

City as borderland: Gentrification and the policing of Black and Latinx geographies in Oakland

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journals.sagepub.com/home/epd**Margaret M Ramírez**

Stanford University, USA

Abstract

From the foreclosure crisis of 2008, to the tech boom-provoked housing crisis currently engulfing the San Francisco Bay Area, low-income residents of Oakland, California have been displaced from their homes at an alarming rate over the past decade. In this piece I draw from Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* and engage with Black geographic thought, urban and sound studies to build a borderlands analytic. I consider how the “tension, ambivalence and unrest” of the borderlands provides a lens to understand the volatility of cities gripped by rapid gentrification. Using a borderlands analytic to make sense of the borders that are produced and policed in gentrifying cities, I consider how Black and Latinx life has been criminalized spatially and sonically so as to be displaced by forces of racial capitalist extraction. To do this, I look to the implementation of gang injunction zones in Oakland in 2010, and then to two moments in 2015 when the city's soundscapes were policed and criminalized. This piece centers the Black and Latinx geographies experiencing dispossession in Oakland, and considers how residents are imagining and fighting for their city's future.

Keywords

Dispossession, gentrification, Black geographies, Latinx geographies, sound, carceral

Introduction

Oakland has become a borderland; “*una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (Anzaldúa, 1987: 25). A city defined by its Blackness¹ for the past half-century has become a site of racial capitalist desire, as tech corporations venture east of San Francisco and eye the “underdeveloped” sites in Oakland, housing developers at their heels. The Bay Area's housing crisis has dramatically restructured the region's racial and economic geographies, and in this piece I argue that the

Corresponding author:

Margaret M Ramírez, Stanford University, Stanford Arts Institute, 365 Lasuen Street, Littlefield Center, Stanford, CA 94305, USA.

Email: mmrez@stanford.edu

rampant foreclosures, evictions, and inflated housing costs that have dispossessed Oakland's low-income residents over the last decade are tied to carceral modalities that explicitly target the city's Black and Latinx geographies. I draw on Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* to build a borderlands analytic—a means of understanding gentrification and urban redevelopment as bordering practices that create structural and cultural exclusion in city space.

Just as national borders exist as colonial boundaries that are profoundly intertwined with carceral geographies (Loyd et al., 2013; Rodríguez, 2008; (Institute for Anarchist Studies, 2013; Jones, 2016), borders are built in the landscape of Oakland, arbitrary lines drawn between geographies to signal (dis)belonging (Bedoya, 2014). The borders constructed are not only aesthetic, representations of gentrification underway, but intangible frictions that arise as borders are enforced. Gentrifying cities such as Oakland are “open wounds,” and I contend that by considering such places through a borderlands analytic, we build a more nuanced understanding of the violent lived experiences provoked by rapid capitalist extraction and the redevelopment of urban space.

In what follows, I engage with the theories of Gloria Anzaldúa as well as Black geographic thought, urban and carceral studies, and sound studies to contemplate the city of Oakland through a lens of the borderlands. I first explore how a borderlands analytic encourages a multi-scalar understanding of how gentrification is not only intertwined with broader processes of racial capitalism, colonialism, and the carceral state, but how it is lived, embodied, and resisted daily by those experiencing displacement. Then I consider how a borderlands analytic might be considered in tandem with Katherine McKittrick's (2013) plantation analytic to build analyses of urban space and urban life that are attentive to the Black, Latinx, and Indigenous geographies of cities in the Americas.² From there, I trace Oakland as a site of urban dispossession, demonstrating how the policing of Oakland's Black and Latinx geographies occurs structurally, spatially, and sonically, and how these carceral geographies are inherently tied to the gentrifying forces in play in the city. In the “Policing the borderlands” section, I explore how Oakland's 2010 gang injunctions spatially confined Black and Latinx youth to their neighborhoods, what local activists have recognized as carceral policies that extract value from the neighborhood and further the displacement of residents of color. In the “Joyful noise” section I look to particular moments in late 2015 when the soundscapes of Oakland's Black geographies were policed by incoming residents, considering how borders are also policed sonically in gentrifying spaces. I draw from Karma Chavez here to identify *moments* as having “a spatial dimension as a ‘turning point’ or a ‘juncture’”. A moment thus possesses both temporal and spatial qualities, and the specific nature of the spatial dimension to a moment implies a coming together or connection whereby there is possibility for change” (2013: 9). This piece draws from over three years of in-depth qualitative fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2017, as well as my ongoing thinking, organizing, and writing from Oakland, California, the occupied Ohlone territories where I continue to live. The moments explored here articulate the multiple ways that borders are constructed and policed in cities, how Black and Latinx life is criminalized simply for taking up space, and how people are resisting. I conclude by considering what urban futures and abolitionist possibilities are born of Black and Latinx geographies in the borderland city.

Borderland as analytic

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. . . A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. . . The only ‘legitimate’ inhabitants are those

in power, whites and those that align themselves with whites. Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger.—
Gloria Anzaldúa (1987: 25–26)

A spatial theory of power and difference, employing Anzaldúa's borderlands as an urban analytic reveals the ways that city spaces are divided and violently restructured through forces of racial capitalist dispossession such as gentrification. The borderlands, as described in the above quote from Anzaldúa, is useful in understanding gentrifying cities for I find it provides three lenses through which to consider urban spaces undergoing rapid capitalist extraction and racialized dispossession. First, that the space of the borderland is inherently relational. As Anzaldúa writes, a borderland itself is vague and undetermined, and yet it is defined by the "the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary." While the unnatural boundary in Anzaldúa's writing is referring to the colonial border, I argue that borders are produced structurally, socially, and spatially in gentrifying cities and are policed by the same carceral geographies that patrol the margins of the nation-state (Loyd, 2011; Rodríguez, 2008). The borderland space is "in a constant state of transition," defined by the relational co-existence of a city's "legitimate" and "illegitimate" inhabitants, a legitimacy that is defined by residents' access to power and capital. This unequal relationship between inhabitants is inherent in a borderlands analytic and is the basis of the friction between social worlds that exists in city spaces (Elwood et al., 2017; McCann, 2011; Sheppard, 2008). A borderland analytic offers a spatial understanding of how these fraught and often violent interrelationships emerge in the city in both structural and seemingly mundane ways.

Second, a borderland analytic centers the embodied geographies of those experiencing dispossession in urban space. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* theorizes how those who embody the violence produced by the "open wound" of the border live in a space of precarity that is defined by their positioning amid structures of colonialism and racial capitalism. By centering those who experience the violence brought by the shifting landscape of gentrifying cities, we push beyond conversations of gentrification as a struggle over meanings. Such framings naturalize gentrification as an inevitable process of capitalist redevelopment that is dislocated from the lived experiences of dispossession. By engaging a borderland analytic that centers the geographies of those undergoing displacement, I refuse the naturalized narrative of gentrification that is "predicated on the assumption that Black communities are displaceable, a-spatial actors" (Bledsoe and Wright, 2019: 13). Gentrification narratives must not be divorced from ongoing processes of settler colonialism and racial capitalism that have produced the conditions that allow Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities to be continually dispossessed of their land and labor (Bledsoe and Wright, 2019; Roy, 2017; Safransky, 2018).

Third, a borderland analytic provides a conceptual opening for how the city is imagined and fought for. Anzaldúa wrote how the fractured and violent nature of the borderlands produced a subject who is resilient by necessity, who utilizes creative practices that people have learned over centuries of colonial domination to survive. The liminality of the borderlands carries a creative potential according to Anzaldúa (1987), and she wrote of a "new consciousness" that emerges from "intense pain, its energy comes from the continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm" (102). Borderland subjects create forces that challenge and re-envision the paradigms of colonial capitalist order, and as Chela Sandoval (2000) theorized, drawing from Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, and other Third World Feminists, marginalized subjects possess a "oppositional consciousness" that transforms into "tactical weaponry for intervening in shifting currents of power" (58). Thus, a borderland analytic also presents the space of the city as one where

the borderlands subject is resisting dispossession in organized and everyday modes, (re) imagining urban space itself. This space of possibility is resonant with Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2017) theorizations of abolition geographies and how "freedom is a place" that is built from a radical consciousness of how "the processes of hierarchy, dispossession, and exclusion congeal in and as group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (227, 228). How might the space of the borderlands be a site of abolitionist or decolonial geographies (Daigle and Ramírez, 2019)³?

A borderland analytic offers a spatial attention to how power relations emerge and are contested in gentrifying spaces—it centers the visceral forms of violence against dispossessed peoples to build a more nuanced understanding of how gentrification is not merely redevelopment of a place, it is the psychic warfare and violent uprooting of entire communities. Now, as Madelaine Cahuas (2019) has so brilliantly articulated in her piece "Interrogating Absences in Latinx Theory," I want to contend with the erasure of Blackness within Anzaldúa's writing. As Cahuas (2019) rightly states, "Anzaldúa's borderlands theory does not directly grapple with Blackness, or Black worldviews and geographies. . .with how anti-Blackness has factored into making possible the landscape of the borderlands" . This is an incredibly important critique, and it becomes even more necessary to address this erasure when considering the city of Oakland—a place that cannot be understood without its Black geographies and the role that anti-blackness has played in the disinvestment and redevelopment of the city (Murch, 2010; Self, 2003). Therefore, while a borderlands analytic provides a rendering of how inequality creates frictions and violences in urban space, it should be accompanied by analytics that center the crucial role (anti)Blackness plays in the construction of racial capitalist and carceral regimes in cities across the Americas. Here I consider how a borderlands analytic might complement Katherine McKittrick's (2011, 2013) plantation analytic to build a more nuanced understanding of urban space.

The site of the plantation, as McKittrick (2011) elucidates, serves as a "meaningful geographic prototype that not only housed and normalized (vis-à-vis enforced placelessness) racial violence in the Americas but also naturalized a plantation logic that anticipated (but did not twin) the empirical decay and death of a very complex black sense of place" (951). The plantation normalized anti-black violence that folds onto Black life in the present, and urbicide, "the deliberate death of the city" is inherently tied to the "ongoing destruction of a black sense of place in the Americas" (McKittrick, 2011: 951). A plantation analytic reveals the ways that capital is added/subtracted from urban space in relation to the presence of Black life, offering a rendering of urban space that connects forms of urban dispossession to the plantation economy (Woods, 1998), and centers the Black geographies of a place.

The plantation analytic can also be contextualized as "a location that might also open up a discussion of black *life* in the context of global cities and futures" (McKittrick, 2013: 5, emphasis original). Drawing from Dionne Brand's *Inventory*, McKittrick (2013) considers how the plantation analytic opens up decolonial futures for Black urban life, seeing *Inventory* as a "creative work that intervenes in the commonsense teleology of racial violence" disrupting renderings of Blackness and Black urban spaces as dead and dying by offering a decolonial poetics "through which Black futures are imaginable" (12). Using Brand's creative text to articulate the geographies of Black urban life, McKittrick (2013) argues that "to turn to decolonial poetics produced by diasporic communities who have survived violent displacement and white supremacy allows us to identify unseen and uncharted aspects of city life" (14). It is alongside these renderings of plantation futures that I introduce the borderlands analytic—what does Anzaldúa's creative text tell us of the violence born of the borderlands, and how might a borderland analytic further understandings of urban space where diasporic and Indigenous peoples articulate futures? Having these

lenses simultaneously fixed upon the city of Oakland reveals how the deep histories of racial capitalism and colonialism, rooted in the geographic sites of the plantation and the border, continue to shape the production of the city. These analytics require an attention to carceral geographies and racialized dispossession, and insist that the creative survival strategies of dispossessed peoples are also actively producing urban space.

Building a borderland analytic based on Anzaldúa's theorizations, it is necessary to also "place" the border and migrants themselves in city space. As has been explored by critical migration scholars, national borders are roving entities that spatially and racially mark certain lives as "illegal" (Coleman, 2007; DeGenova, 2002; Hiemstra, 2010; Valencia, 2017). Indeed, "much of the bordering work that marks some bodies as legitimate and others as out of place happens far from the political border itself," and in urban space ICE functions as a mechanism of the state rounding up, detaining and deporting peoples deemed out of place (Johnson et al., 2011: 61). This form of borderland statecraft, what Coleman (2007) termed borderland neoliberalism, frames the migrant body as risky and utilizes surveillance and policing to not only violently extract migrant lives but to saturate urban space with a border ontology. As Rosas (2006) articulates, the "dehumanizing rationalities pervading the borderlands are inextricably linked to the white supremacist underpinnings of American empire" (402). These policing practices of (il)legality are a lived reality for migrant Oaklanders, and at the time of writing this, 232 migrants were detained by ICE in Northern California one weekend in early 2018, a massive sweep aimed against California's sanctuary city policies. Oakland has been a borderland for migrant lives for some time now, and Black and Latinx lives are disproportionately subjected to carceral geographies extending from the border and the prison industrial complex. Gentrification forces amplify these policing mechanisms, make them more starkly visible in city space as people racialized as "illegal" and "criminal" are made to feel increasingly unwelcome in neighborhoods they live within. The borderland analytic adds to theorizations of the borders in cityscapes (Iossifova, 2013; Newman, 2003; Sassen, 2013; Soja, 2005; UCLA Urban Humanities Initiative, 2016) to make sense of how power is constructed and experienced in urban space. I also engage with what Tim Cresswell (1996) called contested landscapes, in that "places are the result of tensions between different meanings" (59). As Cresswell (1996) explains,

the meaning of a place is subject of particular discourses of *power*, which express themselves as discourses of *normality*. . .the meaning of a place, then, is (in part) created through a discourse that sets up a process of differentiation (between us and them). (60)

A borderlands analytic draws from Cresswell's theorizations of placemaking and the power bound in whose meaning is valued and considered "in place."

This piece centers racialized dispossession in my analysis of Oakland, so as to frame eviction, foreclosure, and the mass policing and displacement of Black and Brown residents as tied to "forms of racialized violence such as slavery, Jim Crow, incarceration, colonialism, and apartheid, that cannot be encapsulated within sanitized notions of gentrification and displacement" (Roy, 2017: 3). Following Roy, I seek to messy sanitized notions of gentrification, to make dispossession visible and audible. This work is also greatly informed by geographers analyzing the intersections between racial capitalism, (settler) colonialism, property, anti-blackness, and carcerality in urban space (Bledsoe and Wright, 2019; Bonds, 2018; Ellison, 2016; Loyd and Bonds, 2018; McClintock, 2018; Pulido, 2015, 2016; Ranganathan, 2016; Safransky, 2014, 2018), and I follow the calls of other feminist urban geographers (Derickson, 2015, 2017; Oswin, 2018; Peake, 2016; Peake et al., 2018;

Robinson and Roy, 2016; Roy, 2016) pushing for a “new epistemology of the urban” that is not only Marxist but also informed by “queer, feminist, postcolonial and critical race theories” (Oswin, 2018: 3). Urban space is not merely a shifting landscape upon which hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces clash; the borderlands analytic implores a reckoning with the violent day to day struggles of those undergoing dispossession. I argue that Oakland in 2019 is a place of violent struggle for the right to remain in one’s home, in one’s community—the right to live and thrive in place. In what follows, I consider what a borderlands analytic can reveal about cities, engaging with several moments of policing that occurred in Oakland between 2010 and 2015. The subsequent section recounts the strategic implementation of gang injunction zones by Oakland city government, and how the injunctions furthered the displacement of long-term residents.

Policing the borderlands

Brownness is conferred by the ways in which one’s spatial coordinates are contested, the ways in which one’s right to residency is challenged by those who make false claims to nativity...Brown indexes a certain vulnerability to the violence of property, finance, and capital’s overarching mechanisms of domination. Also, things are brown by law insofar as even those who can claim legal belonging are still increasingly vulnerable to profiling and other state practices of subordination. - José Muñoz (2018: 396)

The San Francisco Bay Area has seen vast racial and economic restructuring since the mid-1990s, when the tech economy emerged as the major force of the local economy (Walker, 2006). Despite the dot-com bust of 2000 and the stock market crash of 2008, the tech industry has continued to grow steadily, working hand-in-hand with investment banks to funnel wealth into the industry and the local housing market, dramatically restructuring the region’s social, cultural, and racial geographies (Walker and Schafran, 2015). The rise of the tech sector has paralleled a housing bubble that has produced mass out-migration of low-income communities from the Bay Area, particularly people of color (Stehlin, 2015). When the 2008 financial crisis hit, the housing bubble exploded like a balloon, and yet despite the economic recession that shook the nation, housing prices in San Francisco and Silicon Valley only took a slight dip, with housing prices surpassing previous 2007 highs by 2014 (Stehlin, 2016). Larger tech firms set up shop in San Francisco after 2008, the city’s tech employment growing by 90% between 2010 and 2014 (Stehlin, 2016), which created an incredible demand for housing in San Francisco proper, causing long-term residents to be evicted, often unable to afford to move elsewhere in the city (McElroy, 2018; Maharawal and McElroy, 2018). As San Franciscans get priced-out of their neighborhoods, they look for less expensive cities nearby (Schafran, 2013), which is where the tech bubble, once mostly confined to the corridor stretching north from the Silicon Valley to San Francisco, began to encroach upon Oakland. The foreclosure crisis that followed the 2008 crash resulted in the mass dispossession of low-income Oakland residents (Graziani et al., 2016; Urban Strategies Council, 2012), a crisis that disproportionately affected Black homeowners, and left Oakland’s housing stock ripe for redevelopment. It is in the midst of this housing crisis that the City of Oakland introduced gang injunction zones in 2010, exacerbating these forces of dispossession, as residents were deemed undesirable and therein displaceable in the borderland city.

According to the City of Oakland, a gang injunction is a “safety zone” that is “designed to break up gang activity by imposing restrictions on gang members within a specific area.”⁴

The 2010 gang injunctions effectively prohibited individuals listed in the gang member database from appearing in public with other “gang members,” being outside after the 10 pm curfew, loitering, carrying drug or graffiti paraphernalia, or wearing colors that police associate with their gang affiliation. Two areas in the North Oakland and Fruitvale neighborhoods were declared gang injunction zones by Oakland’s Superior Court in 2010 and 2011 (see Figure 1), essentially placing 45 individuals under neighborhood arrest. Rather than banishing residents from the city (Beckett and Herbert, 2009), individuals targeted by the gang injunctions are instead denied the right to roam freely in

Area affected by gang injunction

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



Figure 1. Maps of Oakland’s gang injunction zones. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2010.

city space, provoking a sense of illegitimacy in their own neighborhood. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2017) writes of Oakland's gang injunctions, "the range of concrete control exercised by the criminal justice system doesn't stop at the system's border. Rather local administrators can use civil law to extend prison's total-institution regime to households and communities" (233). The gang injunctions were the latest iteration of the carceral system subjected predominantly upon the Black and Latinx youth of Oakland in the name of "public safety." As a result of state reinvestment in carceral systems rather than social services, Black and Latinx communities have developed alternative modes of social reproduction to survive (Gilmore, 2007). Gangs serve as extended family networks and informal economies, offering support systems and a means of protection that "police and other authority figures...fail to provide" (Rios, 2011: ix). As Gilmore (2007) explains, "gangs constitute territorially bounded rule-making bodies for a mosaic filling in vast regions that the legal state has abandoned except in the form of militarized occupation and social-services based surveillance" (274). Policing systems made gangs one of their primary obsessions, with a discourse of gang violence being prevalent in urban areas suffering from neoliberal restructuring since the 1980s (Davis, 2006).

In 1987 the California legislature declared a "state of crisis caused by violent street gangs whose members threaten, terrorize and commit a multitude of crimes against the peaceful citizens of their neighborhoods" (Rios, 2011: 33). The Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act of 1988 mandated law enforcement agencies to "identify street gang members and enroll them in a statewide database," ensuring that those listed would face additional charges due to their alleged status as gang members (Gilmore, 2007: 107). The decade that followed saw a slew of strict state reforms that targeted youth convicted of gang-related crimes, and those labeled gang members in California were predominantly Black and Latinx youth (Gilmore, 2007). The system of policing born during this period extends beyond the actions of police departments alone; sociologist Victor Rios (2011) defines this system as a youth control complex, in which schools, police, families, community centers, the media, and other institutions treat young peoples' behaviors as deviant and worthy of exclusion, punishment, and incarceration (xiv). Youth within this system are subjected to hyper-criminalization, in which their everyday styles and behaviors are treated as threatening and criminal across social contexts, causing a profound impact on their worldviews and life outcomes. As Treva Ellison (2016) explains, when gang membership alone became reason to preemptively criminalize youth, "'gang member' operated as a metonym for all Black youth...the law [functioning] as a visioning archive because it sediments a way of seeing particular people (as combatant or citizen). A visioning archive...in which Black injury does not exist" (334). In Oakland, this visioning archive subjected both Black and Latinx youth to being preemptively labeled as combatant. The systematic criminalization of Black and Latinx life is part of broader carceral geographies, "the spatial network of the prison industrial complex, including the built environment, labor, capital, and human capacity, as well as knowledge, signs, symbols, images and representational forms and modes that are appropriated for domination and control" (Ellison, 2016: 326).

Criminalization is embedded in Oakland's social order, and Black and Latinx youth suffer the most severely from the spiral of criminalization and punishment (Rios, 2011). When youth are classified as gang members, it is not only police that identify them as such, but also schools, community organizations, and other local institutions. Youth are policed from all corners of their communities, seen as

irreparable risks and threats that need to be controlled and ultimately contained...[which] incapacitates them as social subjects, strips them of their dignity and humanity by systematically

marking them and denying them the ability to function in school, in the labor market, and as law-abiding citizens. (Rios, 2011: 88)

This legal regime serves to “keep the peace” by upholding white supremacist structures that criminalize Black and Latinx residents before they even commit a crime (Shabazz, 2015). As Lisa Marie Cacho (2012) argues:

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

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

Gang member databases harken surveillance practices used to control and criminalize Black and Brown lives that have existed for centuries. Simone Browne (2012) theorizes how *The Book of Negroes* was the first large-scale public record that was “an early imprint of how the body, the skin in particular, comes to be understood as a means of identification and tracking by the state. . .the tracking of blackness” (547–548). The ledger contains detailed data on Black peoples who resided in New York City in the late 1700s, each entry containing the name, physical characteristics, and description of how the individual was emancipated from slavery. Browne (2012) writes how the physical descriptions in *The Book of Negroes*, served as a:

surveillance technology of the fugitive slave advertisement. . .to make the already hypervisible black subject legible. . .serving public notice of runaways by announcing ‘property as out of place’ (Hall, 2006: 70), the subjective descriptions employed by subscribers in runaway notices often reveal the subversive potential of being ‘out of place.’ (548)

City ledgers that identify Black and Latinx youth as gang members are threaded to this genealogy, registering Black and Brown life as criminal for being perceived as “out of place” under the eyes of the law. These ledgers too are rooted in plantation systems that used intimate data to control Black life, demonstrating how the plantation and its ordered violences extend into present spatial formations. The gang databases are a surveillance mechanism that criminalizes the Black and Latinx lives identified, maintaining records that are difficult for youth to evade. Those listed in the database are named based on the subjective decision of a police officer, and they then become surveyed and marked as criminal within the criminal justice system. Black and Latinx youth become out of place in their own neighborhoods, denied the ability to simply move their bodies across space. These racialized ledgers formed the basis of the spatial surveillance system of the gang injunction zones.

The first injunction was implemented in North Oakland in June of 2010 against 15 members of the North Side Oakland gang, an organization that the Oakland City Attorney’s office reported “had been involved with severe and escalating violence in the North Oakland

area.”⁵ Oakland City Attorney’s Office 2009–2010 Annual Report notes the “escalating violence” within North Oakland is seen in an increase of gang-related incidents that occurred: “In 2007, there were three North Side Oakland-related incidents involving murder, shooting or gun possession. In 2008, that number rose to seven incidents. In 2009, that escalated to 18 incidents, including seven murders.” These data are intended to justify the implementation of the North Oakland zone, and yet comparing data from the Oakland Police Department of the five police “Areas” in 2008 and 2009, the North Oakland injunction falls in Area 2 (which is in fact the area with the least number of homicides and injury shootings of all five Oakland areas (see Table 1).⁶ As can be seen in the table, the implementation of the gang injunction zone in North Oakland did not lower crime rates in the years that followed, nor did it in the Fruitvale, which is located in Area 4. These data clearly show what many Oakland anti-policing activists have argued (Arnold, 2011): if the police wanted to target areas with violent crime, the injunction zones were not targeting the areas most in need of crime-reduction.

George Galvis, the founder of Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ), an Oakland-based organization that builds restorative opportunities for formerly incarcerated youth of color, is adamant that the neighborhoods chosen for the injunctions reveal a more insidious objective. Galvis insists that “gang injunctions are very effective tools for gentrification,” pointing to how the city not only neglects the spaces it owns within the gang injunction zones, but also how the two neighborhoods targeted either border gentrifying neighborhoods, as is the case of North Oakland, or are convenient to transit options for commuters, as is Fruitvale (Arnold, 2011: 72). An expert declaration submitted to the Superior Court in an attempt to dissuade the implementation of the gang injunctions warned that they would result in “the displacement of poor and working Black and Latino families from their home communities,” identifying how a development strategy known as “privileged adjacency” utilizes a “pattern of using gang injunctions to benefit nearby affluent areas” (Arnold, 2011: 73). Instances of privileged adjacency have been well documented by scholars working in Los Angeles (Alonso, 1999; Barajas, 2007; Caldwell, 2009; Muñiz, 2014), who have found it to be common practice that gang injunctions are implemented in neighborhoods adjacent higher property value areas rather than in neighborhoods that experience the highest crime rates. These studies of privileged adjacency make it apparent that perhaps, as Galvis suggests, the intention of gang injunction zones is not about reducing violence for a city’s most vulnerable residents, but rather about making neighborhoods ‘safer’ so as to attract wealth.

According to housing data collected by Zillow, as of late 2018 the Longfellow and Bushrod neighborhoods that make up the bulk of the North Oakland gang injunction zone have more than doubled their 2009 values,⁷ as have those of the Fruitvale, Harrington, and Jefferson neighborhoods of the Fruitvale gang injunction zone.⁸ While UC Berkeley’s Urban Displacement Project has shown that the predominantly Latinx

Table 1. Total number of “homicides and injury shootings” by police area in Oakland (2008–2013).

Police area	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Area 1	136	83	126	135	135	70
Area 2	28	38	32	40	45	42
Area 3	103	64	65	88	106	94
Area 4	161	111	120	162	165	120
Area 5	210	183	194	235	239	236

neighborhood of the Fruitvale has not shown signs of extreme displacement of low-income Latinx households, the Longfellow neighborhood of North Oakland, “lost more low-income Black households than any other in Alameda County: 400 households, or a 30% decrease between 2000–2015” (UC Berkeley’s Urban Displacement Project 2017: 4). This mass dispossession of Black families had much to do with the high rates of foreclosure and eviction that Longfellow endured, with 374 homes foreclosed and 220 unlawful evictions reported between 2005 and 2015 in the 48 square-block area (Graziani et al., 2016). While it is difficult to prove causality, given the fact that the Longfellow neighborhood had such low crime rates at the time the gang injunctions were introduced and such drastic displacement occurred during the same period, it is not a stretch to read the gang injunctions as having contributed to the dispossession of low-income Black residents and furthering neighborhood redevelopment. As Anne Bonds (2018) remarks, “carcerality and property are closely connected”, and through an attention to the housing crisis we can better understand the how carceral geographies are enlisted to defend the “accumulated advantages of white propertied power” (7). These connections between racial dispossession, carcerality, and property make it fathomable why community activists such as Galvis insist that the gang injunctions were never intended to reduce crime: “the policing isn’t about public safety as it is about bulldozing and displacing communities of color, about making them uncomfortable enough to want to move, to make room for the gentry to come in.”⁹ The gang injunction served as “a constructive component of neighborhood change enabled by white liberal imaginaries of insecurity” that correlates the presence of residents of color with that of danger (Bloch and Meyer, 2019: 14).

The creation of the gang-injunction zones further exacerbated the borderland state of Oakland, creating spatial boundaries that terrorized its inhabitants geographically as part of a larger system of carcerality. As Ana Muñoz (2014) has argued, “the injunction aids in the further displacement and control of the remaining population of working class people of color. . . [injunctions are used to] wage a war on the least powerful communities” (233). Gang injunction zones decide which inhabitants are “legitimate” and which are “illegitimate” (Anzaldúa, 1987), decide who will go where and when. Oakland has been a borderland for some time—its Black and Latinx residents have been subjected to hyper-criminalization as part of the state’s carceral regime for decades (Rios, 2011). Yet the borderland becomes amplified as capital’s gaze draws near, and the Black and Latinx geographies that have long called Oakland home (Herrera, 2012; Murch, 2010) have been systematically policed to make room for capital to come in and redevelop the city. Whose sense of place is being annihilated in Oakland is rooted in the forms of dispossession that stem from the plantation and the border, and at present it is the Black and Latinx geographies of the borderlands that are being surveilled, foreclosed, and dispossessed for capital to come in. This section has explored the ways that borderlands are structurally implemented and policed in city space as calculated mechanisms of extraction. In what follows I will explore how borders are also policed sonically in seemingly mundane ways, and how these everyday acts of policing also determine who is an (il)legitimate inhabitant of the city.

Joyful noise

The absent presence of the performance becomes the absent and structuring center of perspectival urban space. We could think this in relation to the desire for bohemian space and the way that desire is enacted in and as the displacement of the ones who had been there.—Fred Moten (2003: 40)

One night in late September 2015, the moon happened to be at its fullest and closest point to the earth, what some call a supermoon. A group of drummers began to play around 7 pm along the shores of Lake Merritt in Oakland, just before the total lunar eclipse was to begin. Lake Merritt, adjacent to downtown Oakland, has long been a social hub of the city, a public space where people gather to BBQ, dance, play music, walk, or simply enjoy the view. The drumming group, SambaFunk, frequents Lake Merritt to engage in a drumming practice, the group's intention being to revitalize drumming and dance practices of the African diaspora to alleviate health issues in Black and other diasporic communities.¹⁰ That night, after playing for around 90 minutes, a person approached the group of drummers, demanding that they cease drumming immediately and insisting that they needed a permit to be playing in the park. When the drummers denied that they needed a permit, the person reportedly lunged at Theo Williams, the artistic director of the group, grabbing his wrists and prying the drumsticks from his hands. This person then told the group that if they didn't stop drumming he would call the police which is exactly what occurred. When the Oakland police arrived at 10 pm, the situation quickly escalated.

According to Williams, the police immediately took the side of the resident who had phoned them, and were hostile to the drummers from the start. "They shined a light in my face and screamed, 'Get back, stay where you are!'...They immediately assumed that because I'm Black, I'm the perpetrator."¹¹ The person then told the police he wanted to press charges against several of the drummers for assault, including individuals who had made no contact with the person, according to Williams and other members of the group. Williams responded by telling the police that he wished to press charges against the resident since it was they who had grabbed his wrists and forcibly removed the drumsticks from his hands. The dialogue continued for several hours, with more officers reporting to the scene, the ordeal finally ending around 1:15 am, resulting in multiple citations against the drummers and the resident. As is often the embodied experience of how Blackness is policed in urban space, in which "public Blackness [is] akin to a crime" (Shabazz, 2015, p. 21), Williams stated, "It looks like another one of these cases where anybody who is white and calls the police and says anything against any person of color, that person is guilty until proven innocent."¹²

A person named Sean McDonald left a lengthy response on the *East Bay Express'* web version of the article quoted above, claiming to be said resident.¹³ McDonald claims that after trying to speak to several of the drummers while they played, that none of them stopped drumming, and when he approached Williams, "he looked right in my eyes, smiled in a dismissive fashion, and increased the volume and intensity of his drumming."¹⁴ McDonald's statement goes on to say:

I ask you though: Who is it that is making statements about someone based on the color of their skin, you or me? Who is it that is continually using their own disregard for the members of this community, and their own bad behavior, to advance a false agenda of over policing and racism? Who? *This is only about being a good neighbor, and nothing more.*¹⁵

Here McDonald positions himself as a rational actor, a "good neighbor," who is acting for the greater good of the neighborhood by reporting the "bad behavior" of the drummers, and the sounds he presumes others also consider to be a nuisance. The noise ordinance violations filed against the drummers enforce norms around what are legally acceptable uses of public space (Blomley, 2004; Staeheli, 2010; Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008), the law serving to "target classes of people as unworthy of being in public" (Staeheli, 2010: 72). These norms are deeply racialized, as is the idea of the "good neighbor" that McDonald harbors, and this

incident reveals how borders produced in gentrifying cities are policed not only through state-sanctioned programs, but in violent everyday exchanges that invoke the carceral state.

Within a week from this incident at Lake Merritt in 2015, the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in West Oakland was cited for noise violations because neighbors stated that their choir practice was “too loud.” The City fined the church \$3529 plus penalties of \$500 a day if the “noise” continued. “‘The area we’re in now has changed drastically’, explained Pastor Thomas Harris, ‘it is quite unheard of for a church to be fined because of joyful noise.’”¹⁶ Harris noted that the new neighbors may not understand the culture of a 65-year-old Black church, explaining that the choir rehearses from 7 to 9 pm on Wednesday evenings and that they did not intend to change this practice. “We’ll try to work with the community,” Harris said, “We don’t want to disrespect them, but we don’t want to be disrespected.”¹⁷ The Church’s citation for noise violation seemed to mirror the debacle the drummers at Lake Merritt had been facing, and news of these parallel events reverberated around the city. The noise complaints seemed deeply symbolic to many Oaklanders of how cultural practices that are commonplace in Oakland were being made to feel out of place, their soundscapes offensive to new neighbors in the vicinity. When the police are called over noise violations, the carceral system is enlisted to defend the property rights and tastes of the newly arrived (Bonds, 2018; Loyd and Bonds, 2018). These sonic geographies that have made Oakland hum, the aural landscape of generations of Black life in Oakland, have become criminalized, deemed unwelcome.

Sound functions as a critical modality through which race and racism is (re)produced and resisted, and Jennifer Stoever (2016) notes that the sonic color line “codifies sounds linked to racialized bodies such as music and the ambient sounds of everyday living – as ‘noise’, sound’s loud and unruly other” (12). This sonic color line has become more pronounced in Oakland as the city’s demographics have shifted, with sonic borders being policed by incoming residents unfamiliar with the sounds of Black and Brown Oakland. As Alexander Weheliye (2004) has written, “noise” and “music” are not stable categories, “since they are both heavily reliant on the perspective of the sonic consumer vis-à-vis the borders between ‘music’ and ‘noise’. . . ‘music’ ([being] sounds of their own choosing). . . and ‘noise’ ([being] sounds imposed by others)” (107). These sonic borders between music and noise are also racialized, and when sounds occur in public space, spatial norms are often dictated by the structure of white supremacy (Harris, 1992; Inwood and Bonds, 2017), as “white Americans often feel entitled to respect for their sensibilities, sensitivities, and tastes, and to their implicit, sometimes violent, control over the soundscape of an ostensibly ‘free’, ‘open’ and ‘public’ space” (Stoever, 2016: 2). Jennifer Stoever (2016) outlines in detail how race is perceived not only visually but sonically, demonstrating how listening functions as a tool of racial discernment, which can then be weaponized.

McDonald policed a sonic border in the gentrifying city, calling the police on a soundscape that he identified as noise for it did not match his aural tastes. But the seeming mundanity of this act, his interpretation of music as noise, became an act of violence—he put the drummers’ lives in danger by putting them in bodily contact with police and flagging them as criminal, an encounter that could lead to premature death by the carceral state (Gilmore, 2007). These are the violent exchanges that occur in the borderlands, where worlds and soundscapes grate against each other. This policing of public space furthers the notion that even public space is a form of property (Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008), and the carceral state is bound to white supremacist notions of property (Bonds, 2018) that determine who is improperly taking up public space in the eyes of the law. Sound serves as a modality to delineate the boundary between music and noise, and is evoked to patrol the borders of who is occupying public space legitimately and illegitimately.

Oakland's borderlands made headlines again in 2018, as #BBQBecky became the meme to symbolize whiteness policing Black life. Captured on a video that soon went viral, a white woman called the police on two Black men barbequing on the shores of Lake Merritt, stating that the act was illegal for they needed a permit to do so. The woman, later identified as Jennifer Schulte, harassed the two Black men for barbequing, yet she was not incorrect in a legal sense. In 2015 the City of Oakland had changed the municipal code to prohibit barbequing on the eastern shore of the lake. Since Lake Merritt has been a recreational destination for Black cultural life in Oakland for decades, this policy change has been critiqued as being anti-black in nature,¹⁸ interpreted as an attempt to erase Blackness from a public space that is being restructured for bourgeois tastes. Installing noise and recreational ordinances around use of public space are tactics of carceral urbanism, in which certain behaviors, often racialized and tied to particular populations, are prohibited (Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008), demonstrating how "Blackness in and of itself is said to contribute to the distortion of environments" (Wright 2018: 2). These instances of white residents invoking the carceral state demanded that public space conform to their liking, a violent re-ordering of space to meet white supremacist sensory norms. When the cultural geographies of Black Oaklanders are deemed out of place, acts of Black public joy deemed hostile and even illegal—what does this say about the borderlands of Oakland, and the place Oakland is violently becoming?

Yet these soundscapes and cultural geographies are not being passively policed. Following Weheliye (2004), "sound [also] articulates space" (108), and the same sonic geographies that are being policed in Oakland are being utilized to claim city space. SambaFunk's public practice is an expression of sonic agency, how "particular subjects, individuals and collectivities creatively negotiate systems of domination...sounding and unsounding particular acoustics of assembly and resistance" (LaBelle, 2018: 4). Following the incident in late September 2015, SambaFunk organized a mass drumming demonstration in front of city hall, and a week later an event they called the #SoulOfOakland rally on the shores of Lake Merritt, in which many cultural, arts, and performance groups came out to show their support for the members of SambaFunk and to vocalize their opposition to gentrification and the policing of their cultural geographies. Each demonstration centered on drumming, repeating the aural practice that was criminalized to resist the notion that such sounds warranted policing. The drumming and dance were intended to disrupt white supremacist notions of urban space, sound being used to "break the borders of particular regimes of violence with its interruptive potential" (LaBelle, 2018: 4). Indeed, as Weheliye (2004) writes, "the intimacy and sociality of sound is key...sound cannot be ignored or screened out as can visual objects...the listener is forced to hear the sounds of others, which in turn dissolves mental and physical boundaries" (111). The counter-protests to the policing of Oakland's sonic and cultural Black geographies took to public space and insisted that their geographies be not only seen but heard. This occurred through the #SoulOfOakland rally and also through BBQ'n While Black,¹⁹ where hundreds of Black Oaklanders held a massive cookout at Lake Merritt to protest the BBQ Becky incident, in which they claimed space through the sights, sounds, and scents of barbeque. As Willie Jamaal Wright writes, "just as Blackness invokes fungability, so does it possibility" (2018: 14): the borderlands of the gentrifying city produces ambivalence, violence, and unrest, yet the precarity of this space also demands creative modes of survival and resistance like these.

Futures of the gentrifying city

“All that we love is on the line.”—Cat Brooks, Artist and Co-founder of the Anti Police-Terror Project, 22 September 2018

This piece has sought to render the violent bordering practices of a gentrifying city visible and audible, as structural projects of erasure, incarceration and extraction, and as the racialized policing of creative and sonic geographies. These bordering practices are anti-Black, anti-migrant and defend the interests of the capitalist class and white supremacist regime. Through a borderland analytic, this article has centered the ways the seeming mundanity of redevelopment and cultural shifts brought on by gentrification have violent embodied effects that are being actively resisted. I conclude here by meditating on the spaces of possibility born of the gentrifying city.

Nik Heynen has written on how the spatial logics of the plantation, the ghetto, the colony and the reservation push urban theory to “wrestle with both the racialization of uneven urban urban environments and also the abolition of white supremacy” (2016: 840), creating an opening for the emancipatory insights of abolition ecology. The borderland analytic adds to these spatial logics, and I wonder if the space of political possibility that Anzaldúa theorizes as emerging in the borderlands is the same place that José Muñoz theorizes as the brown commons, a site where:

Brown people, places, feelings, sounds, animals, minerals, flora and other objects. How these things are brown, or what makes them brown is partly the way in which they suffer and strive together but also in the commonality of their ability to flourish under duress and pressure. They are brown in part because they have been devalued by the world outside their commons. Their brownness can be known by tackling the ways that global and local forces constantly attempt to degrade their value and diminish their verve. But they are also brown insofar as they smolder with a life and persistence, they are brown because brown is a common color shared by a commons that is of and for the multitude (2018: 395).

How might the city as borderland, then, also be a site of brown commons - a place where abolitionist and decolonial renderings of the city are in formation. Clyde Woods (2009) theorized how there is an ongoing movement for a new commons as a space of liberation, and how common spaces can be/have been created within sites of enclosure such as the plantation or the ghetto.²⁰ As Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2017) wrote, the the gang injunction zones in Oakland, despite being spaces of enclosure, contained abolitionist commons within them: “transforming the zone into an abolition geography required transforming consciousness, as officially and locally mocked and reviled individuals had to develop their persuasive power both at city hall and in the streets” (233). CURYJ and their collaborators sought to build “community and trust through extraordinary commitment to ordinary things: creating a garden and a mural. Being the first to respond in times of trouble. Leading by following” (Gilmore, 2017: 233). This coalition of formerly incarcerated peoples and their accomplices successfully ended Oakland’s gang injunction program in 2015, and they continue to organize on a local and state level against the policies and practices that criminalize Black and Latinx youth. This abolitionist geography was born of the borderlands of Oakland, and CURYJ among others continues to build commons created by and for the Black and Latinx geographies of the city.

The gentrifying city is not as much a site of enclosure as was the case of previous modes of urban exclusion such as redlining, but rather one of racial banishment and expulsion (Roy 2017), a space that is being violently forced into flux. As cities experience rapid racialized dispossession, what commons are created in these urban spaces of transition, how are residents creating spaces to ensure survival amid the capitalist forces staked up against them? Long-term Black, Latinx, and Indigenous Oakland residents are already creating these brown commons: it is in the creative geographies of dispossessed peoples that urban futures are being made (Ramírez, forthcoming). The efforts of SambaFunk, CURYJ and a plethora of other cultural, abolitionist and decolonial Oakland collectives are resisting the forces that seek to dispossess them, through mass drumming protest, through land trusts and cultural zones, and through the simple act of claiming public space. An attention to the borderlands of gentrifying urban spaces gives another dimension to these creative urban practices, centering the lived experiences of borderland subjects and the urban futures imagined.

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Notes

1. This article focuses on how urban redevelopment and the structural and everyday production of carcerality have affected the Black and Latinx geographies of Oakland, also aiming to complicate the Black–White binary that Oakland is commonly framed within (Herrera, 2012). However, I explicitly center the city’s Blackness here because it is impossible to disconnect Oakland from its Black geographies—Oakland birthed the Black Panther Party, a movement that is central to the Black radical tradition that has profoundly shaped Black intellectual and cultural production (Murch, 2010). In addition, Oakland was a Black majority city until 2010 (Census, 2010), and over the last decade the city’s Black population has been disproportionately dispossessed of their homes, losing 4% of its Black residents between 2005 and 2015 (Graziani et al., 2016). Oakland’s Black geographies have profoundly shaped the space of the city itself, and therefore I find it necessary to not just complicate the racial landscape of the city, but to not allow its Blackness to be displaced in intellectual production as well.
2. What might it look like to also consider the analytic of the frontier upon urban space—what would this analytic reveal of the ongoing erasure of Indigenous lands and peoples in the urban context?
3. Indeed, Gilmore documented the abolitionist resistance that has emerged from Oakland’s gang injunction zones, which I will explore later in this piece.
4. Oakland City Attorney 2010 End of Year Report.

5. Ibid.
6. City of Oakland 2013 End of Year Crime Report.
7. Zillow data, <https://www.zillow.com/longfellow-oakland-ca/home-values/> (accessed 12 September 2018).
8. Zillow data, <https://www.zillow.com/jefferson-oakland-ca/home-values/> (accessed 12 September 2018).
9. George Galvis, Interview, 20 February 2015.
10. SambaFunk website, <http://sambafunk.com/sambafunk-mission/> (accessed 19 September 2018).
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12. Ibid.
13. McDonald S (2015) Member profile. *East Bay Express*, 2 October. Available at: <http://www.eastbayexpress.com/oakland/Profile?oid=4521942> (accessed 17 September 2018).
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid. Emphasis added.
16. Swan R (2015) Oakland threatens to fine a church for loud music. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 October. Available at: <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Oakland-threatens-to-fine-a-church-for-loud-music-6573360.php> (accessed 17 September 2018.)
17. Ibid.
18. See BondGraham Darwin (2015) Oakland police threaten to cite residents for barbeques, *East Bay Express*. <https://www.eastbayexpress.com/SevenDays/archives/2015/05/19/oakland-police-threat-en-to-cite-residents-for-barbecues-by-lake-merritt> (accessed 23 September 2018).
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Margaret M Ramírez, PhD, is a feminist urban geographer that is currently based at Stanford University as a Creative Cities Fellow. Her work explores the intersections between art-activism, colonial racial capitalism and urban space, looking to how the creative geographies of Black, Indigenous and Latinx peoples contest urban restructuring and imagine liberatory futures.