US imperialism, but 'community' has become a central trope of twenty-first-century power, as marketing ethnic or poor neighbourhoods involves depoliticizing tactics in how communities are understood (Dávila 2008). Creed argues that the signifier 'community' is rarely defined, but it creates the appearance of collectivity and is 'loaded with affective power' (2006: 5). The discourse of community has been appropriated from left political movements, because of its positive associations with harmony, homogeneity and shared interests even when describing imagined corporate entities such the 'energy' community, the 'business' community, etc. Community murals participate in creating the meaning of place, but the conditions necessary for producing the work become invisible in later contexts of viewing; the individuals, organizations, labour, municipal and institutional processes, and funding become erased from view. I approach public art as a site of cultural and political struggle by addressing institutional processes, spatial analysis, and the polysemy of images (Hall 1981, 1992; Ranciere 2004). Throughout this article I differentiate 'community' from 'neighbourhood'; 'community' is an imagined signifier of group identification, while 'neighbourhood' emphasizes a geographic area and situated lived experiences among people who may or may not share various identities.

PRECARITY IN OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

My analysis of urban transformation through visual placemaking emerges from the West Oakland context, and while urban precarity is typically identified with 1980s deindustrialization and neoliberalism, this periodization inadequately addresses precariousness among African Americans in Oakland who have endured multiple assaults on well-being since the Second World War (Rhomberg 2004; Self 2003; Gilmore 2007). The term precarity expands on class oppression in capitalist modernity to include heightened exposure, vulnerability and criminalization of a wide range of bodies and places, particularly in neoliberal conditions of austerity, privatization, migration and expulsion (Standing 2017; Sassen 2014; Butler 2004; Das and Randeria 2015). Despite increased media visibility of state violence in the US, especially police officer-involved shootings, the structural violence of racialized poverty produces extensive suffering. Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois write that normative definitions of violence 'fail to address the totality and range of violent acts, including those which are part of the normative fabric of social and political life' (2004: 4).

Contemporary conditions in West Oakland are shaped by the broader political economy of the region, which geographer Richard Walker describes as 'the richest region in the richest country on earth' (2018: 146). Focusing on precarity seems incongruous, but Oakland is an extremely unequal city where wealth and poverty literally map onto elevation between the flatlands (near the port, industry and freeways) and the forested Oakland hills. The eighth wealthiest United States city based on top 5 per cent income (Walker 2018: 78), also has the third highest robbery rate. Neighbourhoods in the 'flats' experience neoliberal neglect in every socio-economic indicator including under-resourced schools, environmental toxicity, asthma rates, unemployment, drug addiction, violence, food insecurity, and lack of public safety (De Giorgi 2017; Whittle et al. 2015). Oakland has the fourth highest rent in

the United States and the lack of affordable housing causes severe displacement during this period of 'economic recovery' (Walker 2018: 198). The affordability crisis also forces many artists to live in unsafe buildings. The 'Ghost Ship' artist warehouse fire in Oakland claimed 36 lives in 2016, making it one of the deadliest fires in U.S. history, while exposing negligence by City authorities.[2]

Historically, West Oakland was one of the original destinations for African American migrants escaping the Jim Crow south, as Second World War industries provided employment and new opportunities. A multi-ethnic, working-class neighbourhood emerged along with a vital cultural scene including West Coast Blues clubs. In contrast to periodizing deindustrialization in the 1980s, Oakland's manufacturing employment peaked in 1943 and fell drastically after the war; Oakland was a centre for retail shopping until suburban malls were constructed in the 1950s, devastating the downtown economy and producing capital flight. African Americans in West Oakland suffered from unemployment, redlining and mass transit construction striated the neighbourhood (Self 2003; Rhomberg 2004).

In 1966, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded The Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP) in West Oakland, in response to impoverished conditions and racist policing. While powerful images of the Black Panthers brandishing guns are well known, the BPP primarily organized innovative 'Service to the People' programmes to improve the lives of neighbourhood residents. Their 'Free Breakfasts for Schoolchildren' model has been adopted by schools across the United States, and other programmes included clothing, house maintenance, legal aid, education and ambulance services (Hilliard 2008). The Panthers broke with nationalism through a systemic critique of power and imperialism (Seale 1991) and were violently suppressed by a government campaign known as COINTELPRO (Churchill and Vander Wall 1990).

2. Corruption in Oakland City government cannot be fully addressed here, but the Oakland Police Department has been under federal oversight for seventeen years, following misconduct scandals in 2003 and later. Oakland Unified School District was taken over by the State of California in 2003 and the District representative for West Oakland has been accused of house flipping, thereby profiting from disinvestment.

Figure 2: Refa1 inaugurating his Black Panther Mural on 14th Street in West Oakland, 2017, photograph by author.

3. Deutsche Bank conducted the majority of foreclosures in Oakland between 2007 and 2011, and 93 per cent of investor acquired properties were in the same neighbourhoods previously targeted by predatory lenders. REO Homes LLC dominates foreclosure investment activity in West Oakland where precarity is literally a real-estate strategy; REO has 'a disincentive to complete substantive rehabilitation work as long as their acquisition apparatus is up and running. If they are capitalized enough to continue purchasing in the short-term, they stand to benefit immensely from continued depressed housing values in West Oakland'. Urban Strategies Council, 'Who Owns Your Neighborhood: The Role of Investors in Post-Foreclosure Oakland', June, 2012, p. 40.

4. This mural was based on a popular image after 9/11: 'HOMELAND SECURITY: Fighting Terrorism since 1492', featuring Geronimo and Chiricahua Apache warriors, by indigenous artist Matthew Tafoya.

Despite their international significance, there is no City-sponsored commemoration of the BPP in Oakland other than a small yellow sign on a street pole. However, the Panthers are frequently depicted in illegal street art, and Oakland artist Refa1 painted the first large-scale mural of the Black Panthers in West Oakland in 2017. The muralists sought permission from a storeowner and conducted their own fundraising on social media to raise $1,000 for paint. While completing the piece, artists discussed the contradiction of mural funding by the City of Oakland: 'There is no funding for local Black muralists but thousands for artists from other places'.

With the efforts of the Black Panther Party and civil rights movements, gains were made in political representation and class mobility among minorities (Murch 2010; Douzet 2012). In the 1980s, however, the neoliberal roll back of the state and influx of drugs, in tandem with the 'War on Drugs', decimated families in West Oakland through addiction, street violence, and incarceration (Webb 1998; Gilmore 2007). Black class mobility involved moving out of the neighbourhood, which shifted the 'communal ghetto' (with multi-class solidarity) to a 'hyperghetto' of sub-proletariat marginality (Wacquant 2008; Wilson 2009). Oakland has elected mayors with progressive credentials that have been Black, Asian, white, male and female, but none have ameliorated poverty and inequality. California experienced rampant predatory lending in the early 2000s and later foreclosures in Oakland were twice the national average. West Oakland suffered a devastating 19.3 per cent vacancy rate, compared to 6.3 per cent citywide.[3]

In the period of 'recovery' from the global economic crisis and after the radicalism of Occupy Oakland had been suppressed (Taylor 2011), the arts have been central to urban revitalization strategies, but in divergent ways. Extensive state and private redevelopment have occurred in Uptown since the late-1990s; in 2011 the City sponsored a monthly street festival that now draws up to 20,000 people and Uptown features commissioned murals by international artists (discussed in opening vignette). Amid severe neglect in the adjacent neighbourhood of West Oakland, the first of several large-scale 'community' murals were completed in 2012 (the 'Super Hero' murals discussed below). In interviews I conducted with neighbourhood residents, few people commented specifically on local murals; working-class people appreciated artwork as a general sign of improvement, since most feel that 'no one cares' about this neighbourhood. One exception was a Caribbean musician of African descent, who expressed an understanding of community murals as a platform for political struggle through a decolonial aesthetic (Maldonado-Torres 2018).

> One thing about being in the inner city, you see people's struggles not just on their faces, not just in their person […] people demonstrate their struggles in murals. Some of the most beautiful murals I've seen were in some of the poorest areas of California. […] Oakland, Richmond, even down San Rafael, there's a big Latino community there. So, you see people demonstrating their feelings, you know, their struggles, their anger, the deceit that they feel for this country, for the U.S.
> *Do you remember any specific murals in the neighborhood?*
> There was a building on San Pablo. I never knew if that building was vacant or occupied, and there was this big mural…'*Homeland Security: Fighting Terrorism since 1492*'[4] That was one. All in all, we don't have the same exact struggle, but I think we can relate to each other's struggles. I mean from slavery days to now, it's just different names of who in

power. At the end of the day, the damage inflicted […] is all the same, you know?[5]

Discussing illegal graffiti and street art is beyond the scope of this article, but it saturates poor Oakland neighbourhoods, covering abandoned buildings and miles of freeway walls. Controlling visual space differs markedly between formal murals and illegal street art, in that City-sponsored 'community murals' putatively represent disenfranchised communities, but they must include imagery for the public sphere that mutes a more radical perspective, and the extensive institutional process for approving public art enacts significant gate keeping. The City of Oakland's Cultural Affairs Division provides information on grants from the Public Art Advisory Committee. The application involves a daunting proposal process, including visual proposal, materials and methods, photos of site, in-situ mock-up, timeline, budget, maintenance plan, community outreach/support documentation, insurance documentation, permissions and waiver of proprietary rights. The City recommends consulting with Public Art staff prior to submitting the proposal, or the project may be subject to a minimum $377 review fee. Ultimately, the majority of street artists risk arrest with their spray cans rather than apply to do public art.

Below I analyse public art projects in West Oakland, to show how a particular visual rendering of the 'community' has become a central strategy for remaking territory in the service of gentrification. San Pablo Avenue is currently one of the most embattled spaces in Oakland, especially after approval of the 'West Oakland Specific Plan' in 2014, which targets the area for redevelopment; legal building heights have been raised to accommodate future townhouses, with no mention of 'affordable housing'.[6] However, this will be one of last areas to gentrify because it occupies a mid-point between redevelopment pressures from Uptown (in the south) and from the better-off city of Emeryville to the north. I analyse three areas with public art in this contested space: Super Heroes murals at the Oakland-Emeryville border, murals that affected a neighbourhood struggle over St. Andrews Plaza, and a real-estate-sponsored mural that mimics community art.

SUPER HEROES OF MODERN LIFE

The pageant of fashionable life and the thousands of floating existences – criminals and kept women – which drift about in the underworld of a great city […] prove to us that we have only to open our eyes to recognize our heroism.
(Charles Baudelaire, on the 'heroism of modern life', *Salon of 1846*)

Located on San Pablo Ave. at the Oakland-Emeryville border, the California Hotel was a single room occupancy building (SRO), abandoned in 2007 and foreclosed, until a multi-million dollar project by the East Asian Local Development Corporation led to its reopening in 2014, with some affordable housing units, and 'community and commercial spaces'. During an interview with a woman who does professional fine art restoration and has lived in the vicinity since 1990, I asked if she thought the neighbourhood was gentrifying. She replied 'no', but added, 'The only thing that has been nominally encouraging has been the California Hotel […] this building could be a *game changer*'. Citing its location on the Emeryville border, she continued, 'it is the absolute instantiation that says "you are about to change neighborhoods" – and
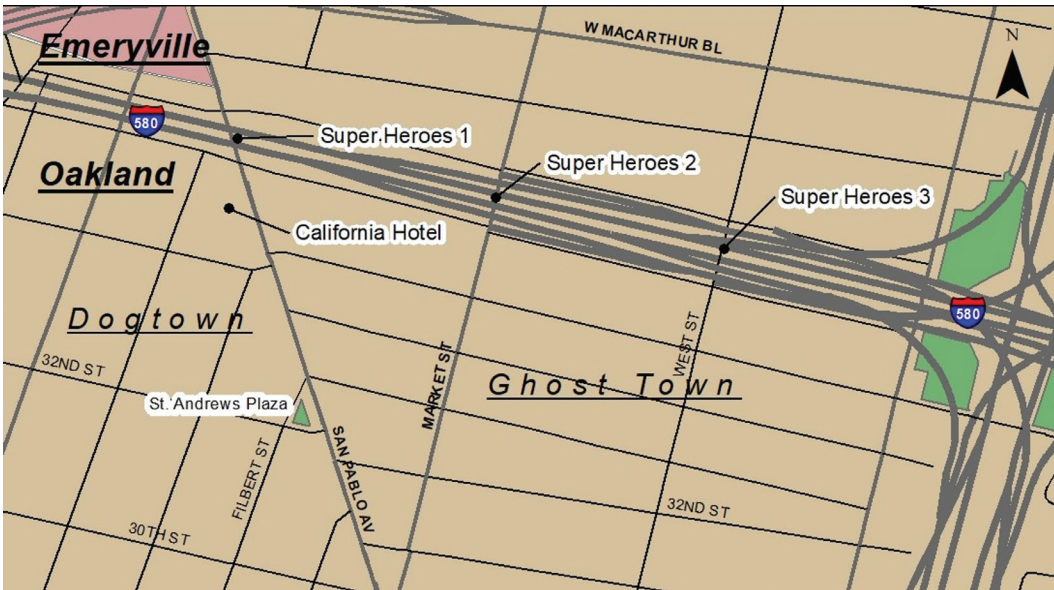
Figure 3: Research area in Northwest Oakland with Saint Andrews Plaza and mural locations, map by Gabriel Lozano.

immediately after the hotel [toward Oakland] there's a liquor store and there's four other liquor stores in the immediate neighborhood'.[7] Like most long-term residents of all races, she thought that 'a little gentrification is fine' if that means having a grocery store (where there are currently none) and she believes the Hotel could attract good tenants and improve the quality of life.[8] In sum, this $43 million-dollar restoration did not occur because City officials care about historic buildings; the California Hotel serves as a symbolic beachhead for gentrification by changing what it means to enter West Oakland.

Facing the California Hotel across San Pablo Ave., and completing this sense of transitional space, a large-scale mural features images drawn mainly from West Oakland's past. This is the first of seven planned murals by the Oakland Super Heroes Mural Project, all under the 580 freeway along major north-south thoroughfares, from better off to poorer areas. The 'super hero' is an individualized and socially alienated image of power, but the organization states:

> Using the theme of super heroes, the murals will be designed by middle school and high school students mainly from District 3 public schools and will uplift and positively transform the neighborhood. These murals will serve as a gateway to West and Downtown Oakland, and will revitalize an area completely deprived of its city's resources and thus more subject to blight, violence, and graffiti. The Oakland Super Heroes Mural Project will become a key way in which this community is perceived.[9]

Beyond 'perception', community murals traditionally asserted concerns of community *life*, which developed 'in big-city ghettoes and barrios throughout the nation where human creativeness struggled against racism and poverty' (Barnett 1984: 11). While this Super Heroes mural is a beautiful artwork and

was probably an enriching experience for the teens involved, the imagery avoids engagement with the current neighbourhood. The mural features positive moments from West Oakland's past, creating consumable nostalgia out of an area that has been severely oppressed for decades. But the impressionistic style, with wavy, out-of-focus lines, suggests that this idealized past is difficult to see clearly from the vantage point of the twenty-first century. In the mural, children skip rope in a happy and carefree manner, but in daily life families are afraid to let children play outside because the streets are strewn with used needles and frequent gunfire injures bystanders. There are many possible visual strategies to support the neighbourhood, and yet this mural eschews any relationship with struggles for public safety, affordable housing, employment, reducing high incarceration rates, etc. The local and international significance of the Black Panther Party has been omitted from these murals, even though Bobby Seale and Huey Newton developed the Ten-Point Program only a few blocks away (Seale 1991: 59).

The overall mural produces aestheticized, nostalgic scenes for people to glimpse from their car window as they pass by. In fact, the placement of these murals directly under eight lanes of busy freeway traffic (on a street filled with noise, air pollution, and garbage) means that no one stops to look at these murals as works of art. A large central image features a Black teen with a briefcase striding heroically forward. This figure suggests that the solution for neighbourhood uplift is through entrepreneurialism. Dominant neoliberal narratives elide structural racism and instead construct improvement as an individual responsibility aligned with market interests. Given the radically unequal lived experiences for youth in Oakland, the term 'super hero' functions as a depressing, but apt commentary on what it takes to survive in West Oakland, unlike their privileged counterparts in the Oakland Hills.

Self-improvement is a core tenet of the sponsoring organization, Healing Arts and Culture (HAC),[10] through an explicitly internal approach to 'change' despite systemic poverty in West Oakland. Student participation in Super Heroes murals emerges from sponsored art classes and curriculum on 'Self as Super Hero'. While there is tremendous need for resources in disinvested areas, the privatization of educational programmes promotes undemocratic processes, often with ideologies that undercut progressive action. The non-profit parent organization operates in multiple countries, focusing on education, health, business, institutions and community. It was founded in 1975 in Tiburon, California, a wealthy white enclave in Marin County that became the nation's 'first public gated community' when license plate-screening security cameras were installed on the only two roads into town (Risberg 2009). Similar to Alcoholics Anonymous programmes, their principles assert: 'It is neither circumstances nor people in the past that are causing us to be upset in the moment. Rather, it is our own thoughts, attitudes, and judgments about those things that cause us the distress […]'. Focusing on individual behaviours to address systemic oppression constructs people who have suffered most as both the problem and solution; 'community' appears simultaneously as the site, object and mode of governing in advanced liberal democracy (Clarke 2014; Rose 2000; Foucault 1991). HAC received one of the largest arts grants from the City of Oakland, and private sponsors include an architectural and planning firm (with market-rate projects in Downtown Oakland), paint companies, smaller local organizations, and churches.

A second Super Heroes mural under the freeway on West St. produces even greater disconnection from the community, as dreamlike figures rely

10. Healing Arts and Culture is a pseudonym; I critique art projects in the neighbourhood, not all aspects of this organization.

on magic to improve the neighbourhood. A young Mexican-American boy plays music from his car, so that 'all who hear it are lulled into peacefulness and don't want to fight, argue, or commit crimes'. Violence is conjured as a problem of interpersonal relations and individual personalities, not systemic oppression. African American twins create water and energy from their hands, while a central female figure named Gaza fights crime by spinning in her magic dress. In this pastel-coloured mural, young people are so alienated from understandings of structural obstacles that positive change recedes into fantasy and magic.

The disjuncture with very real problems in the neighbourhood found tragic expression in 2015 in the murder of one of the muralists, Antonio Ramos, after a robbery attempt escalated to gun violence, which is a terrible but common occurrence. An interview I conducted with an artist couple that lived in the area for decades, took an emotional turn when they said they knew Marquis, the shooter. These artists often invited neighbourhood children to do art and jewellery fabrication in their studio, and they knew Marquis years ago as a neighbourhood kid who enjoyed doing art. They believed that Marquis was born to a drug-addicted mother, which created emotional challenges since childhood. Dana recalled:

> I believe him that he didn't mean it – because the kid had anger issues. He couldn't contain himself, I mean he was impatient and had learning disabilities; he couldn't put things together and I would try and be super
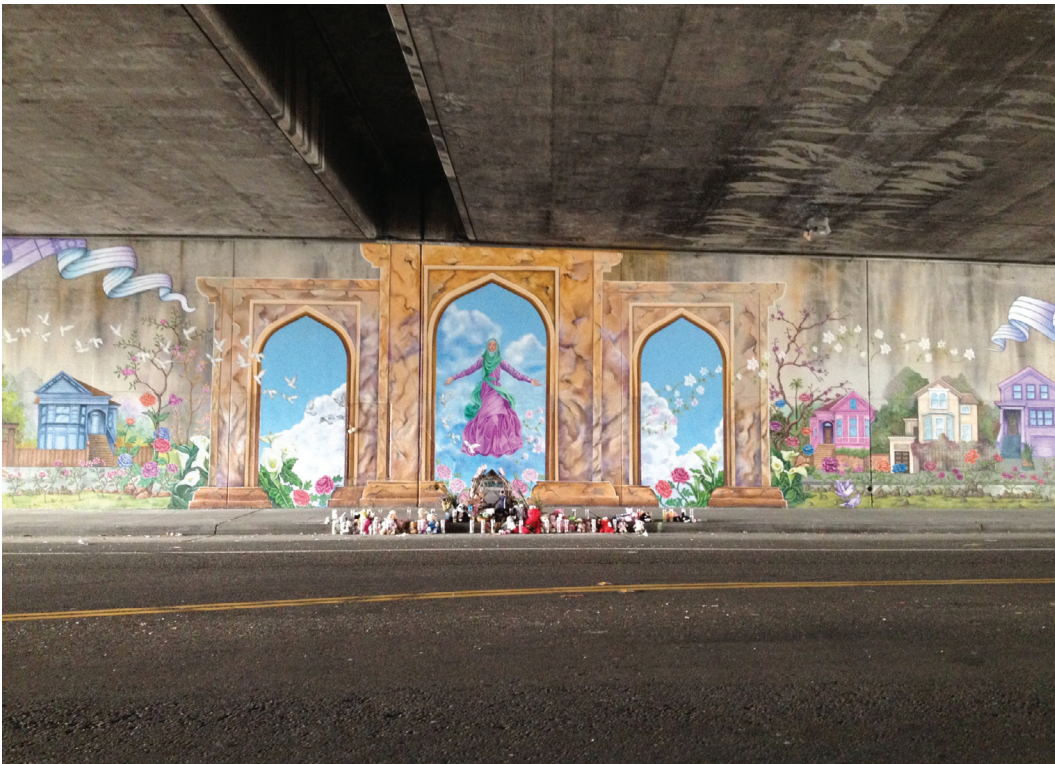

Figure 4: Super Hero mural on West Street with memorial to Antonio Ramos, photograph by author.

patient […] but sometimes he would just have to leave. I mean if a saw blade broke he would have to leave […] and get his composure.
Probably from the drug exposure originally?
Yeah, I mean he was never going to be OK. Never, ever, ever, was he going to be OK. I mean it was like a symbol of this block, where nobody is […] where almost nothing has improved.[11]

11. Interview with Dana, neighbourhood resident, 13 July 2017.

12. Ruggiero, Angela, '"All we have is his artwork now": Killer apologizes to slain Oakland mural artist's family for "selfishness"', *East Bay Times*, 19 November 2018.

The shooting symbolized decades of failure to assist drug-ravaged families living in severe poverty with generational trauma. The fatal encounter between Marquis Holloway and Antonio Ramos was not surprising, yet it unfolded like surreal destiny, since Marquis found the unsecured firearm that same day in an ICE vehicle (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). 'Ramos had been working on an Oakland Super Heroes Mural Project by a West Oakland group that seeks to stop violence by inspiring people with art and education.'[12] Every news story focused on Ramos, the victim and a loved member of Oakland's artist community; a large memorial of candles and flowers was maintained at the mural site for months. The press flatly stated that Holloway was charged with murder; he had no subjectivity, but the lives of precarious 'surplus populations' of our age need recognition as people who were born into impossible circumstances. In 2018, Holloway received a prison sentence of '25 years to life', accepting a plea deal as a youthful offender since he was twenty at the time of the murder. Individualizing guilt and innocence among the urban poor legitimates mass incarceration, and failing to 'address crime's root causes, has led to the worst of all possible worlds' (Forman 2017: 77). This terrible incident also shows how 'community' is a space of social and class antagonism.

A third mural under the freeway on Market St. evokes a coded Black political aesthetic. Two African American figures in profile frame the sides of the work, facing inwards; one appears Rastafarian, wearing a red, gold and green knit hat over long flowing dreadlocks as he blows a smoke rainbow across the mural. His female counter-part blows a music rainbow towards the centre, where trees and flowers flourish beneath an African goddess figure. Multi-colour pyramid shapes redolent of African iconography saturate the background of the piece. A white male figure seems awkwardly inserted in one side of the image; with short blond hair and stylish blue shirt he appears as one of the new hipster gentrifiers in Oakland. Against the objections of Black artists who worked on the piece, the sponsoring organization insisted this white figure be inserted into the mural to be 'inclusive' of new residents in the neighbourhood. Ultimately, imagery in these Super Hero murals works against neighbourhood solidarity and activism by displacing critical issues; instead, these works create a spatiality of consumption, as aesthetic abstraction, fantasy and nostalgic images create an inviting impression for commuters and wealthier newcomers.

COMMUNITY ART AND THE CONFLICT OVER ST. ANDREWS PLAZA

The second neighbourhood space I analyse with strategically placed public art is St. Andrews Plaza, a small triangular park (.17 acres) located two blocks south of the freeway murals, on San Pablo Ave. at the intersection of 32nd St. I lived diagonally across from the park for years and directly observed many changes. In 2000, St. Andrews Plaza was frequented by nearby residents who would play dominos in the shade, drink and socialize in a convivial way. As if foreshadowing economic collapse, homicides increased in the city (especially in West Oakland) with a peak in 2006. By 2008 neighbourhood sociality was

shattered by the foreclosure crisis, which overwhelmed the area with abandoned buildings, arson fires, and drug dealing and prostitution dominated the park vicinity.

From 2012 to 2018, the neighbourhood was caught in an uncanny contradiction of worsening everyday conditions amid repeated claims of gentrification by the press and many activists. The gentrification debate in Oakland is often reductive, as contestations over St. Andrews Plaza reveal different meanings for local residents, activists, community organizations, and artists. Especially after the City closed two other mini-parks in West Oakland, the homeless, drug addicts, sex workers, and other dispossessed people gathered in St. Andrews Plaza, one of the last public spaces in the area. The policing terms 'pinch point' and 'containment zone' have been used to describe this park; containment is an informal urban governance strategy that works by spatially confining illicit economies rather than direct policing (Shaw 2015). Violence emanated from the park at times, mostly affecting vulnerable Black residents, but by 2014 the park primarily served as a refuge for the homeless.

Figure 5: Saint Andrews Plaza became a refuge for the homeless in 2014, photograph by author.

After years of effort by neighbours to improve the park situation, the City of Oakland installed a chain-link fence around St. Andrews Plaza in early December 2014 in preparation for a redesign by a self-proclaimed community organization named the San Pablo Corridor Coalition that included real-estate agents, some older African American residents, and middle-class white loft-dwellers. They garnered $75,000 from the City for the park plan, which featured large Disneyesque flower sculptures purportedly created by local artists. I asked a sculptor from a large artist warehouse close to the park if he knew these 'local artists' and he said 'no'. We agreed the design was stereotypical and had no relationship to the neighbourhood. However, policing urban space through 'sadistic street environments' (Davis 1990: 232) would run counter to Oakland's progressive image, so a large calla-lily sculpture and colourful mosaic tile aimed to produce new spatial arrangements through humanitarian methods (Weizman 2017).

The Park project never materialized, however, because on 20 December 2014 the park was 'liberated' when anti-gentrification activists cut down the

fence with bolt cutters. This was extremely disheartening to many residents in the immediate vicinity, since they viewed the Park as a major source of violence, drug dealing, and garbage. In early 2016, the fence was reinstalled, and the interior benches and green cement planter-boxes that gave shape to the space were removed. Except for four sad-looking eucalyptus trees, every-

Figure 6: Murals were hung on the fence around Saint Andrews Plaza, 2016, photograph by author.

thing in the park was gone – literally to flat dirt.

Only days later, painted wood panels appeared on every side of the park fence. A 'community' organization installed an Outdoor Art Gallery which was clearly a semiotic strategy to claim the fenced-off park as a space for the 'community', not a symbol of gentrification. In one mural, an older African American man peers from the background over the word 'Unity', his eyelids half closed and weary at the invoking of this important but unrealized concept. The theme for another mural was 'Dreams/Self-Determination' but only the word 'dream' was painted; the graffiti-style lettering seemed unusually shaky, as if all that remains of the dream is a trembling signifier.

After these 'community' murals were attached to the fence it remained standing for a year, until early 2017 when activists retook the park. Shortly afterwards, the City replaced the fence again and a single mural appeared with the word 'JOY'. The static dark colour panels and block letters on this sign produced an incredibly joyless effect. By late summer 2017, the City installed a permanent steel fence with a locked gate and cage-like appearance. I asked residents how the park would be accessed, and they were told a neighbour-hood 'ambassador' would open the park during daytime and lock it at night. A neighbourhood organization soon decided the park should remain closed; the drug dealers and addicts just moved directly across from the park onto Filbert St.

Figure 7: Saint Andrews Plaza enclosed by locked steel fence, 2017, photograph by author.

THE SYMBOLIC APPROPRIATION OF 'COMMUNITY' BY REAL-ESTATE INTERESTS

In a final example of the 'archisemiotics of class war' (Davis 1990: 231), I show how a real-estate investor appropriated the concept of the community mural to transform the meaning of neighbourhood space with the intention of property valorization. The house is situated diagonally across from St. Andrews Plaza, next to a small warehouse building with a mural on the front. The warehouse was abandoned after the foreclosure crisis in 2008 and it attracted drug dealing, dumping and occasional violence. By 2014, artists who lived in the immediate vicinity decided to cover the front wall with a mural (illicitly and at their own expense) in an effort to reduce blighted conditions. The artist chose to paint a mural with colourful and whimsical references to nature, since the neighbourhood is so devoid of positive signs of life such as tress and birds. Following the completion of the artwork, residents in the area were pleased that the mural did seem to improve the block, as drug dealing moved further away for a while.

About six months later, a real-estate investor bought the house next door and intended to flip it after doing renovations. In an effort to rebrand this ghetto property as a hip 'urban oasis' he commissioned an artist to paint a similar mural on a new galvanized steel fence in front. This act of community

Figures 8a and 8b: Artist mural on abandoned warehouse and real-estate initiated mural next door, photographs by author.

Figure 9: Class war graffiti-covered wall under the 580 freeway in Oakland, photograph by author.

mural mimicry was not enough to overcome deep structural problems that potential buyers observed in the neighbourhood, and this house has not sold even after five years in a 'hot' real-estate market. Although the mural also includes birds, its darker imagery has little of the fun energy of the warehouse mural. However, a bird that appears to be a raven in the background effectively communicates the carrion-eating metaphor of capital accumulation through dispossession.

The realtor-initiated mural proved unsuccessful and representational practices 'from below' directly challenge gentrification. 'We Buy Houses' signs placed in this struggling neighbourhood have been covered with paint. Graffiti messages on the remaining unpainted walls under the 580 freeway produce subaltern solidarity through calls for 'class war'. Resistance to gentrification in West Oakland also includes several large-scale arson fires that have devastated nearly complete market-rate developments; the destruction slows neighbourhood change while producing a powerful visual statement.

CONCLUSION: 'COMMUNITY' AGAINST THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

My analysis of the semiotics of contested urban space is situated in a moment of unprecedented public concern in the US over the meanings of public art, particularly historic statues and murals, with responses ranging from

direct-action defacement, protests, removal and lawsuits. Images of police killing unarmed Black men spark public outrage over racial oppression, and statues of Christopher Columbus, Confederate monuments, and other symbols of slavery have been torn down. Among many actions in the Bay Area, an 1894 statue entitled 'Early Days' was removed in September 2018; the statue depicts the subjugation of Native Americans in a celebration of settler colonialism. Contestations over public art have also included right wing attacks on San Francisco's famous Clarion Alley murals, particularly artworks in solidarity with Latinx struggles, Black Lives Matter, and the Palestinians. Recurrent vandalism, including crudely painted red 'Make America Great Again' hats, requires near constant repainting by the artists.

While the meanings of cities will always include multiple cultural imaginaries (Cinar and Bender 2007), appropriating the term community and its visual expression in community murals has become a central strategy for producing urban space aligned with gentrification. Gentrification is not inexorable, but a dynamic and contingent process that must overcome multiple forms of resistance (Harvey 2012; Susser and Tonnelat 2013; Peterson and McDonough 2012). Through an imagined claim to speak on behalf of an entire group, the 'deployment of community' does ideological work, while facilitating urban governance and capital reinvestment.

Strategies of neoliberal state power often emphasize the cultural sphere as a resource for creating an environment most attractive to capital (García Canclini 2001; Yúdice 2003; Sassen 2001; Dávila 2008; Ley 2003). The symbolic economy intertwines capital and cultural symbols to increase the sign value of cities, but in place-specific ways. In Oakland, public art plays a strategic role in urban revitalization as international muralists create cultural capital in Uptown, while the form of the community mural is deployed to resignify and valorize precarious neighbourhoods. Visual signifiers serve as urban governance strategies not only through interdiction, but also invitation, and city-sponsored 'community' art represents a non-repressive semiotic strategy for policing the neighbourhood. The lengthy transition from disinvestment to investment in West Oakland is served by imagery that eviscerates political agency from the community mural and transforms racial oppression into consumable cultural difference.

Murals and street art visibly create urban identity and appear to answer questions about who lives in an area, who is welcome, and who is not. Residents of Dogtown often remarked that the neighbourhood 'looked worse than it actually is' as illegal graffiti and dumping become billboards of dispossession. Even 'broken windows' policing originates with the semiotics of blight (Camp and Heatherton 2016). For many disinvested neighbourhoods, infrastructural improvements only occur to aid gentrification. The first grocery store in thirty years opened in 2019 (Community Foods Market) and other recent improvements include bike lanes and trees planted along San Pablo Ave. Since 2012 in West Oakland, the political content of community murals has largely been expunged, so the medium may function as an infrastructural amenity. Officially sponsored public murals are a relatively cheap, non-permanent, heavily juried and controlled visual strategy to transition territory from violent dispossession to attractive profitability.

Whatever the particular aesthetic, murals communicate *specific* meanings, politics and relationships to place: do works emphasize the past, cosmopolitanism, an activist ethos, or light-hearted uplift? Whom do these projects serve? As artists are increasingly recruited to symbolically remake public

and private space, it has critical to analyse the relationship between specific public art practices and lived conditions. The forces promoting public artworks in West Oakland are an assemblage of multiracial bourgeois interests that include district representatives, city officials, real-estate companies, global financial interests, urban redevelopment agencies, non-profit organizations, local businesses, and philanthropic arts and cultural organizations. Culture is a fraught area where social justice work in the arts can easily be overdetermined by capital logics. The term *cultural power* will always have contradictory meanings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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