

# Deracinated Dispossessions: On the Foreclosures of “Gentrification” in Oakland, CA

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**Abstract:** This paper challenges dominant geographies of urban theory by conceptualising the dynamics of displacement in Oakland through place-specific histories of racial/spatial politics. It argues that the repeated transposition of a San Francisco-based model of “tech gentrification” results in *deracinated dispossessions*, or accounts of displacement uprooted from grounded histories of racial violence and resistance. It also argues that, while urban scholars acknowledge the role of historical difference in contouring dispossessions in metropolitan versus postcolonial cities, this consideration should be broadened to account for the racial/colonial dimensions of urbanism in the US as well. Treating Oakland as a “crossroads of theory”, this paper joins calls for a deeper engagement between postcolonial urban studies and critical race and ethnic studies from North America. Drawing upon the authors’ activist and empirical work, it contends that “thinking from Oakland” demands a foregrounding of racial capitalism, policing, and refusal.

**Keywords:** gentrification, foreclosure, racial capitalism, policing, comparativity, Oakland

## Thinking the City from “The Town”

In 2016, anti-displacement activists requested data from the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project (AEMP) on the tidal wave of evictions slamming into San Francisco in order to predict the coming tide in Oakland, located precariously just across the water. The comparison seemed clear, the parallels striking. In 2012, Twitter anchored itself amidst the swell of San Francisco’s “Tech Boom 2.0”<sup>2</sup> by occupying the old Furniture Mart Building on a tatty stretch of Market Street, setting off a cascade of redevelopment and displacement in the city’s skid row. Then, in 2015, ride-hailing colossus Uber announced it would move its headquarters from San Francisco to another old monument to retail, the Sears Building, this one in the Uptown area of downtown Oakland.<sup>3</sup> Like Twitter in Mid-Market, Uber intended to dispatch 3000 well-heeled “techies” to a district long burdened by neglect. During the Dot Com Boom in the late 1990s, Oakland Mayor Jerry

Brown had sought to renovate the Uptown—and with it, the city’s deeply racialised “image problem”—by converting it into a hub of upscale condos and night-clubs out of reach to existing residents (Werth and Marienthal 2016). The spectre of “uber-gentrification” thus touched a raw civic nerve—one disturbed by a rising drumbeat of news reports and everyday discussions that depicted Oakland as drowning in the spillover of companies, capital, and workers linked to San Francisco-style “tech”.

Indeed, since the Dot Com Boom, Oakland has witnessed a devastating wave of property speculation and displacement. The story of it succumbing to its hyper-capitalised neighbour thus makes for a common and compelling analysis. Still, as we show, this comparison overlooks deep disparities in the racial/spatial politics of these two cities. So when asked to transpose data from “The City” to model the future of “The Town”,<sup>4</sup> the AEMP demurred. The group aims to deploy qualitative and quantitative data in collaboration with housing-justice collectives to actualise abolitionist visions (Maharawal and McElroy 2018; McElroy and Szeto 2018).<sup>5</sup> Aligned with Kim TallBear’s (2014) call to create knowledge *with* and not *for* the communities with whom its members cohabit, the AEMP creates maps, narratives, and analyses in service to anti-eviction organising at multiple scales. It often receives data requests; and when politics are shared, information is as well. But until it was contacted by the Oakland-based anti-displacement activists, it had not considered the methods and ethics of comparative modelling. Could the tale of tech-driven gentrification forecast the coming tides in Oakland? Or would it foreclose the city’s histories and geographies of racialised dispossession, overwriting narratives and tactics called for by the place that Spanish settlers once named *contra costa*, the *opposite coast*?

This article considers this question of comparativity in anti-displacement praxis in and from Oakland. While the city is undergoing an intense bout of racialised restructuring and removal, this is hardly the first time it has encountered such struggles. Rather, the cranes and skyscrapers that now mark the resurgent skyline arise from land that, since Spanish and Anglo occupation of Ohlone territory, has been contoured by waves of settler theft and racial violence (Ramírez 2017; Tuck and Yang 2012). But these histories have become increasingly muddled as local, national, and international media have taken a sudden interest in the city’s “gentrification”. After decades of devaluation, journalists have sought to make sense of the city’s recapitalisation by characterising Oakland as a new urban “frontier” through flat comparisons to Brooklyn, San Francisco, and Silicon Valley (Carroll 2014; Haber 2014; Mahler 2012). These media accounts are consequential because they have come to structure the commonsense understanding of the current moment among many Oaklanders. But such comparisons unwittingly mirror the settler imaginaries of tech companies like Uber that, having already “Gone West”, now aim to extend their Manifest Destinies by “Going East”.<sup>6</sup> Based upon our activist and research experiences in Oakland, we worry that this comparativity forecloses the city’s past and present dispossessions—many of which have little to do with the incursion of tech companies or, when they do, cannot be understood through simple comparison to other cities. In other words, the practice of framing the city’s spatial politics through reference to the gentrification of more

prominent locales produces *deracinated dispossessions*, or accounts of displacement uprooted from the grounded histories of racial violence and resistance that constitute cities like Oakland.

In this article, we aim to unsettle the dominance of gentrification as an analytic and San Francisco as its model by advancing an anti-displacement and anti-racist praxis that *thinks from Oakland*. This approach first emerged in 2015–2016 out of collective conversations fostered by the “Oakland School” of Urban Studies (OSUS), a group of 12 graduate students from across the social sciences and humanities. The OSUS, co-convened by Trisha Barua and Alex Werth, became a space for students invested in distinct archives, theories, and methods to think through Oakland’s contentious spatial politics from multiple angles.<sup>7</sup> Out of these generative activities, we began to investigate what this mode of what Gautam Bhan (2017) calls “thinking from place” might mean for our specific concern with issues of comparativity and displacement. Bhan argues that particular places do not just demand that we as activist scholars ask particular questions in our research; they demand that we ask particular questions *first*. What issues and analytics, then, does Oakland insist upon? The answer, we argue, in alignment with the excellent work of Magie Ramírez (2017) and other OSUS colleagues, is multiple histories and geographies of ongoing racialised dispossession and refusal.

In what follows, we chart the geographies of displacement foreclosed by the increasing transposition of San Francisco-isation as a meta-narrative and model to Oakland. In the process, we intervene in debates about the geographies of gentrification and urban theory. Engaging Oakland as a crossroads of (de)coloniality, rather than a “case” of tech-induced gentrification, we explore the politically potent but often overlooked links between postcolonial urban studies and critical race and ethnic studies from North America.<sup>8</sup> This allows us to remap conceptualisations of Oakland’s spatial politics in ways that decentre San Francisco. For it is not just that San Francisco-centred accounts of gentrification ignore racialised dispossession; rather, the treatment of San Francisco as a normative measure of Oakland is *reflective of racist geographies in the first place*. In other words, in a colloquial version of the dominant trend in urban studies (Robinson 2002; Roy 2009), the perceived Whiteness—i.e. the racial and economic normalcy—of San Francisco ensures its epistemological superiority as “The City” versus “The Town”. This article thus refuses the foreclosures of everyday and academic modes of comparison by thinking one particular city, Oakland, from the perspective of The Town.

We demonstrate this approach by discussing Erin McElroy’s work with the AEMP across the Bay Area and Alex Werth’s research on the policing of music venues in Oakland before and after the deadly 2016 Ghost Ship fire. Combining our activist and empirical work allows us to examine the contours of displacement in Oakland in ways that crosscut both residential and formal and informal cultural spaces. This, in turn, leads us to argue that the dominant model of gentrification rooted in San Francisco forecloses the role of racialised logics like nuisance law and policing in driving displacement across Oakland’s variegated landscapes of dispossession. But first, we place our argument in dialogue with its conceptual inspirations across the fields of postcolonial urban studies and critical race and ethnic studies.

## Oakland as a Crossroads of Theory

The question of comparison involved in the current moment in Oakland has animated debates in the social sciences over the last several decades. In urban studies, scholars have sought to reckon with the intensification and recomposition of interurban connections across an emerging “world of cities” (Robinson 2011). Postcolonial scholars, in particular, have contested the discipline’s historically Eurocentric “geographies of theory” (Roy 2009), which treat a select constellation of Western European and American cities as the norm and view everywhere else as inadequate, “insignificant”, or simply invisible. In so doing, these scholars have not discarded the study of interurban connections; instead, they have critiqued accounts of global processes that are hierarchical and dismissive of historical difference. This has led to renewed experimentation with modes of comparison and metaphors of connection that neither originate from, nor treat as primary, a privileged set of “global cities” (Caldeira 2016; Hart 2006; Mbembe and Nuttall 2008; Robinson 2002).

This interrogation of the geographies of theory has grown to encompass what Loretta Lees (2012) calls the “geography of gentrification”. Once an idiosyncratic form of neighbourhood renovation in London and New York, gentrification has become, according to some scholars, a “global urban strategy” (Albet and Benach 2017; Smith 2002)—i.e. the basic mode of urban development and discipline under a financialised and neoliberalised capitalism (Atkinson and Bridge 2005; Schafran 2014; Slater 2017). As in urban studies in general, this concern with an expanding territory of gentrification has generated exciting experiments in critical comparison committed to the methods and ethics of postcolonial research (Lees et al. 2015; López-Morales 2015). But even as they create nuanced accounts of how global flows of capital come to matter through grounded histories, institutions, and imaginaries, many scholars remain convinced that the geographies of commodification and displacement categorised as “gentrification” are central to spatial politics across the “world of cities”. Others, however, such as Asher Ghertner (2015), counter that gentrification is contingent on the social and spatial relations of select Northern and Western cities. As such, treating it as a model for urban transformations elsewhere threatens to obscure the main mechanisms driving displacement throughout “much of the world”, from the global South to the global East (Ouředníček 2016).

Thinking from Oakland, we share the concern of scholars like Ghertner that the conceptual dominance of gentrification theory has turned it into what Jennifer Robinson (2002) calls a “regulating fiction” that overwrites local understandings of racial/spatial politics. At the same time, however, we argue that critics of this conceptual overreach tend to defend their terrains from the encroachment of gentrification theory by parrying it back to the metropolitan heartlands of the global North and West to which it assumedly and unproblematically belongs. In his important call for a deep attunement to context in accounts of urban change, for instance, Thomas Maloutas (2012) does not critique the analytical value of gentrification as such; rather, he critiques the way it has become deceptively dominant beyond its “Anglo-American” origins. But in defending the differences of various elsewheres, he implies—however inadvertently—that gentrification is adequate to

an understanding of spatial politics in cities across the UK, North America, and Australia. Likewise, in arguing that this analytic should be limited to areas where “individualized and property-based land tenure is more or less universal”, Ghertner (2015:553) too suggests that the modes of dispossession remaking Oakland fit squarely within the ambit of gentrification theory.

In other words, in calling for an account of historical difference in a world marked by severe but varied displacements, these authors risk reproducing a monolithic map of the urban North and West that overwrites the enforced differences that comprise these metropolitan but nevertheless colonialist geographies. For all of its merits, then, this mode of demarcating the centres and peripheries of gentrification theory threatens to overlook deep variations within the metropole in terms of regional formations of race, land, and property (cf. Bernt 2016; Kaiwar 2014). We thus seek to take these critiques even further by recalling that post-colonial theorists have long deconstructed essentialist mappings of race and space to question not only the imperial dominance, but also the internal (in)coherence, of metropolitan geographies (Chakrabarty 2000; Spivak 2003). This approach is especially relevant in the US, as a settler colony resonant with the afterlives of trans-Atlantic slavery and trans-Pacific indentured labour (Hartman 2007; Lowe 2015; McKittrick 2011; Sharpe 2016; Smith 2014).

Indeed, in cities like Oakland, longstanding racial formations and dispossessions are alive and well, making it vital to refuse comparisons that flatten—and Whiten—Northern and Western cities, whether across the Atlantic Ocean or San Francisco Bay. Thus, in this article, we seek to deepen the dialogue between postcolonial urban theory and critical race and ethnic studies from North America to chart an anti-displacement praxis that, in thinking *from place*, thinks deeply *about race* as well. In treating Oakland as a crossroads of theory, we are inspired by the recent work of Ananya Roy (2017, 2018). Roy has long maintained that “seeing from the South” does not mean simply producing knowledge from or about cities in the postcolonial world; rather, it means politicising urban studies by continuously remaking it from its social and spatial margins. “The South is not a location”, she argued at a recent talk at the London School of Economics (Roy 2018). Rather, “It is a structural relation of space, power, and knowledge produced and maintained in the crucible of racial capitalism on a global scale”.<sup>9</sup> Further, as she suggests in her recent work on “racial banishment” (Roy 2017), Northern analytics such as “gentrification” often fail to account for the ongoing histories of racial violence that underwrite contemporary urban transformations, including in Northern cities.

Thinking urban displacement from Oakland thus necessitates approaching spatial politics from within a global geography of race and empire in which the location of praxis is just as much a matter of one’s coordinates within the structures of coloniality as cartography (Mignolo 2001). And this means divesting from deracinated accounts of the commodification of space to centre what West Oakland-born scholar Cedric Robinson (1983) famously termed “racial capitalism”. The notion that capitalist exploitation of labour and land is predicated on, but also productive of, racial hierarchy is one that was clear to Robinson—who, raised in part by grandparents who had escaped lynching in Alabama, grew up

ensnared within the segregated and surveilled geographies of Oakland's post-war Jim Crow (Kelley 2017; Self 2003).<sup>10</sup> Drawing upon Robinson's seminal work, then, we argue that Oakland demands an anti-displacement praxis that foregrounds (a) the inseparability of race and class as socio-spatial formations and (b) the coloniality of present-day urban disposessions.

Conventional and even critical scholars of cities, however, seem slow to fully consider what an appreciation of these two aspects of racial capitalism might mean for their analyses of gentrification, eviction, and displacement in the global North (Brenner et al. 2012; Desmond 2016; Harvey 2012; Slater 2017). In terms of the first aspect, these accounts tend to treat race as either a "variable" that correlates to class inequalities or a convenient ideological tool used by capital to undermine minoritised communities' "rights to the city". But as scholars of critical race and ethnic studies have long argued, class relations are contoured and lived through racial formations (Hall 1980). Spatial politics in cities like Oakland thus require an attunement to the urbanisation of White supremacy through processes such as symbolic and economic devaluation, surveillance, policing, and punishment. While these modes of oppression are inextricably linked to class domination and post-industrial economic flows in racial capitalism (Gilmore 2007), they are nevertheless much older than gentrification and never fully explained by it (cf. Browne 2015; McKittrick 2011; Pulido 2017). As Lisa Marie Cacho (2012), along with Paula Chakravartty and Denise Ferreira da Silva (2013) argue, race is the *sine qua non* of rightlessness and dispossession in the spatial politics of US cities—including, we would add, those forms commonly categorised as "gentrification". Under US racial capitalism, then, racialisation is the prerequisite, as well as the result, of profit-driven modes of urban "renewal" and removal (Bledsoe and Wright 2018).

The second aspect tends to be foreclosed by mainstream urban studies too due to a temporal, as well as geographical, myopia that deracinates histories of displacement from their racialised roots and routes (Roy 2018). This is precisely the value of engaging with activists and scholars in critical race and ethnic studies—indeed, of treating their work, much of which centres the racial and colonial histories that underlie contemporary disposessions (Hong 2012; Tadiar 2009), as "urban studies".<sup>11</sup> In fact, the dislocations enacted through foreclosure and eviction, both of which plague Oakland, cannot be theorised apart from the *longue durées* of Black and Indigenous dispossession that US cities rest upon (Coates 2014; Simpson 2014). In the next two sections, we examine what this approach might look like in and from Oakland, a city at the crossroads of racialised histories and decolonial futures (Bloom and Martin 2012; Herrera 2015).

## Cartographic Transpositions, Speculative Fictions

Returning to the request for comparative data, we now discuss the AEMP's place-based approach—which, working from the ground up, refuses such cartographic transpositions. When the AEMP emerged in 2013, its participants and partners spanned both sides of the Bay. But since eviction data were more accessible in San Francisco, it began its anti-displacement visualisation work there. These initial

maps highlighted speculative technologies that had expelled rent-controlled tenants. Most of these focused upon “no-fault” evictions, in which the tenant does not violate their lease but is nevertheless displaced. For instance, the AEMP found that, between 2011 and 2013, nearly 80% of no-fault “Ellis Act”<sup>12</sup> evictions were enacted within the first five years of property ownership (Tenants Together and AEMP 2014). This revealed the intimate links between real-estate speculation and expulsion, and provided a useful statistic in fighting San Francisco’s property industry.

The fallout from this industry is often poisonous, expelling those rendered surplus by speculative logics of accumulation into wastelands, streets, subterranean spaces, and suburbs (Schafran 2018; Tadiar 2013). But while no-fault evictions often banish the racialised poor, they also impact White middle-class residents. And it is the latter that has garnered the most sympathy from the media in San Francisco’s Tech Boom 2.0. This liberal narrative—which centres the removal of hippies and artists, many of whom are White, and their replacement by “techie” millennials—has failed to address how mechanisms of tech-driven displacement rely upon earlier forms of racial and colonial dispossession. So while Black and Latinx residents are disproportionately displaced by local evictions, many of which are “fault” evictions (AEMP and Eviction Defense Collaborative 2016), no-fault evictions tend to be represented in terms of moralistic narratives of unscrupulous landlords and other speculative evils. This absencing of race inscribes preferential fictions of the “good” victims of no-fault evictions and suggests remedies that deracinate capitalism from its racist underpinnings. For instance, while taxes on real-estate speculation and measures to curb the abuse of no-fault evictions have been introduced, campaigns for the right to remain for those issued “fault” evictions (e.g. for late payment of rent), or to provide land reparation and repatriation for those displaced, have gained little traction.<sup>13</sup> While the latter would help crack the historical bedrock of racialised dispossession upon which contemporary gentrification resides, from the first case of colonial theft onwards, the famously progressive city of San Francisco reproduces settler logics.

In so doing, the city reifies what Jodi Melamed (2006) describes as “neoliberal multiculturalism”—or the liberal deployment of postracial imaginaries to code a world free of racism that nevertheless continues to render racialised subjects as surplus, extinguishable, and in the past historic. The hippie/techie binaries inscribed by neoliberal multiculturalism are not only outmoded, but also representative of an extremely narrow—and White—view of San Francisco, a non-White majority city with a housing justice movement rooted in anti-racist organising. Still, these postracial imaginaries travel. So when the AEMP received the request for transposable data, its members worried that such modelling would not only reproduce a Whitewashed account of San Francisco, but also inscribe a fictive future upon Oakland.

In theorising financial speculation alongside speculative fiction, Aimee Bahng (2015) points to the ways that financialised logics—in this case, gentrification—function according to fictitious scripts of the future. Indeed, San Francisco and Oakland have long been shaped at the nexus of land investment and social engineering. But the racial/spatial contours of this double speculation have been quite

different. This has been evidenced most recently by the fact that, while no-fault evictions have impacted San Francisco more than Oakland, the reverse is true when it comes to foreclosures.<sup>14</sup> With these differences in mind, the AEMP refused the data request on the grounds that such forecasting would, in Bahng's (2015:666) words, "produce extrapolative fiction", converting place-specific data "into an interpretive arc".

As a trans-local group, the AEMP's solution to the problem of transposition was not to avoid mapping, but rather to map from the ground up. In 2015, it ran a year-long collaboration with community partners to map, narrate, and analyse increased rates of racialised dispossession in the Alameda County cities of Oakland, Fremont, and Alameda. Working with groups ranging from the statewide Tenants Together to the local Oakland Creative Neighborhoods Coalition (OCNC), it implemented a multi-layered and multi-scalar investigation into the transformation of the East Bay. Unlike work that attempts to universalise understandings of displacement,<sup>15</sup> this approach sought to analyse particular spatial politics from the perspectives of those most impacted. The work culminated in an interactive digital report that collated numerous datasets (AEMP 2016). Here, we highlight four of these—foreclosures, poverty-related evictions, nuisance evictions, and community assets—to outline how the transposition of data from San Francisco misrecognises Oakland both descriptively and predictively.

First, while the AEMP found recent studies on Oakland displacement to be more focused on foreclosure than eviction, *foreclosure has been displaced from popular readings of Bay Area gentrification*. These narratives represent Oakland's gentrification as a recent phenomenon, one stemming from San Francisco's spillover. But before the Tech Boom 2.0, Oakland experienced more foreclosure-related displacement than any other city in the County, and far more than San Francisco. The elision of foreclosure in popular media and gentrification studies alike, we argue, reflects the excision of racial capitalism from historical accounts of US property ownership (cf. Lipsitz 2006). Between 2007 and 2011, however, when over 10,000 homes in Oakland were foreclosed, amounting to 10% citywide, most were concentrated in parts of East and West Oakland that, after World War II, were redlined, stripped of union-wage work, and denied home and small-business loans needed to build resources among Black and Latinx residents (Herrera 2015; King 2012; Self 2003). Moreover, *de facto* disparities in education and racist hiring practices guaranteed that most of the high-wage service-sector jobs that emerged in Oakland in the 1970s and 1980s went to White workers, many from suburbs to the east (Walker 2018). This increasingly structural poverty made communities of colour especially susceptible to the violent drug economies pushed into the city's low-lying flatlands ("flats") during the Reagan Era. These changes then drove vicious cycles of addiction, incarceration, and premature death that displaced countless residents, especially young Black and Latino men (Rios 2011). In addition, they made life extremely harsh among those, many women and elders, who managed to find work, pay their mortgage, and avoid incarceration. While some moved to the exurban fringe, others managed to remain rooted—at least until the 2000s, when mortgage lenders targeted residents long excluded from homeownership, especially Black and Latina women, with subprime loans (Schafran 2018).



Foreclosures have long occurred in San Francisco too—especially in southern and eastern neighbourhoods with higher rates of homeowners of colour like Bayview, Ingleside, and Visitacion Valley. But since these areas have less rental stock, and thus lower eviction rates, they are largely ignored by dominant discourses of gentrification, which focus on the Mission, Castro, and North Beach (AEMP and Eviction Defense Collaborative 2016).<sup>16</sup> The Mission, in particular, which has seen the most evictions since the first Dot Com Boom, has been fetishised by not only real-estate speculators but also reporters as a residential playground pitting techies versus renters (McElroy 2017; Mirabal 2009). Therefore, as commentators have transposed the dominant cartographies of displacement across the Bay, they have elided the violent effects of foreclosure.

Foreclosures have not been Oakland's only racialised source of residential dis-possession, however. As the AEMP learned through Oakland Rent Board and Alameda County Court data, evictions also surged in parallel with the subprime mortgage crisis. And while foreclosure rates have declined in recent years—with only 308 in 2015, down from a peak of 3987 in 2009—unlawful detainer (UD) eviction rates have not (AEMP 2016:10). In contrast to no-fault evictions, UDs often stem from a breach of lease, or "fault", allowing tenants a brief window of time to cure the violation or face removal. As the AEMP (2016:14) found, 76% of eviction notices filed in Oakland between 2008 and 2016 were "three-day notices to pay or quit", meaning that most expulsions were due to the tenant's inability to pay rent on time. Unlike struggles against no-fault evictions in San Francisco, then, Oakland suffers from a surfeit of *fault* notices linked to racialised poverty.<sup>17</sup>

Although liberal logics tend to acknowledge race and class inequalities, they also treat failures to pay rent as unsympathetic and unforgivable. These two positions are contradictory, however, as the inability to pay rent, rather than a moral failure, emerges from historical relations of dominance, failed reparations, and postracial imaginaries. Since 2000, for instance, Oakland's households of colour have experienced a drop in median income across all ethno-racial categories, leading to a surge of racialised income inequality. In 2014, the median White household made \$75,065 a year, while the median Black household made only \$35,987, making it significantly harder for the latter to meet growing rents. This has been exacerbated by the fact that, as rents have risen to some of the highest in the country, exceeding federal limits, many local landlords have stopped accepting Section 8 rental assistance. It is thus little wonder that the city's Black population, which has been declining since it peaked at 50% of the total population in 1980, dropped by 4% between 2010 and 2014 (AEMP 2016:12).

While the majority of fault evictions in Oakland stem from a failure to pay rent, nuisance evictions comprise a smaller but nevertheless noteworthy mode of displacement. These are often thought to be exclusively linked to the city's Nuisance Eviction Ordinance (NEO)—which requires landlords to evict tenants engaged in drug-related activity, sex work, violent crime, and other offenses. But the AEMP found that more mundane nuisance violations may also result in removal. While the number of NEO evictions is relatively small, with under 80 between 2008 and 2016, over 130 non-NEO nuisance notices that nevertheless led to eviction were issued over the same period. In these cases, landlords receive a citation for a minor

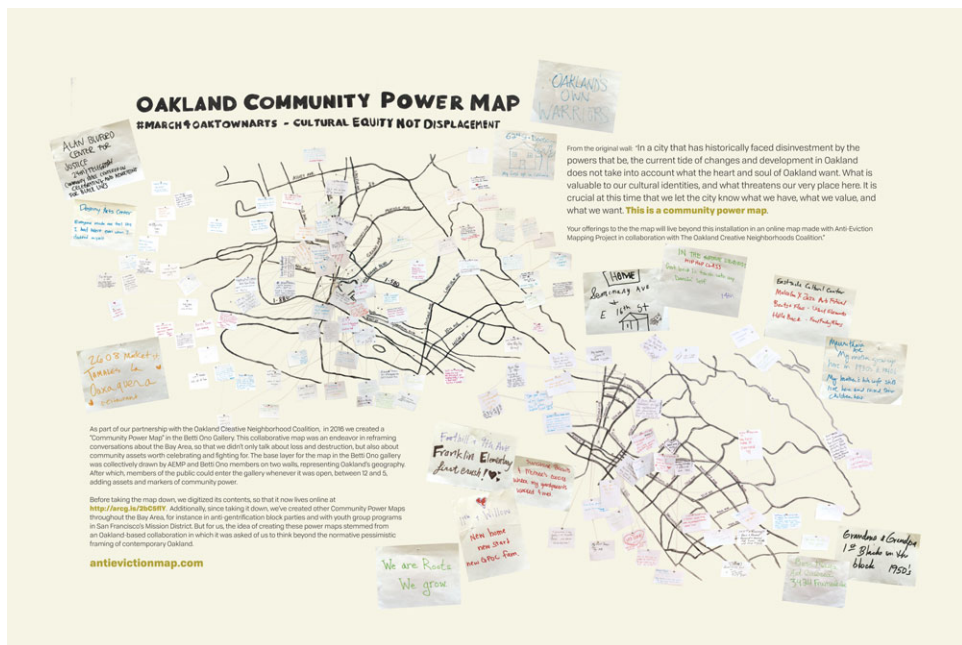
infraction, like poor maintenance or excessive noise, which renders the *tenant* the nuisance, one that must be removed in order to cure the violation. This conflation of “tenant” and “nuisance” perpetuates an unsympathetic and profoundly racialised narrative in which the object of offense, like the subprime victim, is represented as pathologic, criminal, and undeserving of shelter. And these nuisance evictions have been concentrated in East Oakland—an area already targeted by redlining, foreclosure, mass incarceration, and other technologies of racialised dispossession.

The contours of these technologies cannot be charted through reductive comparisons. Instead, mapping this landscape requires conversations that are grounded in particular conditions with local collaborators, some of whom may contradict prior assumptions. On a cold and windy day in December 2015, for instance, several members of the AEMP met with their counterparts from the OCNC to discuss the possibility of collaboration. Sitting around a table in the Black-owned Betti Ono Gallery, the attendees began to discuss joint cartographic efforts to illuminate the mechanisms of racialised dispossession in Oakland. The stream of ideas was interrupted, however, when Anyka Barber, founder and curator, cleared her throat. “You know”, she said, “what we don’t need is another map reducing us to a withering population, another statistic showing loss, and so on. What we need is a map of community assets so that we can remember what’s here. So we can fight for what’s here”. And “what’s here”, she inferred, is more than just an accumulation of past and impending losses.

Barber thus alluded to Clyde Woods’s (2002) call for engaged methodological approaches that avoid “doing autopsies” of subjugated communities. Further, as she observed, reductive maps of Black population loss do little to abet community organising. In response, the AEMP and OCNC set out to produce a map detailing sites of community power and assets for movement building. The groups worked together to draw an outline of the city on the gallery’s walls so that visitors could mark the spaces they saw as worth celebrating and defending (Figure 1). These included places such as Marcus Books, the oldest Black-owned bookstore in the US, where someone wrote: “I LOVE BOOKSTORES with books by (and about) BLACK PEOPLE”. Other important cultural spaces among local communities of colour—the Alan Blueford Center for Justice, Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts, and Tamales la Oaxaqueña, to name a few—were also included. While some residents noted sites of eviction and loss, others recorded joyful recollections of past experiences. At 9<sup>th</sup> and Franklin Streets, for instance, someone “fell in love w/ my Filipino heritage through dance”. After removing the map from the gallery, the AEMP digitised it so that it can be added to online over time. This archive would not have manifested if the AEMP had followed a mimetic model of transposition. Rather, as the group learned, it is from within moments of refusal and spaces of resistance to comparative forms of (mis)recognition that practices of site-specific counter-mapping can emerge.

## Spectres of Policing in the Ghost Ship’s Wake

As the AEMP Community Power Map revealed, Oakland’s cultural spaces are central to residents’ sense of the city as at once precious and precarious. But which



**Figure 1:** Oakland Community Power Map, Betti Ono Gallery, Spring 2016 (source: Anti-Eviction Mapping Project) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

(and whose) spaces are intelligible as vulnerable to displacement underwent a dramatic shift on 2 December 2016, when a fire engulfed an electronic dance party at an unpermitted live/work warehouse in the Fruitvale District. The Ghost Ship, as it was called, claimed 36 lives, cutting a wide-reaching trail of grief in its wake. As first responders sorted through the ashes, artists, city officials, and national news outlets began to sift through the causes of the wreckage. In a rare moment of consensus, most concluded that the culprit was neither an individual nor an institution so much as the rampant “gentrification” chasing artists and creatives out of San Francisco and now Oakland’s formal housing market. From grieving friends to elected officials, people often at odds in Oakland’s contentious struggles over development and displacement were quick to agree that the region’s unprecedented “housing crisis” had forced artists, activists, and others living on the margins to seek cultural community and expression in the discarded warehouses extending across the flats (Lefebvre 2016). Even conservative news outlets that tend to invoke the pro-development trope of “revitalisation” reiterated the new liberal consensus—arguing that Oakland, and especially underground spaces like the Ghost Ship, had become the fatal front line of the Bay Area’s gentrification struggles. In turn, these voices called for the protection of such venues as sanctuaries for artists as valued, but now vulnerable, residents of this “creative” city.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, the rampant increase in local rents has hurt low- and middle-income Oaklanders across a wide range of social locations, including some White

residents, rebels, and artists. The logic linking regional gentrification to the Ghost Ship tragedy is thus far from incorrect. Still, we interrogate the ways that, since the fire, spaces and subjects associated with communities like the Ghost Ship have come to be viewed as the *prime victims of gentrification in Oakland*. Ramírez (2017:219–227), too, in conversation with art-activists like Favianna Rodriguez, has critiqued this political amnesia for the way it erases the longstanding violence of displacement in communities of colour and the work of artists of colour to organise in resistance. Here, using Alex Werth’s research on the policing of music and dance in Oakland, we echo Ramírez and Rodriguez’s concerns: How does a comparative conception of displacement, one rooted in San Francisco, script this interpretation? How does it conceal racialised histories and geographies of cultural regulation that antedate and attend the current moment?

In particular, we argue that this discourse has foreclosed an understanding of disparities between *land-use protections* and *policing* as raced and classed modes of governing cultural spaces. After the fire, public debate became fixated on perceived problems with how the City of Oakland executes regulations, from fire to building codes, meant to mitigate environmental risk. On one side, local media and officials decried a *lack* of enforcement, pointing to the irregularity of inspections, lack of communication between agencies, and failure to follow up on reports of dangerous conditions at the site. On the other, some artists denounced an *excess* of governance, organising groups like the Oakland Warehouse Coalition to defend non-conforming spaces from an anticipated “witch hunt”. Indeed, each of these views contained elements of the truth; while local governance is inconsistent due to longstanding fiscal austerity, there has been an increase in public and private evictions since the fire. But the media-driven conflict between illicit arts spaces and administrative agencies ignored that fact that, over the last two decades, *an alarming number of legally permitted cultural spaces run by and catering to Oaklanders of colour have been contained, circumscribed, and closed down through routine forms of racist state violence*. And almost every time a Black- or Latinx-owned cultural space has been shuttered, the agency in charge has not been the Fire or Building Department; it has been the Police Department (OPD), an entity dedicated to foreclosing the social pleasures and spatial practices of young people of colour since at least the rise of the Black Panthers (Murch 2010; Rios 2011). In what follows, we provide a summary of the changes preceding the fire and two explanations that centre the role of racialised criminalisation, rather than a deracinated “housing crisis”, in remaking Oakland’s cultural landscape.

During the Dot Com Boom, Mayor Jerry Brown sought to redevelop the flats to welcome early artists and tech mavericks—most of whom, like him, were White—being pushed out of the West Bay. First, he liberalised land-use regulations to increase live/work spaces (like the Ghost Ship, but code-compliant) in industrial and commercial buildings. (Brown himself moved from San Francisco to an Oakland loft in the 1990s.) Next, he pushed to replace downtown’s SROs and sports bars with condos and nightclubs. At the time, San Francisco’s music scene was in crisis; as the city underwent a boom in condo construction, middle-class residents flooded the police with complaints about noise from neighbouring experimental rock and electronic music venues, forcing several to close. The San Francisco

“nightclub wars”, as they came to be called, cemented a discursive link between gentrification, land-use regulation, and the displacement of underground music scenes, one that has resounded since the Ghost Ship fire. At the time, these struggles encouraged Brown to capitalise on the outflow of cultural assets from his hometown. The City of Oakland has since spent a disproportionate share of public resources enrolling investors in the redevelopment of downtown as an arts, entertainment, and residential district for a desired (creative) class of refugees fleeing San Francisco (Werth and Marienthal 2016).

Between 2001 and 2016, the number of permitted downtown nightclubs increased from 20 to 28.<sup>19</sup> In the process, however, the relations of ownership and musical format were radically transformed. In 2001, 55% of entertainment venues were Black-owned (in total, 80% were owned by people of colour). These ranged from small blues clubs to large venues where DJs spun rap and R&B. By 2016, however, the portion of venues owned by Black people, either in whole or in part, had dropped from 55% to 36%, while that owned by Whites had rocketed from 20% to 61%. Of the 11 Black-owned clubs open in 2001, only one weathered this much celebrated process of downtown “renaissance”. Black popular musics continue to move crowds throughout the district; but today, at least half of the venues spinning rap, R&B, and Jamaican dancehall are owned by Whites. In 2001, none of them were.

Some of these changes resulted from an increase in rent *à la* common accounts of gentrification. At times, Black operators, who rarely owned their buildings, could not keep up with rising costs amidst the recapitalisation of downtown. But these were the exceptions, not the rule. During this period, 13 of 21 (62%) of the Black- and Latinx-owned clubs that closed did so due to intense surveillance and prosecution by the City. By contrast, among all the other ones that closed, only 2 of 15 (13%) did. And the records reveal that almost every case of the former involved the policing of audiences of colour gathered at or around these venues. This geography of control was driven by two main logics: precluding violence and disrupting car parties known as “sideshows”.

Oakland has long suffered from a state-sanctioned epidemic of civic gun violence, which has at times led to night-time shootings on downtown streets (only rarely have incidents occurred inside clubs). While the City lacks a legal standard for assigning liability to the venues inscribed in the vague aetiology of violence, its routine response reveals a drive to spatialise the prosecution of past crimes and prevention of future ones. And Black clubs have been singularly subjected to municipal regulation for their assumed role in generating, tolerating, or failing to prevent such harm. The OPD has repeatedly designated these venues “attractable nuisances”—sites that, by their very existence, create the conditions of possibility for disorder. In rare instances, the City has used this rationale to close clubs. More often, however, the racist ascription of violence to select venues has served to impose additional operating conditions and costs such as: reduced hours; extra security; mandatory police details at overtime rates; and revocation of the right to play rap music, host concerts without police approval, and advertise on 106.1 KMEL, the area’s “urban-format” radio station. While not direct forms of closure, these exceptional and openly discriminatory requirements have made it

increasingly difficult for Black operators to survive amidst increasing rents and competition from new (White) venue owners, who do not face the same level of resistance from the OPD as they host rap, R&B, and dancehall DJs to more and more mixed-raced crowds (Lefebvre 2017).

The second “vehicle” through which Black-owned clubs have been exposed to excessive policing has been the City’s two-decade-long campaign against “side-shows”. These car parties began in the 1980s as spontaneous gatherings of Black youth in East Oakland. After Reagan-era disinvestment gutted the spaces in which they could safely and legally enjoy themselves, young people of colour appropriated the parking lot of the Eastmont Mall as a territory to show off their cars, dance to the city’s latest “slaps”, and cut loose with a bit of sovereignty and security (Cielo 2005; Tilton 2010). Soon, the OPD chased the crowds into the surrounding streets, inaugurating a game of cat-and-mouse that, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, became one of Oakland’s most contentious arenas of cultural politics and policing. Under Brown, the City lobbied the State to impose a 30-day impound on cars used to block traffic or perform stunts; tried, unsuccessfully, to make it a misdemeanour to attend such an event; and created special patrols to erect checkpoints along popular streets and disperse even small social gatherings. Sideshows thus created a dense site of contestation between a criminalised generation and the police—a node in a vast network of everyday interactions in which the OPD performed its repression of a racialised nuisance, and young people of colour performed their resistance to what Victor Rios (2011:xiv) calls Oakland’s “youth control complex”.

The anti-sideshow campaign transformed the OPD, installing an apparatus of personnel, penalties, and discourses dedicated to disrupting “reckless driving”. But in practice, this system created a catch-all approach that framed late-night crowds of Black and Brown youth as signs of what the press and police described with increasing latitude as “sideshow activity”. The creeping use of this lens had a particularly damaging impact on bars and clubs, where such crowds would often form outside. As the sideshow patrols came to read this scene as an outlawed gathering in some state of formation, officers would close streets, issue citations, make arrests, and activate other means to disrupt such scenarios. This exposed revellers to financial and criminal penalties, e.g. parole violation, just for being in a crowded public space. It also landed club owners in debt for deployments of “police services” over which they had no control.

These dynamics are evident in the case of Jimmie’s Entertainment Complex, a restaurant and nightclub run by former longshoreman “Sweet Jimmie” Ward. City documents reveal that, in the mid 2000s, officers patrolled the venue almost every weekend. In their reports, they used the same language time and again, cutting and pasting whole sections, to map the scene outside the club: “Numerous vehicles were playing very loud music ... [and] blocking traffic, with the vehicle occupants conversing with the pedestrians. The totality of circumstances required immediate action to preserve public safety ... and prevent further ‘Side-show’ activity”. Officers thus called upon routinised ways of reading arrangements of Black and Brown bodies, cars, and sounds to categorise closing-time crowds as sideshows-in-formation, and thus escalate enforcement. Then, assigning Sweet

Jimmie's responsibility for this "attractable nuisance", they charged the club for the time spent clearing the street. Never requested by the venue, these actions still cost it around \$4000 on a regular basis. In 2004, Ward sued the City, OPD, and Brown alleging that, by using their powers in a discriminatory way, they conspired to undercut his operations and pressure him to sell his property to the City at a below-market rate. He lost the case. In 2006, citing the stress of this ordeal, he closed the club and sold the building to a private interest. It is now the site of the New Parish—a popular venue that hosts crowded rap concerts, reggae parties, and DJ nights, the same things that earned Ward the scrutiny of the police. The New Parish, however, is owned by Whites.

These histories of policing have been foreclosed, we argue, by the dominant narrative of gentrification in Oakland. The latter insists that the city has witnessed a cultural "renaissance" as artists and creatives have been priced or pushed out of San Francisco. But Oakland's renewal is now in jeopardy, according to this view, as the market pressure associated with San Francisco's tech gentrification jumps across the water to once again displace these celebrated icons of post-industrial urbanism. This narrative climaxed in the wake of the Ghost Ship, when the victims of displacement scripted in San Francisco's "nightclub wars" reemerged in the fire's horrific *mise-en-scene*. As argued above, however, this discourse overlooks routine modes of racialised dispossession that have decimated Oakland's cultural geographies and economies. Further, the treatment of the Ghost Ship as the consummate sign of displacement has trained the massive political response on solutions that do not address the problems confronting Black and Brown cultural spaces, nor the anti-displacement work of artists of colour (Ramírez 2017), and might in fact make them worse.

In particular, underground artists and advocates have energetically lobbied the City to limit its use of code enforcement as a means of eviction and instead use its resources to make non-conforming spaces safe, legal, and affordable for their occupants. But at no point has this campaign addressed the fact that the main driver of displacement at cultural venues owned by and catering to people of colour, especially younger African Americans, has been the way that *these artists and audiences live lives that are saturated with surveillance and policing*. As in other US cities, however, racialised means of criminalisation, e.g. discourses of violence or sideshows, stalk Oakland's young people of colour across distinct realms of social life—a process that only intensifies around sites of pleasure, such as concerts, clubs, and parties. In most cases, it is this deep-seated system of racialised control, not the lack of "affordability", that has decimated and continues to threaten Black and Brown cultural spaces in Oakland. Treating San Francisco or the Ghost Ship as the universal referent for the crisis besetting all cultural spaces thus promises to do little to nothing to protect these besieged communities and economies. In fact, it might do just the opposite. Since the fire, arts advocates have called for the use of municipal powers—from land-use controls to eminent domain, which, after World War II, was used to attack Oakland's communities of colour (Self 2003)—to keep underground artists in their spaces. This reproduces the state as the vehicle to protect vulnerable groups and activities. But it is precisely the carceral state and its modes of racialised criminalisation that have produced the

violent reorganisation of Oakland's cultural landscape in the first place. Here, then, a deracinated gentrification discourse threatens to enact further dispossession.

## Refusals from the Other Side

Oakland has too long been viewed as San Francisco's "sideshow", a dark and dangerous place on the other(ed) side of the Bay. Today, its histories and geographies of ongoing racialised dispossession and resistance are being erased by spatial imaginaries and politics that frame the city either triumphantly as the new frontier of Silicon Valley or critically as the front line of the region's gentrification struggles. But the racialised mechanisms of state and market violence driving displacement in Oakland—e.g. nuisance violations, fault evictions, foreclosures, and policing—demand that we refuse these assimilatory logics. It is thus crucial to think Oakland through its situated racial/spatial politics rather than reductionist comparisons.

As we have argued, however, such analysis has been impeded by the predominance of gentrification theory in popular and academic discourse. This dominance has been productively critiqued by postcolonial urbanists and scholars attuned to historical difference (Ghertner 2015; Maloutas 2012). But such attempts to demarcate the geographies of gentrification risk reifying a North/South divide in which the transposition of ideas between cities such as San Francisco and Oakland overwrites the coloniality of spatial politics in the metropole (cf. Ramírez 2017; Roy 2017, 2018). Oakland's rich and ongoing tradition of decolonial activism, however, calls for an anti-displacement praxis that resides at the crossroads of postcolonial urban studies and critical race and ethnic studies. This praxis refuses White comparativist imaginaries to heed the way in which Oakland's communities of colour, through their lived experiences and politics, chart "new geographies of theory" (Roy 2009) that reorder epistemological, even hemispheric, divides. This approach, we argue, is not only needed to challenge racialised dispossession in Oakland, but also to militate against the possibility that the modifier "postcolonial" simply becomes a means to resegment urban theory. How, then, can urbanists in the North learn from the South in ways that do not just critique the imperial imposition of metropolitan theories, but that also attend to the violent and colonial aspects of cities like Oakland, thus unsettling the assimilated notions of spatial politics that supposedly bind the "global North" together in the first place? Thinking from Oakland, we argue, calls for modes of mapping that refuse to deracinate the city from its racialised roots and routes.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Both authors have contributed equally to this piece, and are thus listed in alphabetical order.

<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the Dot Com Boom, “Tech Boom 2.0” refers to Silicon Valley’s rapid economic and geographic growth since the Great Recession (McElroy 2017; Stehlin 2015; Walker 2018).

<sup>3</sup> In 2017, Uber decided against the move, instead flipping the property for a 45% profit. In 2018, however, digital payment processor Square leased the entire building from its new owners.

<sup>4</sup> “The Town” is a term of endearment used by long-time residents to distinguish Oakland from “The City”, or San Francisco, which has long been overvalued by media, tourists, and capital in relation to its more working-class and specifically Black neighbour.

<sup>5</sup> Erin McElroy is a founding member of the AEMP.

<sup>6</sup> The Oakland metropolitan area, located on the east side of San Francisco Bay, is often referred to as the “East Bay”.

<sup>7</sup> The OSUS consisted of Trisha Barua, Jeanelle Hope, Savannah Kilner, Allison Logan, Eli Marienthal, Erin McElroy, Andrea Miller, Dorie Perez, Magie Ramirez, Divya Sundar, Claire Urbanski, and Alex Werth. We would like to thank Trisha Barua in particular for her leadership, dedication, and engagement with some of the ideas discussed here. We would also like to thank activists Woods Ervin, Deseree Fontenot, Johnella LaRose, and Jae Maldonado, who spoke to the limits of gentrification politics at a 2016 OSUS-sponsored event entitled *Expanding the Frame: Multiple Perspectives on Gentrification in Oakland*. The AEMP data and critique of comparativity that we draw upon in this article were first explored by Erin McElroy at an OSUS-sponsored panel at the 2016 meeting of the Association of American Geographers. And the nightclub data and discussion of foreclosure versus gentrification as an analytic were first examined by Alex Werth at a panel organised with Barua and McElroy at the 2016 meeting of the American Studies Association.

<sup>8</sup> In this article, we focus on the value of critiques of comparativity and geographic essentialism made by postcolonial theorists to resisting racialised dispossession in Oakland. Those interested in how a critique of settler colonialism informs local decolonial politics in ways that exceed the frame of gentrification discourse should see the insightful work of Ramirez (2017).

<sup>9</sup> Oakland has played a significant role in the development of Roy’s own poetics and politics of translation. Her critical engagement with classical urban theory began as an undergraduate at Mills College, an elite liberal arts school in East Oakland. There, she realised that the liberal and later neo-Marxist theories that she encountered in urban studies were unable to grasp not only her native India, but also the impoverished Black and Latinx neighbourhoods just beyond the campus. “The south was, I realised, never just Kolkata ... [I]t was all of those places that the canon of theory could not make sense of except in quite dystopian ways” (Roy and Bhan 2013).

<sup>10</sup> This notion was also espoused by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, who—radicalised by their time in U.C. Berkeley’s Afro-American Association, of which Robinson was an early member—went on to make anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism twin pillars of the Black Panther Party’s revolutionary intercommunal politics (Bloom and Martin 2012). It is thus clear that, in Oakland, the critical articulation of urban geography, racial capitalism, and empire runs deep, disrupting disciplinary, even hemispheric, divides.

<sup>11</sup> Here, again, we thank Trisha Barua for engaging with us on this topic.

<sup>12</sup> The Ellis Act is a California law that allows landlords to evict rent-controlled tenants for no fault of their own, provided the unit is not re-rented out and the “landlord” effectively exits the rental market. In practice, this law is routinely abused.

<sup>13</sup> In June 2018, however, San Francisco voters approved a ballot measure that guarantees a lawyer for anyone facing eviction regardless of eviction type, the first such law in the country.

<sup>14</sup> By eviction, we mean the removal of renters via fault or no-fault mechanisms. By foreclosure, we mean the removal of homeowners via the repossession of property by a mortgage lender.

<sup>15</sup> See Matthew Desmond's Eviction Lab (<https://evictionlab.org>) and a collective critique of it (Aiello et al. 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Neighbourhoods like West Portal and Saint Francis Wood also have less rental stock. But they were shielded from the foreclosure crisis by White wealth.

<sup>17</sup> While San Francisco endures fault evictions as well, no-fault evictions have been much more prominent in the city's anti-eviction discourse of late.

<sup>18</sup> See Ramírez (2017:Chapter 3) for an incisive critique of the production of Oakland as "creative" through what she calls the "white millennial imaginary".

<sup>19</sup> This analysis is based on the City of Oakland's list of licensed cabarets from 2001, the earliest year for which data are available, to 2016; news reports; and public records on individual clubs.

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