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Black insurgent aesthetics and the public imaginary

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Abstract

This article analyzes the spontaneous production of graffiti art and murals covering the entrances of businesses in the central business district of Oakland, CA, in the wake of the global protest movements, in 2020, against state violence and systemic racism. I argue that the art made legible what gets hidden through the violent processes of gentrification, neoliberal urbanism, and displacement/dispossession. The paper rethinks what borders, policing, and reclamation mean in a time of economic instability and a global health crisis, through the placement of these vernacular expressions in Downtown Oakland. What is revealed through the art is the convergence of two co-constitutive publics—a segregated, decaying city mostly inhabited by poor and working-class Black and Latinx residents and laborers, and a modern, prosperous, neoliberal city that caters to a privileged class of white residents and tourists—especially as the city grappled with the management and regulation of public space in the midst of a global pandemic. The article thus theorizes public space as layered and always contested, and not simply a space of conflict but also collective engagement.

Keywords: protest art, gentrification, public space, urbanism, Oakland

Introduction

Beginning on May 30, 2020, protestors gathered in downtown Oakland, CA, to denounce the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and several other African Americans by police

officers. The protests, unfolding amidst the health inequities magnified by COVID-19, highlighted racialized police violence, a global concern over anti-blackness, and the shrinking and privatization of social services due to years of austerity. The protests were inextricably linked to the pandemic, highlighting the modes by which structural racism remains a concern for public health. Racial disparities in both contraction and mortality rates from COVID-19 mirror ongoing racial disparities in healthcare and health outcomes for Black Americans. Due to the unprecedented restrictions modifying people's uses of public space, the pandemic exacerbated the exigency, intensity, and the visibility of the uprisings as protestors filled the streets of Oakland, largely unoccupied because of the ongoing shelter-in-place mandates. A further incarnation of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which was created in 2013 by three Black women organizers in response to state-sanctioned killings of Black Americans, the protests in Oakland, and in over 500 locations across the United States, sought structural changes in how the state polices communities, and a redistribution of resources to underfunded, disinvested Black communities (Buchanan, et. al. 2020). The uprisings continued for a week, and the widespread social unrest in public spaces was frequently met with violent counteractions by law enforcement using chemical agents against the protestors.

In the aftermath of the uprisings, Broadway Avenue, downtown Oakland's main artery, and its intersecting streets were left with what local (and global) media outlets described as an "outdoor art gallery" (Rosato, Jr., 2020). Reports documented the spontaneous production of hundreds of colorful graffiti art, murals, and flyers adorning the entrances and exterior walls of downtown Oakland businesses. Produced by a collection of mostly Black artists, these vernacular expressions covered plywood surfaces the city and business owners affixed to their doors and

windows to protect commercial property from looters, who they expected to decimate the business corridor following the city's March 13 pandemic-initiated shelter-in-place order. The "riot architecture" (Summers, 2019, p. 126) remained because of an anticipated second wave of looters whom the city believed would arrive after video of Floyd's killing by Derek Chauvin, a Minneapolis police officer, went viral on social and news media. The protest art covered the temporary wooden surfaces and windows as well as the boards surrounding the construction sites that explicitly signal a boom in downtown development. Several murals depicted celestial images of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Oscar Grant (an Oakland resident who was killed by a law enforcement officer in 2009) and other Black victims of state-sanctioned violence (**Figure 1**). Some appealed to multicultural solidarity and unity while proclaiming that "Black Lives Matter"; others denounced anti-Black police violence and explicitly called for the abolition and defunding of police departments. The art showed up in the windows of Black shopkeepers and those identifying themselves as allies ("Asians for Black Lives Matter"), and on the street itself where artists painted a large "Black Lives Matter" banner spanning two city blocks.

[Figure 1 near here: Mural of Breonna Taylor on Broadway Avenue – photo by author]

Collectively, the art reflected anger, feelings of loss and anxiety about unrelenting state violence, uneven development, and the physical and cultural displacement exacerbated by both processes of gentrification and uncertain futures precipitated by the pandemic. But it also pointed to how Black and other artists of color demanded space for non-white people in this moment of social and economic instability. Such unsanctioned, and often unscripted spatial practices appropriate urban space and bring about new meanings and frameworks through which to see public space

(Hou 2010, 2020). The protest art became an important feature of downtown Oakland's visual landscape, providing ways for artists to mark space and document the movement. At the same time, it was/is important to consider these impermanent installations, as a particular mode of city making that exposes the architecture of capitalist dispossession. As a result, we are led to ask, what world do these uprisings and movements allow us to imagine? And, is it now adequate to question, as Sorkin (1992) did so eloquently, whether this is the beginning or the end of public space? In other words, are absence and loss the terms by which we should think about our current relationship to public space?

In what follows, I consider the interrelatedness of impermanence and the political economy of public space amid global protest movements against state violence and systemic racism. In particular, this essay asks how vernacular practices, dispossessed communities (and their uses of the city) pose different ways to view space, publics, regulation, and the management of the city. What can we learn about the possibility for social change exposed through contradiction and the aesthetic intervention of vernacular expressions on plywood canvases in downtown Oakland? Rather than arguing that we have reached the end of public space (Davis, 1990) (Sorkin, 1992), or that we are experiencing the emergence of new public spaces (Mitchell, 1995), I argue that there exist two “grosstopical” cities that have long been mapped onto each other (Miéville, 2009). What is revealed by the art pieces was/is the convergence of two interwoven publics—a sanitized, modern, prosperous, neoliberal city that caters to a privileged class of white residents and tourists, and an oppressed, segregated, decaying city mostly inhabited by poor and working-class Black and Latinx residents and laborers. The gentrified/sanitized city and the oppressed/marginalized city were mediated through the appropriated plywood canvases and

reflect the collision of two racial geographies. Ultimately, the art created an alternative, ephemeral topography that exposes both publics as co-constitutive, produced in relation to one another.

Sanitizing the cities: privatized public space in Oakland

In a 2020 report published by the National Community Reinvestment Coalition (NCRC), San Francisco and Oakland were named the most gentrified cities in the U.S. (Richardson, et al., 2020). The impact of gentrification (e.g., rising rents, prohibitive property values, and new construction) has led to radical changes in Oakland's constitution. A combination of urban restructuring, racialized disinvestment, technology and financialization booms, and the devastating impact of the Great Recession of 2008, has led Oakland's formerly prominent Black population to dwindle precipitously, as the city has lost nearly 25% of its Black population since 2010. The results of the NCRC study come as no surprise to many who have witnessed the rapid transformation of neighborhoods and commercial corridors in Oakland that used to be home to robust Black communities but have absorbed primarily white and Asian high wage earners—and the businesses that cater mostly to them. Aided by finance capital creating conditions that make working-class neighborhoods more vulnerable to the dynamics of gentrification, this rapid transformation coincided with the displacement and dispossession of Black and low-income residents from their neighborhoods to far away regions or on the street. In a gentrifying city now made notorious as the site of confrontations initiated by “BBQ Becky,” “Jogger Joe,” as well as similar incidents replete with white claims to public space (Aponte, 2018) (Stone, 2018), Oakland is an ideal location to examine continuing contestations over race, place, and belonging.

Since the late-twentieth century, city leaders have targeted Oakland's central business district as a prime location for redevelopment and growth, adopting neoliberal governance strategies to boost economic activity and revalorize the built environment. These processes have led to a long list of policies and plans to reshape the social and economic landscape of Oakland, and are contingent on an intensive gentrification effort in which undesirable categories of persons, and activities associated with them, are removed. These policies produce borders, imposing various spatial restrictions, like gang injunction zones (Ramirez, 2020), that slowly erode a long-held sense of place, as the city attempts to recalibrate the meaning of "urban" to speak to the upgraded, cosmopolitan, and cool city that privileges the reconfiguration of municipal space.

Public-private partnerships, primarily initiated by corporate real estate firms, have reshaped downtown public space in ways that effectively control and commodify space to increase rent revenues. One such program, the Downtown Oakland Association (DOA) business improvement district (BID), is one of the two largest BIDs in Oakland (Drummond-Cole, et al., 2012). The DOA came to fruition around the same time as the Great Recession of 2008. The economic crisis accelerated an intensification of capital investment in urban cores, while Black, Latinx, and low-income residents were left to bear the burden of collapsed housing markets in Oakland and its surrounding exurbs (Schafran, 2018). Through its implementation of measures like increased policing, redevelopment, and sanitation, the DOA facilitated the production of a visibly sanitized, placeless, ageographic city (Sorkin 1992). The DOA coupled these efforts with alienating practices like the increased militarization of the city streets using private security forces, various environmental design practices, and shifts in policy to remove unwanted people,

events, and businesses from the corridor and produce an inherently uneven social geography (Drummond-Cole, et al., 2012, p. 51). In their production of a deterritorialized and “departicularized” space (Sorkin 1992, p. xiii), the DOA attempted to erase difference by calling for a generic urbanism that is “safe for consumer citizens to shop and eat at trendy stores and restaurants, and for corporate employees to zip through from [Bay Area Rapid Transit] stations to their office towers” (Drummond-Cole, et al., 2012, p. 51). But even with the DOA’s attempt to expel the poor, working-class, students of color, activists, and the unhoused to produce a sanitized view of the city that is more palatable for new residents and tourists, these groups still remain in place—especially those hired to maintain the space.

The purpose of the DOA is to practice urban management through the privatization of public space, while at the same time, the program enables opportunities for resistance and the creation of space for alternative visions of the street in spite of it. To that end, Broadway Avenue has been a popular site for both protest and celebration—amid multiple economic crises from which the city continues to struggle. The space was activated under similar conditions by protestors in early 2009, who mobilized in the streets of downtown Oakland following the murder of Oscar Grant by a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) police officer, and the Occupy Oakland movement in 2011. In both cases, protestors experienced violent confrontations with the police. More recently, Downtown Oakland has been the site of community events, like the Black Joy Parade, that highlight the experiences and contributions of Black people to the city of Oakland, as organizers and attendees insist “on being present and visible in public space [forcing] dominant society to confront its exclusions” (Mitchell, 2017, p. 507). Demonstrations in the streets, particularly those in popular downtown commercial corridors made the underclass visible in the

space of the sanitized city.

A tale of two cities

Walking along Broadway Avenue, days after the uprisings, it was difficult to locate the exclusive presence of the sanitized city on the surface of buildings and the street. The murals and graffiti art repurposed places and infrastructures left idle during the pandemic and revealed the layered dimensions of the city as they effectively covered any remaining remnants of a commercial business corridor intended to draw in higher-income consumers. Among the hundreds of individual tags, murals, and posters were messages that addressed the precarious conditions facing dispossessed communities, like one piece on 21st and Broadway that featured a police car set ablaze with the phrase “Invest in Our Local Community” wrapped around the image. Amongst the dozens of colorful “Black Lives Matter” paintings on the walls and street, some of the pieces featured radical imagery that were playful and grotesque, alongside messages like “Defund the Pigs” and “ACAB” (All Cops Are Bad) (**Figure 2**). Several paintings spilled beyond the borders of the plywood canvases to decorate the stone and brick building exteriors. Flyers with the faces of men, women, and children of color who were killed by police officers, enshrouded the plate glass windows of supportive businesses, explicitly demanding justice for their deaths. This encounter with unsanctioned street art made possible the emergence of an alternate public space that existed beneath/alongside the veneer of the sanitized city. Such is the premise of China Miéville’s novel, *The City and The City*.

[Figure 2 near here – “Defund the Pigs” – photo by author]

Miéville's sci-fi police procedural helps to illustrate this overlapping presence, and think through the ways in which downtown Oakland's "outdoor art gallery" enabled us to rethink surface and geographic boundaries in ways that signal possibility within conflict and ambiguity (Holston, 1998, p. 46). In the book, twin post-Soviet, eastern European city-states of Beszel and Ul Qoma exist in the same place, but citizens live under a regime that requires them to "unsee" the other and social, political, and economic life operate seamlessly as separate. The cities are separated, not by geographic boundaries, but instead by customs and laws. Beszel is the old, decaying city, while Ul Qoma is a technologically, architecturally, and culturally progressive city with trendy, gentrified spaces of art and cultural consumption. Even as they walk side-by-side, Ul Qoma's citizens and tourists "see" a separate set of individuals, businesses, and public spaces, while "unseeing" similar objects, bodies, and spaces in Beszel.

Together, Mieville's overlapping cities take on characteristics Sorkin (1992) ascribes to the "new city"—a highly securitized and surveilled city space, with an adaptation of urban design features that project endless material and ideological simulation and signification. But unlike Sorkin's conception of the new city as an expertly curated, ageographic urban space, having no ties to specific spaces or places, Mieville's overdetermined "crosshatched" cities contaminate each other in their topographic excess, occupying one geographic location.

Miéville uses the neologism "Grosstopical" to describe the relation of seemingly impossible overlapping cities. Grosstopicality produces distinct and complicit subjects. The divide is punctuated through repeated psychological practice so that it becomes subconscious to these

subjects—any violation or act of revealing the dichotomy constitutes the crime of “breach,” which summons an interstitial power structure, “Breach.” Ultimately, this independent, surveillance, law enforcement body ensures that a cultural divide is built into the social and political architecture of the city as policy.

In Oakland, the state represents a certain kind of order that maintains the current conditions of the state and the movement of capital. The police, for example, focus their efforts on the protection of property above all. Policing is therefore used as a mechanism to exert authority over/on the street – as if the street is an extension of the state and must be reclaimed for those in power. The (police) state, as Breach, attempts to put things back in order. At the same time as Breach regulates and polices the borders of each city, the act of breaching requires what Deborah Cowen (2017) argues is a “whole new modes of both seeing and relating...an unseeing of unseeing” (np). Therefore, breach, as transgressive praxis, is created through protest and the “disruption of infrastructures” (Cowen 2017). The protest art was the interstitial breach of downtown Oakland’s overlapping publics, or “cities,” and made visible. The arrival of the deadly COVID-19 virus made room for this breach by leading city and state leaders to restrict the uses of public space and physical distancing to reduce transmission. Nevertheless, the oppressed city was able to bubble to the surface when the breach occurred. It could no longer be hidden. This moment of pause allowed the artwork to fully resonate. There was potential in this breach for the oppressed to be heard and the oppressors to be exposed. The art practices and spatial contestations in Oakland pointed to the conditions of possibility—for seeing the multiple populations, meanings, and relations that are bound up and enshrouded in the neoliberal city. Therefore, the perceived notion of loss, or the end, of public space does not adequately

account for the kind of urban restructuring that emerged through the artwork as a productive site of public expression.

Impermanence and breach as possibility

In his essay on the spatial claims made by marginalized social groups through insurgent practices of resistance, James Holston (1998) describes sites of insurgence as those that “introduce into the city new identities and practices that disturb established histories” (p. 48). Dynamism is part of this remaking of the city and the heterogeneity of city life (conflict and ambiguity) and insurgent urbanism provides “alternative, possible sources for the development of new kinds of practices and narratives about belonging to and participating in society” (p. 53). Using insurgent urbanism as a spatial practice is a direct challenge to infrastructure as material form since the ephemeral use of space goes against modernist conceptions of space that are based on a strict segregation of functions in clearly defined zones. In this way, Holston is renegotiating the terms of belonging and recognition by the state. His notion of “insurgent citizenship” challenges the seamless, utopian narratives upon which modernist urban planning strategies eschew conflict, turmoil and difference. I propose that the insurgent aesthetic practice of re-appropriating the walls and plywood surfaces of buildings clarifies and exposes an enduring subaltern presence.

Impermanence is both an explicit and implicit reality of most public art if we consider how many public art installations on buildings are destroyed due to neoliberal development. Impermanence and the broader issue of design reveal the capitalist logic of decay and failure. The plywood that decorates downtown Oakland is an ideal object to witness these relations. Riot architecture

functions as an impermanent mode of protecting a permanent material, however the protest art gives the plywood alternative meaning. This production of a temporary landscape “opens a potential space for questioning the idea of permanence as a univocal solution to various urban conditions” (Mehrotra and Vera 2018, p. 45). The vernacular force of the art work produced in Oakland in the heat of the street and struggle operated as an insurgent form of rupture that was transgressive, imaginative, and counter-hegemonic. The work created an opportunity for grassroots politics to usurp geography and architecture and to come to the fore, told through boarded up storefronts. The artwork also invited a particular use of the city—participation by the very participants who are left out of the neoliberal city. But, in the aftermath of the uprisings, and the presence of a breach, what will it mean for the dispossessed and dislocated citizens of the city to walk, cycle, or ride the bus through these spaces once the unseen has been seen? What does it mean to live and work in the space of the breach?

The 2020 uprisings did not take place in a vacuum. In fact, these actions, and the resulting public art, were a response to ongoing inequalities and power dynamics that play out in public space as the street becomes increasingly privatized and militarized by police and private security brought in to protect property at all costs. The public art represented the breach itself, a way to look at both the gentrified and the oppressed cities that exist in the same place at the same time. One of the most striking pieces, which covered the entrance of Peet’s Coffee, proclaimed, “The City is Covered in Our Dead Friends [sic] Names” (**Figure 3**). The image spoke to the anguish felt by the people protesting in the street and provoked attention to the city’s complicity—of exclusion, omission, securitization, and regulation. At the same time, this geographic and prophetic message amplified how the spectral presence of the dead produces a map of the city, confirming

that the traces of their bodies and souls will always remain, no matter how much the city gentrifies. In this way, the decorated canvases provide an alternative and distinct urban geography produced within the “breach.” The protests can be read as an attempt to reclaim the streets, but what the art tells us is that the people have already been there—and have no intention of leaving.

[Figure 3 near here – “The City is Covered in Our Dead Friends Names” – photo by author]

Black Oaklanders, both past and present, are reinserting themselves back into the urban landscape (and the historical narrative) that they have been banished from (as people, not simply as labor). The murals and graffiti art actively resist a public amnesia of Black labor and presence in Oakland, as cities adopt aesthetic forms of blackness in the service of redevelopment goals (Summers 2019). At the same time, the impermanent and ephemeral architecture of the adorned plywood makes legible what gets hidden through the violent processes of gentrification, neoliberal urbanism, displacement, and dispossession. Exposing the political reality of public space, the line between public and private become less discrete. How, where, when the dispossessed and displaced appear in the breach challenges the permanence of the neoliberal city. This also challenges the impossibility of futures that fail to address these visible signs and practices of belonging and use of the city and space.

The protest art adorning the streets and riot architecture of downtown Oakland revealed where both publics meet. The two “cities” were not segregated, they were co-constituted. It is through

the protest art painted upon impermanent structures adorning buildings that protestors both challenged and transgressed the invisible borders of two cities that occupied the same space. The experiences of people who exist in each city were intricately interwoven. Breach is a momentary rupture, allowing both “cities” to come into view, and it requires accompanying action (policy) to create lasting change. Impermanence and the ephemeral mobilize action and the activation of urban space.

Conclusion

The complexities of experience in a global pandemic that has exacerbated existing inequities in health, employment, education, and housing require us to think not only about the meaning of public space, but also how to be in public space—the terms and intimacy of the public. The aesthetic occupation of the plywood barriers produced a visual record of state violence, disinvestment, displacement, and erasure, while providing a visual catalog of the many ways that artists, activists, and organizers claim public space—repurposing place and infrastructure left idle during the pandemic.

While the terms upon which protestors were making their claims are not new, the notable pause of daily life and the vibrancy of the images allowed for a different viewing. The art disrupted the act of unseeing. The insurgent art adorning Oakland’s downtown business district, enabled us to see a longer history of dispossession, displacement, and erasure, as the city actively maintained its vision of downtown Oakland as representational space. Inherent to these hegemonic spatial practices though, are the slippages that facilitate, or perhaps invite, productive negotiations over

the meaning of urban public space. Public space remains layered and always contested (Mitchell 2017); not simply a site of conflict but also collective engagement and public discourse. The artists in Oakland negotiated the potential dangers of pandemic public space, in their attempts to contain, and make visible, the rich city. Just as the overlapping “cities” exist in a precarious balance, the art and discourses of the city they signify also exist in a precarious symbolic tension. In many ways, new limits and mandates on spatial interaction during the pandemic complement longer-term transformations of public space by forces of privatization of public space and technological developments. Oakland and its residents, like many other cities in the United States, continue to face an uncertain future, with the reverberations of Covid-19, a capricious economy, treason and Trump-era politics, as well as the Black Lives Matter protests reinforcing an unsteady political environment. Yet, demonstrations against racism, state violence, and capitalist dispossession show that public space, specifically the street, remains an effective site for political struggle and possibility.

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