Oakland is a Vibe: Blackness, Cultural Framings and Emancipations of The Town

by

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Abstract

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In this dissertation, I examine the ways that developers and Black community organizers in Oakland, California, utilize a situated concept of Black culture to produce value in the city. This value is constituted by a politics of Blackness rooted both in racial capitalism, shifting structures of community care, and their affective articulations. The affective qualities of Black Oakland – which includes a sense of relationality, creativity, and resistance – are understood colloquially as "vibe." While representations of vibe are mobilized by both developers and community organizations to respectively advance and resist gentrification, I argue that the vibe of the city is constituted by a Black sense of place that cannot be reproduced through capitalist representations of cultural value alone. This study of vibe presents an opportunity to take seriously the invitation of Black geographic scholarship to work at the intersection of poetics and historical materialism by exploring relationality as a site that coproduces racialized space and experience. Where developers leverage notions of vibe to generate value through private investment, Black organizers utilize such representations in order to reclaim the physical space necessary to the very production of vibe. The latter strategy is, I suggest, an enactment of what I call "emancipatory framing," in which hegemonic framing is mobilized in order to create alternative spaces for liberatory praxes. This dissertation explores vibe and emancipatory framing at three different scales: the Black body, the independent business, and the grassroots collective. I conclude that vibe as a material and metaphorical asset of Blackness, is at the root of contestations over place, and sometimes contradictory imaginaries of freedom.

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Introduction: Fighting for Oakland

Instagram post, July 23, 2019, by @SoOakland, an Oakland-based events organization

I remember when someone set fire to one of the new construction sites as an act of resistance just blocks from my apartment off Grand Avenue near downtown. Helicopters in a blue sky from my window; hell fire and gray-Black billowing smoke as I exited the building and turned the corner to walk down my street towards downtown. Thick clumps of ash fell like snow, blurring the bright green Whole Foods sign at the base of the street and clinging to my clothes and bicycle helmet; smoke stung my eyes from the building that was still blazing less than a mile away, though a steady fountain of water doused the last of the flames from the top of a tall fire truck's ladder. The city's resolute, decades-long commitment to high rise development is as tenacious as the spirit and grit of resistance that set fire to the building in the first place. The condo building sprouts back up soon enough, another resilient weed in the battle of native and invasive in Oakland, California.

The site of the fire is in the midst of a triangular stretch between Grand, Broadway and 30th street, an area that has been known as Auto Row for its many car dealerships. In the 4 short years that I lived in this neighborhood, the place transformed from lonesome parking lots to roped-off barren pits and skeletal building fronts; whole blocks have been demolished and rebuilt into tacky, resort-like dormitories, carbon copies of the high rise condos I see spat out around San Francisco. It is only a matter of time before the car dealerships migrate, like the people, to the outlying suburbs and the name of this place changes to something trendier, something a landlord or real estate agent can pitch, as with Koreatown Northgate, or Uptown.

The inequality of this transition has become a shocking, sobering eyesore, as tent encampments of homeless Oakland residents fill up spare real estate under freeways and along the lake's protected edges at an unprecedented rate. The reproduction of such an homogenous aesthetic, marketed as beautification, reveals the ugliness of development: the housing crisis and the issue of homelessness it has magnified. This rapid change has also unveiled the stubborn refusal of Oakland residents to leave, their attachment to not only the material spaces of Oakland but to its communities, and the idea of it as home.

One such encampment that has sprung up as result of gentrification is hidden away between warehouses and raised over shallow, still water near the estuary. There, I am sitting with the director of The East Oakland Collective, Candice Elder, on a bed covered in a fuzzy red blanket that fills one half of a hand-built, plywood home. It is swarming with flies but feels cool at least. The woman who speaks with us is Rosa, a young Mexican woman who is showing signs of her years of struggle. Her hair is full, thick, dark and long and it frames her small, heart-shaped face. Her skin is lightly freckled, a sun-tanned brown, which sets off her dark brown eyes, eyelashes rimmed with thick mascara that's begun to dribble tiny Black clods of make-up onto her cheeks. It is her mouth that gives away the hardship she has experienced living on the street; her cheeks and mouth are sunken in, and a single Blackened tooth hangs onto her top gum. As she talks, her small, strong hands gesticulate loosely in front of her, and I notice the tattoo on her right thumb below the knuckle: "510" the Oakland area code. Despite crossing the border when she was 12 and living "all over California," she's branded herself with an Oakland trademark. Despite having family that cares for her daughter a BART ride away, she remains here. Despite being an undocumented migrant with markedly less access to the municipal resources provided to Oakland's homeless, Rosa has chosen to stay here, visibly bound to this city and what it represents.

The fight for Oakland manifests through such extreme statements as the arson, and, more mundanely, in such displays of affection as Rosa's tattoo, in the subtle smirk on the faces of those who can sing the lyrics to Bay Area hip hop classics while they note everyone else who merely bops awkwardly along. The feeling of Oakland being fought for is precisely this place-based praxis of resistance and intercultural solidarity. Rosa's struggle and connection to Oakland, along with the anonymous arsonist's motives, are enmeshed within a history of struggle that has defined the city. It is bound up with resistance, which comes not only from the desire to protect middle and low-income residents of color from displacement, but from a nostalgic fear of the dull, homogenous mediocrity that comes with an injection of new wealth and, more importantly, the threat this poses to the sense of Oakland *as Oakland*. What is lost, what Mayor Schaff is speaking to in Oakland's report on culture and equity, is a "vibe" or "secret sauce" that is unique to the particular geographies of struggle borne out of a racialized connection to place.

Dissertation Overview

In this project, I examine the ways that developers and Black community organizers in Oakland utilize a situated concept of Black culture to produce value in the city. This value is constituted by a politics of Blackness rooted both in racial capitalism, shifting structures of community care, and their affective articulations. The affective qualities of Black Oakland – which includes a sense of relationality, creativity, and resistance – are understood colloquially as "vibe." While representations of vibe are mobilized by both developers and community organizations to respectively advance and resist gentrification, I argue that the vibe of the city is constituted by a Black sense of place that cannot be reproduced through capitalist representations of cultural value alone. Where developers leverage notions of vibe to generate value through private investment, Black organizers utilize such representations in order to reclaim the physical space necessary to the very production of vibe. The deployment of cultural market strategies to resist dispossession is an enactment of what I call "emancipatory framing," in which hegemonic framing is mobilized in order to create alternative spaces for liberatory praxes. Vibe as a material

and metaphorical asset of Blackness, is thus at the root of contestations over place, and sometimes contradictory imaginaries of freedom.

Vibe quavers between the poetic and material, production and consumption. Where much of the literature on Blackness, racial geographies, or Black geographies tend to focus on either the experiential, structural, or the way that one of these produces the other, the study of vibe presents an opportunity to explore relationality as a site that coproduces racialized space and experience. The analytical arc of this dissertation opens from the outside, inward. I use "framing" to explain the fixed, often visual methods by which city development stakeholders reify vibe as a function of commodified diversity. In practice, however, vibe is not a public, demonstrative quality, but a porous, relational space of interiority. The thirdspace (Soja, 1996) of the images used to represent Oakland and its vibe project inward, into the self-emancipated, partially-freed bodies, business spaces, and gathering grounds of Black space. The internal experience of vibe – within self and Black space – is central to the reclamation of Oakland spaces; likewise, the very existence of interior, in-between Black spaces are central to the production of vibe.

I understand vibe as a function of the historical materialism of Black space via the forces of migration, segregation, deindustrialization and now gentrification and displacement. The affective qualities which have arisen from these forces drive both abstract extractive framings, and concrete actions of neoliberal and collective ownership of Black space. Taking seriously the invitation of Black geographic scholarship to work with the poetics landscape alongside its material workings, I unpack the relational qualities of vibe as a conversation about hustle, openness, diversity, family, and pride. Moving from the innermost spaces of experience toward a collective imaginary of liberation, I follow three case studies that trace vibe at the scale of the Black body, the independent business, and the grassroots collective.

"Oakland is a Vibe"

The overarching "cultural vibrancy" that the mayor, developers, and locals all try to capture through a variety of branding tactics emerges as a unique sense of place that resists definition. Where I see Oakland in the shimmer of the sky above Lake Merritt while a mass of Black and Brown bodies swell joyfully to the sound of drums and beats coming from any one of at least six different Bluetooth speakers, others see Oakland in the squeal of car tires at a sideshow late on a Friday night, in a t-shirt that proudly reads "El Pueblo," in an Afro-Peruvian dance performance at a block party, or in the Black beret style of a West or East Oakland Black-owned vintage storefront. It is this very collectivity of experiences that comprises an irrefutable narrative about Oakland as digging in its heels, as an undefinable "there," as a home.

Celebrated poet and long-time Oakland resident, Ishmael Reed, describes the meeting of these waters in Oakland when he calls it a blues city. He says, "Oakland is a city where identities blur. Where one encounters hip-hop dancers at a festival in Chinatown' where the mistress of ceremonies at a Kwanzaa celebration is a white woman in Yoruba dress…" (Reed, 2003, p. 27). The blues and feel of Oakland as a Black space are steeped in the traditions and geographies of many lineages. There is something about Oakland's Blackness, its situatedness in history and in place, that has made possible the multiplicity and intersectional coalition building that is so celebrated and so implicitly woven into the "vibe" of Oakland and its construction as a Black space. This does not diminish the power of understanding Oakland as a Black space in the way

that it is experienced; but it does challenge the representation or concretized identity of it as such.

Nevertheless, this vibrancy has been collected into some recognizable phrases. Throughout its history, Oakland has worn various titles and identities, which have been utilitarian, hopeful, or valorizing adornments, each reflecting the different facets of Oakland's development: The "Hub of the West," the "Athens of the Pacific," the "Progressive City," and, most enigmatically, "Oakland is California, only more so." (Wasserman, 2000) It's most recent nickname, "The Town" or "OakTown" is a nod to Oakland's place in the hip hop scene, and, perhaps, a tongue in cheek check on the way that Oakland always gets short shrift in comparison to its glittering sibling city across the Bay – "The City" or San Francisco. The contemporary nomenclature of Oakland is intriguing in the way that it does not boast any particular claim to economic, political, or intellectual prowess, but to an alluring, imaginative form of place. The Town, for instance, connotes contradictory images of quaint, small town Americana and a sense of utopic communalism, with the gritty underbelly of a place that is not quite the metropole, but the 'other side of the tracks,' the ghetto, the overlooked industrial cache of The City's excess.

"The Town" evokes Oakland as a place to live. Without towering skyscrapers fueled by finance capital or the title to any major general industry, there is little by way of things to see or do to attract newcomers or tourists to the city. Even its housing prices - some of the most expensive in the country although once attractively cheap for the area - no longer provide the motive they once did. What Oakland does have is much more quietly spectacular. The Town swaggers at dusk, when Oakland's low skyline is silhouetted against a cotton candy sky, glowing behind the necklace of lights around Lake Merritt. Oakland is "The Town" in the way that familiar old Black men play chess and fist bump one another outside of a local café, while someone dressed in gold rides a gold-painted bike with a gold-painted boom box, blaring his way up and down Broadway. And all of this, the city's swagger—its aura, its magnetism—is nested within its own reputation as one of the most dangerous cities in the country, a fate typically coupled with low investment, the (re)production of place suppressed by low expectations of a city's inner populace - Black, poor, immigrant, *the Other within.* It is this complexity that perhaps makes Oakland "California, only more so," and makes it the oasis of diversity that politicians have been touting it to be since the 1990s.

This particular moment in Oakland's history, however, marks a turning point that has been making its very slow about-face since Mayor Jerry Brown's development plan stalled out after the rupture of the dotcom bubble in the early 2000s. Mayor Libby Schaff has taken up the mantle, re-igniting the high-rise development furor in the midst of a housing affordability crisis in the Bay Area. Simultaneously, and much to its deficit in the minds of many locals, the Town now also blushes under the glare of San Francisco's tech money, which has contributed to its gentrification and ballooning housing costs.

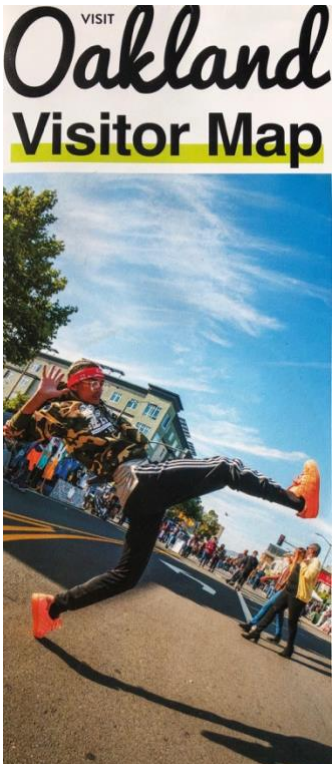

Figure 1: Visit Oakland Map. Courtesy of Visit Oakland.

Oakland's representation as a Black city belies the lived reality of Black dispossession. Black residents currently constitute only 26% of the city's population after a 28% decline between 2000-2014. Yet, tourism organizations like Visit Oakland advertise the city using images of Black bodies, food, arts and music. Despite its history as a predominately White city, the hyper-visibility of Blackness emerged with the Black Panther Party's emergence, the rise of the Black political elite and a subsequent period of federal divestment, in which the city became predominately Black. This period in its history continues to strongly influence Oakland's branding as a Black space, despite the steady creep of displacement. For instance, "Oakland 1966," the year of the Panther's establishment, has become a ubiquitous, if unofficial, icon of a contemporary Oakland reclaiming its Black Power past. One can find this branded with the image of a panther onto the backs of faded denim, camo-patterned, and bomber-style jackets and hoodies, and sold alongside the Warriors and OakTown t-shirt vending stalls that dot downtown corners.

Still, the image, identity or representation of a city is contested turf, the site of claims for the city's future. Even "Oakland 1966" is a hopeful return to a remembered, if romanticized, moment in the city's past in the attempt to hold onto the notion of Oakland as a Black space. The daily experience of Oakland, that which motivates the gritty fight against the waves of gentrification and displacement, belies identity or any fixation through representation. This is the *vibe* of place that I explore in this dissertation project. Specifically, I argue that Oakland can be loosely defined by some of its most ineffable qualities. These qualities may be surmised as part of its identity as "The Town" and as a Black space. Moreover, I propose that Oakland is a Black geography through this particular experience of hustle, collective struggle, and placeless-ness, rather than through any superficial representation of it as Black (i.e. occupied by Black bodies). Vibe, in this project, can be contextualized within the fields of affect theory, a Black geographies, and the commodification of culture.

Literature Review

Affect

The arson and the tattoo described at the outset of this chapter betray an intensity - an affective relationship of bodies being acted upon and acting, imprinting themselves indelibly onto this non-place. "Oakland" is not about the facts of the matter, or event the events of tattooing or committing arson, but an inhabited, bodily enrapture, a physical response to decades of abandonment. The intimate in-between spaces built in the wake of disinvestment propose alternative structures of care, and are the planes through which wordless understanding take place. Vibe happens here, as a resonance of place - of Oakland - upon the raced, Black skin.

Throughout this dissertation, I refer to vibe as an affective quality of race and space. Rather than any particular socialized or enculturated emotional reaction, vibe represents an interstice between the object/material of the city's physical structures and the racialized bodies therein. Vibe is what

has been used to describe familiar, though often indescribable, patterns of affective encounters within the context of race and place. In line with affect theory, vibe charts the everyday registers of encounter (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010), feelings that evade capture (White, 2017), that animate ordinary life (Stewart), and form the in-between place where surfaces press against one another (Ahmed, 2014).

Affect, according to Brian Massumi (1995), is a proposal congruent with the emergence of postmodern, cultural studies formulations of ways of being that defy binarism or categorical confinement. The unbounded quality of affect has great potential political power; and, says Massumi, the ability of images to convey or "transduce" affect toward political ends had not yet been addressed by radical, postmodern parties. By elevating vibe over a particular definition of Blackness, or indeed of Oakland, Black business owners and cultural workers propose and affective, spatial-bodily rebuttal to the actualization of those abstract images and feelings of Oakland perpetuated by developers. I position vibe as a racialized, emplaced form of affect because the situated relation between bodies and space inform a collective impression of "Oakland-ness" that is integral to understanding the transduction of affect within commercialized images of the city, and their refutations.

The field of affect theory has primarily explored the relational space between bodies and objects, signs or image. Place is itself an abstraction comprised of many intersecting signs and objects, composing a more complex register for understanding affect and its political valence. As such, emotional or affective explanations of place are usually taken up in discourse on senses of place, character, or *genius loci* (see below). Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects*, however, represents an accumulation of "inhabitable" affects - everyday relations and arousals that make things and place lived and animate. In a brief discussion of "Vermontness," for instance, Stewart states that these everyday qualities do not merely add up to an identifiable set of distinct images, but are complexly linked and repeated. Says Stewart, "The question is not where, exactly, this Vermontness came from—its "social construction," strictly speaking—but the moment when a list of incommensurate yet mapped elements throws itself together into something. Again. One time among many. An event erupting out of a series of connections expressing the abstract idea—Vermontness—through a fast sensory relay. Disparate things come together differently in each instance, and yet the repetition itself leaves a residue like a track or a habit—the making of a live cliché." (p. 30) Similarly, I suggest that vibe outlines the colloquial reside of "Oakland-ness," through a myriad network of linked events, habituated by the interactions between its people and structures.

The shimmering quality of liveliness that emerges is so full of potential, so beyond explanation, that it tends to fall into the realm of cliché or romanticism. Specifically, within the social and economic context that affect theorists have responded to, affect's tendencies seem to trend toward this kind of optimism (Berlant, 2010) or anxiety (White, 2017). Both compulsions situate affect as relative to time (Berlant, 2010; Massumi 2010). The immediacy of affect eclipses the present, registering outside of time, "pastnesses opening onto a future" (Massumi, 1995, p. 91). When sutured to Blackness, however, there arises a skeptical progressivism, a habituated affect around struggle and foreclosed futures. This does not necessarily entail fixity in a feeling of happiness or sadness, but, perhaps, a reversed affective orientation to place: as utopic futurity opening onto a romanticized pastness, be that of Black radical solidarity, or African ancestry.

As I will argue in Chapter One, the promise sustained in the affective spaces of vibe is what has driven Oakland's economy since WWII. Oakland's is a political economy of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2010) and racial anxiety, in which both Whiteness and Blackness are variously perceived as threats to the viability of an optimistic future for the city. Vibe is animated through the kind of post-Fordist affect that Berlant (2007) notes as being ever-oriented around a movement toward the normative, utopian or, especially in Oakland's case, a perception of belonging, while remaining trapped in neoliberal, isolated, but relational, acts of survival.

> "It is a scene of mass but not collective activity. It is a scene in which the lower you are on economic scales, and the less formal your relation to the economy, the more alone you are in the project of maintaining and reproducing life. Communities, when they exist, are at best fragile and contingent." (p. 280)

The affective space of Oakland as always being on the edge of the next great development thus produces a vibe that both awaits a promised racial utopia, and struggles to survive within a space that is simultaneously defined by its lack of "thereness" or material development. "Hustle" thus emerges as a skeptical affective aspect of vibe, along with affects shaped around ideas of openness and family kinship structures, all of which produce a kind of community that is contingent upon securing and reproducing spaces for Black life. In so doing, the city paradoxically maintains its identity as unidentifiable, as Black, as affective in-between space.

Spirit & Sense of Place

Explanations of the way a place feels generally fall into theological or philosophical discourses on nature and the human, or become discussions of how collective or structural value and meaning is spatially expressed. I group these literatures, respectively as Spirit, and Sense of Place, where the concepts of Spirit tend to generalize about the human condition, and theories around Sense focus on the particular interactions between the individual and the built environment.

To discuss the spirit of Oakland evokes a humanist geographers' approach to place as being related to a human essence and a moral or theological ethic. For instance, many humanist geographers have followed Martin Heidegger's work on dwelling (1971) as being the seat of humanness. Geographers like Yi Fu Tuan (2001), Anne Buttimer (1993), and E. C. Relph (1976) write about place through the vantage of the experiential or existential. Tuan, for example, considers experience the means by which humans understand space and, consequently, give meaning and shape to otherwise abstract space. Relph (1976) takes a phenomenological position, arguing that the "lived-world" experience of place is central to human attachment to particular locations - a personal relationship which precedes ownership or development. The creation of place is demonstrative of a range of human civilizations' methods of rationalizing earthly and universal phenomena. As such, humanistic geographers like Tuan (2001) and Buttimer (1993) use place and experience to make abstract claims about the emplaced human condition. The role of culture is viewed here as an influential, but not necessary or central factor in one's experience of space or place.

Raymond Williams' (1961/2001) notion of "structures of feeling" utilizes space as a particularity, a defining fixity that holds culture. Understanding culture, says Williams, requires an engagement with the meaning, values and feeling tone of a group of people in a particular time and space. Space and culture, in this context, are divided along the classic dualism between human and nature, viewing space as transparent, and as that which holds and reinscribes delineation. The convergence of feminist geographies and the spatial turn in cultural studies makes space an integral and co-produced function of culture, political-economy and structures of power.

"Sense of place" has been critically examined with relation to power geographies by Doreen Massey (2013). Her use of the phrase critiques and revises above notions of space as representative of rootedness or fixity in the midst of globalization. She also stays close to the importance of local configurations of space to contradict universalizing or globalizing theories that ignore the dialectical relationship between race, gender, and the productions of place. Says Massey, "The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple." (p. 5) Anthropologists, and race, feminist and cultural studies scholars, too, understood that invoking a sense of place from its inscrutable, heterogeneous and personal roots enabled a study of uprootedness as its own relational geography (Feld & Basso 1996; hooks 1990; Anzaldua 1987)[1]. These works of senses of place understand culture, power, and space as being relationally produced.[2]

The specifics of culture, power, and "sense" with regard to the construction of the built environment in urban spaces, however, become blurred in some urban planning and architectural readings that are oriented toward the reproduction of "place" as an aesthetic or economic value. Place, as it is organically and abstractly explored in spirit and sense of place literature, gives way to the creation of the kind of "placelessness" that E.C. Relph (1976) defines as "the casual eradication of distinctive places and the making of standardised landscapes that results from an insensitivity to the significance of place." (Preface, 1976) Such "placeless" methods of development were challenged in the early 90s with the rise of the New Urbanist movement, which advocated for the re-centralization of neighborhoods around plazas, mixed-use development, and other street-level forms of community. The movement began as a response to post WWII modernism and suburban sprawl, and has since received critique for the exclusive forms of community it promoted, given that its designs fail to acknowledge difference from a White middle class norm.

In a response to the rise of New Urbanism and the emergence of "sense of place" and "genius loci" in architectural and urban planning literature, Jivén and Larkham (2003) argue that these understandings of place cannot be produced by "professional intervention" but are created by

[1] For feminist readings on the nonbinary, affective relationship between body and matter, see Hayes-Conroy (2010) on "visceral geographies," in which the structural and post-structural are always operating through sensory perception.

[2] Adjacent to these discussions is the concept of "cultural landscapes," in which landscapes - themselves a formulation of idealized Nature - are imbued with cultural ideology (Cosgrove) and represents a function of imperial power (Mitchell). These discussions are less about culture or space in its affectation, but place as an image that does hegemonic work.

people and their value systems. Nevertheless, in the coming decade, the literature would shift from "sense of place" toward "vibrancy," and adjacent terms, as a means of accounting for the contributions that arts, culture and concepts of diversity play in new urbanism's "human-centered" design. (Walker, 2018; Congress for the New Urbanism) Redeveloping the nation's decaying urban cores hinged on quality of life factors (Strom, 2002) to bring White residents and retail back to centrally designed neighborhoods, most notably, arts and entertainment.

The concept of creative cities came about w/ Richard Florida's (2003) influential idea about the creative class; while arts investment as a development strategy had begun as early as the 1960s, Florida introduced creativity as a neoliberal means of developing an attractive amount of diversity for cultural consumption by highly educated workers. Other scholars, policy-makers, and funders in the early 2000s began to pick up on this rhetoric, publishing on a variety of terms meant to identify elusive cultural and affective formations that make places so viscerally attractive. Carr & Servon (2007) suggest that places have unique personalities, or "vernacular cultures," that are anchored in businesses, arts and cultural institutions. Anne Nicodemus (2013) follows the way that policy and funding organizations have perpetuated the term "vibrancy" as a way of gesturing vaguely toward activities and institutions that generate a "quality of place, which helps develop, attract, and retain talent." (p. 217) Sharon Zukin (2008) locates the way that ethnic diversity is embedded in these qualities through expressed desire for "authenticity," which becomes absorbed into consumer patterns of gentrification that actually reflects White and higher class interests. All these concepts acknowledge the high potential for displacement as a result of creative placemaking strategies; yet, they remain focused on how to avoid harmful modes of gentrification in order to benefit city development in the long run. Such theories are devoid of the way that the lived experience of racialization – that which is not always represented in art or business activities – is inherent to creative productions and appropriations of urban space.

Vibrancy, feeling and sense of place have been taken up as metrics of identity, the very categories that the postmodern spatial turn toward affect and a relational understanding of power sought to evade. An emphasis on the identity of place is meant to objectify and romanticize affective spatial interactions, and ultimately clamps down on cultural and racial essentialism. The role that this plays in the branding and commoditization of place will be discussed in a subsequent section. Presently, I'd like to turn toward the way that a lack of identity is constructive of a Black sense of place that resists commercial packaging.

Oakland's Black Geographic

The non-geographic geographic

Gertrude Stein's description of Oakland as having "no there there" warranted renunciation every few years for much of the 20th century because it felt accurate. Caught between the suburbs and San Francisco, between the inflows of Black, Latin American and Asian/Pacific Islander migration and outflows of industry, the city struggled to establish itself as a distinct, recognized entity. It was everything and nothing, central and completely overlooked. Most anxiety-inducing, it was visibly, and increasingly Black. Its lack of placefulness or a consecrated identity has thus been central to Oakland's Blackness and "deep" spatial formations.

Neil Smith (1984) suggests, in proposing the idea of "deep space," that the material and metaphorical/social aspects of spatial theory be brought together in order to understand how their 'crushing reality.' The reference to the "real" is a means of experiencing structural shifts of inequality as an intensity; although Smith's project was an analysis of how to further extend the work of geographers attempting to undo the binaries latent within conceptualizations of space, "deep space" might here be considered a kind of geographical affect, a metaphysical space that requires the unthinking of dualisms. In this context, deep space becomes a way of considering how Oakland residents experienced the local and broader effects of a deindustrializing, globalizing Western economy. Extending this work, Katherine McKittrick uses Smith's theory of deep space in order to contextualize the material and poetic compulsion of the Black geographic.

McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds* positions the unknown, the ungeographic qualities of Black life as not in antithesis to the White or knowable, but as already central to spatial production. Blackness is presumed to be ungeographic, placeless, a violence that abstracts Black people from place, and universalizes Black labor. But to be imperceptible, or overlooked, is not to be unimportant or without geographic relevance. The real and imagined spatial practices of Black people, especially Black women, are already a part of known geographic representations. In spite of, and perhaps because of, their designation as ungeographic, the spatial epistemologies and ontologies of Blackness meaningfully respond to geographers like Smith, who are unthinking Cartesian binaries. This evocation of Blackness highlights ways of being in the world - as political, economic response, and as poetics of relation (Glissant, 1997) - rather than fixed identity.

Here I suggest that the imposed idea of placelessness upon cities like Oakland is coterminous with its designation as a Black city. This has resulted in a kind of obscurity - an opaque form of knowledge - at the center of Oakland's production. As jobs and White residents left the city, and as violence and homelessness grew, Black *life* continued, expressed in Oakland's various gathering places and forms of hustle (the poetic and the material). The unacknowledged, unidentifiable ways that Oakland has been produced via its Blackness has contributed to its *very* geographic, place-full quality, expressed as "vibe."

Spatial Sociogeny

The question that W.E.B. Du Bois asks in *The Souls of Black Folk* as a follow up to his famous invocation of the problem of the color line is central to the Black geographical inquiry that drives this project: "How does it feel to be a problem?" To be a problem is to understand Blackness as more than an inhabited representational category, but a radical, felt, and grounded experience; it is to relish in one's unruliness, to trouble the boundaries of transparent, segregated space, and to disrupt the assumption that the production of space is either economic or poetic, white or Black. And so, in this project, I am turning DuBois's question slightly to understand what it has felt like to be a productive problem and the specific sociogenic parameters created by the experience of Blackness and struggle in a city troubled by its own opacity.

Vibe hinges on the understanding that Blackness has a psychological and physical affect on the way of being in place. Frantz Fanon's (1968) concept of sociogeny, an ontology that is produced by social structures such as race, is akin to DuBois's double consciousness in that the Black person is always cognizant of their own perception, and simultaneously how they are perceived

as a racialized figure. Fanon's own experience of Blackness shifted based upon the geography of his social context, driving home the affective puncture of this shock in his recollection of being identified France: "Look, a Negro!" Sylvia Wynter's (1995; 1999) reading of sociogeny is linked to racialization in the New World through geographic representation. Detaching people from African, place-based realities and imposing the representational category of "Black" upon them functioned to "induce the specific mode of perception needed by a culture-specific order, and to thereby orient the prescribed behaviors needed by that order." (1995, p. 20) Part of this induced perception included being not only dispossessed, but made of an "uninhabitable" and "unknowable" space in accordance with Spanish religious epistemologies. To "be" Black thus was to inhabit the ungeographic, the "zone of nonbeing" (Fanon, 1968), and to be only "like" a Man. This binary became a set part of the universal understanding of Man and his freedoms. The geographically relative experience of oneself as Black - and how far this veers from the represented social norms of a place - is what has enabled so much of Black critical theory from thinkers like Fanon, DuBois and Stuart Hall. I understand the racialized experience of place - a kind of spatial sociogeny - to likewise be critical to understanding the production of that place. The spatial sociogeny of vibe asks us to consider the co-produced nature of race, space, and the ontology thereof.

Relation and Historicity

Oakland was at one time heralded as a Black city and still leverages an idea of Blackness in its afterlife as a "post-Chocolate City." (Summers, 2019) Within the context of the affective life of Black geographic spaces, I understand Oakland as a "Black City" to be comprised of not only its demography, but a relational landscape of struggle.

Hunter and Robinson argue (2018) propose that "Chocolate Cities" are all defined by the imprint of The South as a geographical idea and cultural formation. As Katherine McKittrick (2013) argues, however, the transposition of the South is accompanied by the proliferation of a plantation logic; "plantation futures" represent the repetitious iterations of Black containment, from prisons to the projects. Within these segregated, contained Black spaces, many differences from the stark White/Black binary of Southern traditions emerge. Most notably, Black neighborhoods in Oakland were not populated strictly, or even necessarily majority, by Black people. Additionally, Black youth in California resisted some of their migrant parents' conservative Southern principles, a break that helped to make the Black Panther Party, and their politics of radical interracial, international solidarity, possible (Murch, 2010). I argue that Oakland's vibe is not constrained to the North/South North American binary, or the universalization of The South. Rather, it is through the excavation of Black spaces, and the openness and practices of solidarity expressed therein, that Oakland's Blackness is transmuted into a broader sense of place.

"Vibe" in Oakland also evokes Clyde Woods' (1998) "blues epistemology." For Woods, the blues becomes a theoretical intervention that encompasses the forms of knowledge and praxis that came out of Black American resistance against plantation economies and post-bellum oppressive development in the Mississippi Delta. The blues captures a particular, if essentialized, West African, Native American and Southern tradition of struggle and expression that, when acknowledged, acts as a retainer against commoditization, in spite of its popularity in the mainstream music industry. While I understand vibe to encompass such practices as music and

artistic expression and to be informed by the social and economic reverberations of the plantation bloc, I see it as also as being a much more flexible methodology that is responsible to the historical relations of a particular place, rather than bound by a teleological temporal or spatial lineage.

In addition to providing a flexible means of understanding place as both material and imagined outside of the purview of formal recognition and modes of knowledge, "vibe" is correlated with Éduoard Glissant's concept of relationality (1997). Glissant functionally provincializes European notions of identity by locating powerful productions of space and knowledge within the movement away from a Root and toward the new forms of relation produced in a particular time and space. Similarly, we might consider The South as a kind of "root" from which errant practices in and of Oakland mobilize a poetics of relation. Affective encounters within the Black spaces of Oakland engage "creolization," "a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and errantry." (p. 34)

Finally, the Blackness of Oakland is also a function of its own autopoeitic narrative. The names of legendary Black Panther Party members who began their work in Oakland are repeated as a point of pride, and as a means of resisting the silences that will and have invariably emerged as a result of White hegemonic historicity (Trouillot). In the process of sewing these stories of Black political, as well as artistic achievement, "vibe" is narrativized as a way of being that becomes part of the Black spatial sociogeny of Oakland. In other words, the stories of Blackness in Oakland produce the people of Oakland as much as they do the space of Oakland. They are a function of being what Sylvia Wynter (McKittrick, 2015) identifies as *homo narrans* - a story-telling species that is at once *bios* and *mythoi.* Black geographic space, on the scale it has taken on in Oakland, is an autopoetic convergence of narrative, material space, and the experience thereof.

Blackness as an affective, spatial signifier engages the dialectic between the material and the personal and poetic experience of space. Black geographic thinking calls for a praxis of openness, situating freedom not as a teleological process that necessarily culminates in the realization of something or somewhere concrete, but is attentive to the layers of abstraction that formulate the concrete. In doing so, Black geographies, particularly as it derives from Black feminism, is always confronting its own unknowability (McKittrick, 2006), and staying with the processes of abstraction, of marronage (Roberts, 2017) of errantry (Glissant, 1997) of longing (Ellis, 2015).

Culture, Commodity, Community

Reclaiming Vibe

Many cultural activists in Oakland hold anti-capitalism and anti-colonialism at the center of their politics, while grappling with the contradiction of making change within a system that enforces notions possession and commoditization as avenues to power. This tension extends beyond participation in a transaction of land and capital, however. As will be explored throughout this dissertation, the pathway to Black land ownership is premised upon the primacy of Black community space and cultural production to the vibe, the beloved "soul" of Oakland. Thus, the

marketable value of culture, community, and Blackness in conjunction with a commoditized brand of place is inhered within the question of owning a designated Black space.

In the below exploration of property, the driving idea behind much of Black cultural claims in Oakland, "land is liberation," can persist within an ethical framework wherein this does not necessarily equate to an idea of property as liberation. Re-possession - of bodies and lands that, through the prism of Black American racialization never belonged to Black people - is an ontological assertion that defies racial-spatial and economic codes that structure ownership and private property. Black activists insist that they need to "own" something; while this is certainly true with regards to accruing wealth enough to have autonomy over one's movement or staying power in place, ownership here signifies the ability to claim something of Oakland, both materially and metaphorically. In this case, the intangibles of racial encounter that have driven the city's development - positively and negatively - are being asserted as a kind of property, and usurped as form of Black fungibility.

Owning Culture

Marketing Blackness often means marketing Black art and other forms of cultural production. Art, especially visual and performance art, is particularly effective at evoking the desired vibe of Oakland advertised by the tourism board. Black artists and cultural workers engaged in projects of racial repossession have, for this reason, made themselves central to arguments over the redistribution of funds and land in the city of Oakland by making their art and vibe into cultural property that may be leveraged to manage dispossession (Lewis, 2017; Li, 2015). Most anthropological debates on cultural property and heritage tourism rely upon an idea of indigeneity in which there exists a fixed relationship between a group of people, a region, and their cultural distinction by way of historical occupation. A *narrative* of indigeneity has been claimed by way of relative "prior-ness," (Thomas, 2016) in which the political and cultural labor of Black residents is recognized as pre-dating contemporary waves of gentrification. The Black Oakland "native" here makes the concept of "Oakland," as land and brand, into a cultural property that may be re-territorialized and reappropriated - through occupation, "activation," and transactional forms of ownership. Dispossession is managed less by asserting a heritage-based right to a particular land than making a claim to "Oakland" as a Black cultural property with spatial consequence.

Making an assertion of cultural property can fix one's ethnicity in a way that is beneficial within a violent structure of rights based on recognition (Povinelli), as making oneself legible within the "identity economy" or "ethnicity industry" of cultural tourism is a method of attaining power through ownership in the midst of dispossession (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009). But, unlike heritage tourism literature, Blackness in Oakland is not being advertised by Black people for the purpose of tourism, but for a contained form of Black economic support and, largely, as a form of resistance to being the consumed Other (hooks, 1992).

Importantly, the commodification of Black culture entails a tautological reification of an encultured racial category, which itself was created to perpetuate the alienation of objects and slave labor. Afropessimists have often concluded that Blackness as ontology is of abjection and/or negation; it cannot have a "culture" beyond the white/Black Enlightenment binary that created the Black body (Spillers, 2006). To again cite DuBois, to feel oneself as a problem,

rather than as any fixed notion of "Black," disrupts naturalized conceptions of race and locates Black radical politics as situated within anticolonial, anticapitalist struggle rather than within contrived parameters of 'culture', itself constituted through geo-racialist logics of otherness (Ferguson & Gupta, 1992).

Additionally, without a fixed geographic heritage, Blackness as an essentialized market object has few viable outlets beyond soul food, ubiquitous West Afrocentric items, or stereotype. Instead of reading Blackness in Oakland as itself cultural commodity - an abstraction of an abstract category - I situate the unexpected, unbearable or unseeable spaces of Oakland as sites of cultural, bodily and territorial re-appropriation through what Tiffany King (2016) identifies as "Black fungibility," or the "capacity of Blackness for unfettered exchangeability and transformation within and beyond the form of the commodity, thereby making fungibility an open-ended analytic accounting for both Black abjection and Black pursuits of life in the midst of subjection." (p. 1023) Here, I am constituting Black fungibility within the framework of exploitations of representation, rather than labor. Black Oakland as fungibility transforms a bare market economy of art form into social practice that functions through (but not on behalf of) Blackness; this offers a form of interstitial freedom that may be used to intercede upon Oakland as a physical, affective and cultural property.

The Idea of Community

Embedded within the idea of cultural work and collective ownership models is the hazy, yet very politically charged concept of *a* "community." Although "community" is often brandished to dispel the individualism of capitalist consumption, it can be used to disempower and homogenize. Miranda Joseph's *Against the Romance of Community* follows the risks of overlooking the way that community is itself formed through capitalist practices of production and consumption. Further, community is not inherently antagonistic to capitalism but in fact reproduces it. Joseph, along with political theorist Iris Marion Young (1990) argue that insular groups tend to overlook the particular in favor of the universal and, in so doing, reproducing a kind of universal humanism.

Resisting homogenization does not need to give way to a poststructuralist, individualist melee (as Young argues, individualist autonomy is an opposing but equally harmful form of isolation). Indeed, interrogation into the harms of essentialization have, as Joseph points out, already been largely addressed by Black feminist theorists and activists who have always already been intersectional/interstitial thinkers (Hill Collins, 2002; Combahee River Collective, 1986). To quote Robin D.G. Kelley (2002),

> "Radical Black feminists have never confined their vision to just the emancipation of Black women or women in general, or all Black people for that matter. Rather they are the theorists and proponents of a radical humanism committed to liberating humanity and reconstructing social relations across the board. When bell hooks says 'Feminism is for everybody,' she is echoing what has always been a basic assumption of Black feminists. We are not talking about identity politics but a constantly developing often contested, revolutionary conversation about how all of us might envision and remake the world." (137)

George Lipsitz's (2011) definition of "Black spatial imaginary" offers some useful nuance as well, as it resists the kind of "hostile privatism" and "defensive localism" that is built into imaginaries of White, segregationist forms of community. Rather, political and economic necessity have required that Black community power be built on broad spatial, inter-racial alliances. Additionally, the foundations of solidarity and economic self-determination established by the Panthers in Oakland provide clear steps for understanding the "both/and" of Black liberation strategies that neither skirt their embeddeness within racial capitalism, nor the possibility of liberation with a heterogenous, united community-based effort. As a result, there exists an insistence on "self-determination" within Black community dialogue, along with a celebration of the neoliberal "hustle" in Oakland's vibe. The project of Black community production - and the creation of intimate Black paces at that - are not based on a strictly romantic or pure notion of insular community[3]; it is an opportunistic economic pursuit as much as it is a sentimental one.

Commodification of place

The process of branding Oakland with images and a variety of tag lines encouraging visitors to "experience" the city essentializes its culture(s) in a way meant to produce an affective attachment or sentimentality to Oakland (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009). The commodification of place through tourism has tended to refer to the commodification of the experience, and affiliated products and services, that make possible this place-based brand (Young & Markham, 2020; Vanolo, 2017). Place, argue Young & Markham (2020), cannot be wholly encloseable as a commodity; while the economic production of experience is contingent upon abstracted labor, the experience of place also requires the "free gifts of nature" and a city's attendant social space (Lefebvre, 1992) or sense of place to produce a use-value. Those who are marginalized from profiting on a value of "authentic" place that they produced, as participants in the social relations implicit in the social space of place, are fighting for their "right to the city" - as physical structure and as brand. More pointedly, as I will argue, Oakland's brand is comprised of a series of images that take advantage of an essentialized representation of Blackness that evoke vibe as an emotional experience of place.[4]

[3] A strain of ardent Black nationalism certainly exists within these organizations. Strategies to center Blackness are also not inherently exclusive, though again, they can be. The organizations presented in this account toe this line, readily embracing both Oakland's ethnic diversity, and gatekeeping Black-bodied spaces. It is here we see the hairline fissures between a politics of "unapologetic Black" organizing and multiracial leadership within the representative BCZ organizations. The relative in/exclusivity of Blackness in Oakland was a recurring thread throughout my research, and represents a topic I wish to explore more deeply in future writing.

[4] The emplaced, racialized body as a site of accumulation for the production of Oakland is less-well examined in this literature. (The effect of capturing this value through rent and housing prices, rather than consumption of hospitality goods and services, is partially captured in my discussion of creative cities and gentrification.)

Oakland's Black History

Characterizations of Blackness and the city have shifted in relation to class and mass migration from the South. Black poor and migrant difference from – and refusal of – the White spatiality of Oakland's pre-War configuration is what would cohere a sense of Oakland around an ethic of familial mutual support, openness to diverse allegiances, determination and an orientation toward political and economic hustle. Their presence gave weight to Gertrude Stein's once personal reflection that Oakland no longer had a "there there" by making the city Black, ungeographic and, for an extended period of its history, undevelopable. Oakland's Black history also demonstrates the ways that Black spaces were created and maintained in the city's landscape of inequality. Those who fought this process (and didn't just fight for a piece of the segregationist pie) were Black/inter-racial working-class organizers who produced defining characteristics of Oakland in their struggle within and against Black space.

Early Black Oakland

Isabel Wilkerson's (2011) account of the Great Migration tells the story of what she identifies as the three main geographic arteries and temporal eras of Black migration - Southerners fleeing terrorization and economic oppression by Whites. The first wave of migration begins in 1915 with the spike in demand for industrial laborers during World War I. While Wilkerson notes that most of the nearly 1 million Black southerners who migrated in the post WWI era went to Northern and Midwestern cities, the number of Black residents in California rose slowly as well (though they were stymied, in part, by greater competition on the West Coast with Mexicans and Filipinos for industrial and service industry jobs). The migrants who arrived in Oakland – the end of the Southern Pacific railway – often came here from the "near Southern" states of Texas, Louisiana and Arkansas.

Prior to this migration, historical notes tracked and presented by the East Bay Negro Historical Society (EBNHS) indicate that the first few free Black settlers in the Bay Area were among the initial colonizing Spanish groups from the sixteenth century, crew members from New England whaling ships, and gold miners. A script written by the EBNHS entitled "Oakland in Ebony" notes that "These first Blacks to settle in Oakland were relatively educated and literate. With a majority of them from the Northern or border states, they seem to have been exceptionally adept at developing Afro-American social institutions that, ultimately, were to pave the way for Black political and economic interests." The earliest population data taken in Oakland in 1852 documents just five Black men and one Black women as residents of the city. The early Black history of Oakland, according to EBNHS, was comprised of respectable laborers and entrepreneurs who established businesses and supported Oakland's community from its inception.

By the time that Black families like Electra Kimble Price's arrived in Oakland, the city's Black population comprised little more than 2% of the total. Electra, a 94 year old Black, Oakland-born resident, spoke with me about what life had been like for her and her parents at this time. Her father, Tom, had attended Tuskegee, where he learned shoe repair. And like so many who had begun to flee the South at this time, he was no longer welcomed in his hometown of Monroe, Arkansas, as his skilled trade encroached upon White businesses. A reverend and friend of Electra's father had already migrated to California and offered to help her father find a place to

live in Oakland. And so in 1924 the family moved across the country to Linden Street in the northern reaches of West Oakland. The neighborhood near her home and her family's shoe repair business and beauty salon on 32nd and Peralta was, Electra described, mostly Portuguese and Italian at that time. Being Black business owners, however, Price says that she met "a lot of people, because Blacks in those days, of course, tended to patronize Blacks. So we knew a lot of Black people, all practically...in Oakland." (personal communication, March 17, 2020)

The WWII boom brought 337,866 new Black people to California (Wilkerson, 2011), and increased Oakland's Black population five fold between 1940 and 1950 (Bay Area Census Bureau); Black people comprised nearly 10% of the city's residents by 1945 (Rhomberg, 2007). This not only significantly expanded Price's social network and business, but Oakland's character as a White frontier city was significantly disrupted. Mayor John L Davie presided over Oakland's changes throughout the 1920s and is described by Oakland historian, Beth Bagwell (2012) as being a character that could only politely be referenced as having its origins in his "Wild West" roots. It was during this post WWI boom period that Davie coined one of Oakland's first mottos attesting to its personalized, and racialized, affect: "My city Oakland." This phrase reflected a city-wide pride, unifying identity and belief in Oakland's economic promise, despite the "patchwork quality of the city's consolidation" of its disparate districts at that time (Fitelson, n.d.). Exactly whose city this was came into question after WWII. Says Bagwell (2012), "mistrust grew between the races, the stage was set for a major problem in postwar readjustment. There was no more 'my city Oakland." (p. 241) In other words, with Oakland's White majority suddenly threatened, the economic boom and sense of White ownership in this particular spatial imaginary too came under threat.

Electra also noticed the shift that the second wave of Black migrants brought to her once small and intimate Black Oakland community.

> And we were all very well, warm, comfortable, friendly, you know, group of Black people in the Bay Area. And then, of course, the change came gradually. When you have the new members coming into work in the shipyards…And in fact, we used to laugh at the kids. We were kids at that time, that here were the newcomers coming. They worked in the shipyards. And they were frugal, took care of their money. Bought these beautiful you know homes. Some built them. You could see, you know, the change coming. And that's when you had these long Cadillacs, and they would cruise up to church on Sunday, you know. And it was fascinating to watch this happen.
>
> (Kimble, E., personal communication, March 17, 2020)

Without saying outright, Electra implies that there were notable class differences between the Black people who had migrated to California prior to the WWII wave. She subtly suggests that the care and expense they paid on their homes and cars was noticeable, perhaps gaudy or otherwise out of place in an otherwise modest Black community. In so doing, they changed the look and feel of Blackness in Oakland – from a respectable and more easily ignored minority to a suddenly loud presence.

The growth of the Black working class, and its political power, came at the expense of tightening restrictions around housing covenants and White backlash. Electra explains that, for the Black middle class and for those trying to leave West Oakland especially, this became a problem, saying "But of course, as this happened, there was more dissatisfaction and conflicts with whites.

And so then you began to see redlining going on, which meant, you know, boom boom boom, you go to try to buy a house. And there were only certain areas that real estate agents would show you."

White residents were indeed more explicit about their alarm and contempt for the new arrivals. In response to a "riot" on Twelfth Street, *The Observer* wrote on March 11, 1944 about " …a new race problem, brought about by the influx of what might be called socially-liberated or uninhibited Negroes who are not bound by the old and peaceful understanding between the Negro and the white in Oakland, which has lasted for so many decades, but who insist upon barging into the white man and becoming an integral part of the white man's society…." (Bagwell, 2012, p. 240) The incident occurred after a Cab Calloway concert at the Oakland Auditorium, when a number of Black patrons attempting to board a Key streetcar in downtown Oakland became involved in an altercation with at least one white sailor. (Tobit, 1944) The fight highlighted both the increasing cultural and economic presence of Black populations in Oakland; integration - once lauded by liberals White and Black in California - became more of an inconvenience for Whites who had only tolerated a smaller Black population.

Although still a child at the time, one of these "socially-liberated or uninhibited" new arrivals included Huey Newton, who had migrated with his share-cropper parents from Monroe, Louisiana in 1943. West Oakland, in particular, was being the most quickly transformed, as Black migrants arrived here at the end of the rail line, took jobs in the ship yards, and were steadily corralled, via restrictive covenants and redlining practices, into this sloping corner of Oakland's geography. People from Monroe were drawn to Oakland more than any other city on the West Coast. As a result, the country character[1] of this small town gradually imprinted itself onto West Oakland's increasingly compact streets. In Wilkerson's write-up of Monroe-born Robert Foster's own perception of Oakland at the time, she says,

> "Robert drove into west Oakland, past the fussy Victorian row houses and the worker cottages, turreted and marching in lockstep, barely a foot between them, roosters and pole beans growing in some of the postage stamp yards. It was looking familiar. It was looking like Monroe, which was perhaps one reason why people from Monroe had gravitated there in the first place and made a colony for themselves. It was precisely what Robert was looking to get away from. It was not living up to his glamour vision of California. It felt as if he had driven all this way for the same place he had left." (pp. 236-7)

Oakland, particularly this burgeoning region of Black Oakland, did not live up to Foster's understanding of California as the golden, liberated and abundant landscape he'd hoped to find. This part of California was, as many Black Oakland residents would continue to attest generations later, very "country."[5] Thus, this second wave of migration set the stage for a massive shift in Oakland's economic prospects, its identity, and its racial politics.

[5] Historian Robert Self (2003) notes that in the 1930s and 40s, Oakland retained a "small-town feel" due, in part, to the significant presence of White Protestant populations that had migrated from the Midwest and Upper South (p. 43)

Post-WWII Oakland

"The distantly Negro character of the new population being added to California's urban center is one of the most important factors of concern in the whole matter of social planning for new populations in the present and post-war periods." - *The Problem of The Negroes in Oakland*, 1945

Oakland's war-era glow began to fade precipitously into the 1950s as the economic and cultural boom of the war era gave way to deindustrialization, job loss, declining downtown property values, overcrowding in an increasingly ghettoized West Oakland, and conservative redevelopment policies that gutted Black communities. The development policies that evolved in the 1960s became centered around snuffing out Oakland's growing "Negro character" by implementing redevelopment and social policies that were meant to segregate, displace, assimilate and/or control poor Black populations.

Progressive labor parties - part of the Oakland Voter's League (OVL) - were represented on city council for a brief period between 1947 and 1951, boosted from war-time labor organizing; these representatives proposed introducing more public housing in West and a portion of East Oakland near the lake (declared "blighted") to address over-crowding and housing shortages that had been a mounting problem during and after the war. Specifically, in a bid to physically and politically centralize multi-ethnic working classes in Oakland, the OVL and the NAACP supported city planning engineer John Marr's 1949 plan to develop integrated public housing. The plan was ultimately defeated with the party's decline in power.

In the 1950s, 80% of the Black population in Oakland lived in West Oakland (Rhomberg, 2007). Most worked in blue collar jobs, particularly manufacturing, despite high joblessness rates in the Black community after the war. However, as a function of racial density and segregation in West Oakland, Black-owned businesses and entertainment venues flourished, particularly along Seventh Street. This street acted as a borderland, an end-of-day meeting place between the bay front industrial ports where many worked in the shipyards during the war, and the residential areas just to the north and west. The most famous and enduring of the businesses that sprouted up on this street included entertainment venues like Esther's Orbit Room and Slim Jenkins; both of these clubs hosted many of the jazz and blues greats of the day. West Oakland's economic niche promulgated a Black business elite that organized themselves into a Black Chamber of Commerce, and a number of social organizations such as the Men of Tomorrow Inc.

White residents, however, had already begun moving out of the city and migrating away from Oakland's commercial centers. In response, business executives from Sears Roebuck, Kaiser, Bank of America and Wells Fargo and conservative real estate commissions - East Bay Homebuilders Association and the Oakland Real Estate Board - formed the Oakland Citizen's Committee for Urban Renewal (OCCUR). They established the Oakland Redevelopment Agency in 1956, and within three years, the organization had demolished the Acorn Project in West Oakland without adequate plans to relocate or re-house the Black poor who had been displaced. Oak Center, on the other hand, was a neighborhood comprised of mostly Black middle class property owners, who organized to against the razing of their homes and in favor of rehabilitation.

Between 1960 and 1966, more than 5000 units in West Oakland were taken through eminent domain and demolished, forcing some 14,000 residents to move to other parts of Oakland, or out of the city altogether. East Oakland had begun to open up in the mid 1950s to more Black residents, as real estate gatekeepers made certain neighborhoods available to Black buyers. Additionally, with the presence of Sears and Montgomery Ward department stores, East Oakland was appealing as a more upwardly mobile geography than the now halfway demolished West Oakland. “In the sixties you had this mass migration from West Oakland to East Oakland. The whites were giving it up out there.” (Arthur Patterson, quoted in Self, 2003, p. 161)

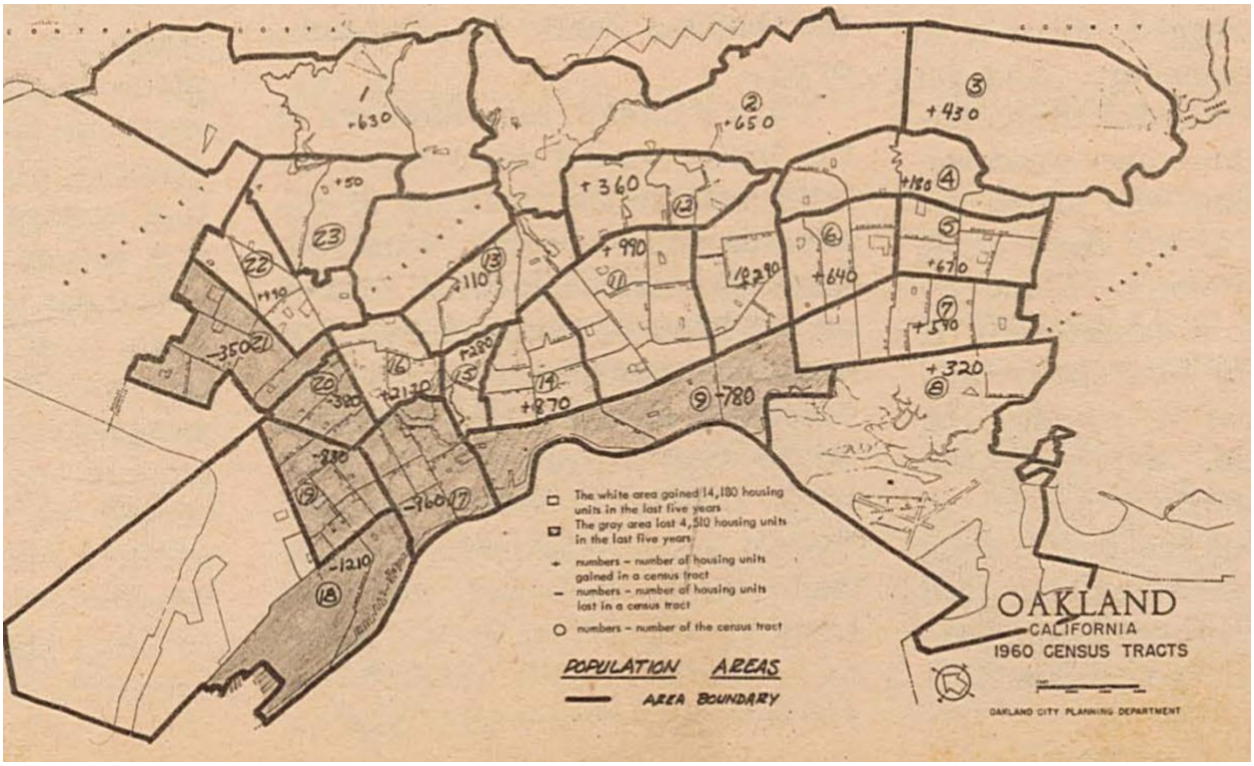

Figure 2: The Flatlands. Map of loss of housing in West Oakland.

Conservative political blocks operating alongside OCCUR focused downtown development on the construction of transportation infrastructure - such as highways and the BART - in an attempt to recapture some of the retail and buying power that was gradually being suburbanized. This included the construction of the Cypress Freeway in 1958, which sliced through the western edge of West Oakland and became the first major blow to Seventh Street’s cultural and economic life.

Fear of the Black poor continued to mobilize White business and political bodies around redevelopment activities that worked to displace poverty rather than alleviate it. In 1961, shortly after voting to demolish the Acorn Project, the city won a grant from the Ford Foundation Gray Areas program, which had been designed to combat poverty in transitional zones between business districts and the suburbs. The city organized the Oakland Interagency Project (OIP) around the $2 million in grant money to coordinate social services in the “Castlemont” region of East Oakland - an area that would come to be known as the “Deep East” - in order to prevent its

becoming another ghetto, as Black people were displaced from West Oakland. (Rhomberg, 2007, p. 135)

The Flatlands - a newspaper written by and for the poor in Oakland - argued that the War on Poverty programs, including the OIP's Ford funded project, did little to serve the poor because they were not represented on any of the advisory committees. Indeed, the Gray Areas program - intended to assimilate Black poor and "newcomers" (Southerners) - largely failed, given that many East Oakland Black families were upwardly mobile, middle class locals who had moved across town. In 1964, Oakland was federally declared as a "depressed area" under the Area Redevelopment Act. The "flatland" regions of Oakland – industrial districts of West and East Oakland nearest to the bay - were targeted by the War on Poverty programs implemented here. The city created the Oakland Economic Development Council (OEDC), which was divided into Target Area Advisory Committees (TAACs) that represented regions like Fruitvale and West Oakland. Representatives within the leading OEDC were predominately middle class Black, as well as Mexican and Asian American residents. On March 12, 1966, low-income organizers walked out of an OEDC meeting; they are quoted in a letter addressed to the board as saying,

> "We have tried in every way possible to represent the concerns of the poor people in our communities to the Oakland Economic Development Council. In spite of this, the Council has followed its own course, funded agencies that are not trusted by the poor, supported programs the are not wanted by the poor, and in general refused our advice and counsel. If we are to responsibly represent the poor, we feel that we can no longer support the Department of Human Resources and the Oakland Economic Development Council as it is presently constituted." (The Flatlands, 1966, p. 5)

Organizers withdrew representatives from the OEDC and advocated for the TAACs to become the Oakland Community Action Program, which assembled a more grassroots collective to control Oakland's poverty programs. The OEDC would eventually break off from the city and become incorporated as its own, fairly radical organization (the OEDCI) that still received government funding from the Office of Economic Opportunity. The program would eventually be shut down in 1971 after representative, Percy Moore, was accused of misusing federal funds (Morada, 2006).

The Black Panther Party for Self Defense

The struggle for control over city redevelopment and poverty programs like this, along with the Model Cities program in West Oakland, began to generate radical political momentum in Oakland around representation of the Black poor; this energy, and the continued need to defend West Oakland communities from redevelopment, economic decline, and police brutality, gave rise to the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, which was formalized just seven months after the OEDC walk-out.

At that time, Chairman Bobby Seale had been working with the Youth Jobs Corps at the North Oakland Neighborhood/Area Services Center, an outgrowth of the TAACs and the OEDC's anti-poverty programming. As demonstrated by his previous interest in city government and later run for mayor, Seale was interested in bringing Black Power forward as an instrument of political - and ultimately economic - power in Oakland.

At the core of this political power was the Ten Point Platform and Program, at once a kind of constitution outlining the basic rights of Black people and a list of demands. The BPP was established on the exact date in October, 1966, that copies had been made of this document, which demanded not only participation in representative politics, but radical redistribution of land, housing, and economic development rights. This work carried forth the momentum of Black, poor, interracial organizing that had begun with the Oakland Community Action Program's break from the OEDC - and, more symbolically, a break from Black middle class assimilationist representation that had failed to protect the interests of the poor when housing projects had been razed.

In action, these principles organized members into a decentralized network for mutual aid that functionally operated by the first point on the Ten Point Program: "We want the power to determine the destiny of our Black community." Carolyn Johnson, the executive director of the Black Cultural Zone Community Development Corporation, grew up with the Panthers walking her across the street at the corner of 85th in East Oakland. Even though her middle-class minister father resented the Black Panthers at first, he began to "recognize that as much as we move from the south and we tried to strive and do better, we're still getting dogged."[6] (personal communication, September 21, 2020) The Panthers were a regular feature of her neighborhood - involved in late night discussions, standing lookout on street corners for police harassment, and educating youth such as herself in self-defense and emergency preparedness.

The Panther's Survival programs broadened to include food and clothing distribution, community health programs, including screenings for sickle cell anemia, a freedom school, transportation to visit prisoners in California, and a number of co-operative living spaces. The BPP attempted to corral resources and strengthen is power-base in the Black community by patronizing Black businesses - and convincing them to financially support the Survival programs. Additionally, their representation - through the newspaper and Emory Douglas' political artwork - cohered supporters around their vision. Says Douglas, his work grew out of the work he did on patrols, observing and participating in BPP actions. It represented the lived reality of what the Ten Point Platform and Program demanded, and as a result, cultivated "a culture of resistance and self-determination." (personal communication, May 29, 2020)

The Panther's practices and principles, says CJ, "got lost with the 80s and, you know, Reagan and everybody wanted to be preppy and make money and buy an island and a boat and that whole Wall Street era." They are being recalled in contemporary projects that reclaim a sense of Oakland that has long been rooted in an unbridled "Negro character" of Southern poverty, community, solidarity, and resistance. Oakland's development has revolved - in call and response - around this stubborn characteristic.

Oakland's Infamous Era

The Panthers made a surprising showing in the 1973 elections, with Elaine Brown winning 33% of the vote for city councilor, and Bobby Seale winning 19%. While this would spell the beginning of a decline for Black radical politics for some time, the election paved the way for

[6] Most of the Black middle class in Oakland, however, remained skeptical of the party, which fractured its support and power base.

Black moderate and former OEDC board member, Lionel Wilson, to win the mayoral election in 1977, and the sharp increase in Black representation in city politics. This was matched by a steep decline in Oakland's White population, which decreased by some 90,000 people between 1970 and 1990. The character of Black resistance through the BPP that had put Oakland on the map now was now matched by a Black population that, in 1980 reached 47%. Wilson, distinguishing himself from Black radicalism, threw himself into pro-development interests, particularly downtown's City Center renewal project. This project had broken ground in 1972 and been steered by John B. Williams, head of Oakland Redevelopment Agency and Oakland Office of Community Development from 1964 to 1976. In many respects, Mayor Wilson, was taking after his admired late colleague, whom he had called the most "powerful and effective Black man in city government." (Ulinskas, 2019) Williams was a controversial figure, to say the least, given that he led the organization that had been principally responsible for demolishing West Oakland neighborhoods. But he was attentive to clearly and visually representing the organization's plans for the city's development - and its relocation plans; additionally, he made racial parity in employment for city-funded development jobs possible.

Wilson intended for his investments in renewal projects to benefit the Black community by earmarking that a set percent of construction funds would go to Black owned businesses. This would prove a crucial sticking point, as members of OCCUR, most prominently, Paul Cobb, would protest the construction of the Grove-Shafter Freeway due to complaints that minority businesses were not receiving their share of the tax-financed work. (The Tribune, 1979)[7]

Yet, many of these downtown development projects faltered or failed. Having been cut off from federal economic development funds, organizations like the OEDC and its neighborhood representatives were defunct. The direct targeting and fracturing of the Black Panther Party by the federal government too undermined remaining political organizing power amongst the Black and poor. Between 1981 and 1988, Oakland would lose 12,000 blue collar jobs, sending unemployment rates for Black workers up to 14.5% in 1990 (Rhomberg, 2007, p. 186). Meanwhile, Mayor Wilson's business and development oriented agenda benefitted the Black middle class, who now also had more incentive to join a burgeoning Black political bloc. Said the 1977 chair of the Men of Tomorrow Inc, "We as Black business and professional men have much at stake in this city and area. I would venture to say that most of us, should we become totally dissatisfied with the political system, school system, police department, fire department, business climate, or any other facet of our city, would not be in a position to comfortably transfer our businesses to surburbia [sic] or another city or state." (West, 1977) The group, which principally functioned as a networking organization that regularly circulated announcements about distinguished positions and awards within the Black community, took this opportunity to deepen their engagement with the rising Black political elite. These groups had enough political power to protect their interests, a protection which did not necessarily extend to the interests of the Black poor.

However, the increasing class stratification had ill-effects on the city overall; as the drug economy took over low-income neighborhoods and violence between gang leaders and police brutality escalated, retail stayed out of Oakland, and Black middle class homeowners also began

[7] The freeway would be completed in 1985; it delivered the final blow to West Oakland's integrity with the rest of the city, definitively cutting it off from downtown, and again severing its now flagging Seventh Street corridor.

to leave the city. With little community or economic staying power left, Black communities in Oakland were made incredibly vulnerable to the next wave of gentrification policies implemented by Mayor Jerry Brown.

Oakland today is drawing on a history of organizing by the Black working class to build power for the Black, low income, and people of color who remain and are resisting the final stages of the city's long-waged campaign against the Black poor. In lieu of the population density that gave rise to Black working and middle class political and economic power, organizers are attempting to use Brown's own strategy – of cultural development – against him and current Mayor Libby Schaaf. In order to understand this strategy, I will review the way that developers and boosters were responded to Black and poor organizing in the city.

Method

I sometimes wonder if conducting an ethnography was the best choice for me, given my disposition. Although I am enthralled by stories, and am patient to a fault with lengthier tales, I find the idea of approaching a stranger to even ask about their day to be a nauseatingly terrifying prospect. In addition to being simply a part of my personality, I perceive this fear to be a function of my raced and gendered positionality, and consequential feelings of vulnerability in public spaces.

Embarking on a project about vibe, seemingly a surfactant bound to outward affects of a place, thus posed an added challenge: how do I make inquiries about something that is communicated and understood in everyday, public encounters as a cis, Black (queer, light-skinned) woman? In resisting the pull outward to 'the streets', I turned inward, conducting ethnographic observations, interviews, and participatory action indoors, and in-network. This would prove central to understanding vibe *not merely* as a public affect but as a sense of trust, intimacy and familiarity - carefully constructed within racialized and gendered productions of space - that is central to affective press of skin upon the surfaces of the city, and commodified consumptions. This falls in line, as well, with the kind of intimate attention to the multiplicities of experience that Black feminist methodologies makes possible (Hill Collins, 2002; Christian, 1987/2007). By staying local and turning inward, we also meander without, beyond the boundaries of any such binary. The inner worlds and unexpected interior spaces of Black women's liberatory imaginations have offered inexpressible freedoms, and a richer understanding of complex outer movements.

In Katherine McKittrick's *Dear Science,* methodology is a verb, not a noun; it is processual, relational, intertextual and transdisciplinary. "Method-making is the generating and gathering of ideas—across-with-outside-within-against normative disciplines—that seek out liberation within our present system of knowledge. The goal is not to *find* liberation, but to seek it out." (p. 47) And so, the questions that drove this inquiry could never be "*What* is Oakland?" or "*What* is vibe?" Because who could answer these questions when, at the core, these are queries into the seeking heart of Black life, here? Addressing the nuances of Oakland's Blackness as a lived experience, an affect, and a feeling invariably led me to working with artists. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many methodologies of Oakland Black place-making have employed artistry, as even the real estate moguls and business owners here needed a relationship with art to be connected to place. The necessity of poetics in McKittrick's reading of Black geographies, too, compels an inquiry into poetic methodology. I interpret her refrain of "description is not

liberation" to mean that analysis - the fixing of meaning - is not necessarily warranted in the process of seeking. Pursuing a poetic method, too, is a way of resisting the compulsion toward prescriptive, universalizing theory. Exploring the lived experience of the Black geographic from the perspective of Black feminist thinking is an endeavor into a praxis of playful, fluid language (Christian, 1987/2007). Poetics and art are the languages of survival, the means of expressing inexpressible outrage, the form of knowing within a structure of knowledge that always shifts to make resistance incomprehensible and illogical. To cite Audre Lorde (1984), then, poetry is not a luxury, "not idle fantasy, but a disciplined attention to the true meaning of "it feels right to me."" (Lorde, p. 37) And so in my walks of Oakland, I gathered bits of feeling and scenes unfolding without resolution. Passages meant to evoke as much are inlaid throughout this dissertation as glimmers, disruptions to bare understanding.

The analysis I offer in this text is based upon such forms of experience and encounter alongside critical attention to the material predicaments of Oakland, historically and in the present. I draw from fieldwork and archival research conducted June - August of 2017 and 2018, and June 2019 - August 2020. During the summer of 2017, I taught a 10 week "Smartphone Photography" course for members of United Roots/Youth Impact Hub. Class participants were informed of my preliminary research topic; their names and images have not been used here without their explicit permission. Sunflower represents the one student whose work I have used to build the analysis presented in Chapter Two of this dissertation. In the tradition of Black feminist methodologies, I draw on the wisdom of her words, images, and everyday experiences. (Hill Collins, 2000; Shange, 2020; Hartman, 2019; Christian 1987/2007) Sunflower has graciously given me verbal and written permission to use her photographs, words, and name.

Work conducted during the summer of 2018 comprised mainly of conducting interviews on behalf of the Just Cities policy report on race, homelessness and the housing crisis. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of interviewees included in this dissertation, along with the elimination of any identifying place-names. The formal research period between 2019 and 2020 was comprised of ethnographic work, participant observation, participatory action work, semi-structured interviews, and archival research. Respectively, I observed five of six public stakeholder meetings of the Black Arts Movement and Business District at City Hall in Oakland, volunteered with the Community Archives Program at Eastside Arts Alliance, served as their representative for the Arts and Culture Committee for the Black Cultural Zone, and conducted twenty interviews with long-time residents, activists, artists and business owners. Interviews were split between informational conversations with representatives of organizations, and semi-structured interviews with community members. I used open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews to prompt the resident to discuss their experience of and within the city. Finally, I conducted archival research at the African American Museum and Library of Oakland (AAMLO) and the Oakland History Reading Room of the Oakland Public Library.

A Note on the Pandemic: The COVID-19 pandemic interfered with all research performed after March 16, 2020. Mandated office closures and event cancellations meant that the final element of my research plan - participant observation at public events and festivals from June until August 2020 - necessarily shifted to attending virtual events, meetings, and conducing all interviews on Zoom. The exception to this, however, were small, outdoor gatherings hosted by

Eastside Arts Alliance and the Black Cultural Zone. Archival work at AAMLO and the Oakland History Reading Room was suspended entirely.

Chapter Overview

Chapter one of this dissertation examines the trajectory of representations of Oakland over the last century. The influx of Black migrants during WWII, combined with radical Black working-class organizing, acts as an historical and political touchstone for Oakland boosters, who have either tried to negate the city's Blackness, or highlight it within the context of desirable diversity narratives. Importantly, the city has long struggled with establishing an identity distinct from San Francisco or its suburban neighbors. Its literal and figurative in-betweenness situates Oakland as a Black geography, one that has persistently contended its own placeless-ness. The city's lack of transparent spatial identity was compounded by persistent failures to achieve material progress. As a result, much of Oakland's tourist and development appeal has relied upon allusions to the city's situated affect. I argue that these feelings of place have been produced as a function of Black spatiality. Oakland's affect in its current iteration as "vibe" has driven an arts and culture-based creative cities development model that exploits representations of Black bodies while participating in the process of their displacement.

The next three chapters follow vibe as it operates at various scales of Black repossession: the body, the interior space, and spaces of gathering. Chapter two opens with a series of vignettes that evoke, rather than explain, the way that vibe is experienced and described by Oakland residents. The chapter subsequently follows the story of one artist in particular, Sunflower Love, and her Black feminist practice of counter-representation. Her response to the city's exploitation of Black art demonstrates the importance of emplaced bodily experience in resistance to displacement and the radical production of vibe, which is a matter of survival. I propose the *Black geographic image* and *emancipatory framing* as frameworks for understanding these various interventions into racialized representations of Oakland, and the means by which such interruptions become opportunities to reclaim space and imagine freedom.

Chapters three and four look at the way that two Black coalitions have responded to Oakland's cultural development with their own arts-based strategies. In so doing, they reclaim the kinds of spaces productive of everyday, Black working-class interaction that is inherent to vibe's Black spatiality. Both organizations are grounded in the Black Arts Movement, highlighting the ways that nonrepresentational forms of Black culture and radical politics are productive of material space. However, where the downtown Black business district conforms to a designated cultural corridor, the "Black Cultural Zone" (BCZ) organizers refute government spatial framing, instead activating a geographically disparate network to occupy spaces in ways that directly serve the remaining Black community in East Oakland.

Chapter One: Representing The Town

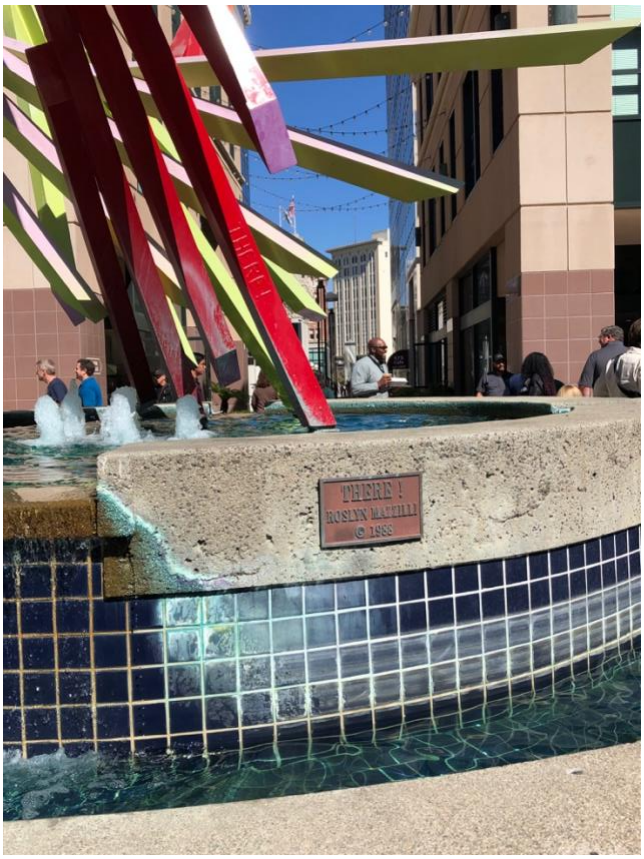

Figure 3: Oakland City Center, Fountain Square. Photo by author.

A city, says Lewis Mumford, takes its shape from its purpose, its reason for being…But what if a city has no clear function? What if—founded by squatters, without identity, its shoebox architecture bespeaking a spirit as aimless as string, self-consciously inferior to smug sister-cities—a town's only purpose is to fill space, to be there?…Well, it turns out to look like Oakland. The joke is as hoary as it is just, but its days are numbered. Across the Bay, emerging resplendently from its Raggedy-Andy past, Oakland will soon stand as a major American city in the forefront of our new culture. (Read, 1966)

Notes from an Oakland Snob

On a boastfully bright day in October, a gleaming white and yellow banner hangs across the pleated pillars of Oakland's city hall, proclaiming that the city had been named one of National Geographic's "Best Trips" of 2019 – "A must-see." In the courtyard spread out below, a small group of mostly students and young people have gathered around an equally boastful, white and yellow-clad figure named Don, a self-described "Oakland snob" who became a walking tour-guide shortly after arriving here in the mid 1970s. His look is understated, yet unique. His ordinary yellow button down, khakis, and Black socks, visible above plain Birkenstocks, contrasts with the thick, flat gold chain that glimmers on his ruddy chest, exposed by the unbuttoned top his shirt. He keeps his chin tilted upward ever so slightly, even when we're not craning our necks to look at buildings. And before we've even begun the tour, Don has made his "snobbery" known by the way he insists on calling the San Francisco peninsula "the West Bay,"

saying that the term “East Bay” is itself a means of decentering Oakland. The story Don provides of Oakland’s city center – its political and architectural history – is bookended by this rhetoric of reclamation, as we wrap up the tour standing around the abstract firework sculpture at the center of Fountain Square. At its base and carved into its colorful metal prongs rising from the bubbling water reads a single, simple word: “There!” It is both a simple, defiant retort, and a memorial to the decades-long campaigns waged to win Oakland’s uncertain future. Indeed, the same year that this statue was erected, city councilor Leo Bazile was quoted in *The Boston Globe* as having been assigned to improve Oaklands image. “He wants the country to know that, contrary to a comment widely attributed to Gertrude Stein, “There is a there there.” (Wasserman, 1988)

Gertrude Stein’s oft repeated quotation about Oakland having “no there there” is a tired cliché, a bad joke that has now been inked into Oakland’s memory and physical structure like a regrettable tattoo. The phrase has historically been used derisively, insinuating that Oakland lacks a clear economic purpose or sense of place, especially when compared with San Francisco. The tagline has, unfortunately, been taken out of the context in which Stein used it. Having grown up in Oakland prior to the city’s industrialization and population boom in the 1910s and 20s, Stein wrote remorsefully in *Everybody’s Autobiography* that the place she had known 40 years previously – a pastoral town full of oaks and orchards – no longer existed. As Don said at the conclusion of our tour, “What she knew wasn’t there anymore. Oakland progressed.”

Despite the decades of politicians, developers and activists who have worked to define and re-define the city, urging it toward an unattainable horizon of “progress,” Oakland remains stubbornly undefinable, giving the mis-quoted Stein-ism an even more tenacious hold over the city on “the other side” of the Bay. The odd brilliance of using “no there there” as an ideological straw man for the city is precisely this self-conscious and continuous turn toward Oakland’s historicity and futurity; asking who’s “there” is represented in the construction of Oakland’s physical and aphoristic memory delineates the sites of cultural, affective and physical contestation for Oakland’s identity and development. What, in other words, is the “there”-ness that constitutes the heart of the struggle for The Town, and by whom is it determined?

In this chapter, I am focusing particularly on the way that Oakland’s apparent deficiency has been central, if invisible, to its marketing and development campaigns. I argue that the inchoate nature of Oakland’s “there,” and the city’s racialized vibe, are what makes the city a Black geography. Regardless of the city’s actual Black population, the notion – and fear – of Oakland becoming a Black space took hold very shortly after WWII. Development policies and advertisements have grown around this resistance to a Black Oakland. Thus, the city has been produced through a series of racial encounters between White and Black spatial imaginaries. I utilize a set of archival clippings from the Oakland History Reading Room to chart the way that development boosters have, over the years, crafted Oakland’s identity as perpetually being in opposition: to San Francisco, to placelessness, and to Blackness. In so doing, Oakland’s desirability is based upon a promise, a horizon, that is produced in dialectic tension with the structural reality of the city, from which *vibe* emerges. This tension is what gives Oakland its Black geographic nature.

This chapter begins by drawing from two files of newspaper clippings, relocation guides, and other booster material from the Oakland History Reading Room. In lieu of a clear place-based

identity, the "there" in this literature tends to fall back poetic language about Oakland's future, or an affect of place, often communicated conjunction with descriptions of cultural diversity. I subsequently review the gentrification campaigns that have led up to today's development, and the way that they draw from a history of affective advertising. The city's gentrifying politics, the ad campaigns of the 1960s-90s, alongside the Oakland tourism board's contemporary advertisements all make strategic use of Black bodies to contextualize their definition of the city's "vibe" as being a commodified extrapolation from Oakland Black culture. Finally, I describe the way that vibe is objectified within arts and cultural plans in the city and the promotional app-based company, "Vibe App." Each of these strategies overlook everyday Black life as central to the production of Oakland's desired economic stability, identity and "thereness."

Timid Boosterism: Oakland's Uncertain Horizons

Downtown property values began to decline in 1925, shortly after the boom of the WWI economy, dipping by more than 50% by 1955 (Self, 2003 p. 26). For the nearly100 years since then, stakeholders in Oakland's downtown property have been fighting an uphill battle to increase its value, and engaged in fierce competition with Los Angeles, San Francisco, and other Bay Area cities to attract new businesses and residents to the city. The tantamount declension of its identity as the "Ragedy-Andy" little sibling of San Francisco and, more pointedly, the literal Black sheep of the Bay, proved to be one of the more difficult images to overcome. Despite the fact that the majority of the population remained White, Oakland's post-War de-industrialization and the eventual migration of Black residents out of the red-lined confines of West Oakland (Self, 2003) again made city leadership hyper-aware of Blackness in public and commercial spaces. Within a few decades, the rise of the Black Panther Party and far-reaching concerns about the city's stability after the Los Angeles Watts Rebellion, further raised the specter of Oakland's Blackness, chiefly as a threat (Mitchell, 2009). The stigma attached to Oakland, and especially its declining downtown, was such that when the city pitched its bid for the federal buildings that now crown the city's skyline, Diane Feinstein objected by saying that employees who then lived in San Francisco, and worked in the Tenderloin district, would be demoralized by a move to Oakland (walking tour, October 9, 2019).

It is this economic, racial and affective backdrop of fear, mounting political struggle, and desperation that boosters and news articles about the city from the 1960s onward persistently resist. The declining economy of downtown properties had much to do with the growing significance and visibility of Black people in this space. Previously and, with growing desperation, on through the 60s and 70s, Oakland was presented as an idyllic town whose primary source of culture was the Oakland symphony and ballet, and its main attraction Lake Merritt. When I spoke with the head archivist, Dorothy Lazard, at the Oakland History Reading Room about this, she said that this exemplified what she called "timid boosterism," which especially marks the advertisements of Oakland through the late 60s and early 70s when Black revolutionary politics was on the rise and White property owners and businesses were on their way out. As Dorothy would joke, the tone of these ads went something like "It's ok! We have the Panthers, but at least there's the lake!"

While it's certainly true that most[8] advertisements of Oakland feature Lake Merritt, as Dorothy pointed out, it's a weak asset to bank on for a city widely reputed as being dangerous, and Black. Because Oakland's greatest liability was its image, boosters and reviewers in local and national newspapers emphasized its equally intangible strengths: cultural (if not racial) diversity, promises of future development, and the character of the people and place. Where Oakland's airport, Coliseum, the Raiders and Jack London Square failed in attracting enough tourists, residents, or new developments, the ineffable qualities of an overlooked city were amply rehashed with some success.

Postindustrial Promises

Before WWII, advertisements about Oakland tended to portray the city as an oasis of integrated manufacturing and residential economies and a central hub of the East Bay. After 1945, however, booster bids for the realization of a White middle and working class manufacturing center became more desperate as Oakland's pre-existing retail, industry and the White middle class moved to the suburbs. Centralized business districts were already in decline and the city needed to attract capital from the East and Midwest into downtown if it were to retain – and build – an identity for itself that could rival other Bay Area cities'. The Metropolitan Oakland Area Program (MOAP), Oakland's response to this post-war crisis, brought together booster images with urban planning. This created a decades-long promotional tone that unintentionally positioned Oakland as both a hopeful site of development and a place that seemed to be perpetually lacking.

Between 1958 and 1966, in addition to declining downtown values, Oakland would lose 9,000 of its manufacturing jobs to its surrounding, suburban neighbors (Self, 2003). Oakland boosters and developers worked to bring capital and suburban consumers back to the city by advertising downtown Oakland as an enhanced and revived economic space. Advertisements widely announced plans for the Cypress and Grove-Shafter freeway extensions, an underground BART in downtown[9], and a number of office and retail complex plans.

In focusing on Oakland's potential and future development, many of these advertisements, from the 1960 through 1990, are characterized by a language of futurity, promise, or surprise. Booster columns, unattached to any particular development, discuss Oakland's "emerging resplenden[ce]," and "bold future" (SF Examiner 1966). More negatively, other columnists positions Oakland's growth as finally being notable as compared with San Francisco (LA Times 1979; Air California 1977), having "come a long way" (Air California, n.d.), or where things were finally "happening" (Chicago Tribune, 1979).

Others followed particular signs of life, such as passed development measures or the completion of new retail and office complexes. The most exciting of these projects was Oakland's City Center, made possible by the ostensible flow of traffic from the new Grove-Shafter freeway. It was described in an Air California column (Tosi, 1977) as "the keystone of ambitious hopes to transform Oakland." California Magazine (Johns, 1977) too viewed City Center as "vital to

[8] One pamphlet even featuring a man water-skiing in the lake, which, for anyone who's ever been downwind of the lake on a hot day, or peered into its shallow, bird feather rimmed, algae-scummed waters, knows is an appalling idea.

[9] The BART runs over ground in West Oakland and, like the highway extensions, drove another stake through Seventh Street's Black commercial corridor.

Oakland's viability because it will provide a downtown environment to attract and hold corporate and retail business. Unless that happens, Oakland may as well cover itself with topsoil and grow vegetables." As would come to pass, however, City Center did not bring in the desired retail stores (i.e. Penny's and Liberty House) that would uplift the city's economy, and the plan for the mall would be abandoned several years later when Macy's backed out. In 1984, just a year after City Center opened, Kahn's department store, noted as having long been a symbol of downtown's vitality (Rhomberg, 2007, p. 184) would shutter its 14th and Broadway location[10]. By the end of the 1980s, the retail that city planners had banked on in the wake of Oakland's deindustrializing landscape would appear to be complete recession with only four department stores remaining in the entire city and a development deal with Nordstrom that offered Oakland's final promise for a "retail renaissance" eventually falling through (Weber, 1987).

With the definitive decline of malls by the late 80s, Oakland promoters and city administrators would pivot their development strategy. The establishment of a Tour and Travel Department in 1987 (Wasserman, 1988) enabled boosters would dig in their heels around affective characterizations that might draw new residents and tourists to the city. In a 1988 New York Times article looking at national strategies for revitalizing downtowns, Oakland's Jack London Square is cited as being the kind of development needed to cultivate a lucrative sense of place, even though the square still struggled to attract and retain businesses. "The issue" said one San Francisco based developer "is how the city feels…Malls do work. They are convenient and safe. But you get a downtown that is listless. Vitality is taken off the streets. You get jobs and sales tax dollars with malls, but not enhanced downtown city life." (Bishop, 1988) Even without gains in material development through shopping centers, Oakland could still make strides toward a future animated by an affect of open air cultural vitality.

[10] The "Rotunda" building that housed Kahn's is now home to the city's current primary economic driver: the municipal and federal government.

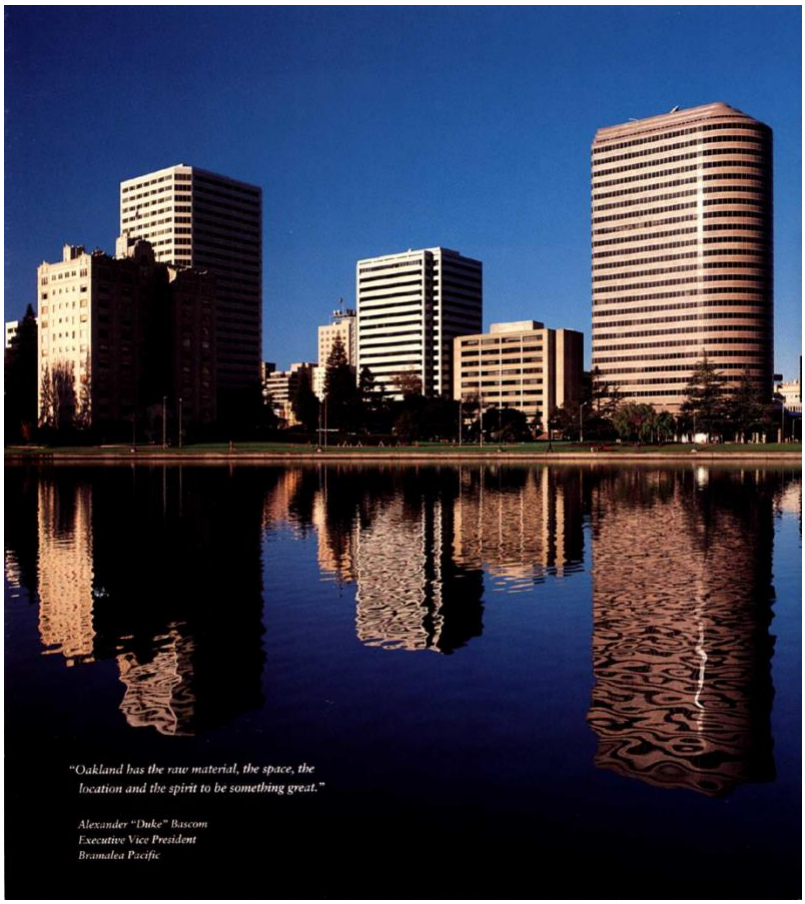

Figure 2: "Oakland has the raw material, the space, the location and the spirit to be something great." (Oakland Chamber of Commerce)

"A thousand and one intangibles"

In light of the legacy of MOAP's booster strategy, and lack of real traction on many redevelopment projects, promoters heavily relied upon characterizations of Oakland, mostly of the kind appealing to those with enough gall to invest in – and thereby create – a disparaged non-place. Oakland, by these accounts, is unpretentious, tough, and "resilient" (Read, 1966). In one column, for instance, hustling is proclaimed to be "a No. 1 Oakland activity," and that Oakland has "the energy of an ambitious underdog." (The San Francisco Examiner, 1968) Embracing its own shadow as a means of distinguishing itself from the bright light that is San Francisco, Oakland is portrayed as "real," a city of substance and "mutually supportive neighborhoods. What is important about Oakland is that it relies on tradition and roots, not on image-mongering or trend-spotting. Oakland does not mess around." (Carroll, 1983)

By these accounts, the city could maintain a positive, future-oriented frame for development; that even if Oakland failed to become much of anything particularly noticeable, at least the city maintained a sense of pride and a try-hard attitude from which one could "build just about anything… including a new image." (Tosi, 1977) The image of Oakland that would continue to emerge, however, was not an image, but a undefinable feeling that functionally kept the possibility of Oakland's development open. Not having a "there," in other words, gave rise to a "shapelessness…that makes [Oakland's] bold future possible." (Read, 1966) A later relocation guide published by the city picked up on the promise of Oakland's nonrepresentational nature, saying "The qualities and strengths of all communities lie not on the surface, easily open to inspection and classification, but somewhere deeper—in a thousand and one intangibles." (Oakland Chamber of Commerce) As such, characterizations of Oakland – simultaneous to its stubborn determination – evaded a fixed sense of itself. Journalist Mike Fitelson, writing about Oakland's lack of an identity stated that "a city of such verve and vitality that is…difficult to characterize." (n.d.) He suggests that the last time Oakland was able to cohere around a particular identity was during the city's last boom period in the 1910s and 20s when "My city Oakland" was the popular catchphrase of the day. Those for whom Oakland could be owned in such a way, however, would lose or relinquish their claims to the place that became increasingly claimed and occupied by Black, Latinx and Asian migrants.

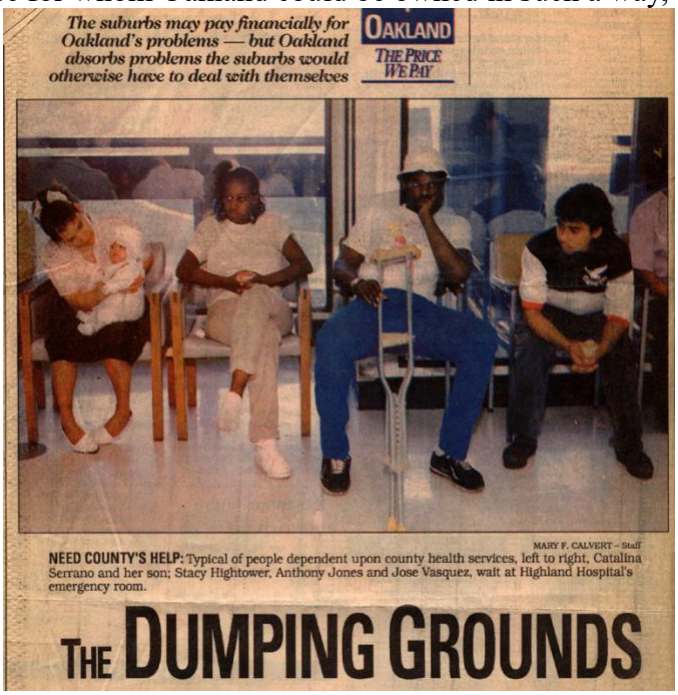

Figure 3: A 1991 headline demonstrating negative conceptions of Blackness in Oakland.

Working Against the Image of the Black City

The non-image of Oakland still had a major image problem. By the 1980s, it was an unavoidably Black space, a fact which had stalled many of the aforementioned development projects. Prior to 1980, advertisements about Oakland used phrases like "diverse" and "ethnic mixture" only sparingly. Usually, the topic of race – particularly Blackness – was elided entirely; specific examples usually pointed toward Oakland's Chinatown as an attractive site for cultural tourism. In the 80s and 90s, when Oakland's Black population peaked at about 47% (Bay Area Census Bureau), the city itself began to cite Oakland as the "most integrated" in the country (Oakland Chamber of Commerce). The very use of the word "integrated" signals assimilation and, consequently, erasing diversity rather than accentuating racial or cultural difference. Indeed, racial difference in the 80s and 90s was considered a painful liability for developers, as criminalization of Black and Brown bodies, and the disproportionate effect that the crack-cocaine epidemic had on communities of color in Oakland meant that the city's violence was conflated with its perceived Blackness.

> "One thing that most certainly worked against Oakland, unfortunately is its racial makeup. Two-thirds of the residents are Black, Asian, or Hispanic. In a non-county region where only 8 percent of the people are Black, Oakland's diversity stands out. To suburbanites largely white communities—or executives deciding where to locate their firms—it is an easy place to avoid. 'Outsiders envision Oakland as a place filled with crazy, Uzi-toting Black kids.' " (San Francisco Focus, 1990)

For much of the 80s and 90s, as long as racial difference was associated with crime and perhaps the physical density of Black people in Oakland, "diversity" could not be counted upon as an attractive buzzword. The word appears, for instance, on the back page of a newspaper story on what might be considered positive about Oakland; the front page, however, identified Oakland as a "dumping ground" of welfare cases from which the White suburbs of Alameda, who, seeing themselves as the unwilling, tax-paying patrons, wished to secede from the county (Albro & Owen, 1991). To say that Oakland was "integrated" is thus an intentional stretch of the imagination. The racial boundaries between Oakland's mostly Black, Asian and Latinx flatlands and the White and prosperous hills remained as starkly binary as they had been when racist housing covenants were legal.

Oakland, according to this same article that honestly pointed to Oakland's racial makeup as being the city's Achille's heel, had everything it logically needed to become a thriving city: a central location, access to a nexus of highways and the new BART system, and a containerized shipping port that was growing so successfully, it appeared to be leaving the city behind. "The catch, " says the author, "in all of this of course, is that neither cities nor developers operate by rules of logic." (SF Focus, 1990) They appeared to operate by the rules of a space racialized as Black.

In an attempt to both white-wash the city, and allude to Oakland's still supposedly shining future, an ad agency hired by the city proposed "The Bright Side of the Bay" as Oakland's new tagline. A San Francisco Chronicle (Carroll, 1983) article pointed out that, in response, City councilor Wilson Riles Jr. "felt, perhaps with some justice, that the slogan was a way of diminishing or disguising the fact that Oakland is, well, very Black. Black mayor, Black city manager, Black majority on the city council, strong and independent Black middle class moving into every political and cultural aspect of the city." He described the slogan as having a "Nadinola effect" on the city, referring to the skin lightening cream. Indeed, while the city's tagline has changed a number of times in its history, the name that has stuck around since "My City Oakland," resists this kind of lightening, even in the midst of contemporary displacement: Oakland is "Oaktown" or "The Town," an homage to Oakland's Black southern roots and feel. In a partial embrace of this identity, boosters shifted from using Nadinola strategies that covered up or integrated the city's Blackness, toward a means of diminishing it by making Blackness a part of the city's diversity narratives.

In the mid to late 1990s, rather than trying to bait manufacturing and retail back to the city with promises of new shopping centers and highways, brochures began to highlight the city's quality of life through cultural attractions. Relocation guides began to advertise Oakland as a "Mecca of culture," highlighting especially linguistic and ethnic diversity (Oakland Chamber of Commerce). This strategy revolved around the shift to build office and housing developments;

Figure 4: Image of Festival at the Lake featured in an Oakland Relocation Guide.

pitching Oakland as a lively, diverse, and family friendly place to live acted as a selling point for future residents and employees who could be lured here. Festival at the Lake, for instance, was known for having heavily featured Oakland's Black arts and performance culture; still, marketing materials tended to dilute Blackness as a focus. This uptick in racial and ethnic marketing occurred alongside the beginning of a decline in the city's Black population as those who could leave for the suburbs – many Black middle class residents – did so, or were otherwise displaced.

Blackness continued to dominate Oakland's spatial imaginary; but without the threat of Black populations once again becoming a majority, Black bodies could increasingly be used to advertise an extrapolated form of Oakland's vibe, one that successfully began to bring White homeowners and office-workers back to the city.

Are we "There" Yet?

Oakland, over the years, has shifted from making promises of material development toward a kind of promised land of a racial utopia. In not being able to keep promises of material progress, and continually tripping on its own (non)image, the discourse around Oakland began to highlight the city's ephemeral qualities, the "intangibles" that seem to come alive in descriptions of diverse cultural events.

The drive toward becoming something bigger – a bigger skyline, a bigger industry town, a bigger lure for shoppers and tourists – clashes with the subtle qualities of down-home, neighborhood collectivism[11]. Additionally, the city's development has been continually hamstrung by the tug of war between Oakland imaginaries of an expanding future, and its humble history. Robert Self's recounting of Oakland's postwar identity in *American Babylon* describes some of this apparent dualism in the way he frames the city as cultivating itself as an industrial garden. Self paraphrases this style of urban theory and planning from Ebenezer Howard and Lewis Mumford, saying that they were intended to "occupy the man between civilization's opposites by combining factories, dwellings, commerce, greenbelts and services into a single entity." (Self, 2003, p. 9) Whether or not this model succeeded is less relevant here than the kind of ideological bifurcation through which it operates, and perhaps helped to perpetuate. Oakland has been riven with temporal, racial and developmental divides. In the pursuit of a hybrid identity and the creation of a place between The City and The Suburbs is The Town: a mosaic of contradictions that, through their apparent polarity, produce a unique sense of Oakland as a non-place, and therefore one of possibility, a sense that is extended by the way that Blackness has come to define this city. In what follows, I explore the way that Oakland's cultural attractiveness and undefinable feeling, or *vibe,* have been intentionally exploited by the city, developers, and private industry.

[11]This sense of neighborhood collectivity could be cultivated, in part, by its single-family home architecture

Vibe is Value

On the same walking tour with Don, the "Oakland snob," I meet Bishu[12], a small-framed young Nepali woman living in the Lower Haight of San Francisco. After peering up at the decorative reliefs that define some of the architecture in recently re-designed Latham Square, I ask Bishu about what has brought her out here from the city. She explains that while she enjoys parts of San Francisco, "Oakland is more energetic…I don't know how to describe it." I tell her about my own love of the city before we're interrupted by the next stop on our tour. By the time we reach the "There!" sculpture in City Center Plaza, Bishu, has had time to mull over our conversation. And so, perhaps for my benefit, puts up her hand to ask Don a question. "Why do you like Oakland? What's the magic of Oakland?" "Oh that's a tough one" Don replies. "Everything. I like our food scene now. [For instance, we just passed] a Sri Lankan restaurant." He explains that the diversity of eateries in the city mirrors the diversity of its architectural look. And indeed, after the tour concludes, Bishu and the other Berkeley students on the tour agreed to get lunch from the popular punk-rock Japanese fried chicken restaurant, Aburaya. I stay in the plaza, where an afternoon concert of Afo-Cuban cha-cha, reggaeton, and merengue was just getting started. In the midst of a wide variety of fast-food options catering to city employees on their lunch breaks, I opt to check out one of the few, seemingly local businesses in the plaza. It evidently advertised to a higher class clientele that could afford $12 vegan quinoa bowls. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, I find Mayor Libby Schaff in line in front of me, who had just received two large green coconuts drinks with striped paper straws poking out of the top. She looks over to her lunch partner and says eagerly, "It's like a tropical vacation in the middle of your work day!"

The surreal feeling of walking through an idyllic United Colors of Benneton ad that day, as concocted by an eclectic selection of restaurants and entertainment, was not unlike the experience of Oakland that the city tourism board now advertises online and in its brochures. In addition to highlighting bars and eateries of the kind that Bishu and Don had mentioned, Visit Oakland is, like its forebears in the 1980s and 1990s, invested in shifting the perception of Oakland away from its reputation as dangerous or place-less. To do so, Visit Oakland has upgraded recycled images of diversity as a boon by strategically leveraging the language of "experience" and "vibe" as way of marketing non-white space to the bohemian and cosmopolitan generation of new wealth that has developed and begun migrating across the bridge.

Creative Cities

A central means of attempting to capture the value of Oakland's "intangible" and racialized quality of *vibe* has been through arts and cultural development. In 1999, Mayor Jerry Brown's election was instrumental in shifting the city's development plan toward capitalizing upon existing arts communities to draw in residents and businesses from the suburbs. This was part of Brown's nearly singular agenda to develop housing for new some 10,000 new residents that were, according to him, "not just for people that are hanging on or people who live on subsidies, but people who have disposable income that can go to the art galleries and restaurants." (Elinson, 2010)

[12] Pseudonym.

In other words, what the building of highways, redlining, and neighborhood razing did not achieve with regards to keeping Black people out of Oakland's physical and imaginal center, this administration attempted to accomplish with rigorous market-rate development and an arts-based marketing campaign. Brown's plan for developing the downtown region included funding for public arts and rebranding the northern/central region of the city's center as "Uptown." Brown's rebranding of downtown framed this part of downtown as a distinct representational space that excluded West and East Oakland artists from participating in the new arts economy. Arts organizations like the Community Rejuvenation Project bemoaned the inequity of the plan stating, "Public art projects in and around Uptown were funded to the tune of several hundred thousand dollars, even as art programs were slashed in the city's less-tony areas" (Community Rejuvenation Project, 2012). The arts, alongside the threatening representations of Blackness that still dogged the city's reputation, came to define Oakland as it joined the wave of other mid-sized cities trying to attract development – and displace low income people of color – through a range of "creative placemaking" strategies. (Ramirez, 2017; Nicodemus, 2013).

Secret Sauce

Brown's so-called "10k Plan" stagnated a few times: first with the initial tech-bubble in 2001, and again with the 2008-2010 recession. It has since been picked up by Mayor Libby Schaaf's current administration. She has also utilized Oakland's art's scene to her advantage and references Black performance culture in her discourse about Oakland's "secret sauce" as being a key part of the city's forthcoming arts, equity and downtown development plan. In the cultural report drafted for the city in 2018, she writes,

> "I often refer to our city's cultural vibrancy as being part of the secret sauce that Oaklanders embody in their daily lives. It's in our dance moves, our lyrics, our murals, our paintings; the notes of our musicians, the wisdom of our cultural bearers, the voices on the stage and in the streets, and in the words of our writers and poets. These creative expressions ensure that we live, work, and play in a city where we all feel a sense of belonging—a sense of Oakland….Equity is the driving force. Culture is the frame. Belonging is the goal."

In this sense of Oakland, "vibrancy" is that which is fungible in the city's affective and material development; here, Schaaf uses it as a metric meant to attract and hold together all of the newcomers, and their wealth, arriving in the city. Schaaf rightly locates vibrancy as being only part of the unidentifiable but felt sense of place in Oakland. However, her remark suggests that Black and Brown creative expressions are central to the city's sauciness[13], a cultural cool that inculcates "belonging" for everyone. Similarly to other creative placemaking scholars and funders, Schaaf identifies equity as key to maintaining a sense of Oakland as "authentic," real – The Town. Vibrancy is, in other words, a safe, externalized and marketable form of Blackness in which "all" people, particularly White people, may partake. Secret sauce is secret by function of the erasure of Black people and that this form of embodied experience is necessary, but unrecognizable, to Oakland's visceral quality, its vibe.

Erasure advanced by the integrationist strategies of the 1980s has not disappeared, but been repackaged within diversity narratives. While Mayor Schaaf references the everydayness of

[13] "Sauce" is a slang colloquialism that derives from AAVE and, arguably, emphasizes Oakland's Black cultural influence.

Oakland's "cultural vibrancy," everyday and racially embodied forms of vibrancy are strictly policed. Take, for instance the "BBQ Becky" video of a White woman, Jennifer Schulte, calling the police on Black men grilling at Lake Merritt in 2018. This is a testament to the way that the allusion of Black visuality and affect through representations of the arts contradicts the reality of the formal and informal policing of Black bodies and Black visibility in public spaces; this is particularly true in gentrifying spaces, like Oakland's Lake Merritt. The event has since inspired an annual "BBQ'n While Black" festival in which hundreds of Black people have convened to reassert their presence within the cultural affect that has become central Oakland's produced desirability. Residents who remember Festival at the Lake from the 90s as a showcase of Oakland's various forms of Blackness have used BBQ'n While Black to make an intentional connection between the city's Black history, gentrifying present and to stake a claim in its uncertain future. This event is a reclamation, and the proliferation of lingering pop-up Black businesses it has produced have also been policed. These embodied claims to Oakland's space and vibe are not rendered in public campaigns. Rather, it is the superficial qualities of vibe – images and more legible festivals like the Black Joy Parade – that become accessible to White consumer markets, and which are leveraged by Oakland's tourism board, Visit Oakland.

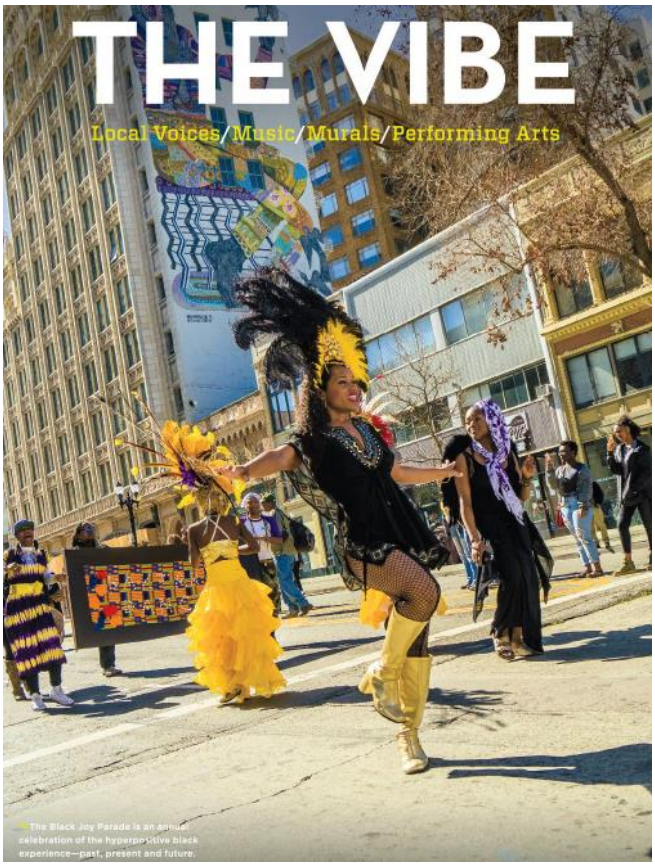

Figure 4: Full page spread from the Visit Oakland Inspiration Guide. The featured photo is from the Black Joy Parade.

Visit Oakland's Cultural Ambassadors

In a video that plays as the welcoming banner for Visit Oakland's website, drone footage depicts the city's skyline, Lake Merritt and a few street-level scenes featuring an all-Black band singing on Broadway Avenue, and lanky young men turf dancing at the monthly First Friday street festival. Between each of these scenes, the following phrases are cut in: "Experience Culture. / Experience the Vibe. /Experience our Soul. / See things from Our Side." According to Lisa Baird, the Director of Marketing for Visit Oakland, this four-pronged branding campaign addresses the decades-old problematics of Oakland's languishing representation in a few distinct ways.

First, by emphasizing the experience of such intangible and apparently non-commercial qualities as "culture," "vibe" and "soul," visitors are channeled toward a kind of cultural tourism that seemingly prioritizes an "authentic" engagement with Oakland residents. In this way, Visit Oakland is developing a brand that isn't centralized around any singular iconic thing, which Oakland pointedly lacks. Rather it centers that which is

decentralized: the kind of energy and ineffable affect that Bishu explained drew her across the bridge that day. This style of branding is what Baird describes as "real," focusing on an understanding of place that "our community members are ambassadors of." Additionally, it fits the latest trend in tourism which, says Jean-Paul Zapata, Director of Public Relations for Visit Oakland, is experience-based. People, he tells me, are looking for "an authentic experience" and Oakland offers something more unique than the redundant, "take a picture of Golden Gate Bridge and then what' quality of San Francisco. Emphasizing euphemistic "experiences" that are dependent upon the entrepreneurialism of Oakland residents has the benefit of taking the pressure off of boosters and city representatives to promise expensive, centralized redevelopment overhauls; and it takes advantage of the existing neoliberal creative economy that has burgeoned in the landscape of Bay Area start-ups. At the same time, this strategy encourages investment into a cultural economy of people who can no longer afford to live in the city of which they have suddenly become "ambassadors."

This ambassador-based model is meant not only to propel an experiential form of tourism that addresses Oakland's struggle with placelessness, but to confront the second thorn in Oakland's side: stereotypes about the city's perceived crime and race problem. The line, "See Things from Our Side," Baird explains, is not only a direct reference to the metaphor-laden journey across the bay from San Francisco to Oakland, but an invitation to visitors to see Oakland through the eyes of its residents. And while this entails telling stories that elucidate Oakland's more idyllic qualities - like its diverse food or arts scene - the marketing team at Visit Oakland emphasizes also being honest about the city's gritty reality. Sabrina Dueñas, Visit Oakland's digital marketing manager, says that "We're really embracing what Oakland is what it was and what it's becoming." And while this might mean taking a less "shiny" approach to what Oakland has to offer, and scaling back the horizon-based narrative of the city, it's evident that the embedded desire for a brighter, and lighter, future hasn't quite abated; and that what the city is "becoming" is based upon a presumption that Black communities will, and indeed *must*, continue to be pushed out, their value already described as an historic relic that is no more than an attraction.

Without Black people, however, the city loses its appeal as offering a "real," and unique experience. CEO, Mark Everton, confronts this apparent contradiction by addressing the need to disrupt criminality, which is colloquially divorced from race. He points to the reality of crime in downtown Oakland, referencing 13th and Broadway, an intersection that is well-known as a site for the city's seedier operations. The corner is just blocks away from the City Center plaza that features the "There!" sculpture and twee drinks that satisfy a drab municipal craving for an exotic escape. And it is directly adjacent to one of Oakland's few iconic images: the Tribune building. Nevertheless, 13th is an entirely banal stretch of street with little car or foot traffic, despite being steps from the 12th Street BART station and high rise office buildings along Broadway. A few people have set up folding tables laden with T-shirts, soaps, incense, and other trinkets on the sidewalk along Broadway here. Along 13th, it is not uncommon to see women, likely being trafficked, in tight polyester dresses and high heels leaning conspicuously against a wall in the middle of the day. According to Everton, drug deals, dice games and shootings are also common. He glibly suggests that in order to rid the area of crime, it is the people themselves who must leave. Quoting himself, he says " 'Could you go somewhere else?' and the people are like no." In partnership with the local business improvement district, Everton envisions turning the area into a park-let, using tactical language to explain that he'd like to "flood that block with

park benches" and "overpower" the area with art and retail. The kind of "real" experience that the marketing team at Visit Oakland would like to advertise in the midst of Oakland's decades-long "becoming" is informed by more acceptable and respectable representations of Blackness, like Black-owned businesses.[14]

When I spoke with the team, it was February and the front office and visitor center in Jack London Square where tourists collect information for their tours of the city, was flooded with promotional material featuring Black people. This included an illustrated brochure of Black-owned restaurants in or near downtown and a few vinyl stickers depicting a Black woman with the words "Black History Month" spelled out in curly cursive within her large Afro; "Oakland" is scripted beneath her. Yet highlighting Black arts and businesses in Oakland is, says the team, a strategy that goes well beyond this one month. Jean-Paul, who had been leaned back comfortably in his board-room chair, stretched forward across the long table to explain how interested Visit Oakland is in the Black Panther walking tours and the chicken and waffles diner around the corner from this office; they are important to crafting a compelling narrative of the city. Blackness matters in that Visit Oakland is, according to him,

> "using diversity as a tenant to bring awareness to these businesses to get consumers to pay attention to the way that these fit into the fabric of Oakland [which has] made it into what it is now. The celebration of these businesses is year round here in Oakland…[We're] capitalizing on those stories, on the importance that they have to this history…They're a bridge into the future of Oakland."

Blackness is, here, something which may be capitalized upon. It has value as an historical marker and a milieu; it also alludes to the fading existence of actual Black people in the city's core. If Black bodies are dispensable enough to be replaced, without question, by parklets, then today's booster visions for The Town's future remains as resolutely turned toward being the "bright," light and White side of the Bay as they have always been.

Mark acknowledges that his work with Visit Oakland is part of a much longer trajectory of desired gentrification within, at least, very particular locations in the city. Like the issues at 13th street, he frames Oakland's changes not explicitly around who occupies the space, but euphemistically as a shift in the experience of them. Black people who won't take their crime to someone else's backyard become the obstacle to achieving the promises of development that is defined by their very "gritty" experience of the city. "To some degree" says Everton, "you don't always want what you ask for. You want better streets, safety, but wait a minute, we've lost what we used to have. It's how do you balance that. San Francisco has allowed itself to become fondue without real identity." In the development equation as Mark and the team have laid it out, identity, grit, and everything that appears to bring Oakland to life as a "real" place seem to be antithetical to infrastructural improvement or protection from violence. That this identity is affiliated with those being displaced is implied in the comparison with San Francisco. Yet, when

[14] Immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had been invited to a festival that was to take place on this block in order to survey business owners about this very possibility, but under the supervision of the Black Arts Movement and Business District CDC and Dr. Ayodele Nzinga. Although the event was cancelled due to the pandemic, there remains a desire amongst some Black business owners to take Everton up on his proposal to make the space safer for downtown clientele.

discussing where the "vibrant" venues in the city were located, Mark cited the gentrifying Uptown and Temescal districts as having the highest concentration of such businesses. Places anywhere east or near the Coliseum, where most of the remaining Black population in Oakland actually live, have very few attractions. Said Mark about this particular place, "There is really no there there." For Visit Oakland, "there" is where Blackness is publicly available on a 9-5 business hour schedule. The kind of decentralized cultural branding strategy that Visit Oakland promotes is meant to make Oakland's Blackness a palatable and confined square of color in the city's multicultural crazy quilt. It makes a certain type of cultural production in certain areas of the city profitable, while continuing to criminalize, marginalize and displace unproductive, ungeographic, and colloquial forms of Black community space.

"Belonging in Oakland": Arts and Cultural Policy

As an organization that is functionally, though not fiscally, independent[1] of Oakland's governing bodies, Visit Oakland approaches Blackness as a matter of marketability and development for the city. The other branch of Oakland's cultural development work has been seated within the arts and cultural commissions that have arisen, to varying degrees of importance, since the city's first established committee in 1985. In 1988, Oakland published its first cultural development report; among its central values was the preservation of cultural diversity, which was seen as being critical to establishing Oakland's identity. Diversity in this document is conceived of as a map in which cultural activities defy geographic expectation, and "Hispanic music is heard in Montclair, ballet is performed in East Oakland, Sumi painting is taught in the city's West section, the sounds of gospel ring out on Fruitvale Avenue." (p. 5)

In order to meet this goal, the city's arts commissions have made it their focus to support individual businesses, artists and cultural institutions through policy and grant money. Before 1985, the city only gave funds to the Oakland Symphony and the Oakland Ballet. In 1985, after advocacy by the Oakland Arts Alliance, Oakland's Cultural Funding Program (CFP) was developed and the city's first Cultural Affairs Manager was hired. This gave rise to a competitive grants process that allowed for the city's independent individual artists, culturally-specific arts organizations, contemporary artists, and visual artists to apply for and receive support from the City of Oakland.

Kristen Zaremba, policy analyst with the Economic and Workforce Development division of the City of Oakland, explained that while the public commission ebbed and faded with shifts in mayoral agendas, alongside significant budget cuts after the 2008 recession (personal communication, December 18, 2020). In 2011, the commission officially went on hiatus, though the funding advisory committee for arts and culture continued to meet and bring agenda items forward to the city council. Interest in arts and culture hadn't significantly waned in the intervening years between the commission's hiatus and it's resurgence in 2018. As Zaremba said, "no mayor has been anti-arts and culture in a town like Oakland." Rather, the goals of single-term mayors Ron Dellums and Jean Quan diluted the focus on arts and culture and, specifically, the need to restructure the commission such that commissioners were more empowered to advocate and direct policy, rather than just "rubber-stamp" funding advisory recommendations around the recipients of public grant money.

The 2015 task force and Mayor Schaaf's election commitments to arts and culture helped to bring in much needed new energy from Roberto Bedoya, the commissioner hired in 2016 to lead the next iteration of the Arts and Cultural commission. But it took activism led by Anyka Barber and the Oakland Creative Neighborhoods Coalition (OCNC) to reestablish Oakland's arts and cultural commission and advocate for the needs of Black and Brown artists in the city's downtown redevelopment plan. Said one activist with the coalition,

> "We are the ones that make Oakland a cool place to visit. We don't need any more beer gardens. Without Brown and Black culture you have nothing here. Make sure that whatever changes and whatever plans get made that we need to be included, we need to be able to afford it. We are not only being forced out of our homes and businesses, but priced out of our culture." — Chaney Turner, Oakland Creative Neighborhoods Rally, October 19th 2015" (quoted in Ramirez, 2017)

In addition to demanding equity for arts and cultural production within the Downtown Development Plan, OCNC members ostensibly spoke with the media about the fact that a "1% for art" tax ordinance levied on new developments was not being used to support arts infrastructure (personal communication, December 19, 2020). This brought the ire of development contractors, and prompted Schaaf's administration to reinstate the commission. New commissioners were selected in 2020 and work has been significantly slowed by the pandemic.

As of 2009, both Visit Oakland and the arts commission began receiving funding through the Transit Occupancy Tax, commonly known as the Measure C Hotel Tax. This measure added a 3% surcharge paid by visitors staying in Oakland hotels. Half of this tax goes to the visitor's bureau, Visit Oakland. The other half goes to other anchor institutions of Oakland tourism: the Oakland Zoo, the Chabot Space and Science Center, the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) and, previously, Fairyland. A final small fraction of these funds go toward the city's recently revived cultural commission. Lead writer for the 2018 cultural plan, Vanessa Whang, points out that the funding the commission receives is entirely too slim to adequately support the kinds of equity measures – like cost of living alleviations for artists – that the plan calls for. Yet, according to another city employee Oakland's CFP has been sorely underutilized, the number of grants disbursed having shrunk by 60% since 1999. At that time, the total allocation of the fund was $1.3 million and twenty years later, the fund is still comprised of $1.1 million. Other reports indicate that grant requests have gone up since 2018 and that, when adjusted for inflation, the granting budget is more than half of its 2001 budget. (Lefebvre, 2020)

Regardless, a significant issue with the grants-based funding is that meeting their eligibility requirements introduces another barrier to equitable arts and cultural development. For instance, the city of Oakland requires that grantees carry millions of dollars in insurance, including liability, auto, worker's compensation, and sexual abuse coverage. For individuals and small organizations, this grant-based funding strategy is laborious, expensive and unsustainable. Yet, the 2018 cultural plan suggests that a more decentralized approach to cultural funding is what is needed. Unlike the past municipal cultural strategies, which have tended to focus on a few anchor institutions, author Whang understands culture as being suffused throughout the city and at various scales. Says Whang, "…the most vibrant parts of the cultural sector in Oakland is probably not incorporated as nonprofits. It's like small businesses and, you know, individual

entrepreneurs and people who are just like trying to make their way and express their truth." (personal communication, June 2, 2020) The model of identifying particular institutions like cultural centers (i.e. nonprofits which receive funding) is antiquated and, says Whang, defaults to "a kind of structural racism" that ignores the way that the feel and culture of a city is produced through everyday, interpersonal interactions. While this approach strives to elucidate the complex cultural ecology at work and uproot the hegemony of large non-profits in the arts economy, it functionally still defaults to a kind of neoliberal economization of culture that is not necessarily equitable. While Whang and the cultural commission are attempting to make cultural funding more accessible, it remains to be seen how this will be operationalized.

A Bleak Future for Blackness

The cultural report produced by on behalf of, if not by, the new cultural affairs commission, "Belonging in Oakland" is unlike any standard issue urban planning document. It circumvents more linear models, such as the 1988 plan, which looks at the largest venues that generate the most cultural value, by asking instead about the multifaceted quality of cultural production itself. And indeed, the authors argue that by couching a cultural plan within the language of racial equity requires new "habits of mind." (p. v) This stance alone makes the document strikingly unique; that it includes such phrases as "The landscape is a palimpsest we write on over time," (p. 40) an abstraction only seen in poetry and arcane academic works, intrigued me enough to call the lead writer of the report.

Although the pandemic meant that we could not meet in person, and so talked instead over Zoom, I still felt as if I had been warmly invited into Whang's lavender-painted living room. Whang smiled and laughed freely throughout the call while talking openly about her rather radical political orientation around cultural planning and organizing. As someone who began doing cultural work with La Peña in South Berkeley in the '80s (also the origin point for Eastside Arts Alliance), Whang is rooted in collectivist international solidarity movements. She spent most of her career after this working for philanthropic foundations, including the National Endowment for the Arts. During this time, Whang lived for a period in Washington DC, which was, according to her, the first time she had lived in a Black city. She noted that part of the culture that she appreciated while living there was that "people just acknowledge each other, you know, they acknowledge each other's existence which is, you know…just something that white culture doesn't do." This sense of street-level connection, of "realness" and interactional quality between people and their surroundings that Whang experienced in DC, Queens and Oakland, is a central part of her thesis on how cultural work might be practiced and re-considered. She, like Bishu and Don, is honed in on the acute phenomenology of a city, describing her appreciation for Oakland as exceeding anything reasonable: "a lot of it is visceral for me."

The ineffability of a place, the unique, "palimpsestic" quality of a landscape that has been shaped over decades, is a challenging subject for intentional planning and development. When Whang talks about places like Manhattan or San Francisco, she notes, with distaste, the artifice of such evidently manufactured spaces. This can become a problem for cultural planning, when, in the interest of protecting what is unique about a place, one inadvertently destroys its alluring quality. Whang describes this as the "Disneyfication" of neighborhoods. In her view, this results from the formation of cultural districts that are "driven by commercial concerns and tourism" of the kind usually directed by the visitor's bureau. But this kind of lamination can also result from in-group cultural preservation efforts, as with Chinatowns. In talking about Chinatown in DC, she realized that "Chinese people didn't really live there anymore, and it was just this artifact.

Was like a shell. It was like a gate…and a few retail stores. And that was pretty much it…It was a dead Chinatown." And so, when asked about the role of Black cultural preservation, such as the kind that the Black Cultural Zone has been pursuing, Whang's laughter dimmed; she grew quiet, and took careful pauses. There is something dangerous about these kinds of projects because, says Whang, they become about nostalgia, turning cultural and political pursuits into artifacts, relics of something that is no longer real or present.

Thus, in spite of a 120 page long document that charts the avenues of Oakland's culture, when it comes to the specifics of anti-Black displacement, Whang is less confident. She recognizes that despite the robust language around cultural diversity and a thriving arts economy, the facts on the ground with the Black cultural economy are rather grim. With regards to the housing crisis - now aggravated by the precarity of the pandemic - Whang understands that most of the Black population has already been pushed out of the city, or is continuing to head that direction. She says:

> "I really appreciate and admire the work of trying to hang on, you know, to hang on to the culture because it is really important and it's important to people who can't afford to live here anymore, but still think of Oakland as home. But I'm not sure…how to hang on…because…I don't know how to push against, you know, the forces [of] capital that are at play."

An ambivalence toward Black cultural preservation in a document that propounds Oakland's "diversity" doesn't align with the admitted understanding of the city's "essence." According to the cultural report:

> One of the main shifts from the '80s that makes today's lived experience in Oakland different is the change in the city's racial/ethnic and therefore cultural makeup. The often-cited 1980 census statistic of the peak percentage of Oakland's Black population—that is, 47%—is a proxy for what is often thought of as its defining identity. Not only has the city been known nationally as a historic stronghold of radical Black culture, but for many Oaklanders, this is the essence of the city—this culture is what gives it its unique spirit of defiance mixed with a "we're in this together" solidarity. (p. 20)

Although the report claims that the lived experience of Oakland is no longer Black, the "unique spirit" remains stubbornly connected to Oakland's perceived Black identity. When Whang asks "where's the beef in the secret sauce," she is, of course, referring to the lack of real financial backing for cultural work. In a similar vein, however, we might ask about the "beef" as it refers to that which is driving the value of the city's ineffable identity: Blackness. Without a strong commitment to "holding on" for the Black community, what, then, is the core of the cultural commission's focus on racial equity? Given her - and, purportedly, the city's - commitment to directing the forces of capital toward creatives and communities of color, a marked lack in confidence in the viability or *reality* of a Black community 'hanging on' admits an early defeat, or at least, that Blackness is being edged out of Oakland's "diversity" and culture as swiftly as possible.

Despite the results of their survey that clearly indicate that Blackness, and the history of Blackness here, is fundamental to the city's identity, Whang's doubt and dismay is revealing –

and not unmatched. Others I spoke with, activists who have been part of the fight for racial justice here for decades, took on a similar melancholic expression, or otherwise side-stepped the question when asked about the future of Blackness in Oakland. For some, it was simply too painful to consider all that has been lost. Given current trends, some think that Oakland's future is bleak, not Black.

Fill in the blanks

Fill in the Black open space, open wounds, the bleeding maw of weedy lots, jagged barbed wire teeth and spilt Sunday morning song. Shouts strangled by shushing, stoops shrugged off cold shoulders. What's left are just the skeletons - but what beautiful bones! - and West Oakland is a lost cause anyway, a space awaiting infill.

I sit in between Mandela's wide berth, benched in between the meandering parkway that divides the street. In between the remodeled warehouses of a gentrified aesthetic and the people still here, still trying to hold on. Between a bicyclist wearing a racing jersey and a bicyclist with bags of recycling slung over his overburdened shoulders. Between a police car racing without its lights on and the silent cruising of a Lexus and a Prius.

West Oakland is still full, filled in and around and beyond the aching blank spaces that used to be Miss Dean's place and Esther's Orbit Room

"People are like I don't understand why people get so connected to an area. *And it's like, because of what that area does*. Think about what neighborhoods used to be and how people used to take care of each other. These are places where, you, you know, a lot of people grew up around their cousins, their families, you know, whole families, blocks. And so you go down two houses and your cousin's over there, you know, even if you're renting like everybody lived around everybody. This is family. This is home. And everybody has that feeling. And some people have it more than others because they feel like, you know, there are more cultural experiences. There's always stuff happening here….So, again, wipe your feet on that rug, *breh* cause, you know, there's a reason why people love Oakland so much and why people want to come here and why people come here and never leave." - Rashida Chase (personal communication, July 29, 2020)

How to Map a Vibe

After my "tropical" lunch break in City Center square, I'd walked up 14th Street toward the 980 freeway, toward West Oakland, and paused, noticing a sign in the window that read: "Oakland 2100." The office belongs to an architecture firm and appears to have a front room open to guests. It's cool inside, the tinted windows offering relief from the late summer heat. I peer around and, seeing no one at the receptionist desk, walk in to the open, but rather small, front room. At the center is a large, unfinished wooden table. It is just sturdy enough to support an enormous model of downtown Oakland. At one end, a blue Y-shaped squiggle of shiny plastic represents the familiar outline of Lake Merritt. The rest of the board is comprised of wood cut city blocks, plain, low building models, and, most strikingly, a conglomerate of tall, spindly, blue, orange and yellow Lego towers. The Oakland of 2100, as modeled here, is perhaps as unrecognizable to me as the Oakland of the 1930s was to Gertrude Stein. The description of the model reads:

Oakland 2100 is a game where people work together to imagine the future of downtown Oakland. Players navigate trade-offs, prioritize and place investments and engage other players in the type of negotiations that happen in the building of cities everyday…

I look around the room now at the posters hanging on the walls, explaining the module. Whereas most were typical of a participatory urban planning process - complete with sticker polls and explanations to the visiting public about what each color Lego represented - one poster stood out: "How could we experience the city?" Below a map of Oakland studded with bulls-eye radiant patterns was a visual labeled "Vibrancy Metrics." As I puzzled over this poster, a voice floated unexpectedly from a back room I hadn't seen, telling me to let him know if I had any questions. Startled, I looked around the corner to where someone named "John" was taking a working lunch at his computer. After introducing myself, I asked him if he knew anything about this "Vibrancy" map I had been looking at. Whereas some of the other posters describing the game had been designed by AIA, an architectural professional organization, the "vibrancy metrics" were the brainchild of a start-up called "Vibe App"[15]. John explained to me that their app determines the vibe of neighborhoods based on data about the kinds of activities and events that occur there. He shares an example: West Oakland. People think "they're Black, they're poor and scary. But of course, there are Black people around but that's not the vibe. The vibe is…well you fill in the blanks."

[15] Pseudonym

Black people, in this model, are not the vibe, but the blanks to be filled in. Infrastructure offers the vibe, the metrics for street life without "the streets," the saving grace for developers looking to produce a carbon copy of something that was ostensibly unique. And yet, what a place *does* is not a one to one function with how a place is built. Nevertheless, when "Theo"[16] walks into the AIA office to explain the Vibe App visuals to me, he suggests that the concept of "vibrancy" may be summarized as a higher level of street activity and a density of attractions, businesses, transit, residences and office space. These metrics are meant to convey not just the *what* of a place, but, Theo says, the "real life of the city…the spirit [and] life of the place." Whereas Rashida's accounting of the appeal of a place like Oakland, and West Oakland specifically, is entrenched in a familial, community-centered quality, Theo takes the position that character can be developed with the right balance of infrastructure. If, for instance, developers wanted to copy the kind of "vibrancy" that exists in San Francisco's historically Black neighborhood, the Filmore, into downtown Oakland, one would need to focus on increasing residences, followed by office and retail space (see Fig. 5). Race is erased from vibe and space flattened into a transferrable structure and commodity - a blank waiting to be filled in.

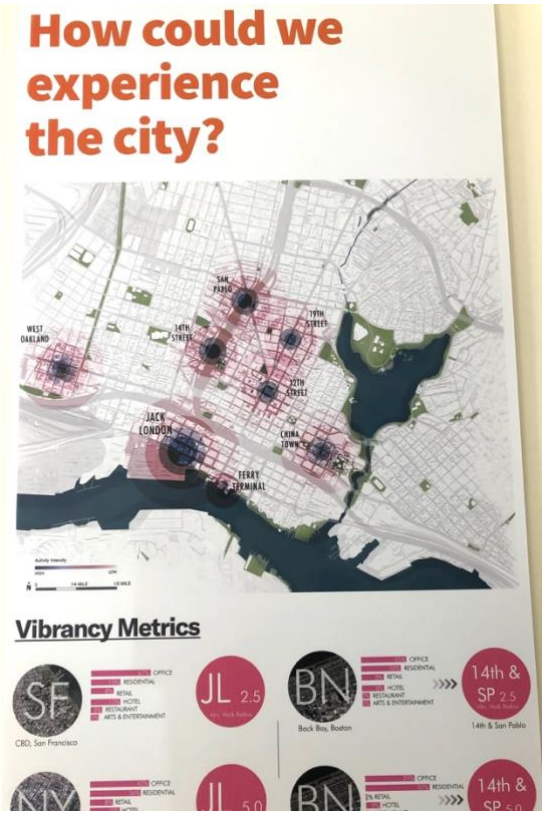

Figure 5. Vibrancy metrics poster featured at AIA.

The actual app, however, relies upon additional layers that were not represented in this rather flattened model. In the prototype version of Vibe App, an area's "vibe" is tagged according to geolocated sentiment and adjectives scraped from open source sites like Eventbrite. Vibes can include tags like "popular," "local," "loud," or "ethnic." These tags, along with the way that Theo categorized the vibes of Oakland around general community descriptors - like LGBTQ, Diverse and Culture - rather than particular feelings or interactional qualities suggests that Vibe App is oriented around individual and one-off consumption.

Hanging on…

Theo is a self-described pro-development, without displacement, urban planner from Berkeley, California. While Theo recognizes that vibe is culturally influenced, he has little patience for my questions about cultural "preservation." The first time we discuss this in the context of concerns about gentrification and the displacement of Black cultural heritage, Theo, who has a penchant for telling passionate tangential stories, begins to talk about an Indigenous Central American tribe. This tribe, at risk of being culturally erased, made unique forms of art and used the sale of these items to bring resources back into the community. The moral of this glib, second-hand anecdote: culture has value, and this value can and should be leveraged by the people who produce it, rather than complain about or protest their own erasure. Like the Vibe App model,

[16] Pseudonym

this example flattens experience; a cultural artifact does not contain the entire complexity or emplaced workings of a whole culture, but represents a desirable amount of Otherness to be made available as a circulated commodity.

A similar logic is at work in the expropriation of Blackness in order to accrue value for the city. Except instead of a singular artifact, the synthesis of Oakland's Black culture is conceptualized and functions as an experience - a safely packaged way of being temporarily immersed in a Black sense of place. As much is evident in the way that Theo later contradicts himself when, while speaking at a Black-owned coffee shop in Old Oakland, he wished aloud that people would "get past the Black Panther image" of Oakland. This seems an odd comment, given that the city is only just beginning to turn the tides on a decades-long "image problem" with being a Black city. Additionally, its history as a being a stronghold for the Black Panther Party holds a strong appeal for tourists, according to the directors I met with at Visit Oakland; it is only within the last year that proposals for more permanent monuments to the Panther history in the city have been implemented. Mobilizing popular Black history - particularly in the wake of blockbuster films like *Black Panther* - presents an opportunity to capitalize on Black culture as value, which might then be redistributed to the Black community in Oakland. And indeed, the Panther symbol is already well-utilized by Black entrepreneurs selling merchandise branded with "Oakland 1966." To play up the Panther history would be one way of creating a commoditized cultural artifact of value, as Theo suggests. Yet, what he seems to want is to push past the distracting valence of that particular symbol in order to highlight what he says is the strength of the communities that made the Panthers possible: a strong Black community, of which the kinds of thriving Black businesses Theo would like to promote are certainly a critical part. Yet, the kind of value he and Vibe App seek are cultural events - celebrations like the Black Joy parade - that app users might also be able to benefit from. These types of events fall in line with what he indicates as being the central vibe of Oakland: experiences that are *free*. Which raises the question: if culture, and its consequential, experiential "vibe," is a value, for whom is that value being leveraged? How strong might the Black community behind the Panthers have been had they not been operating principally toward self-determination?

The idea of protecting a legacy of Blackness in the face of capitalist development is unnerving to people like Mark, Vanessa, and Theo – people who each hold visions for how to manipulate Oakland's cultural development to take advantage of the city's vibe. They are each right to emphasize supporting Black arts and business establishments, as they offer the physical spaces through which vibe is generated. But "Black" here becomes just another brand in the city's diversity. From the outside in, "Black" cannot support the struggle, the hustle, the ethic of mutual aid and openness that Black people have brought to the city. Without this understanding, Deep East Oakland remains marginalized and symbolic of everything placeless and Black that boosters like Mark have been resisting for decades. Without this understanding, there is not possibility for liberation or real inclusiveness for Black practitioners in the city's cultural plan. Without this understanding, the Black Panthers remain an empty symbol, a story that doesn't have the teeth that the Black community needs. Without the understanding of how Black embodiment has and continues to be integral to the experience hocked by the city, such entities will be perpetuating the violence of erasure – narrative and material – against not only Black communities, but the city itself.

Conclusion

The "there-ness" that Oakland's development stakeholders desire is a sense of place that can be fixed, framed, and circulated as commodity. What it has in abundant supply, however, is a thick sense of place that is, as will be explored more in subsequent chapters, understood through the everyday, embodied encounters of racialized struggle in place. It is vibe, an affect – one that seems to promise much, but cannot cash in. Activists and city representatives alike have identified the arts and cultural economy as a key area in which to invest in the reproduction of vibe. Keen cultural workers like Vanessa Whang and entrepreneurs like Theo have also noted the importance of small businesses as being productive of vibe. And while these are, respectively, products of vibe and spaces within which vibe *happens*, they are thin manifestations without attentiveness to the living politics of Black space. The project of representing The Town thus seems to devolve into impossibility, or negation.

In the following chapters, I look at the way that vibe is produced at the interactional level. Spaces for this formation to occur are being claimed and developed by Black community organizations who are re-appropriating the value generated by exploitative forms of vibe. In so doing, they are attempting to ground cultural narratives about Blackness in Oakland within the work of arts and business praxis.

Chapter Two:

Refusing the Frame: Oakland Imagined & Embodied

"*The only thing I knew for sure was that she did have a name and a life that exceeded the frame in which she was captured."* (Hartman, 2020, p. 15)

Where Mayor Schaaf, and creative-placemaking and vibrancy researchers have externalized vibe or 'vibrancy' as being something that Oakland residents can appropriate and don like a T-shirt, or entrepreneurial citizens can feature in their galleries, I argue that vibe is inherently an embodied condition, the resulting experience of emplaced inequality and racialization. As Emory Douglas, Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party, put it to me,

> "…it's what everybody's playin off of each other and how we communicated, how we talked the language, how we dressed, how we-, all that played into the revolutionary culture…It wasn't like you sat down and you mapped it out like this. Maybe some things [you] begin to map out like that in conjunction with actions that were taking place, you see. But it was just, that was the style and the flavor that we had at the time." (personal communication, May 29, 2020)

The art and culture that seems to define a movement or place comes out of the work and struggle, not the other way around. Although vibe has become accessible as a market commodity with the decline of the city's Black population, I, like Douglas, am identifying vibe as an experiential quality of place that has grown out of embodied Black struggle. It demonstrates the affective quality that is vital to the production of place, particularly Oakland. It has been made spatially valuable for development through reification in the visual (and, more broadly, cultural) economy through, for example, murals in Oakland's Uptown. However, vibe is ultimately inscrutable to this process of exploitation; it's not something that can be contained within a frame, even a "cultural" one.

This chapter begins with an exploration of the ways that Black people have been "playin off" one another to produce an ineffable understanding of vibe in Oakland. These feelings, expectations, styles, and forms of relation are then taken up in the second half of this chapter by artist and entrepreneur, Sunflower Love. Her embodied understanding of vibe in Oakland is what interrupts exploitative racial framings and makes an emancipatory re-framing possible.

Oakland Imagined: Vibe as Vignettes

I've come to respect the hustle / that stuck me for my hella - Chinaka Hodge[17]

Oakland is expressed as a vibe, most commonly described as being mostly indescribable. There is a heat, an urgency and excitement behind the searched for words. Oakland is…it's…*Hustling. Open. Family. Diverse. Proud.*

Shayla Bang, creator of So Oakland, has built her own brand from Oakland's vibe in a way that liberates it from appropriation. So Oakland was established as a Black arts, business, and community festival in 2015, becoming its own day on July 30th, 2016, as pronounced by Mayor Libby Schaff. Shayla created So Oakland in the hopes of recreating the experience of the "chill" and familial vibe she experienced growing up. The Oakland she knew "was…just a feeling and a vibe. It was like no other. I wanted to create spaces where we can just truly be ourselves and not feel like we have to water down the culture of Oakland." (Town Folk, 2019) This is a reclamation, a re-framing of Oakland's Blackness qua vibe that resists the brand, the image as a carceral plantation space. Vibe, here, refuses the exploitation of labored Black cultural production. Oakland's vibe has a gaseous quality, occupying the entirety of a space and all of its porous boundaries while being completely un-graspable. It surrounds, and infiltrates and fights and wraps around linearity, filling ruptures - and becoming them.

In what follows, I trace vibe as a threaded series of ideas, feelings and phrases that weave, call and respond across multiple conversations. I quote people I have interviewed: Chris, Henry, Electra, Kele, Truck, CJ, and Rashida. I am also drawing from a series of interviews published in a photojournalist's chronicles entitled "The Town Folk Project." His interviews with Shayla, Mashama, Chinaka, Leon, and Franklin all inquire about what they think makes Oakland special, and what they'd like to say to newcomers to The Town. Each of these meditations on Oakland offer their own proposition of Oakland's vibe that reverberate with one another. I position them here within my own interlocutions to evoke, rather than define, vibe as a concept that resists framing, yet still organizes within political, economic and narrative structures.

Oakland hustles…

"I'm just sittin' here just thinking, sweetheart- I think I might be the only Black business in my neighborhood." Truck

Rashida speaks to me from a Zoom screen. But her selected background - an aerial shot from the west side of Lake Merritt - makes her immediately recognizable as being Oakland-proud, born and raised resident. Later, when I comment on it, she pulls up another background that reads "Oakland girls hustle harder." Rashida is, herself, a new business-owner, radio host, and musician. She makes Oakland work for her.

[17] "For Those Of You Who Must Know How I Am Doing In New York," *For Girls With Hips*

Opportunities to gather are opportunities to hustle, to press business cards for one's at-home salon into your palm at one sideways glance at your grown out curls, or to set up booths vending one's screen-printed shirts and handmade homeopathic tinctures. Events like the Black Joy Parade and BBQ'n While Black are dense with the ostentatious optics of Blackness, and so become an opportunity to vend Black cultural products that the middle class White market will not buy. Most days, though, the lyrical thrum of "Oaklaaaand, get yo money!" that reverberates through festival barricaded streets is less triumphant than it is a daily war cry. Money flows in sideways, in the moments between jobs, the spaces between offices and BART stations, on the grassy public arenas that have been policed into private lawns. The hustle makes Oakland exhausting, creative, and strange in a way that we've come to expect.

The processes of displacement have made space-ownership and leasing much less amenable to Black Oaklanders' hustle. Those who do attain the capital to open spaces open them as much as possible. Barber shops, bars and other businesses with space enough to gather become community assets. Restaurants are family-owned. Merchandise stores and the services that people like Truck offer are done in partnership or in memoriam of beloved Black mothers. In the sparse landscape of Oakland's Black businesses, enterprises take on much more meaning.

"Truck," or "Truckie," is a veritable institution in today's West Oakland Black community and apparently the last one standing in the Lower Bottoms. He seems to do just about everything - and everything quintessential about Oakland, at that. He's a pastor, collects backpacks and school supplies for neighborhood kids in the fall, runs regular "Rollout Crew" bike rides in the neighborhood to promote health and fitness. Though he lets his own hair run in a wild array of Black and graying curls, he is a barber who cuts a mean fade, and makes his home parlor a home for many of his clients. And he is an artist, doing his trade in custom-painted shoes, caps and bike designs. He hustles naturally, comfortably, and as much for others as he does himself.

Chris, another business owner who is critical of capitalism, makes a point of this tendency toward mutual support in the hustle and grind of Oakland's culture, saying, "Oakland's entrepreneurial theme is collaborative." Rather than assume competition as the norm, Chris sees Oakland experiments in, for instance, alternative currency, housing collectives and land trusts as just one of many examples of the ways that Oakland hustlers are "figuring out ways to support each other." Shifting the expectation of individualism to collective care is a prominent part of the capitalist, anti-capitalist Black hustle here. *...that's beautiful. That's gonna save us.*

But sometimes hustle runs in its own circles. Hustle that is disconnected - from place and community - leaves a sense of itself vulnerable. Gentrification happens when money leaves the community, and when, "*we stop seeing the value in our own neighborhoods. And we're gonna take the short buck, the quick buck to get out and not see the long term value of what we've already established*." Mashama Thompson

Ideally, then, the hustle is for the people, for Oakland, and services an investment in the community. But the reality is that the apocryphal 80s and 90s persist, forgotten beneath the veneer of downtown's shining, plate-glass development, hasn't been healed quite yet.

"*If you're born and raised in West Oakland, the seed of a hustler is planted in you. It's rooted in everybody.*" Truck

"*I've never seen people that like go after the stuff that they want like people from Oakland. And that's something that I feel like is just kind of in the DNA of this city…no matter what part of the city you come from*…" Rashida Chase

"*If you're from Oakland, I feel like you need to establish something here and run it in a way that Oakland people would appreciate it…[E]ven if you have other people here, but it still should have that Oakland culture….We got to establish our own businesses, and more than just throwing parties and shit like that…we need to be providing different services. Cause if not these motherfuckers going to provide it for us. They gonna provide some shit, they want and put a price tag on it and…they're going to make us feel a certain way when we walk in. So I feel like we need to meet to establish more businesses*." Leon Sykes (co-founder of 510 Day)

"*Oakland is hustle and it's still broke here. There's two Oaklands, you know. It's still hood as fuck for so many people.*" Chinaka Hodge

Oakland is family…

The stories tell us that hustle is what brought Black people to California.
If they weren't fleeing the horror, the genocide, the plot, that is, which many were.
People arrived on Pacific shores in search of jobs, opportunity, the hopefulness of something and somewhere else, the freedom to establish their own places, and a less aggressive form of racism. They found it anyway. The racism, of course. Found the plantation reseeded in the way the city morphed around their presence - always removed, and bled to sustain the metropole. Found the same overseers. Found the same country houses, chickens and all. They had new neighbors (Portuguese, Italian, Chinese, Irish, Mexican) and this difference would come to make all the difference. But still, they were neighbors, slotted into the same sweating western wedge of Oakland's armpit, struggling together. And so, amidst the new was the familiarity of the South, the familial, whether by blood roots or geographical roots.

"*I think the folks who moved to California really focused on striving*." Carolyn Johnson (CJ)

"*We were just growing stuff to make our ends meet. And then when my uncle came out here [in 1943] he sent a - you know you write back and say there's jobs out here with the wartime industry. Come on. So my father and his brother, my uncle, came out here together*." Henry Raulston

"*[My father] had his own shop. And there was another gentleman in the area who did not appreciate the fact that a Black man would own his own business…Long story short, he got run out of Monroe.*" Electra Kimble Price

"*They literally recruited police officers from the South to handle the 'nigger problem,' as they called it*." CJ

"*people always say, why are people from Oakland so country? Like yall talk like yall from the south*." Rashida

Oakland feels like the south a little bit, or they used to a little bit more, it used to feel a little bit more homey. A little bit more like 'hey how you doin.' Kele Nitoto

They knitted together in the soil at base of Oakland's tree, made this strange, final frontier and port city into The Town, made it fruit in the middle of no-place, made it work. And they made each other kin. Folks tipped their hats, nodded heads, made eye contact, any contact, in an attempt trace themselves into one another and into the topography of the Flats and muddy banks of Lake Merritt. New signs posted around the lake look official. They read "Helpful Hints for New Residents of Oakland" with Oakland's tree emblazoned in the letterhead top of its manila card stock. The tone of the content mocks its own form, knowing that it has duped passers-by into reading the growl of a warning etched into this list of commandments: "Eyes up," "Be kind to your neighbors," "Clean up after yourself" "Practice cultural humility" and, in case you weren't paying attention to the subtext, "Snitches get stitches." Feet on contested soil. *Eyes up*.

They came here, often without their elders, made themselves old to care for the "Oakland-native" generation only to see them scatter, and fall. They have been dispersed, but are perhaps not yet uprooted. Because they can, and sometimes do, return, tapped into the network of adopted kin that has held this ground before. Treating these connections as the sacral lifelines of family is critical.

Regardless of one's background, says Shayla, who experienced Oakland at its most fractious, "we're just all vibing with each other."

Everybody spoke to everybody. You walk around the lake and you get tired of saying hello to people but you do it anyway because that's what you were supposed to do." Rashida

"I grew up in Campbell Village, so there was like a core of mothers and grandmothers that, you know, they were like the real village keepers. You know?…although we grew up testing the waters, we also grew up with a great respect for our elders and the importance of family." Truck

So we kinda made up a family of Black people in Oakland weren't genetically family. But it kind of mirrored a little bit what I saw in the South for Black folks and their actual biological family. But it was not as intimate. So I think the travel from Oklahoma to the Californians, people got separated, they didn't have that family, they kind of made up the family, but there was still not quite as much solidarity. CJ

"*It's not about what you got or who you are, but it's how we connect with each other.*" Shayla

And yet.
Crack, fractured. Everything.
The drug slinging was its own kind of hustle, of course. It was a way of surviving the perpetual ache of abandonment and invisibility. It hurt to hold on like this. Solidarity slid out between the cracks in the foundation says Lenn Keller, the late Bay Area Lesbian archivist. Solidarity became

solid, like overly chewed gum, now hard and flavorless in a clenched jaw. Family dispersed as people fled all forms of violence. Communities shrank, changed. Hyper-local solidarity became mean and tight, glued to corners, blocks and race. And in response, a city-wide solidarity widened, as people who remembered the Panthers, remembered the South, remembered their neighbors, remembered what kinship can do, called in the strength of multitudes. Oakland means something in that way. Now, those who survived, who continue to live in the wake of this Black mark on Oakland's historical landscape, have a knowing look in their eye as they walk the smoothed over sidewalks at Lake Merritt. The oak tree roots beneath it still strain at the foundation, as if at any moment they might buckle the concrete again, fracturing the veneer of this urban utopia, and sending the joggers and their dogs sprawling.

> *…there's still pride you can have in your hometown and pride you can have in your neighborhood and your street, even though you went through some shit, even though you probably saw some shit or your siblings saw some shit or experienced some shit.* Chris

OakTown Proud…

After the White and Black middle class sprawled outward to the suburbs, like a heart's slow palpitation, they retracted back into the appropriate ventricle chambers of Oakland's still-segregated heart. Those who never left are the veterans of a war turned against them, and Oakland is their lost reward. In their holding on, they remained committed to becoming something great, resuscitated the city's cold heart with creativity and political will-power, in spite of the way that the country's Black cities have been failed, over and over again. There is pride in knowing that because of the failing, the fugitivity, the foreclosures, Oakland happened, happens, is happening. Because C.L. Dellums was fired by Pullman, the union of Black railcar workers was strengthened. Because Huey Newton's parents left Monroe, Louisiana, the Panthers arose in Oakland. Because Bobby Seale ran for mayor - and won an unthinkable 37% of the vote - he changed the direction of Oakland's political machine, making it Black leadership possible, and making Ron Dellums' Congressional seat possible. Because of foreclosed futures and deindustrialized landscapes, Too $hort had reason to give voice to the hustle, and put "Oaktown" on the map as a maverick in West Coast hip hop. Out of the ruptures and breaks arose disruption and dissent that has drawn rebels of all causes, disrupting the placid, cliched image of Lake Merritt.

It is difficult to remember all of this amidst the breaks in family lines. Embodied knowledge becomes dismembered. And there is little public memorabilia testifying to Oakland's Black pride. Fredrika Newton - the late Huey Newton's wife - and the Newton Foundation have begun the work of erecting statues in honor of the Black Panther's legacy. A few street signs mark historic points of interest in North Oakland, such as the intersection at which the Panthers lobbied for a stop sign to prevent pedestrian injuries. The West Oakland BART station is, surprisingly, home to one of the most robust public memorials to Oakland's history as a Black artistic hub of the West Coast: "The Music They Played On 7th Street: Oakland's Walk of Fame." It is also the least noticeable, trampled as it is everyday by commuters from San Francisco, who keep their eyes neither up nor on the ground, but, likely, stuck to phone screens. Eighty-four small golden plaques enamel the sidewalk, each honoring a blues or jazz great that had played on West Oakland's 7th Street. Truck, who had also passed over the plaques innumerable times, paused one day, glancing long enough to see the name "Big John Evans."

I didn't know my father was that kind of great. But my father, once I started to find out he played all over the world. And Oaklanders had this kind of effect or presence to what what they did, especially coming through that 50s, 60s and 70s….Like we had a strong impact on a lot of stuff that went on throughout the world, not just not just here. The Black Panthers is going to forever go down in world history. And that's West Oakland rooted….That's crazy to know that that's where you come from. You come from that. Whether the guys that were in it actually was actually kin to you. But that's yo, that's yo brother and your sister because of where they come from. And that's what we done lost when it come to this whole sense of being a neighbor and community. Truck

Geography makes them kin. Surviving and thriving in Oakland, particularly the Oakland Flats, makes them family. A hustling relationality makes them proud, makes Oaklanders loud in their commitment to preserving, creating and perpetuating the spaces that they feel bound to.

This pride veers on a regionalism so intense as to render its own kind of Oakland nationalism yoked to tenets of Black nationalism and self-determination. Racial pride and pride of place thus demands a form of recognition, and representation. Yet, Black poet and playwright Chinaka Hodge, half-jokes that if the city were a country, its flag and title would need to reflect more-than-Blackness. It would need to demonstrate respect for Indigenous peoples, principles of mindfulness, "female spiritual energy" and to be represented a local woman of color artist (she suggests Faviana Rodriguez). Oakland, in this sense, would be a borderless nation, an unfixed spatiality that is at once held by the fluid edges of the East Bay, and refracted across embodied narratives, histories and affectations that have no descriptor beyond *Oakland*. Just as *home* may be multiply geolocated, personal, communal and political, and known sometimes only upon arriving there, *Oakland* feels a certain way.

The difficulty of pinning a particular image to Oakland's vibe is suggestive of exactly its more-than-representative form (Lorimer, 2005). In this sense, Oakland has always been un/defined by is lack of a "there" there. Its placefulness has always been made by its lack of a centralizing identity. It is situated (at least latitudinally) as always being in relation to an elsewhere; it is the other side of the Bay, the other side of the Pacific, the other side of the country. It is both a beginning and an endpoint. For many, it has been a last stand.

We are at the seaboard and so there's nowhere else to flee. And so all you can do is turn around and face forward and say you know what? We've got a ways to go. You gonna push me in the sea? We gonna be on boats now? So we have no choice. So I feel like almost the geographic barriers is such that we have nowhere else to run. And so we have to turn around. CJ

I feel like I've almost lost some friendships over, you know, stuff that I've said about Oakland. 'I just don't understand why people get so upset…it's just a place.' And I said, bruh, if it was just a place, yo ass wouldn't be here. You would be in Stockton. Right? You don't understand why people have pride in their city. Let me tell you why I have pride in my city. I have pride in my city because of the things that people did before me. This city has a history and a legacy of activism. We don't play that shit, like we are disrupters everywhere we go. We are breaking shit up and making sure that everybody has what they need. Rashida

I take a lot of pride in the town, in the culture and the lifestyle. It's just really different. Like the vibe is different out here. Franklin Cartagena

Diverse and Open…

Oakland is a threshold, has been both a gateway and a landing place for so many, a shoreline awash in blurring cultural distinctions and histories. The Ohlone people were here, remain here still and their legacy is invoked regularly at events and meetings as more than historical fact, but as living respect. Shell mounds have been built over - and are defended as sacred. Temescal (sweat lodge) is a trendy North Oakland neighborhood now - and still ceremonies continue. Spanish colonialism brought death, missionaries, and the Peralta family, who took the land that would become Oakland; they made themselves distinct from Mexico, from Spain, calling themselves "Californios." (Bagwell, 2012) But Indigenous Mexicans here refuse this, too. Mexica dancers arrive amidst the low-riders for the Virgen de Guadalupe annual festival that fills East 14th in Fruitvale. They are cheered on in their full feathered regalia, echoed in Nahautl refrains, supported in recalling traditions that precede even the Aztec empire (Anzaldua, 1987). "*Ometeotl!*" they shout: the bringing together of dualities. Marginalized, Mayan-speaking, Guatemalan migrants shuffle toward designated industrial blocks - *paradas* - a few blocks away, awaiting day-labor jobs, avoiding ICE raids (Herrera, 2012). "Little Saigon," a neighborhood of refugees and their families encompasses an eastern stretch of East 12th and East 14th dotted with fish markets, mechanic shops, and a series of numbered pho restaurants. A hula *halau* (school) directed by an award winning *kumu* (teacher), Mark Ho'omalu, keeps a quiet presence at the Academy of Hawaiian Arts on MacArthur Boulevard in Deep East Oakland. Berkeley's counterculture too has drifted into Oakland as more than the occasional, disruptive march that starts at Sather Gate and ends with teargas and busted windows along Broadway and 14th Street. Appropriations merge with longer traditions of radical politics, holistic healing practices, and other forms of spiritualism.

"*[Oakland] means everything. It's just like you got tough skin and you get a piece of all cultures in one, you know what I mean*?" Leon

"*It's crazy to say this but the power of Oakland is that there is no culture. Like…what's the cultural food of Oakland? …what's the beacon or icon of Oakland? It's like, there is nothing because it was everybody's and like anybody could come here and make it their own.*" Mashama

"It's a really diverse city. Man, you can hear almost every language in the world out here. Like almost every cuisine in the world out here…I feel like people are hella open minded out here too. And that's a lot that you don't see in other cities….There's a lot of open mindedness out here. When people are open minded, you can grow or you're more accepting of hella other shit, like cultures and lifestyles and stuff." Franklin

"I think like to be from Oakland is to assume a level of like spiritual, gender and religious fluidity and a little bit of, like 'Bruh, you gonna do you. I'm leaving my hands off'" Chinaka

"*You know, Oakland is an amazing come-as-you-are city. There's no fanfare. I mean, recently there is, but at that time there was no fanfare. There was no national news of positivity to come here. So you really had to kind of be introduced to the lifestyle by somebody and then once you*

got here, you're like, 'Oh, it's so freeing'. You know, it was just open and you could just be who you were." Mashama

Oakland is a space of refusal, and so too becomes a space of openness. In rejecting a cultural border - becoming a borderlands - possibility arises, and expectation withdraws. The "alternative" becomes the norm. Oakland is ever the city of outsiders, those left behind in the bust after World War II, left behind in the bloodshed of the War on Drugs. And in the leaving, they brought in others with promises of possibility.

This openness is conditional, however. There is an ethic to approaching Oakland. Oakland is not opposed to a kind of cultural influence that adds to and builds with what already exists. The issue is the heavy-handed power of entitlement and bulldozing development that tends to erase the presence and contributions of previous and current inhabitants. Difference is respected, even if not understood. People are drawn together, not willing to risk erasure. And in so doing, space is made, not taken.

"I encourage people to move to Oakland, but you got to add to the culture. Don't take from, which is what a lot of people do. They come out here and they take from the culture, but they don't add to it." Franklin

"*my hope is that it becomes this idea where Oakland is still the place to come as you are and to uplift the cultures that you don't know or to be able to be a place where you can start to recognize the cultures that you don't know and then bring your beautiful, dynamic self. You know, bring your amazing, bring your value, bring your perspective. But as a value add and not to replace*" Mashama

"*The way that I grew up and the way that I was raised by people who are from the south, you know, like my granddaddy, used to say, you better wipe your feet on the rug 'fore you come in his house. Respect where you are. You know what I mean? And just, you know, understand that you are coming into a place that's already existed before you were here. And there were already people here before you got here and to, you know, treat those people with the dignity and respect that they deserve. And this is not you know, this is your home. You purchased it. But I understand that, you know, you being here also means that there's somebody who isn't here anymore.*" Rashida

Oakland's vibe is Black in its counter-geographic nature, the way it wends itself in and around the map. The vibe is Black in the sense that it produces the conditions of capitalist development (the plantation, in its many forms), and for marronage, for re-appropriating the abject margins and outsides as inclusive spaces of liberation. The vibe is not limited to the Black body, but begins here. Vibe pours forth from a struggle made possible by migration, by confronting conditions of impossibility. Vibe moves westward, horizontally into an elsewhere, an unmapped thereness.

Oakland Embodied: Vibe as Refusal

When I pose the question "What's going on in your neighborhoods these days?" to a group of young, mostly Black people, the answers that come back are almost unanimously about gentrification and displacement in Oakland and the wider Bay Area. The eight of us are sitting in a semi-circle in the bright red meeting room of United Roots/Youth Impact Hub, a non-profit on a stretch of Telegraph Avenue that features a few remaining Black-owned businesses, interspersed with the some of the only fast-food restaurants to be found in the immediate area. It is the summer of 2017, and I am teaching a weekly workshop series on smartphone photography for the organization's young adult members, each of whom is engaged in their own social enterprise or social justice project. In response to my question, "Iris," looks up from her sketching to explain how city planners have been gentrifying the city in "discreet ways," such as intentionally building highways that divide Oakland's Uptown neighborhood from West Oakland. Iris explains, "It's a method of control and we're unhappy, but not doing anything about it." The cynical sentiment hangs in the room, as unsurprising and thick as San Francisco's oppressively chilly summer fog.

In light of the theme of the class, I ask a follow-up question to the group about how photography and/or social media might be affecting their interventions into the politics of gentrification in Oakland. "Kalu," whose project focused on positive images of Oakland overlooked by news media, states that while images should "show the city as beautiful," he fears how this might compound issues of gentrification. Sunflower, often the contrarian in class, points out how social media platforms have the advantage of highlighting that which makes people uncomfortable. She explains how these images are widely interpreted, and finds that the Black people whose lives are depicted in the media are poorly represented by two-dimensional portrayals of Black life. Says Sunflower, "Our picture is up there…but it's not about us."

Multiple facets of image-making arose during our discussions of how Black people and the politics of displacement in Oakland are visually represented. In particular, the murals that banner Oakland's shops, alleys, and downtown buildings; the Black self, manifested through students' numerous self-portraits; and the various uses to which these images are put. These images emerged as the central analytical motifs across everyone's projects and form the triadic axis of image-production in the context of Black spatiality that I will be analyzing in this chapter. To do so, I look especially at a selection of Sunflower's images, in which she poses for full-length self-portraits in front of local murals. I argue that these images complicate representations of Blackness and space in a way that simultaneously refutes and takes advantage of capitalist representations of Black feminist spatial practice.

Sunflower attempts to recuperate the value being generated by exploitative pictures that aren't "about us" for her own, and her community's, survival. The intervention that Sunflower offers is the liveliness of her own racialized body situated in Oakland as both memory and dream, collective and personal. The reproductive function of the Black woman's body here refuses the production of transparent space for the city's development; instead, she assumes the kind of visibility that circulates value within Black Oakland scopic norms, generating virtual and physical spaces of Black interiority and pathways for care. What this reveals is a praxis for reappropriating vibe and its spatiality at the level of the fungible (King, 2016), territorialized Black woman's body.

I understand Sunflower's efforts as being congruent with collective efforts by the BCZ and its members to reclaim space and value for Black people in Oakland. They are both formulations of Black feminist refusal and reproduction. Additionally, both Sunflower and the BCZ direct attention toward vibe as an embodied space of Black life. However, where the BCZ interrupts the commoditization of the Black visage on behalf of an imagined collective, Sunflower's images bring attention to the immediate and errant demands of Black women's bodies.

In this chapter, I situate these negotiations – between the visual abstractions of vibe, social-spatial production, and embodied Black experience – as aspects geographic image-making. I propose the "Black geographic image" as a means of looking at these dynamic intersections between Blackness, representations of place, and the embodied experiences that inform them. The image operates as a framing device, a way of looking at the city that is akin to the cultural commission using culture as a frame. Oakland's Blackness, in Sunflower's intervention and what follows, is thus more complex than a consumable image, neatly contained in two-dimensional space; it unsettles – or *emancipates* - any such frame. This process of "emancipatory framing" is the means by which Sunflower and the BCZ have leveraged Black geographic images for the reclamation of spaces through which vibe may be produced.

Vibe and The Image of Oakland

The study of human and environmental interaction has, in geography, relied upon visual representational practices that can conceptualize, model, and develop space (Rose 2003; Gregory, 1994). In what follows, I write about Oakland as an image in the sense that it is a represented spatial entity. The amalgam of symbols, photographs, advertisements, slogans and narratives that comprise Oakland's representation are part of its *geographic image*. I approach Oakland's geographic image as a set of representations that "enclose" the city (Kockelman, 2016) and render its people, attractions and, "vibe" as reproducible, consumable qualities that produce economic value.

As described in chapter one, much of Oakland's contemporary geographic imagery is comprised of allusions to an experience of place that might supplant past development deficiencies, and encourage future investment. Additionally, in conversation with a decades of negative stereotypes about Oakland's unruly Black population, these images co-opt representations of Blackness that convey a contained - and therefore consumable and desirable - experience of Black place. The process of visually inscribing Blackness into a city's geographic image while simultaneously displacing Black people is outlined in Brandi Summer's (2019) definition of *Black aesthetic emplacement*, which "accounts for this kind of active dissociation of Blackness from Black embodiment, and its re-presentation in the form of words, objects, images and performances….[it] opens up a space to place with the fluidity and instability of Blackness when Black bodies are both present and absented." (p. 3) Black aesthetic emplacement in Oakland takes exploitative advantage of public art displays, such as murals and festivals, because they seem to enclose and render commodifiable the qualitative experience of Oakland's vibe.

Vibe is an experiential quality of place that has grown out of embodied and emplaced Black struggle. Such struggle is a function of what Katherine McKittrick (2011) calls a *Black sense of place*, which she defines as "the process of materially and imaginatively situating historical and

contemporary struggles against practices of domination and the difficult entanglements of racial encounter." (P.#) Such a sense of place is derived of the carcerality of Black space, patterns of urbicide that have persistently eviscerated Black place, but is not delimited by violence. The experience of confronting a production of space based upon racialized power dynamics comprises much of the ontology of emplaced Blackness in Oakland, and its correlating vibe. Where McKittrick's Black sense of place situates spaces of racial encounter as productive of generative frictions, I offer vibe as a means of describing the ethics of care, refusal, and possibilism that arise from such sites of struggle and lived experiences.

The art practices generated through vibe have been appropriated to enhance the city's image. Black aesthetic emplacement has been leveraged in Oakland through the arts, as encouraged by the city's creative model of development. The *Black geographic image* is a direct response to attempted appropriations of vibe; it 1) (re)appropriates a representation of place, 2) intentionally brings attention to the lived experience of Blackness in the city, and 3) may be circulated to politically or economically reclaim spaces within the city. The Black geographic image, too, asserts that visual appropriations are not actual approximations of vibe, which is a situated and racialized affective experience. Vibe, in other words, is ultimately inscrutable to the exploitative process of Black aesthetic emplacement. The use of Black geographic images - individually and collectively - represents a part of Black Oakland efforts to confront the city's weaponization of diversity, arts and culture. Because the city's geographic image and framing relies upon an experience that is made available through art for its development, arts and culture based strategies of refusal that incorporate Black geographic images become an effective means of reclamation.

This third aspect of Black geographic imagery is a function of *emancipatory framing*, a process that responds to, but is not limited by the two-dimensional representational politics of the production of space. Emancipatory framing re-situates representations of place as subordinate to the embodied spatial practices of Black bodies and communities, redirecting the flow of value extraction. Emancipatory framing describes interruptions of gentrifying practices that attempt to frame Oakland's vibe as racially consumable; these interventions offer a means of recapturing the spatial value generated by vibe. It shifts the focus of the racializing image away from the disembodied mechanics of social/spatial reproduction and toward the excesses of the frame: Black economic empowerment, the emplaced Black woman's body, and the lived expression thereof. Emancipatory framing practices of empowerment and reclamation still operate within the enclosure of racial capitalism but also turns toward an as-yet unrealized experience of liberation.

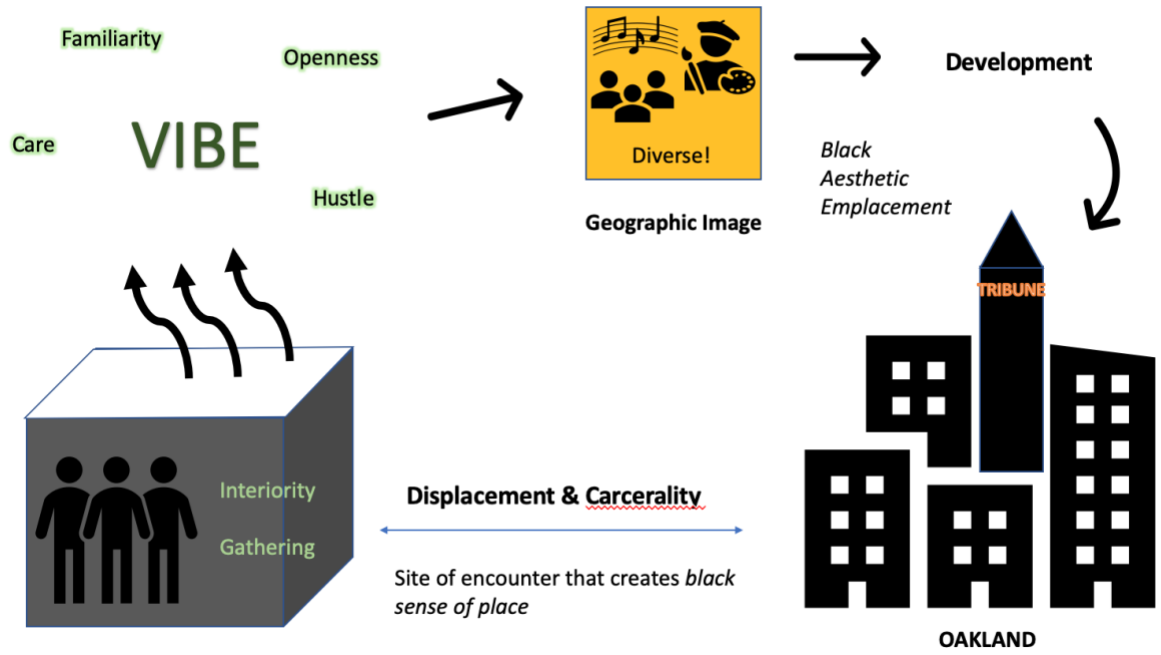

Figure 5. Diagram of Vibe.

Murals as Frame and Resistance

Just a few blocks from United Roots/ Youth Impact Hub is Uptown, where murals bloom into existence. Feminine, brown-skinned figures stretch many stories tall, looking out over a personified city. The public art projects that embellish Oakland's downtown structures are hallmarks of Brown and now Schaaf's creative city development model (Figs. 10 & 11). Murals like these, which depict gestures toward Afrofuturist visions, Black power pasts and contemporary hip-hop[18] participate in the visual, racialized extractive economies of Oakland and its development. While their placement and content signal differently to various audiences, Sunflower's assertion of herself in multiple forms of public art suggests that they may all depict Black life in ways that have all too often been extracted from the realities of inequality for the production of a palatably "diverse" Black Oakland.

[18] Joshua Mays' mural is part of his BEACON series, which draws influences from Maya Angelou. The "Visit Oakland" mural which includes the word "Yee!"- a term expropriated from Oakland Black hip hop – and the visage of a Black Panther.

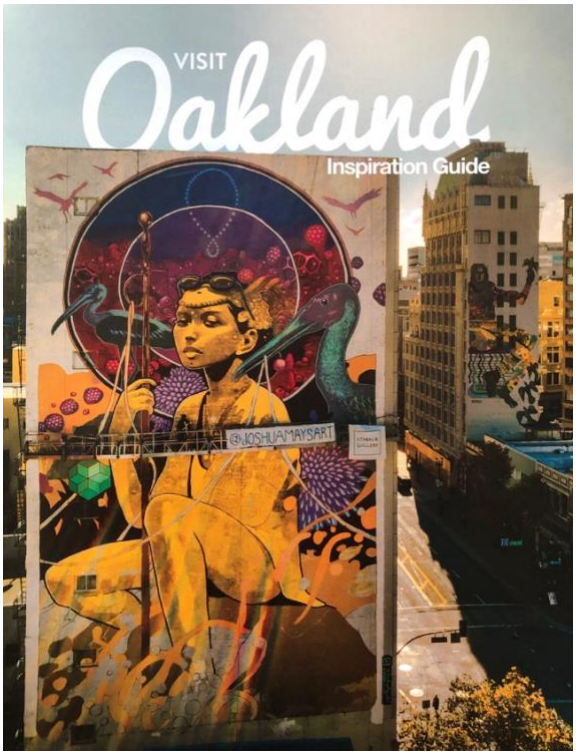

Figure 6. BEACON Mural. Courtesy of Visit Oakland.

Figure 7. Visit Oakland Mural. Courtesy of Visit Oakland.

Today, these murals are a kind of signifying skin for the city, and an enactment of Black aesthetic emplacement. Simultaneously, however, in the history of gentrification in the Bay Area, such murals have often been at risk of being white-washed or covered over by new developments (Mirabal, 2009; Ramirez, 2017; Li, 2016). While many public arts and murals are enmeshed in capitalist representational productions of space, community arts projects are often political pieces that reject the commoditization of art (Miles, 1997; Chapple and Jackson 2010). In contradiction to the city's politically fluctuating and development-motivated investment in public arts, artists in the Bay Area have been known for producing public arts and mural projects rooted in a decolonial praxis and aesthetic (Ramirez, 2017). In Oakland, murals are part of the anti-gentrification discourse, even while the greatest density of murals are currently exhibited in gentrifying neighborhoods.[19]

For instance, Eastside Arts Alliance actively produces murals that center abolition and mutual aid for the East Oakland communities of color that they are embedded within. They are also cognizant of the lack of public art in "Deep East" Oakland. More than providing aesthetic relief from a landscape studded with empty or industrial lots, some murals are actively producing a streetscape that counteracts racial and sexual violence. One in particular, produced by a collective of women of color artists and led by two self-identified Black women abolitionists, Amara Tabor-Smith and Regina Evans, was informed by the accounts of women being sexually trafficked in East Oakland. The mural features a prominent portrait of Harriet Tubman, and a

[19] Based on community created map of Oakland murals. (https://localwiki.org/oakland/map/tags/mural#zoom=13&lat=37.79985&lon=-122.2267&layers=BTT)

river of paint that spills out below a depiction of an altar and out into the sidewalk. This mural, like Sunflower's own images, offers spiritual and affective respite, and a visual pathway toward something like freedom. They necessitate an imaginary that intentionally disrupts the enclosure of both frame and walls. They gesture toward an understanding of Oakland that is vibrantly on-display, yet deeply personal. And so, while organizations like Visit Oakland generously advertise the city's murals and publicize a community-made map of where to find them, Sunflower and the BCZ insist upon reclaiming something of the intimacy and Black care networks signified within these images.

Figure 8. Image by Sunflower Love.

Sunflower's Story

In this photo, we are on a street corner – 2400, Oakland. The otherwise anonymous, half-shaded brick building is alive with the brown-skinned face of a graffitied figure, a guardian sentinel of the street. Sunflower stoops low before it, putting her hands on her knees, to look directly into the camera, a confident smile on her face. The viewer stands on lower ground, is perhaps smaller in stature, and is being confronted, like a child caught staring. There is no omniscient surveillance here, no seeing without being seen, no release from the responsibility of looking. In this image, she is the mediator, stepping in, to level the ground between consumers and Oakland's Black skin by raising herself, and her experience, between them. "They," she tells me, referring to gentrifiers, want the culture of Black Oakland, seen from a safe, contained distance. They "don't want to see it in the streets. But I am in the streets." Sunflower is making herself and her experience of emplaced Blackness seen as vital to understanding Oakland as more than a consumable image, neatly contained in two-dimensional space.

Like her images, Sunflower embodies emancipatory framing – the impetus to defy confining frameworks, demonstrating instead what it means to live and produce spaces between liberatory and conventional imaginaries. She has an effervescent energy that is simultaneously sweet and rooted in an iron-clad determination. Her voice is lyrical and softly styled around consonants, yet her words land with the sharp, resounding finality of a poet's mic drop. When we meet to discuss her images a year after her taking them, she dances easily across the room, singing the lyrics to a newly written original song, but holds my gaze firmly as we talk, hardly stirring or blinking. "The camera captures my pose in a moment," she says, explaining her relationship to her art.

Beyond the constraints of that millisecond, she considers herself, and the experience of the spirit, life, and culture in Oakland she conveys in her photographs, as free. “That’s what art should be…When you think in art, that’s analyzing.” Unbound by technologies of capture, Sunflower embraces the unthinkable realms of the Black woman’s relationship to space.

Sunflower’s story is part of acknowledging the heterogeneity and complexity of Black geographic experience, one that is often intentionally repressed in the commercial images of diversity that Sunflower contests. There is an inherent opacity to Sunflower’s narrative due to the nature of her work, which is not expository, but is rather a means of economically and socially connecting to her online and in-person network. What might be missing here is vibe, that which is in excess of the frame, an experience that can’t be captured by the linguistic, imagistic or academic forms of knowing. This is part of the refutation inherent to emancipatory framing, and engages the unknowability inherent to a Black feminist geographic inquiry.

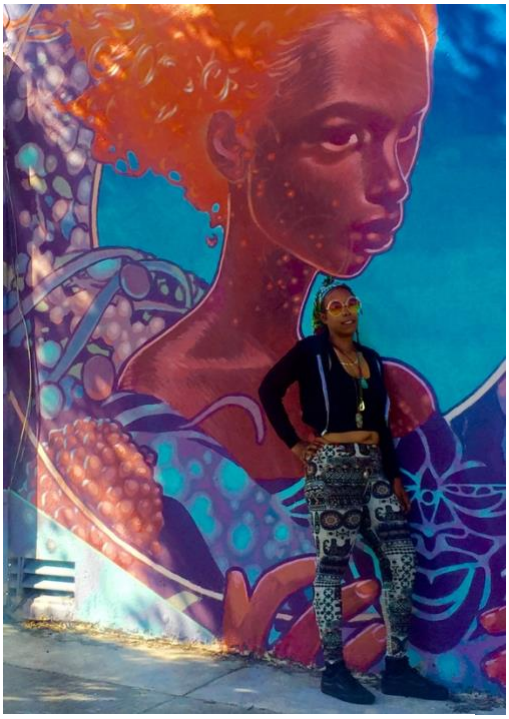

Figure 10. Image by Sunflower Love.

Figure 9. Image by Sunflower Love.

<u>Sunflower’s Black Geographic Images</u>
“In my pictures, I’m taking space.”

Fingers seem to grow up from the ground and creep between Sunflower’s legs, ready to curl around her calf (Fig. 9). Blue patterned tights blur any distinction between her lower-body and the mural behind her. Despite her confident stance, that Sunflower is so small in the frame compared to the inscrutable figure behind her, so cupped against her chest, that the mural’s image dominates. This figure, painted by the same artist whose designs now splash across Oakland’s marketing materials, looks out into an Afro-futurist vision in which Sunflower is not

necessarily empowered, but a part of. By contrast, Sunflower fills up the foreground of the next image (Fig. 10). Her chin tilts up slightly, eyes again cast down to the viewer, the shadows cast by the sun making her into a three-dimensional figure before the mural. Her mis-matched tie-dye and camo patterns echo the tiger-stripe, mis-matched artistic style of the mural's aesthetic. Rather than being swallowed, she stands out, a proud piece of the colorful assemblage arranged in the frame.

In both images, Sunflower makes herself central. The prompt I had given her to contextualize these photos, "invisible places," was meant to encourage visual story-telling about an underappreciated aspect of hers and the other students' community. Here, Sunflower interprets the prompt to mean her self – and Black people more broadly – as that which has been invisibilized in these spaces. Her full bodied presence, the colors, patterns and unconventional vibe she evokes in her images, is what makes visual consumers of Oakland uncomfortable, as it unsettles their own spatial imaginaries. What Sunflower claims to be channeling is the Oakland and heterogenous Blackness she grew up experiencing. It is vibe.

> This is Oakland, this is my community and this is my culture. Oakland has made me who I am. So much negative is said but you come out of Oakland you're gonna be a survivor. Oakland builds strong minded people. This is where I belong. This is my land, this is a vibration that's connected to me spiritually. This is my portal. I'm welcomed here and loved here. Neighbors, smiling and acknowledging one another. Like a mother. Oakland birthed me. I want to now give back to her.

Sunflower claims everything – the negative and positive – about Oakland because, for her, and for so many here, this place is familial. It is female, motherly, productive, protective, and a doorway between where she is and where she wants to be. The Black Oakland of Sunflower's imaginary is of her own embodied contradictions.

Sunflower also indicates that while the media was busy pointing fingers at violence in Black communities, the real violence of urbicide (McKittrick, 2011), of civic and economic abandonment, was overlooked. Her images are indeed confrontational, countering the violence of both gentrifying, futuristic aesthetics and a long history of negative media stereotypes that co-produced the cycles of economic depression and carceral spaces (Shabazz, 2015) in Oakland's Black communities. The Oakland that Sunflower thus represents is set in the present temporal landscape of these images, somewhere between collective memories of Black Oakland's past and a futurity that is circumscribed by the mitigated risk of a Black Oakland that can be developed because it is Black in name and image only. Rather than succumbing to a foreclosed future or storied past, Sunflower leverages the camera to produce a dream space – a means by which a liberatory Black spatial imaginary for Oakland may be remembered and enacted. Pictures, she says, "help me remember my dreams. [You] can get caught up in feeling depressed and stuff because if [gentrification] keeps going, you may not have a home here."

The act of taking these photos is as important as the images themselves as a praxis for partaking in personal and community-based liberatory imaginaries that become integral to strategies for keeping her gong and "let[ting] Black people stay." Producing these images offered Sunflower a way of retracing of her own umbilical connection to, as well as expulsion from, these physical,

visual and economic spaces. “I’m channeling Oakland’s energy. Walking the same spaces I did as a child. Where I used to sit as a little girl, then young lady.” She positions herself as centrally poised in between her own situated historiography in Oakland and a collective uncertain economic future. All of these moments close in on one another in the process and material conjuncture of her images; the channeling of Oakland’s energy is thus not a means of capture, but allowing the simultenaeity (Thomas, 2016) of the city’s Black past, present and future to unfold before the camera.

These murals formulate one piece of Black aesthetic emplacement – a surrogate racialization for the city. And so, in Sunflower’s images, the very quality of Oakland she and the artists she cites through the murals, are trying to convey is cut short by the physical framing of the photo. The fact that these locations are clipped, flat brick walls, and that there’s no identifying features of it as Oakland except for the mural generates another level of abstraction. “Oakland,” the marketed ideal, becomes quieted here, marginalized, alluded to in intimate details that only a local might recognize. Rather than circulating as a brand for the city’s development, these images become brands for her business, thereby redirecting Oakland’s racialized epidermis away from the gentrifying reproduction of space toward Sunflower’s own social, economic network and experience as a Black woman facing displacement. The Black geographies of the city are both marginal and central to the dual work of self-determination and collective empowerment at work. The anonymity of Oakland and the forward presence of her body counters Black aesthetic emplacement while reclaiming a visible, yet quietly personal, experience and understanding of one’s place in this city. The Black geographic image of Oakland thus renders the city as opaque, visually perceptible but unattainable. This is Sunflower’s Oakland. In these images, she reclaims vibe for herself and for the Oakland she remembers and cares for.

Emancipatory Framing and the Embodied Economies of the Image

Where the Black geographic image asserts the qualitative importance of Blackness to the racial capitalist production of space through its visual modalities, *emancipatory framing* is the process by which Black community members, like Sunflower, intervene in gentrifying framing practices in order to recapture some semblance of the value and spatiality these visages have produced.

Sunflower is a musician, artist, herbalist and entrepreneur of marijuana products.[20] Her images sell the persona that of her potential buyers, one draped in the undulating colors of a hippie, trippy aesthetic. The murals and her own styling are representative of the cannabis economy she is attempting to enter, which has a high barrier to entry. Indeed, another Black cannabis business owner I spoke with described that while the red tape in Oakland is less burdensome than other California cities, the issue of finding an affordable and available space within Oakland’s limited “Green Zones” poses a significant stumbling block. The recreational marijuana economy is an appealingly lucrative commercial new market, generating millions in new taxes for the city yet is one that has yet to lose its shadow as a long stigmatized underground economy routinely used to penalize Black communities targeted by California’s “three-strikes” policy and the drug crack-down of the 1980s**.** In response, in 2017 Oakland created an equity program that provides assistance to Black long-term residents of low-income districts with fee waivers and access to commercial kitchen space. Nevertheless, setting up shop in a fiercely competitive commercial

[20] Since first writing this article, Sunflower has since shifted her business line to focus on printing and is launching an online holistic supply store.

real estate market imposes more expenses than many Black entrepreneurs aren't able to afford (Graham, 2018, March; Mitchell, 2020). So, for Sunflower to occupy the digital – while maintaining a visual relationship to a physical manifestation of an increasingly unaffordable Oakland – is a vital strategy for her business.

Figure 11. Image by Sunflower Love.

When I first began speaking with Sunflower, her Instagram page was devoted to self-portraits and images of covertly marijuana-laced edibles. Photos like those above these generate conversations not about her or about the murals, but about her work. In addition to generating business, the circulation of these images on social media broadens her entrepreneurial network. The image becomes a vehicle for being seen in a widening a commoditized social network, and recapturing some of the value otherwise being generated for developers.

Despite its legal status, posting images of cannabis products is restricted on Facebook's social media platforms (McMillan, 2018). Instead, Sunflower promotes her business by using the aesthetic and affect of the subcultures that surround cannabis. In this image (Fig. 11), she brands her products using series of phrases like #rastagirl, #dreamy #entrepreneur #oaklandcannabis and #oaklandartist to appropriate the images they evoke – including the image of Oakland, and the combined indexical imaginary of a Black Oakland that is tagged here. In using these tags, Sunflower visually redefines Oakland's entrepreneurial and artistic landscape to include her own timeless dreams: to remain rooted in place and be able to provide affordable holistic health care items to her community.

That Sunflower tags the image of herself in front of a piece of graffiti within the indexical conversation of #streetphotography speaks to the form of refusal her images take. Krista

Thompson's (2015) work on street photography in New Orleans and Kingston, Jamaica features similar photographs of Black youth posing in front of painted backdrops. Those who are being photographed are participating in a performance, an act of being seen that has little to with the actual end-result photograph, that Thompson calls "un-visibility." Un-visibility highlights the relative value of being seen in visual, neoliberal economies. Rather than complying with conventional aesthetics or expectations of Black respectability or invisibility, un-visibility "refuse[s] existing structures that define more formal political activity, highlighting the limits of these structures." (p. 41) That Sunflower chooses to pose before painted backdrops conforms to what Thompson identifies as Black visuality, which highlights the fantastical artifice of capitalist infrastructures while appearing (and actually) participating in these structures as a means of representing the self as a member of civil society. Being witnessed is also consequential to what Thompson calls "photographic becoming" vital in an economy of being seen. In the digital economy, this performative becoming occurs online, as evidenced by likes and comments.

Sunflower presents herself before these mural images as an enterprising citizen of Oakland who is seen as both an outlier to and product of its significations. In these images, emancipatory framing operates through Sunflower's assertion of her body and livelihood as the space between; it is this which produces alternate imaginaries while participating in a conventional framework. Sunflower's refutation of enclosure seems to rest uneasily alongside her stated usage of these images to promote her own business. On the one hand, she considers herself a story-teller whose images express the experience of Oakland from the perspective of someone who has grown up here, a heterogeneous understanding of Blackness as Indigenous, Ethiopian, West African, Creole and White, and an expression of sexuality that queers normative and racialized expectations of her gender. Simultaneously, Sunflower is savvy regarding how she fabricates the aesthetic of her photographs to market her various artistic and business ventures. What she has found at the meeting ground between these realms of image-making is a method of bringing people into her world. "I use my pictures to attract people…Each image is a story." The community of followers on social media buy into her product: the disarticulated assemblage of race and gender (Weheliye, 2014), the material goods she is selling, and the imagined communal world she is constructing through them.

In addition to catering to a particular economic niche aesthetic, Sunflower is committed to countering the gentrifying trendiness of these industries by using these murals and graffiti arts to inflect her images with her interpretation of the gritty, affective mélange of the city itself. The mash-up of color, materialist and radical cultures, two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms, and doubling her own embodiment in this image is her way of "channeling Oakland's energy"; it is emblematic of the space that Sunflower is reclaiming through the image. Says Sunflower, "This is Oakland, this is not corporate." By focusing on evocations of vibe, and an intentional creation of virtual space (rather than risk being denied physical spaces of interiority), Sunflower reclaims economic means for not only herself, but the reproduction of a community that has been largely displaced. Her statement is thus not a contradiction, but a visualization of double consciousness (DuBois, 1903), and a self-conscious way to intercede on the gentrification of consumer markets that have appropriated Black affect (Zukin, 2008). This emancipatory framing is an enactment of both refusal and reclamation of economic and affective space, and is the means by which Sunflower carves out an un-visible space of near-freedom.

The Black Woman's Body: Being the Place Between
"This is me, this is my feminine being. Not to be packaged or sold."

I highlight Sunflower's story partly to draw attention to the way that vibe is a function of embodied Black feminist praxis. The body itself presences the enfleshed medium through which vibe is reproduced. Her body is not abject here but intentionally disruptive, made evident by her piercing gaze, confronting the viewer, disallowing two-dimensional representation or exploitation. Her body grounds representations of Oakland and the way that they have arisen through decades of demands for care that the state did not meet. Her body is not merely a symbol here; it is made visible as a reminder of the recompense due to the beleaguered Black communities that have existed and produced value here.

Racialization makes a body legible to discourses of capitalism, enclosure and ownership. It also operates at the scale of territory as a dimension of privatization and value production. Similarly, the lived experience (Fanon, 1952) of one's gendered and racialized body may also be understood as an experience of the materiality and imposed geographic identity of a place. Katherine McKittrick's (2006) configuration of Black feminist geographies navigates this space between known representations and unknowable realms of experience, or poetics. The experience of Blackness disrupts "transparent space" – geography as it is canonically, colonially known and rendered. A Black feminist geographic framework includes, for instance, the "space between the legs,"—which McKittrick theorizes building on the work of Marlene Nourbese Philips' "Dis Place – The Space Between." The "space between the legs" signals the territorialized Black woman's body, which serves as the site of capitalist reproduction, and a threshold to another way of being.

This turn toward affect and poetics in Black Geographies situates political consciousness and struggle within the interstices of culture and the material relations of production. Black geographic thinking thus always calls for a praxis of openness, situating freedom not as a teleological process that necessarily culminates in the realization of something or somewhere concrete, but is attentive to the layers of abstraction that formulate the concrete. Nadia Ellis (2015) describes this unrealized somewhere as a kind of longing for "elsewhere," as always moving toward a horizon. Blackness by this definition of is to move laterally within the "territories of the soul" in "those spaces that embody the classic diaspora dialectic of being at once imagined and material." (p. 3) It is to be between the confines of the present neoliberal need to define oneself, and a desire to belong to a communitarian elsewhere. The perpetual not-quite-thereness is a queer sense of failure in the utopian reach, making Sunflower's images a kind of compulsory, technological act that never arrives at completely free space, but is always reaching toward it.

The emplaced experience of Blackness is about residing in between fixed enclosures and a poetics of landscape. Black life exists on the precarious fringes of a neoliberal economy that individualizes, and an expansive communal imaginary. It is important to locate the Black woman's body as a hybrid substance of the in-between, as well as reckon with what it means for the concept of self-hood and community to live these geographies. By inserting her body between the mural image and abstracting Oakland's streets, Sunflower presents an obstructing signal, a conflating noise, an interruption of utopic and objectifying representations of Oakland's

diversity. She firmly establishes her experience as taboo—a sacred and ostracized being. Her position makes visible but rebukes an alliance with entropy, devaluation, and urbicide (McKittrick, 2011). Sunflower's images present a narrative of desire for belonging to a sense of Black place that resists Blackness as abject and projected onto her body, and for some semblance of security, and elsewhere, tantalizingly promised in the enclosure and circulation of images in the online marketplace. The echo of this utopic desire nested within the restrictions of an image that persistently denies such freedom is at the heart of an ethic of emancipatory framing.

In Sunflower's images, there is an implied, intimate relationship between the mural, place, and her body. The flattening perspective of the camera figuratively transforms her into a kind of mechanical, emplaced being, simultaneously of a fixed moment in time, the infrastructure of Oakland, the Black, female body and the technological network through which her image is produced and circulated. Sunflower is not a distinct figure apart from the mural image, but a part of it. Sunflower, thus, transforms the murals by making herself a part of them, and them a part of her. Her images call attention to the lived realities of her body within the racist economies at play in Oakland, and to the spiritual invocation of something just beyond what can be enframed. In other words, the role of the Black woman's body is meant to reclaim not only the bare economization of Black bodies, but the *experience* of embodiment. Sunflower is recuperating extrapolated value, along with her own memories and experiences of the city, which have become part of vibe's commoditized abstraction.

Conclusion

The Black geographic image and emancipatory framing enable an understanding of the dynamic interplay between art, symbolism, the space of Black businesses, and the import these have to the production of Oakland. We see how poetic landscapes – the ineffabilities of vibe and its creative, interpersonal manifestations – materialize as political, economic landscapes. Sunflower's images highlight the importance of the Black woman's body as a site for the production of vibe and its reterritorialization.

In the following chapters, the BAMBD and the BCZ take up the Black geographic image through Black cultural districting. They assert the lived experiences of Blackness in Oakland through representations of business-space and "activated" spaces of gathering. Emancipatory framing operates by leveraging the top-down image of the BAMBD to support businesses spaces, where survival, life and connection happen in the back rooms. The BCZ, rejecting cultural framing strategies that ghettoize rather than cohere, use "activation" to legitimize their claim space while bringing people together in gathering spaces of vibe.

Chapter Three:

Inside Out: Making Black Oakland through the BAMBD

"You got a Korea Town and a China Town but why you ain't got no Black town?" (McElhaney, L., October 11, 2019)

Fourteenth Street is a thin, unassuming cultural borderland, thick with the presence of those who have migrated laterally across Oakland's flats. It is a number, sequentially placed just a few blocks north of Chinatown's bilingual street signs, but not far enough north yet to be of much socioeconomic consequence[21]. Stretching west past the 980 freeway, 14th becomes a wide boulevard and central thoroughfare of West Oakland; it passes parks, schools, fading Victorians and industrial warehouses before curving south, bottoming out in The Bottoms, just below the train station that brought thousands of Black Southerners here in the early 1940s. To the east, 14th slides out past the Alameda County Courthouse that staged the late 60s Free Huey marches; it hugs the muddy channel that empties Lake Merritt into the bay; and it becomes East 14th or, as it was rebranded in advance of gentrification in 1996, "International Boulevard" for the way it traverses a variety of Asian, Latinx and migrant neighborhoods through East Oakland. The street was singled out by Councilwoman Lynette McElhaney as a way of visibly weaving Blackness into Fourteenth's story of Oakland as a diverse city.

The Black Arts Movement and Business District (BAMBD) is the cherished "soul work" project of District Two Oakland Councilwoman Lynnette McElhaney; she worked in collaboration with community organizer and Oakland Post owner, Paul Cobb, Black Arts Movement leader Marvin X, and his former student and theater director, Dr. Ayodele Nzinga. It was officially adopted as a measure on January 19, 2016. When Councilwoman McElhaney initially proposed making the district part of Oakland's downtown specific plan, she hosted a number of community meetings, including a series for "Black Culture Keepers" in 2015; these were hosted by Paul Cobb and Marvin X. At these meetings, discussions centered around how large the district should be, the creation of an entertainment commission, and general ideating about what a Black arts and business district might look like in the future. Four years after these initial set of meetings in October 2019, McElhaney hosted a new set of meetings about the BAMBD. Her stated goal was to get business owners and artists in the room to advance the mission of the district, suggesting that little had been done or accomplished with their full participation or knowledge within the intervening years.

The district is a grand gesture, an attempt to concretely affix Black history to Oakland's origin story and identity. The councilwoman speaks passionately at every monthly meeting for the assembled business owners of the BAMBD about the need for this kind of representation, about how Black people and their history need to be "revered" and to have space held for them in downtown Oakland. Yet urgency bubbles up after every reverent historical recounting. *So what? And what do we do now? And where's the money?* Indeed, Councilwoman McElhaney has only been able to promise $75,000 for the district for "place-making" improvement projects, which seems not to involve much more than a few signs marking that the otherwise invisible cultural district in fact exists. Dr. Nzinga, who is also the co-founder of the community development

[21] This refers to way that moving north, or into the hills, has connoted upward mobility.

corporation (CDC) for the BAMBD, spoke most clearly to the circular and paradoxical tension at the heart of such a project: "One of the greatest challenges is that people don't know [the BAMBD] exists. If is exists, then what does it mean? *What is it*?"[22]

Dr. Nzinga's question about what curated spaces *are* (or become) once they are made visible as Black cultural areas highlights a subtle violence perpetuated by white spatiality and gentrification: being forced to claim *what* one is disallows the complexities of who and how people occupy and co-create space. Whereas whiteness is never asked to spatially define itself, Blackness is being passed through a mythico-economic sieve; only that which may be rendered as (culturally) valuable for development is able to be maintained. The irony is that Black "culture-keepers" and "space-holders" undergo this kind of scrutiny because it is one of the few viable means of creating and maintaining spaces that retain and produce vibe - a community and affect that is indeed central to the way that people experience, create and invest in all of Oakland.

The idea of the district transcends the geographic specificity of 14th street by centering Black visibility in the heart of downtown Oakland in a moment of its advancing development. With the exception of the flagship Black institutions along the street – the Malonga Casquelord Center for the Arts (formerly Alice Arts Center), and the African American Museum and Library of Oakland (AAMLO) – the street itself is not outwardly or visibly Black, particularly organized around Black culture, or especially significant with regards to Black historical events. Rather, by situating the BAMBD at the center of the city, and at the intersection of East and West Oakland, the creators of the district propose the thesis that *Oakland* is Black, and that Oakland's Blackness ought to be recognized for its contributions to the city's culture and development. The history lessons reverberating through the room at BAMBD meetings pertain to Black Oakland as a whole; relatedly, Councilwoman McElhaney's response "why you ain't got no Black town" was that The Town used to be *all* Black.[23] This assertion is the primary importance of the district.

Yet, its over-emphasis on symbolism and story makes its strategy as an actual arts and business support structure fall flat. The needs of all the Black business owners on 14th street facing heightened stress from nearby construction and rising rents were not about to be met by $75,000 in "place-making" funds. Stakeholders were impatient to perpetuate sustainable spaces for their patrons, rather than to make a memorial of 14th street. Crucially, these brick and mortar businesses make real what the representation of the BAMBD alludes to in its reference to the Black Arts Movement: soul, or – as I am positing in this dissertation – vibe, as a kind of emplacement of soul. Residing in the back rooms, the inner-most spaces of these businesses, is the internal quality of vibe: spaces of possibility that elide the frame of two-dimensional representations and capitalist forms. It is here where mutual aid for the wider Black community is circulated, and which might be amplified with more robust support.

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[22] According to Dr. Nzinga, the $75,000 in placemaking funds were negotiated by the BAMBD CDC in collaboration with the Department of Transportation.

[23] The councilwoman's statements were full of apocryphal stories, faulty statistics, and self-aggrandizing statements. Yet, the notion that Oakland at one point was majority or "all" Black is not unique to McElhaney. Although, according to Census documents, the city was never majority Black, that it seemed or felt this way, particularly in the 80s and 90s, is effectually more to the point. When McElhaney and other elders in the room state that Oakland is or was Black, the number of bodies counted at any one time matters less than the *embodied* experience of Black*ness* in a city with blurred boundaries.

This chapter charts the aspirational, emotional, and concrete work of Black space making in downtown Oakland. I begin by following the story of the BAMBD, as told by Lynette McElhaney and the various stakeholders present at a series of six City Hall meetings. The second half of the chapter documents my own experiences walking the street and interacting with the business owners in their spaces. The honorary name of the district – the *Black Arts Movement* and Business District – signifies the way that emplaced affect of soul, or vibe, in the way it is appropriated and organically formed is central to Black claims to space in Oakland. The name, while ineffectual on its own, points us toward the various strategies of Black place-making, and the way they are operationalized through arts and cultural praxis.

The analytics of this chapter weave between the outward-facing publicity of street life, branding and group or governmental forms of representation, and the inward-facing world of *interiority*, the hidden spaces within these businesses where relation, gathering, and vibe happen. Like the garret that hid Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent's self-liberated body, the back rooms of the BAMBD are paradoxically liberating and contained spaces, housed "deep within the crevices of power." (McKittrick, 2006, p. 44) Within the BAMBD, occupants of these interior spaces, like Jacobs/Brent, have little agency over the structures or representations in which they reside. Still, these interstitial spaces are the places from which Black patrons and entrepreneurs might "articulate [their] lived experiences and emancipatory desires, without losing sight of the dehumanizing forces of slavery," (ibid, p. 41) the expropriation of government and commercial representation, or the forms of racial capitalism that have given rise to such back room business spaces to begin with. *Interiority* here points us toward thirdspace (Soja, 1996), the kind of Black space in Oakland that is central to its reproduction and an imaginary of the "elsewhere" (Ellis, 2015) of freedom.

"If it exists…: Building the BAMBD Brand

Like seemingly everything open to the public at City Hall, the BAMBD meetings take place after normative business hours and seem to stretch deep into an endless night of tense conversation. Instead of the grand city council meeting room seated at the center of the Hall, however, we are asked to climb a worn set of marble stairs, past a hanging, faded mural of "What Oakland is…" into a long, dimly lit hearing room. Councilwoman McElhaney stands at the front of the room in a beige skirt suit, humming to herself, reviewing notes, and preparing a large sheet of butcher paper for meeting notes. Her jacket is slung neatly over a nearby chair, and her tennis shoes - which I'd watch shuffle familiarly up the grooves in the stone steps - have been kicked to the side, French-manicured feet bare on the dingy carpet. With the exception of one of her aides, a young man dressed to the nines in a pressed matte-blue suit and spike-studded loafers, everyone here arrives as-is, invited to kick back and receive their uncomfortable seat at the table as if it were a plush living room chair. Those of us who edge toward the back of the room are shooed out of our corners to crowd around the U-shaped table, and we're encouraged to take a plate of food, catered by a nearby Black-owned eatery. Before we discuss any business, McElhaney has us each introduce ourselves and respond to a check-in question that feels both like an invitation and a test of one's ability to talk the talk in an almost exclusively Black space. "What's your favorite place to get a meal in Oakland?" becomes a conversation about seafood and soul food restaurants. Responses to "What's your favorite song or musical artist?" are dominated by old-school soul and R&B singers like Donny Hathaway, Jill Scott, Lauryn Hill, Earth, Wind and

Fire. Answers are mm-hmmed and teeth-sucked and nodded at. Such performances of Blackness and ease invite intimacy, similarity, and a form of kinship; in equal measure, they anticipate the long-held grudges, unwavering alliances and unspoken ire that would surface.

McElhaney's opening remarks pose Oakland as a discursive Black space, and the BAMBD as pet project that is at once aggrandized and infantilized. The BAMBD, she tells us repeatedly, is "her baby," a project born out of her "soul work" commitment to her Black West Oakland constituents while working on the most recent downtown specific plan. Anticipating the deleterious effect[24] this plan would likely have on Black downtown constituents, and recognizing that many of these Black residents were already being displaced to regions well outside her district, McElhaney takes a strategically geographic approach when discussing the BAMBD. She tells us that race - as in actual, embodied occupation by Black people of this particular location - is less important than delineating a space through which a Black emplaced experience might be brought forth. In defining such a space, McElhaney is not actually halting or restricting the long-awaited downtown development, but symbolically "holding the physical space as place changes." In this top-down approach, giving the district a name gives some solidity to an idea of Black Oakland. In becoming formally emplaced, Black Oakland is not only defensible, but an unavoidable and active part of the vocabulary and discourse about Oakland's civic and economic center. McElhaney is thus intentionally leveraging downtown to tell a Black story of Oakland, to highlight the work of the Sleeping Car Porters union, the Black Panthers, the Black Arts Movement for which the district is named, among other less well-known tales. And so while this section of 14th street, indeed even West Oakland, no longer contains a critical mass of Black residents or business owners, the BAMBD allows McElhaney to say with some legitimacy that the city is *still* Black, and to make sweeping pronouncements like, "All of Black California is focused through the sense of Black Oakland."

What emerges from her rhetoric is a pronounced emphasis on abstract histories, narratives and feelings about - or senses of - Blackness in Oakland. Others are quick to jump in and supplement her political gloss with their own impassioned speeches about Oakland. Geoffrey Pete, for instance, is an elder in the room and the owner of Geoffrey's Inner Circle, a famed social club for the "Who's Who" among Black socialites and politicians; he had been chuckling at notes passed down the table his way, when he interjects suddenly and forcefully to pronounce that Oakland had a great and important story to tell the world. The Town, he tells a sympathetic room, is home to a disproportionate number of noted Black athletes and activists. Others nod in deferential agreement.

And yet, it doesn't take long for the cracks the narrative to emerge. One man - a wiry, eager latecomer who leans forward from a chair in the back of the room - talks enthusiastically about the district and the importance of Oakland in sustaining Black culture for everyone in the Bay Area. But, he asks, "who are we serving" with this project when the majority of the participating local Black Diaspora live many miles away from downtown Oakland? The energy being generated by renewed attention to Blackness in Oakland is important, and he praises events like the Black Joy parade in particular. And yet, he says, this energy is not being made into economic

[24] For instance, upzoning is being expanded for market rate developers in exchange for paltry community benefit agreements; impact fees that developers pay aren't actually keeping pace with regional market demand for housing.

viability for the Black community. His comments bring forth a fountain of raised hands. Anxiety fills the room as business-owners express frustration at not having been included in earlier iterations of discussions about the downtown development plan, and about the community development corporation that has been created in conjunction with the BAMBD.

The monthly BAMBD meetings at City Hall were thus operating at two sometimes competing levels: abstract political manifestos on the value of a Black cultural district with questionable stakes and beneficiaries, and demands for concrete investment in Black businesses and arts practices. Over the course of the next six months, 14th street stakeholders came back to table to try to fill in the form of a mapped out shape and feeling. The process of bringing the economies of Black space to the BAMBD's metaphor was messy, and remains unfinished. For McElhaney's sake, the group of business-owners and artists in the room achieved what she wanted achieved: they laid down the sentences of their collective purpose and gave themselves tasks that freed her of attentive responsibility. The grander stakes of Black Oakland are woven into their mission; and the granularity of a functional membership has been outlined in a manifesto on BAMBD stake-holders.

As the group met to determine the mission of their newly forming organization of artists and business owners within the BAMBD, Dr. Nzinga's question still seemed to haunt the stale air of the hearing room - *what is it?* Everyone works in teams, shuffling through the various worksheets on writing mission statements that we have been given, before reciting their proposed statement. Bambidele, the director of the AAMLO, puts up his hand politely and reads his statement over thin wire-framed glasses in a crisp, soft-spoken voice: "To promote African American culture, history, aesthetic expression and businesses that give an ongoing vitality to the city of Oakland." The room is shushed into an impressed silence for a moment, before bursting into congratulatory jokes about being able to stop the work there. A few amendments are proposed however. A small nervous woman in an West African print hair wrap suggests broader language than "African American" pointing to the many Caribbean and African contributors to the Black culture in this area. Instead, "Black" is found to be an ample enough substitute to discuss the African Diaspora. Another business owner, referring to other Black cultural mission statements he had seen, suggests adding "reclaiming" a Black heritage to the statement. "Aesthetic expression" is discussed as being an adequate enough phrase to encompass Black artists in the district. What remains undisputed, however, is the idea that the BAMBD - and its Black stakeholders - contribute an unquestionable value to the city of Oakland. Said Bambidele, the city should be considered a "targeted beneficiary" of the organization because it provides Oakland with "vibrancy…and a profound sense of cultural competency." That the City of Oakland acknowledge its indebtedness and commitment to Black cultural workers is the unquestioned story arc for the BAMBD.

The BAMBD CDC

The question of who and what kind of work would represent this district - itself a representational space - was persistently contested. The community development corporation (CDC) that emerged shortly after the BAMBD's creation has taken on a number of projects to support Black arts and businesses in the district, including an anti-displacement micro-grant program of $150,000 created from a total of $400,000 in funds collected via negotiated community benefit agreements with three different developers. As of 2019, the group also

initiated a month-long festival, "BAMBD Fest," as a way of naming and claiming "Black August" while celebrating Black-owned businesses and artists. These programs came as a surprise to the stakeholders assembled in the hearing room. As a result, they felt that their needs were not being adequately represented by the CDC, whose organizing power in the district seemed to threaten *becoming* the BAMBD itself.

The organization's leader and co-founder, Dr. Ayodele Nzinga, considers herself a direct beneficiary and student of the Black Arts Movement. As a result, the organization is built less upon McElhaney's political geographic imaginary of the 14th street corridor and all the Black constituents within it than a commitment to uphold the radical legacy of the movement within Oakland. In light of this focus, and twinned with its CDC status, the BAMBD CDC's approach to development in the district is not only to support its economic ecosystem, but its "spiritual" health as well. Like Bambidele's gesture toward the BAMBD's role in supporting the city's "vitality," spirit too appears to allude to the importance of art and other affective forms of Black presence. In the words of the Black Arts Movement then, they are concerned with the "soul" enmeshed within Black political and economic power (Neal, 1968).

Soul, poetry and the arts are by no means passive producers of Black space and collective empowerment. They mobilize and represent the world-making desires of displaced people (ibid), and of what Dr. Nzinga calls Oakland's refugees. The way Dr. Nzinga sees it, the creation of the BAMBD presented an opportunity that needed to be seized. A cultural district is more than a symbolic re-territorialization of Black Oakland - it is an actual "battleground," a site upon which material and cultural capital might be accrued for communities of color and arts communities, and thus a catalyst for pushing back against development. Most enticingly, the BAMBD presents opportunities for owning land, the fabled heart of Black freedom. She recognizes the district's symbolism as an integral part of a Black Arts motivated struggle for space. The "beauty of the district" goes beyond a nebulous focus on Oakland writ large, but the fact that it is not located in either East or West Oakland. This has the effect of dissolving some of the bifurcation of race and poverty in the city. The ribbon of 14th is less of a straight line than a refracted radial, connecting multiple places together.

Having a name, a clear geographic delimitation also focuses resources that the CDC structure, capable of mobilizing a large network of "development actors" (Frisch & Servon, 2006), is well-equipped to take advantage of. Relations strengthened through a CDC include city government planning agencies, federal agencies like the HUD, banks and other financial institutions, foundations and grant programs, private corporations and developers, and access to tax credits and technical assistance, as well as pre-existing autonomous Black community development structures, such as the church, business associations or other community organizations. CDCs, and specifically Black CDCs, have been in operation since the late 1960s (Hill & Rabig, 2012), but started taking on more of the load of local governance work in the 90s when federal funding cuts worsened conditions in poor urban neighborhoods. Early CDCs were less professionalized in structure but sought to extend the work of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements by effectively institutionalizing community efforts to control local development, rather than relying on elected officials. (Rabig, 2012)

However, upholding the mores of the Black Power - and in this case, the Black Arts Movement - within the complex network of private and governmental actors may impose contradicting interests; radically self-determined spaces of liberation are difficult to attain in the highly competitive downtown Oakland market without significant investment of capital, likely from outside what might be considered the boundaries of the community. Specifically pursuing Black liberation through the CDC, even within an explicitly Black district, might raise problems with regards to the organization's legitimacy as a representative for a geographic region that is not occupied by majority Black patrons or institutions (Frisch & Servon, 2006). Indeed, the BAMBD CDC avoids stating in their vision, mission, or purpose that their intention is to serve specifically Black organizations. Rather, they claim to support the development of the district by creating a "Black culture driven space" that supports "Black livity," understanding that this will serve other marginalized populations within the district (BAMBD CDC, 2021). They position themselves, in other words, as an intermediary between the Black community at large, within the BAMBD, and other non-Black stakeholders within the district.[25]

As such, the BAMBD CDC is not necessarily a threat to the business association within the BAMBD; in fact Dr. Nzinga has warmly welcomed collaboration with the newly created network of Black business owners. What remains contested, however, is the narrow field of how the district would be represented, and who would receive the benefits of such recognition. This is a function of the converging forms of representation in an area chosen not for its constituency, but for is locale as a symbolic site. The resulting pressure between interested parties is reminiscent of a extemporaneous land rush – in this case, by people suddenly urged to reclaim a space never-occupied, once-occupied, and currently-occupied by Black stakeholders for the sake of an unpromised, future-occupied Black space.

The brand power of the BAMBD felt, to the stakeholders in the room, like occupied territory. Rather than being directly affiliated with the district, the group chose to distinguish themselves as the Association of Black Business and Arts Organizations (ABBAO). It functioned as an institutionalization of the mutual support that, to some extent, already existed between the businesses and, more importantly, formalized their role as an entity to be consulted regarding downtown development plans.

Ultimately, there were many interested parties and little wiggle room for those represented to feel as if they had actual autonomy over the project which, after all, McElhaney affectionately called her "baby." When pressed to talk about the concrete structure of the district, McElhaney insisted on keeping to a program that revolved around ideation. She encouraged frustrated stakeholders to 'dream big.' But the dreamy, representative qualities of a Black district could not be indulged without a concrete understanding of what that meant for the Black business owners and artists who were being ousted from city center at an alarming rate. Said one business-owner to McElhaney before storming out: there is precedent for Black cultural districts in Oakland, and so "telling us to come here and dream is offensive without telling us the stakes." Having battled the city for raising rent on her downtown space several years previously - all while Lynnette was busy promoting the BAMBD – this business-owner was well aware of the stakes, and the

[25] The BAMBD CDC has also advocated for fiscal and political investment in other Black cultural hubs, including support for the Black Cultural Zone in East Oakland.

hypocrisy, involved in this project; she was busy making place within the walls of her space, making life, making a tangible rather than ideational BAMBD.

The Village Bottoms Cultural District

The idea of a Black cultural district indeed not new, nor is it the first time one has been attempted in Oakland. Years prior to McElhaney's proposal, a group of poets and artists in West Oakland attempted to create a Black cultural district in the historic neighborhood. Anticipating the gentrification that would soon sweep the region, Marcel Diallo and a collective of Black artists organized to create the Village Bottoms Cultural District. As additional justification, and echoing current calls for the BAMBD, Diallo is quoted in an SF Gate article saying that, "The Chinese got Chinatown, the Latinos got the Fruitvale and the Mission. We want our equivalent…The only way that Black people are going to be all right and not on the brink of revolution and wanting to burn this s -- down is if we have our own place that we feel like is ours." (Stuhldreher, 2007)

This same article outlines the Diallo's guerrilla development tactics, purchasing properties up and down Pine Street (part of the region of West Oakland known as The Bottoms), beginning with a corner lot on Pine and 10th that Diallo bought at auction for $7,500. In the hopes of creating a viable and thriving Black cultural center upon the completion of Rich Holliday's Central Station condos – the beginning of gentrifying forms of development in West Oakland – Diallo collaborated with Holliday to ensure that buyers who came through Diallo's collective would have the first right to buy in the development. At the height of their work, says collective member Kele Nitoto, the group had a total of nine properties. Kele himself owned a home with his then-fiancée that, even at that time, cost them $515,000. Said his fiancée "We're still poor but we have the house." In addition to controlling real estate, the artists' collective had also worked on civic branding strategies, like renaming the West Oakland BART "Mandela Station" and attempting to obtain recognition from the city as a cultural district.

The collective had their own "First Friday" open gallery events in West Oakland when the Black New World (a performance venue that Kele described as an underground club on Pine and 8th) Diallo's space and another gallery, Cornelia Bell, would open to passers-by. Previously, the collective of artists had hosted hip hop concerts, "sock hops," and spoken word events at the Black Dot Cafe, which began on East 14th in the San Antonio/Fruitvale area. This scene, says Kele, defined a sense of Oakland for a lot of people (personal communication, January 17, 2020). More than a sense, the Black New World enabled neighbors to get a pulse on the goings-on of the community, some describing it as more of a town hall. (Wodsak, Suczynski & Chapple, 2008) Yet the work that this group did was struggling to gain grant money because, as Kele put it, "we were too Black." At this point, they began to collaborate with Greg Morozumi and Elena Serrano, who weren't happy with the way things were being run at La Peña Cultural Center in Berkeley. Out of this combined effort, the non-profit, Eastside Arts Alliance, was created. This powerhouse of an organization would later go on to perpetrate the idea of the East Oakland Black Cultural Zone.

The Village Bottoms collective was strongly united in a vision – a dream – of a once-again Black West Oakland, and worked toward building physical spaces for its manifestation. Yet, they also recognized the grim reality of their situation; says Kele, "there was no…way to fight

[gentrification]. All we could do was get ahead of it and try to control the narrative of what West Oakland was gonna be." Ultimately, however, the goal of the Village Bottoms development plan he tells me, was to bring not only the purchasing power of the Black middle class back from the suburbs into West Oakland, but their embodied commitment to a Black and Afrofuturist space. "We needed the people with money to come down and put down and put their families and their bodies there in West Oakland….We gotta move back into these neighborhoods so we can have our say." But, this being the early 2000s, Nitoto and Diallo were attempting to build a gentrification-resilient neighborhood at a time when the Black middle class was fleeing a city ransacked by deindustrialization, disinvestment, and the incursion of drugs, violence and heavy policing. As Kele put it, people were still "traumatized by the violence in the 80s and 90s" and were wary of purchasing in a neighborhood that had been redlined and already uprooted by eminent domain. The reclamation of space - in terms of financial, embodied and representational commitment - is critical to an anti-displacement praxis for cultural development. Returning again to Dr. Nzinga's question: what is a Black cultural district, the BAMBD, especially without a critical mass of Black people?

…

If it exists, then what does it mean? What is it? The BAMBD is a mapped outline, a thickened spatial metaphor[26], that points toward the interior, unframed work of liberation, the networks of Black life that are not representable.

…

…what does it mean? What is it?": The Inner Worlds of 14th

A resident-run group that organizes walking tours, "Our Oakland," has published a remote Black history walking tour that meanders down the section of 14th between the AAMLO and the Alameda County Courthouse. Stops along the way include the anchor institutions identified by the BAMBD - the Malonga-Casquelord Center for the Arts, and AAMLO - along with several businesses identified for their community and cultural legacy: Geoffrey's, identified by McElhaney as the "sound and heartbeat of Black Oakland" and Joyce Gordon's. By Our Oakland's account, 14th Street has never been actively singled out for Black social production, but has been a literal and figurative avenue for Black political action over the years. Gathering places for direct action, civic engagement, arts and cultural performances, journalistic and intellectual labor all abut the blocks adjacent to 14th Street.

[26] "Metaphors function to radically map existing useable (entwined material and imagined) sites of liberation and joy! Metaphors move us. Metaphors are not just metaphoric, though. They are concretized. This means — if we believe the stories we tell and share — that the metaphoric devices we use to think through Black life are signaling practices of liberation (tangible, theoretical, imaginary) that are otherwise-possible and already here (and over there)." (McKittrick, 2021, p. 12)

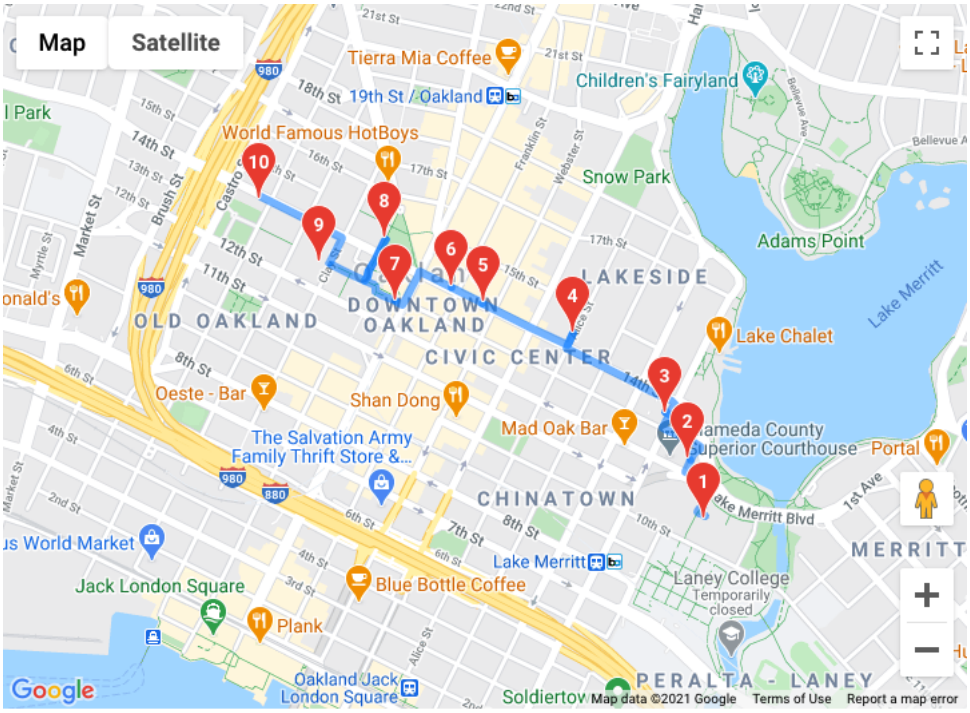

Figure 12: Walking tour route.

That this throughway is being named a Black cultural district is thus a way of calling attention to the centrality of Blackness to Oakland's civic life, rather than a way of enclosing or protecting existing Black institutions. My own walking tour of 14th reveals less about the historical significance of this street, or indeed any outward attempt at "being Black." What these walks reveal is the interiority of Black spatiality, so often disregarded in favor of the public stake.

The Blackness of a space is often marked by the streets or, in this case, a single street. Martin Luther King Jr. Way hugs the 980, delineating "Uptown" from bleak stretches of West Oakland; Black people living on the streets, as is so achingly common, build precarious worlds subject to being "moved-along," to the scream of cars that race past them in exhilarated fear, to the whir of drones taking artsy aerial shots (yes, it is artillery) of their poverty; the economies of working the streets, neon high heels swaying on the pavement at noon and midnight, incense and soaps being brandished from folding tables, quiet deals being made from car windows and street corners; street corners marked with signs and statues that show off the Black Panthers' civic works; sideshows whirling, car wheels tattooing infinity symbols into the Black pavement.
These are functions of the publicity – and pornography – of Black life.

No one in the BAMBD pretends that the spatiality can be contained within a street. Not even McElhaney; histories and political affiliations and residences all stretch the definition of a Black space that claims to be a singular geography. Black spatiality here is always morphing, twisting to meet its mycelial connection to the Diaspora of Black people, and the Diasporas of Black capital flows.

What is it?
Illegible.

Visibility is a tax.
A physical, searing burden.

To see and observe made-for-TV stories, of high drama and spectacle of the Black Panthers' or gang bangers gun, is the warped narrative expense tolled by White spatiality.
And so, walking the length of 14th, I pause at every threshold, awaiting invitation into the backrooms, into obscuration, into a felt space rather than an understood one.

Walking the street between the freeway and the lake, one encounters a rather mundane mélange of businesses, peeling and boarded up flats alongside sprawling new high rise developments. A small storefront sits just across the street from a condo building that's all bay windows, large Black-railing verandas, and kitty corner from City Center plaza and a single room occupancy hotel. The sign, already somewhat obscured by the trees and fire-escape ladders above it, is now almost entirely blocked by the construction façade for a new development next door: *Uncle Willie's BBQ & Fish*. Inside, the purple and yellow candy-striped walls and small tables make the restaurant feel homey; and it is alive with the chatter of popping grease and busy people, most of whom are assembling large tin catering trays back in the kitchen. A young girl sits doing her homework at one of the small tables, bent over a text book while glancing at the phone in her lap. Behind her are a number of framed BBQ-tasting awards alongside a collage of pictures of Willie and his family. Around us, construction workers fill up the small restaurant to order their lunch at the front counter. Grub Hub orders are being placed in plastic bags and set out for pick up. The phone rings consistently. Yet when I ask how business has been, the owner, Willie, says it's been more difficult than usual with the parking that has been lost to construction. And indeed, one man, who appears to be a long-time regular and friend of the family business, chats easily with woman behind the counter about his teenaged son while keeping a nervous eye on his double-parked car.

Figure 13: Uncle Willie's BBQ & Fish - overshadowed by construction. Photo by author.

Willie is short with tufty graying hair and glasses that magnify his already large brown eyes. He speaks with a slight Texas drawl and walks quickly and stiffly in his leather cowboy boots. When he sees me in the restaurant, he comes over and without hesitating, gives me a warm hug, and offers me something to drink on the house for the time I've spent waiting. At a previous BAMBD meeting, I'd heard him speak passionately about his desire to see Black businesses like his survive here. This stretch of 14th Street is, for him, one of the last pockets of Black culture he sees, since the "other side of 980" referring to West Oakland's Black community is "just about gone." "I can't go to East Oakland and hardly find a Black business. Used to be a lot down East 14th." Although originally from Parish, Texas, Willie is invested in Oakland and the form of Blackness that he and others have created here. He's been in business for over 15 years but it's taken all this time to "really feel something"; suddenly, the feeling of family, a regular customer base, the glimmer of economic stability is threatened by shifting ground of development around him. And East Oakland, while home to many residents, does not convey the kind of hope for Black business ownership that he has experienced on 14th.

By the time my meal arrives - a Southern-style fish and chips - I feel as though I've slipped back in time into my grandfather's kitchen. The corn-meal crusted catfish is hot and fresh, transporting me to afternoon fish-fry dinners on grease-stained paper plates, my own short, stiff-legged "Papa" asking me if I wanted any orange juice in his Monroe, Louisiana drawl. When I leave, the woman behind the counter calls after me, saying "Be careful out there hon!" I slip

back out into the gray February chill on 14th feeling profoundly warmed, and walk toward Broadway.

…

14th and Broadway forms the heart of City Center's complicated knot of bus lines, converging diagonal streets (Telegraph and Broadway), government buildings, ongoing construction, and BART entrances. Just a block south of this intersection is 13th, where a number of shootings have occurred over the years alongside the regular set-up of gambling, sex-trafficking, and folding-table sales of various knick-knacks and wares.

The triangular section of sidewalk where Telegraph meets Broadway - the recently renovated Latham Square - is just a few blocks north of 14th. A Peet's coffee shop now occupies the awkward interstitial space, and the square glows quaintly with hanging string lights and old fashioned street lamps. A new yoga studio featuring starkly white mannequins bent into abstract contortions in its large picture windows is across from Telegraph. Opposite this, a pristine high rise - creatively named "17th and Broadway" - shadows the street. Downtown Oakland is unaccustomed to buildings much taller than 14 stories, and the phosphorescent light needed to illuminate the gray streets, now shaded from a southern sun, gives this squashed little corner of The Town an abruptly cold, urban quality. No longer The Town, I could be in San Francisco, Chicago, New York… And yet, Oakland's Black life persists here in the triangular square, and loudly. The oceanic sound of skateboarders jumping the curbs and riding over the newly installed permeable pavers; the quiet bleed of hip hop beats through headphones pressed against someone's short puffy ponytails; the grind of stiff wheels under a collapsible shopping cart laden with someone's livelihood; young Black students sitting on the benches, laughing, joking, heckling one another. They insist on giving the city a feeling, prevent the downtown core from becoming drywall plastered overtop fantastic and dilapidated facades.

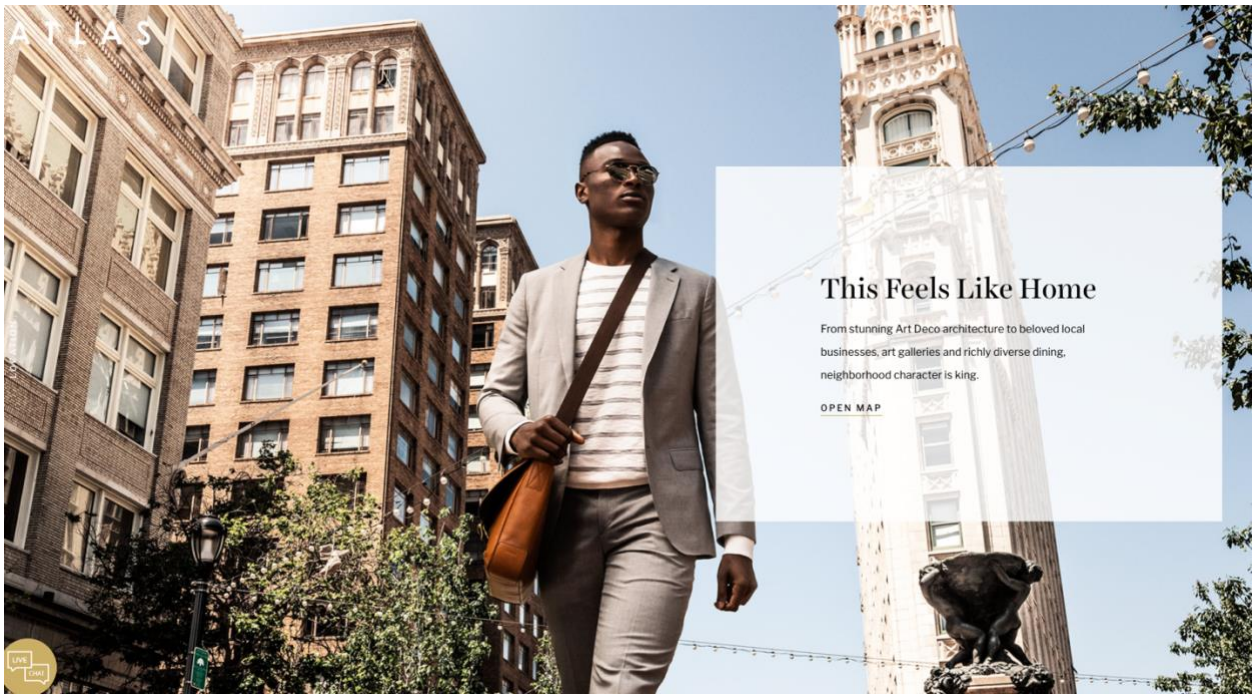

Figure 14: Latham Square, as depicted by the Atlas high rise development.

Just around the corner on 14th between Franklin and Webster, the new Atlas luxury apartment building soars 40 stories above The Town. It grabs at the air of the BAMBD, advertising itself as a "soulful sort of luxury." (Atlas, 2021) Its own interior spaces devoid of affective comfort, the idea of "home" and "soul" is projected out onto the street, onto the persistence of Latham Square, into the BAMBD businesses and galleries. As Blackness is consumed and capitalized upon, it's easy to become cynical, to ask the question again: who is this district serving?

In the middle of this spatial conversation is Betti Ono - a Black arts space owned by Anyka Barber. Barber is careful to avoid calling the shop a gallery, preferring to describe it as a cultural center or, as described repeatedly on her website, a "space for art, culture and community" whose mission is to "build power through culture." The space regularly features gallery installations, and displays a small selection of prints, t-shirts and other merchandise for sale; Betti Ono also hosts community dialogues, readings, and other "experiences" and events. The space occupies two storefronts between a trendy-looking wine bar, a new co-working space, and a cafe that caters to tech workers tired of their near-by offices, or indie writer types, too cheap or poor to rent office space here. The whole row is situated in a building that comprises the outer, eastern edge of City Hall plaza and is owned by the city (Ramirez, 2017). The building where Betti Ono is located is in fact owned by the City of Oakland, being located just around the corner from City Hall. From the beginning, Barber has been requesting a long-term lease from the city, but has only received one-year leases with rent hikes year after year. In December 2015, however, Barber received notice that the gallery's rent would be increased by 60 percent, or $22,000 a year, and was forced to go month-to-month while she determined if the gallery could afford such high rent (Burke, 2016). As a result, Barber began to organize a fundraising campaign to keep Betti Ono in its space. The result was the Power, Love, Resistance campaign, which was kicked off by an event in late March of 2016.

As such, Betti Ono is positioned at the gentrifying heart of downtown Oakland at the intersection of development and city politics; the space itself has therefore been central to Barber's anti-displacement and cultural activism. In 2015, Barber's rent jumped by 60%, which came to $22,000 per year. Previously, when Barber moved into the space in 2010, she had been told that she would eventually be able to secure a long-term lease, and receive support for infrastructural improvements. The abrupt change put the cultural space in danger of closing. Not only did Barber work to fundraise for Betti Ono, but she organized to create the Oakland Creative Neighborhoods Coalition; this activist movement was central to re-starting Oakland's cultural commission - long on hiatus - in a way that would center Black and Brown arts and cultural spaces to advocate against their displacement.

Barber has been at the forefront of arts-based activism, challenging the city of Oakland to put its money where its mouth is for the better part of five years. She has little patience for superficial talk. And so while she is supportive of the BAMBD project (and indeed features it on her website), and understands where "sister Lynette's" heart is in all of this, she scoffs in a tired, bitter way when I tell her that the next meeting is supposed to take place on a First Friday, or that I had found out about the meetings by a happenstance encounter with a flyer posted in a coffee shop many blocks from here. She is principally skeptical of any strategy that prioritizes branding before relationship-building, and resource distribution. For business owners like her who have occupied space here for more than 10 years, it's important to meet with newer business owners. Because, she tells me, "you can't have [just] a symbolic cultural district" or identify a few Black-owned businesses and call it a district. Rather, actions need to be taken that stabilize and support entrepreneurs and artists with brick and mortar spaces. Much as she supports Black cultural space, does her work from a place of Black historical compulsion[27], and seeks to support other Black people in being seen as critical to defining and protecting emplaced cultural legacy, these actions do not begin with an idea or a story. Cultural work is rooted in embodied action, space and the moment. What is the purpose of telling "the story" of the BAMBD when changing a narrative is not the source of political power, but the result of it? To whom does a story or image serve and for what purpose? Even if people know that the BAMBD is here, *what is it?* Defining her place - and her Black community's place - within this spatio-political network, at the center of governmental and capital discourse, takes priority.

All frustration dissolves when familiar customers enter the store, appearing to seek familiar company and refuge. Barber glows in remembering the day Misty Copeland came into the store and complimented Oakland's vibe. And when a Black man in a white pleather jacket comes in asking to buy a shirt from a Black-owned apparel business, she tells him "We're out of stock, but try Queen Hippie Gypsy…owned by a sistah."

In a moment of echoing silence, the song playing from Barber's Spotify station drifts into focus, to which she exclaims "Ah! Oakland!" and turns up the music. It is a mellow, crooning R&B song by Terrace Martin. *My home is in you…/We know what happened in Oakland/ Remember Oakland baby…* The word "Oakland" reverberates at the end of each chorus, tinny and crackling before fading into a smooth saxophone line. The song is a sliding reverie, the somber remorse of someone seeking a past lover, and a past place.
We know what happened in Oakland / Think of Oakland now / Let it hold you somehow.

[27] She is an Oakland local whose family has been here for five generations.

The song comes to a wailing close, and it's time to leave.

…

Even without having to navigate the snarl of traffic on Broadway and 14th, I find that accessing the set of storefronts here is unpleasant. To get to the Benny Adem parlor, I have to pass through the labyrinth of orange barriers and safety netting, erected for the construction of yet another high rise on the corner of 14th and Broadway. The parlor is on the first floor of the building that Geoffrey owns, wedged in next to the stairway ascending to Geoffrey's Inner Circle and Joyce Gordon's gallery; it boasts a modern aesthetic with frosted plate glass windows, a plain black sign printed in curling font, stark bright white lighting, and shiny concrete floors below a surprisingly high, exposed ceiling. Inside, I pass one client, looking absently at a large TV screen while the barber works diligently on his fade, the electric blade cutting clean crisp lines along his temples - almost too clean, like everything inside the parlor. Toward the back of the shop, however, Yusef ushers me toward a few blocky black leather chairs around a coffee table. This, along with the low bookshelf of books by all Black authors here, makes the shop feel more inviting, a little less starkly crisp. "My personal plan," he tells me, "is to have a self-sustaining, thriving business that provides services to the community while partnering with other businesses doing the same." For Yusef, services to the community takes on a broad meaning. The seating area, along with a small room at the very back of his shop, is part of his vision to make the shop into a community space. While he often stresses how barber shops are, already, a kind of refuge for Black men, he wants to stretch the possibilities of his space, making room for a barber school and, by opening a gym in the small back room, a community health program. In addition to contributing to the local ecosystem of Black-owned businesses offering community services, by keeping the boundaries of his shop flexible, Yusef is able to "stay nimble" in a rapidly changing downtown market.

Yusef is comfortable, arms propped up authoritatively on the leather chairs, but he keeps an eye on the comings and goings of the parlor while we talk. So when his eyes dart toward the door and he raises a greeting to a Black woman in an apron, I turn toward her, mirroring his smile. She is holding something small in her hands and, by the way she lightly handled the thing, it is quite delicate or valuable. She asks if Yusef has any pliers, to which he replies that he didn't bring in his tool belt today, but to try asking Darrell, the tattoo artist on the corner. I had seen Darrell before, one exceptionally sunny day, sitting outside of his parlor painting with an airbrush on an easel and making a bit of a show of his artistic practice. Stretched canvases of other designs - a Black and white tableau of TuPac, colorful accentuated depictions of Black women - leaned up against the glass windows of his shop. The woman, Yusef says upon turning back to me, owns Moods Beauty Salon just two doors down. Not long after this encounter, another Black business owner enters the shop to ask if Yusef had seen any packages lately, as he had been expecting a delivery, which had been all the more difficult to receive on the construction-congested street.

Regardless of the outcome of the BAMBD meetings, it is evident that mutual support and community space is built into the operations of the businesses on this block (if not the street). Indeed, the building that Yusef and other Black proprietors on the block rent within is owned by Geoffrey. Yusef, someone so aggressively respectful that he calls me "Ms. Kaily" even by text,

refers to Geoffrey as someone whom he not only respects, but reveres. Geoffrey, along with Joyce Gordon, are considered the elders of 14th street. In addition to providing support and advice to younger business owners, the two represent a cache of Oakland's Black history that anchors (or reinforces) the BAMBD's claim to this region as a Black cultural district. For them, the specific site of Black cultural production in Oakland (and downtown) matters less than the principle of Black occupations of space as a re-appropriation of Oakland. Downtown is a site of economic and representative power; and so when Yusef exclaims in defensive reproach that "people are trying to take [Geoffrey's] real estate" it is a statement that is historically recursive, one that reverberates across "Black Oakland." The feeling of being closed in by high-rise luxury developments, of having one's business constricted by their very construction, is threatening (and indeed threatens their bottom line when losing customers to an impossible parking situation). That Oakland did literally did take Black families' real estate through the process of eminent domain for the purposes of neighborhood "improvement" - a defaulted upon, and anyway always suspect promise - has not been forgotten.

This struggle, not only to own space, but for *empowerment* through spatial occupation, forms what Yusef calls the root of Oakland's Oak tree, which is the emblem of the city. This is, "why he's always giving a history lesson at every meeting," says Yusef with a wry laugh, referring to Geoffrey's regular outbursts and long tirades about Black Oaklanders' fame and contributions to the city. The stakes of the BAMBD project are much larger than "place-making" signs (which are only place-holding representations) - the act of forming partnerships with other space-holding business owners is at once a praxis of Black cultural production and cultural-historical preservation. Preservation not in the form of laminated still-lives of a Black-life past, but the hard form of mutual aid - from small loans, to a handy set of pliers - necessary to sustaining community space.

Next door, Joyce Gordon's gallery is, according to the posted hours, supposed to be closed. But upon peering in past the paintings and an exhibit description in the window, I see an older man shuffling through prints at the back of the gallery. Her gallery space is small, shining wooden floors reflecting the glint of austere white walls and track lighting that illuminates paintings of Black people set in West African village scenes. A few moments after I enter the gallery, a woman strides down the center of narrow space and asks the man for a print that Ms. Joyce had left for her. Upon her inquiry, he tells the woman that he's minding the store for Ms. Joyce; but, upon turning to me, says he's, almost winking, that he's really just a good friend doing her a favor. He soon ushers me out of the gallery, but tells me that Ms. Joyce is just next door in Moods Beauty Salon. And indeed, he waves through the window at two white-haired women at the back of the salon; the woman propped on a stool above the stooped figure in the salon chair is Ms. Joyce Gordon. Upon seeing her, I exclaim "I didn't know you could cut hair too!" She laughs, revealing a wide, gap tooth grin that nudges at her large, gold and Black-rimmed cat eye glasses. Cutting hair, she says, is something she can do in her sleep - something she's been doing for years for her "ladies." While we talk, I watch, entranced, as she deftly handles her scissors to evenly shape the lightly dozing woman's short-cropped, natural gray curls. More sharp, clean lines. Behind her, the woman who had come in for a print is working at a desk perched in an elevated loft above the salon.

Although Ms. Joyce's tone is light-hearted, the sourness of her skepticism as we discuss the BAMBD make her words hard-flecked. While the whole process is, to her mind, well-intentioned, the project has not been well executed. She's concerned about the younger business owners on the street who have more to lose than she does in a (pre-COVID) unstable market, and who haven't been able to benefit from the BAMBD CDC's micro-grant program. "What about the two women who lost their businesses? What about Anyka when she was about to lose her lease with the city? Why didn't they get the money?" There are, in other words, entirely too many needs going unmet by Councilwoman McElhaney's plan for a cultural district. Without real financial support, she says, banners are meaningless. "What's the point for businesses that might not be here?" The words sting - both in their piercing veracity and, like the way she wields her shears, her casual and yet precise delivery.

Not only the future of a Black business district at risk, but the notion of a past or even present Black district here is quantitatively and qualitatively questionable. Ms. Joyce points out that, given the intensity of high-end development here, this particular stretch of Oakland isn't very visibly or obviously Black, saying, "What's a Black business district with a bunch of White people walking around?" Seventeen years ago, when Ms. Joyce established her gallery on 14th, when downtown development was still stagnant or concentrated in Uptown, there wasn't much of a business district worth discussing. Today, she finds that 14th does contain a relatively higher density of Black-owned businesses than other downtown streets; and since her daily walks down the street take her toward the lake and not back across Broadway, she's been surprised to learn, through the BAMBD meetings, about other Black-owned businesses, like Uncle Willie's. Every time she hears him speak, she is heartbroken by the kindness – and desperation – in his voice.

Beyond the Black neighborhood of her block, Joyce does mention Lilly's shop, "Queen Hippie Gypsy." Further from the metallic gleam of development at Broadway, color returns. Even from the street, I can see the walls of Lilly's shop are painted a vibrant shade of magenta, and the store is filled with so many glittering stones that my eye seems to catch on every corner of the space; it rejects the crisp black and white lines of Benny Adem's and Joyce Gordon's Broadway adjacent spaces. This stretch of 14th is also openly disheveled and home to an array of styles and businesses. Across from me, the lower level hosts a diverse assortment of stores: a Halal taqueria whose walls are decorated with spray painted graffiti art and words that read "Maya Halal,", a new, modern looking coffee shop with simple, bold black and white lettering on its awning, and an unassuming shop called "Royal Bling Jewelry" with a sign in its window that reads "Gold grills gold teeth repair." The Afghani restaurant I've visited a few times is just one more door down, past a pile of wet cardboard and a tagged, rusty door that likely leads to an alley loading dock. Glancing up, the building appears to be fairly old - a Victorian style with simple white framed windows and circular, decorative reliefs above them. The gray paint is peeling from its wooden exterior walls and the windows are either boarded up or exposed, empty of glass. A small, faded sign for a realtor named Paula is wedged between two of the western-most windows. Somewhere in this row of buildings, perhaps further down the block, is where the woman who had been requesting emergency anti-displacement funds for her business, had lost her lease. This part of 14th is, on the surface, tethered to the scrappy, gritty affect of diversity, but loosed from the glossy versions of it plastered into the façades of 14th and Broadway.

Figure 15: 14th Street Scene. Photo by author.

Inside, apart from the intensity of color, Queen Hippie Gypsy looks similar to most crystal shops in the Bay Area: bins of glittering gems, incense, candles, bath salts and jars of herbal blends line the wall. Lilly, who is at the back of the store at the register, makes all the difference; even though she is busy with another customer, she waves says hello as I walk in and soon after takes my hand in both of hers in an exuberant greeting. We'd barely begun talking when the phone rings. While on the call, Lilly looks increasingly exasperated by a client's ongoing questions. As soon as she hangs up, she apologizes to the room, which comprises two other Black patrons, for the accusatory, disdainful tone she used when speaking on the phone about earth signs. "Is anyone here an earth sign?" The tall man near us replies simply, "Nope, fire." I tell her I'm an air sign. Another Black woman with hair dyed a very light green and who had just walked in says, hardly missing a beat, that she, like me, is a Libra. Lilly laughs in relief and as more people enter the store, she waves and doles out a generous number of hugs; she tells me, "everyone is family around here."

Busy with customers, Lilly tells me to check out the community space she had created to host events, workshops, and healing circles, up a set of stairs that lead up and away from the bustle of the store. Lilly had hand-painted the glittery rainbow that ran the length of the stairs. The wall here is adorned with simple murals, including a silhouette of a woman blowing dandelion seeds that dance out onto the long, magenta-lit landing. The narrow room is staged with two chairs at one end and, behind the stairwell, a huge altar, with large silver chalices glittering under a green

light. Paintings of Black women hang on every wall. Although the space is small, really a renovated attic, it conveys intimacy rather than stuffiness. This garret gleams.

The real power of the BAMBD is tucked into back rooms, attics and registers that don't ask you to identify yourself at the door, but pull you inside, inward, deeper within the intimate web of relationships that keep the door open, even when the sign says "closed." The invitation to make Black culture here is the act of making structures of support - and this becomes embedded in the language about preservation and promotion - preserving life in the present. It becomes about generating spaces for vibe to persist, quietly, intimately, in the backrooms where it's always been, not in the banners or sidewalk signs.

"We pull up our own boots…"

Skepticism of government intervention - even by a Black councilperson like McElhaney who ostensibly represented Black constituent interests - has long been a theme in the creation and evolution of the BAMBD. According to McElhaney's own record of the origins of the district, community "elders" were reluctant to designate a Business Improvement District or Cultural District, stating that "initial response [was] tepid due to a history of City Administrations being utilized to disrupt and close down Black businesses." For instance, in 2009, Geoffrey Pete filed a federal civil law suit against the Oakland Police Department, documenting a pattern of racially targeted overtime fees, and security requirements for Black downtown entertainment establishments. Pete, refusing to pay the fines, was forced to temporarily close his club over a story, fabricated by then-Sergeant Kyle Thomas, about drugs and violence occurring in his customers' garage. The same OPD sergeant was known for forcing other downtown businesses - either Black owned or patronized by Black people - to close down (East Bay Express, 2011). By this time the Black political bloc that had come to characterize Oakland city government in the 1970s-1990s had begun to wane. And although clubs like Geoffrey's Inner Circle was a refuge and stomping ground for many Black politicians, the institution of the City has remained something of a grudging ally for many.[28]

Yusef had told me that, according to elders he had spoken with prior to opening his parlor, that to go into business downtown was to go into politics. Invariably, the city - and all of the non-governmental political actors who also occupy space and positions of power here - are enmeshed in the web of business dealings he and others like him must deal with. Nevertheless, he tells me that he's very reluctant to let them "get in the way." Upon hearing himself say this, he pauses to backtrack a bit. He doesn't mean to take a traditional anti-government, capitalistic stance, but, he tells me, "we pull up our own boots" and don't have a problem with "doing our work." Though he doesn't specifically define the "we" in this sentiment, I take this to mean the "we" of the business owners, the network of Black entrepreneurs who have taken pains to reach out as neighbors, friends, and mentors. This community sits apart from a formal representational body. They are, for Yusef, the roots of Oakland's tree - rooted amidst one another's networks of care.

Barber - a tenant of the city itself - is unflinching in her cynicism toward the government. In her own activism around building and protecting spaces for Black and POC businesses, arts and

[28] After all, a number of atrocities against Black Oakland communities were committed by Black representatives - like W. Oakland's "redevelopment" by John B. Williams, and Lionel Wilson's mayorship came with thousands being poured into saving Oakland Coliseum rather than its surrounding communities, decimated by drugs.

culture in West, East and downtown Oakland, involving the city is usually more work than it's worth. Red tape and drawn-out, repetitive discussions drag out the process of establishing something; this is time that many space-holders, without the funds to pay for next month's rent, do not have. Additionally, while marketing the aesthetic veneer of Blackness - of Oakland's vibe - might be lucrative for the city and those who can afford the marketing, the actual lived-experience of being a Black business owner is mired in difficulties, including what Barber notes as the continuation of redlining and racist practices that put her at the bottom of public and private power holders' priority list.

Self-determination is the goal for business-owners like Barber and Yusef. Neither want to rely upon a power structure that continues to restrict their ability to create and define Black space in Oakland. Similarly to Yusef, Barber shirks away from capitalism, knowing it to be an imperfect tool, to say the least. Yet it appears the only means by which self-determined liberation is possible, not to mention the only option available for survival. In lieu of collective ownership models - free from banks, businesses, developers or government bureaucracy - these entrepreneurs and place-makers reluctantly accept capitalism as the framework through which self-determination is possible. Recognizing the limitation of this type of organizing, Barber asks very poignant, if exasperated, question: When and where is Black organizing *from a place of liberation?* Is there any way to move freely, not a struggle against the conditions of power that rely upon violent encounters with Blackness, and not in wincing collaboration with those same structures? *Places of liberation* are exactly what business-owners (and the CDC organizations) are attempting to create.

The ABBAO project in the BAMBD resists acts of government intervention; but the BAMBD itself is an operationalization of centralized representative power. In this project, we see an emergent neoliberalism that is at once self-conscious and critical of capitalism while cognizant of perpetuating this cycle. To this point, the community spaces contained within otherwise transactional business spaces are physical examples of the way that places of liberation are being produced within the framework of capitalist occupations of space. Interiority, spaces of freedom, connection and vibe, exist within - and around - the structure of capitalist space.

"Let the world be a Black Poem"[29]: Understanding Spatial Reclamation through the Black Arts Movement

The Black Arts Movement (BAM) is clearly at the core of the BAMBD's creation. It also underlies the Black Cultural Zone via the political orientation of one of its founding institutions, Eastside Arts Alliance. While the legacy of the Black Power movement, particularly as represented by the Black Panthers, is a prominent piece of Oakland's Blackness, it is significant that the Black Arts Movement is an inspiration many formations of property accrual and Black space in the city.

While still rooted in the politics of Black self-determination, the BAM is noted for diverging from the Black Power Movement in the way it attended to cultural nationalism and the expression and cultivation of soul: Black (Afro-centric) spirituality, culture and aesthetic practices. The founders of this movement – including, most notably, Amiri Baraka – insist that

[29] (Baraka, 1979)

these cultural practices are central to the mobilization of Black Power. Making the physical space for artistic and affective expression takes precedence over jockeying for political or economic power within what Black radicals view as an already corrupt system. Producing the Black aesthetic is tantamount to producing Black spaces of self-determination, because the Black aesthetic is, first and foremost, a set of ethics (Neal, 1968). It is at once a style of representation of ways of Black being, and a reflection of the idea of "soul."

The leaders of Eastside Arts Alliance – Greg Morozumi and Elena Serrano – are also students of Black radicalism and the BAM; Greg, in particular, was a long-time friend and acolyte of Amiri Baraka. Their approach to the creation of the Black Cultural Zone (to be discussed further in the subsequent chapter) is rooted in a preeminent concern with developing spaces for Black cultural production. Just as in the BAMBD, these arguments often seem to weigh less than the urgent need to build and sustain such spaces. The near-sanctity of such spaces is mutually agreed upon, however, in the consistency of *the arts* as being foundational to Black spatial reclamation in Oakland. Art and aesthetics are the language of vibe and soul – manifestations of emplaced and racialized ways of being. That Blackness in Oakland is necessarily hinged around Black art suggests an insistence that while vibe might be (and must be) appropriated in the market, room must be made, too, for the nonrepresentational forms of life, of care.

What the symbolism of the BAMD reveals – from its naming to its messaging through geographic location – is an attentiveness to the way that Blackness as affect, be it through a BAM description of soul or a casual mention of vibe, must be built into Black claims to space. The emblem of Black Oakland through Black Arts operationalizes both of vibe's dialectic utilities: as something that may be appropriated and leveraged for economic gain and as a Black sense of place that resists enclosure and remains open to the Oakland Black diaspora. The BAMBD project, as it stands, rests uneasily between this tension. Currently, McElhaney's vision skews heavily toward telling a story without material benefit or support for the spaces of interiority that already exist along 14th. While the CDC is able to leverage more of these resources for artists and businesses within the district, the ABBAO was created to formalize the structure of community alliance between specifically Black spaces and artists. The result is a Black cultural district that is operating at two very different scales: the ungrounded narrative of Black Oakland, and the small, familial back-room spaces of 14th Street that have given rise to and perpetuate such a story. What's left are the people in between, filling in the spaces of Blackness in a city being emptied of Black people.

Chapter Four:

Land is Liberation: The Black Cultural Zone as an emancipatory approach to traditional development framing

"*Are reclamation, preservation, and remembrance merely a question of re-enacting hegemony, or are these processes a defining feature of regional identity and humanity? The act of making corners, neighbourhoods, communities, cities, rural lands, rivers, and mountains sacred is central to their defence and the defence of the communities that love and cherish them*." (McKittrick & Woods, 2007, p. 5)

"*A whole world is jammed into one short block crowded with Black folks shut out from almost every opportunity the city affords, but still intoxicated with freedom. The air is alive with the possibilities of assembling, gathering, congregating*." (Hartman, 2020, p. 8)

Land is liberation. This is the refrain of the Black Cultural Zone (BCZ), and represents the motivation behind the BCZ's collaborative work to purchase and repurpose spaces across East Oakland. Liberation, here, is imagined as Black communal thriving and a refusal of the "forces of gentrification." Within this context, "land" is more than an acquisition of property; it is the means by which Black relationality may continue to produce the possibility of liberation against the confinement of capitalist privatization, exploitative racialization, and government policy.

Policy, according to Harney & Moten (2013), is an attempt to control the means of social reproduction. To plan from the undercommons, as members of the BCZ Collaborative do, is to cohere the means of reproducing Oakland via Black life, functions of which have been represented and exploited by the city as the commercialization of vibe. Yet planning is "not an activity, not fishing or dancing or teaching or loving, but the ceaseless experiment with the futurial presence of the forms of life that make such activities possible." (pp. 74-5) Rather than working in service of policy by adhering to discrete allocations for cultural districts, the BCZ reclaims Black Oakland through its affective forms of vibe, principally through joyful, cultural forms of gathering. Gathering irrupts in various forms of interior spatiality, wedges itself comfortably into the back rooms and back streets of formalized space.

The cultural planning of the BCZ represents the emergence of an emancipatory reclamation of space, a wresting from two-dimensional visions of Oakland's diverse spaces. Embedded as its community development principles are in both Black capitalism and Black radicalism, the BCZ presents a partial view of liberation, wherein "land" is a formulation of a variety of interconnected gathering spaces that produce and protect structures of care, relationality and *vibe.* Rather than being driven strictly by capital or policy, these affective spaces become methods of "activation" that utilize their value as a space of social reproduction to make claims to space.

Occupying abandoned, marginalized, or otherwise invisibilized spaces is also a kind of marronage, "a group of persons isolating themselves from a surrounding society in order to create a fully autonomous community" (Roberts, 2015, p. 4). In Roberts' estimation of freedom, liberation is enacted through flight, and that freedom is not a place, but a state of being. Robin

D.G. Kelley (2002) too locates freedom as a verb, an exodus, the ability to move and build and be beyond the limitations of the current condition. The BCZ, however, proposes a form of marronage whose flight is mobilized by a refusal to move, and whose freedom is imagined as an archipelago of decentralized, liminal, and porous spaces that make a more liberated state of being possible.

The quality, rather than achievement, of freedom is what is at stake here. The sense of freedom that Massumi (1995) suggests that latent within affect - as something that is never fully arrived at - is congruent with the way that freedom is formulated as a not-yet-there, horizonal and unknowable quality of Blackness, fugitivity. The space of affect is comprised of paradoxes, the collapse of binaries. So too are the spaces of near-freedom as they have been cond in the vibe of Black places. The BCZ is an assertion of a "queered belonging" (Ellis, 2015) to Oakland through its attempts to secure economic and branded control of land, along with attempts to hold onto an imaginary, remembered, hoped for, affective claim. Freedom is in the elsewhere of a mooring to the unstable ideas and soils of the city.

The project, or really problem, of freedom here is one of the economies of affect, rather than a question of governance. While still constrained within grant funding infrastructures and the land-use permissions of the city of Oakland, the BCZ and its participants seek the "right" to place, an idea expressed through transactional ownership that also legitimizes a claim to the vibe and brand of Oakland. Similarly to the way that Yarimar Bonilla (2015) describes the project of "non-sovereign futures," the BCZ's form of liberation grapples with the limitations of modern scripts for freedom that rely on property and liberal individualism. Land as liberation positions space and rights to the affective and material use of that space as basic to freedom. The property relationship is less important to this equation for liberation than what *land*, held in trust, offers for the perpetuation of spaces of interiority.

Unlike the BAMBD, the BCZ opens the private spaces of interiority to semi-private spaces of gathering. Rather than occupying the back room of a single business, the BCZ occupies the back yards of under-utilized spaces, compelling mass occupation for political and economic "activation." Activation serves to both outwardly enliven the low-income communities in which they are embedded, and to placate "vibrancy" seekers from the city and funding agencies with good optics. In the process, BCZ members and participants are collectively cooperating in the reclamation of space that does not cohere within a frame of city policies that confine Blackness to a corridor.

The collective that gathers at the BCZ generates the social capital needed to leverage funder and city interest with little interference or manipulation. An element of independent business, capitalist participation remains as vital to liberatory spaces of gathering as they do to those of interiority. "Activation" is as much about arts and political gathering as it is the opportunity to support Black economic livelihood. The ability to fiscally and materially care for one another is a central figure in the spatial imaginary of East Oakland's future and the BCZ. In this chapter, I use references to "the deep deep" of East Oakland as an instantiation of care. I understand care here to track with political or social practices of care. In activist circles, this is often expressed as "mutual aid." Dean Spade (2020) defines mutual aid as, "a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not

just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable." (p. 136) While this presents as a series of neoliberal projects that refute government aid, Spade argues that they offer provisions where public services have failed or been made inaccessible (p. 143).

In this chapter, I understand the BCZ as a territorially broad network that relies upon and produce spaces for internality through a nonlinear weaving of business, spiritual, and cultural congregational nodes in East Oakland. The feeling of being cared for in the refuge of these spaces is the basis for making Black people and Blackness matter – a function of in-group visibility that generates vibe, a quality of life that produces economic value, and produces Oakland. This has consequence for the collective's ability to build the social and financial capital needed to claim land and make possible the movement toward liberation. While still rooted in a form of capitalist formulations of freedom, it represents an emancipatory break from cultural development frames.

The Feeling of Color

Walking west on East 14th from Fruitvale BART toward Eastside Arts Alliance (referenced below as ESAA or Eastside), the difference between the Latinx cultural business district concentrated near BART and the gaps of bare concrete beyond it is palpable. The *paseo* that leads from the BART transit-oriented development plaza to East 14th gives way to a crowded array of storefronts of Fruitvale Village that stretches a few blocks east and west. I linger over the smells as they waft past me: the acrid odor of cheap plastic from the dollar store, the punch of warm, corn-flavored air as I pass a taqueria, a sweet floral perfume as I walk behind a woman pushing a small child in a Minnie Mouse stroller. This section of International feels close, and cool under the cover of tall trees. People speak Spanish on the street, pause in the shade, walk slowly down the sidewalk. The T-shirts hung in the window are all in Spanish, and notably, are not about Oakland - a shift from the shirts that loudly read "A Tribe Called Oakland" or "Straight Outta Oakland" that I've seen at independent vendor booths while circumambulating Lake Merritt. The tree-lined business sector gives way to fewer trees and number of newer-looking apartment complexes, some which are affordable housing developments. Within a few blocks, however, the street begins to feel more unforgiving, the sun inescapable as it beats down on uninterrupted blocks of blank buildings and darkened dive bars. My pace slows in the heat and I count down the numbered north-south streets dragging past me: 30th, 29th, 28th… For once, I yearn for the litter of electric scooters that plague downtown. But East, and some of West Oakland, lie outside of the designated, higher-income "parking" zones for many app-based transit rentals - including scooters, bikes and cars. I crane my neck behind me at every bus stop to look for the number 1 AC Transit bus that runs the length of East 14th from downtown to the San Leandro BART Station. But it is, somewhat ironically, delayed, backed up behind a chokehold of one-lane traffic caused by construction on a new Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) line.

In spite of the clear lack of accessible alternative transit options in East Oakland, the BRT is viewed with justified anxiety by community members who fear that this signifies the advancement of gentrification. With some East Oakland housing values increasing, its relative inaccessibility offered some protection against the tide of reverse suburbanization - the result of White home-buyers returning to city centers seeking the convenience of public transit while displacing "inner-city" residents further to the suburbs. Although the BRT would not bring me to

Eastside Arts Alliance that day, it is, indirectly, what brought me to their front door. Foreseeing the potential harm the BRT might have on East Oakland communities of color, Elena Serrano, co-director of ESAA, was one of the principal advocates for creating a Black Cultural Zone (BCZ) in East Oakland as a means of fortifying the community against the growing forces of displacement.

Rather than assuming a traditional development strategy of building homes and businesses first, Eastside takes a radical Black Arts approach to development that centers Black cultural power. Unlike the BAMBD, however, ESAA's cultural strategies do not begin with an abstraction of Black history, or an image of community that is designed around token institutions or sign-posting. Instead, I understand the organization to be drawing upon the pre-existing vibe (diversity, creativity, and familiarity) of local neighborhoods as a source of culture, tradition and, therefore, a sense of place. This then becomes the political and economic basis for grouping a wide networks of advocates, organizers, business-owners, artists, politicians, realtors within the Black Cultural Zone. The BCZ is a broad and ambitious attempt to reclaim large swaths of East Oakland in the name of protecting "Oakland's Black Culture" and spaces of interiority that sustainably foster this culture. ESAA and the BCZ Collective thus use grassroots models of organizing in order to generate enough social capital to move sources of financial capital to re-appropriate land and place.

BRT & the Fruitvale Village Model

The East Bay Bust Rapid Transit project intends to improve transportation, as well as offer public art, walkways and bike lanes, along the 9.5 mile stretch from San Leandro to the Uptown region of Oakland. A designated bus lane running down the center of East 14th, along with other functions and more frequent service, is meant to make the bus operate something like a streetcar or light rail line. Already, however, the construction's negative affect on traffic and parking has forced some businesses to close (Savidge, 2020). Having opened in 2020 at the height of the pandemic, the benefits of rapid public transit for business districts is off to a slow start with ridership down.

The project is part of a larger redevelopment campaign for "International Boulevard." Outreach around the BRT's development was led by the City of Oakland and the Oakland Sustainable Neighborhood Initiative (OSNI), a three-year working group comprised of community based organizations, East Oakland residents, and AC Transit representatives. Community presentations and maps assembled by the Urban Strategies Council in 2013 and 2014 lay the groundwork for establishing Transit Oriented Development (TOD) projects and policies that might equitably "guide investment on the heels of BRT." (OSNI Presentation) East 14th, one of the most disinvested business corridors in the city, is certainly primed for redevelopment (see Fig. 16). Even though Eastside's front doors open onto East 14th and an AC Transit bus stop, they were not informed about the project, or OSNI, until the second year of the community input process.

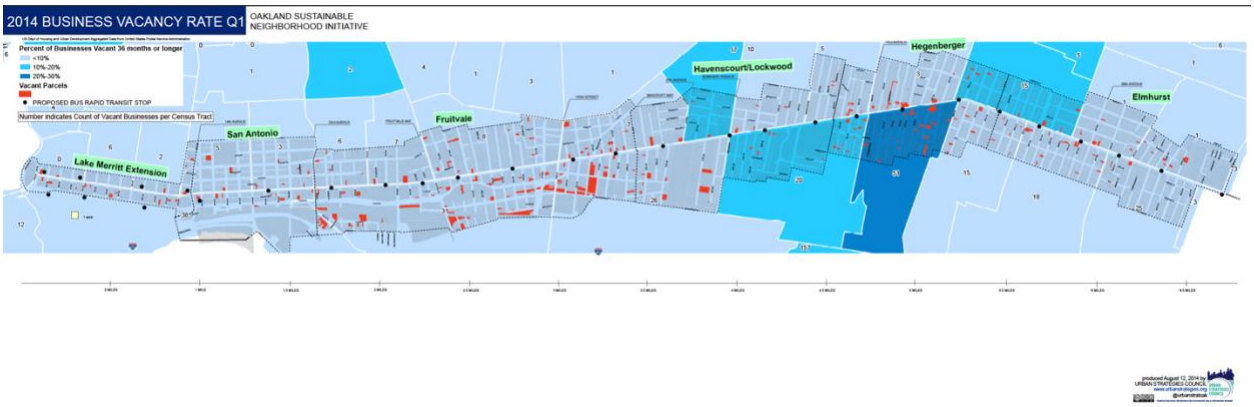

Figure 16: OSNI Map of the BRT and adjacent vacant business sites. (Urban Strategies Council, 2014)

Akin to some of the complaints Black business-owners placed regarding the implementation of bike lanes in a downtown development plan that reduces parking availability for a displaced customer base, the city's desire to retrofit its development for a more sustainable future has tended to conflict with low-income residential and business needs. Keeping sustainable transit-oriented development from displacing pre-existing residents of the surrounding neighborhood has been a consistent challenge for developers and community organizers alike.

The Fruitvale Village Transit Oriented Development has been lauded as a national model for equitable TOD projects. Fruitvale was developed in partnership with the long-serving institution, The Unity Council, a Spanish-speaking community development corporation that began serving the Fruitvale district in 1964. The mixed use development here is comprised of 47 units, 10 of which were made affordable to 35-80% of the area median income. In addition to bringing together businesses and some affordable housing, the Village includes community resource centers like a senior center, community healthcare clinic, library and preschool (The Unity Council, 2021).

Prior to the village TOD project, the Fruitvale region was known as a predominantly Latinx[30] neighborhood, though commercial activity had been largely disrupted after the construction of the MacArthur and Nimitz freeways. (OCCUR, c.a. 1985) While reports that Fruitvale has mostly retained its integrity of a predominately Latinx population, housing prices still went up in the area and it is unclear how much of a success this project has been in preventing gentrification indicate (Barreto, Diaz, & Reny, 201; Cortright, 2018). Nevertheless, it has still held up as the pinnacle of success when it comes to models for environmentally-conscious development without displacement. Due to its reputation and, moreover, its density of cultural offerings, Fruitvale is commonly referenced in discussions about Black cultural districting.

The BCZ, however, is not intending to organize itself specifically around transit hubs along the BRT. While arising out of concerns about the BRT, the BCZ is one of many imagined cultural

[30] Although, according to Juan Herrera (2016), Latinx organizing in Oakland has historically rejected a geographic delimitation. The Fruitvale TAAC established during the 1960s War on Poverty programs pushed back on the "Fruitvale" determiner of what was functionally the only committee that served Oakland's Spanish speaking communities.

hubs across Oakland that are meant arise as geographically organic, centralizing around where people are rather than around institution-driven development. In this sense, it is actively resisting government directed development and pursuing an independent resistance based model of development and community based cultural investment.

Eastside Arts Alliance: "Culture is a Weapon"

When I finally do reach Eastside, I notice how refreshing the sudden splash of murals here is. The color after the last few blocks of fast-food and gray cracking concrete feels like cool water on this hot day. About a half a block west of the center is an empty lot to which Eastside has gained some access rights. As a result, the old, white-washed and boarded up gas station here has been overtaken with bright, florid yellows and blues. Women bloom from open brown palms, *sueños* pinned to their chests. Behind this mural, another grows up from the weeds at the back of this lot. More muted tones give the illusion that tinted Black and white photos of Black Panthers have been painted on the wall. Above a raised fist is the phrase that often greets me on my way to the center: "Culture is a Weapon."[31] It's a reminder that the way that I feel physically changed here – surrounded as the center is by daily, demoralizing reminders of poverty and neglect – is a form of power and beauty in and of itself.

On this same block is where Eastside started their "Oakland is Proud" annual series of block parties in 2014. This was their initial pushback against the BRT redevelopment plan and a primary means of gaining more community feedback about the project. Within each of their events, Eastside maintains an underlying commitment to the concept of cultural gathering as being tantamount to political organizing. Given that their center, neighbors, staff and extensive network of affiliates were largely unaware of the BRT project and OSNI meetings, neighborhood gatherings like this one become a means of more effective communication about city-wide development. Said one then-Eastside organizer, Maisha Quint, these block parties are part of an effort to develop cultural plazas in every neighborhood that celebrate Oakland's diversity and offer the opportunity "to gather together with our neighbors, to celebrate ourselves, and to figure out how as a group we can make those changes that we need." In another refutation of institutionally-driven development, Quint continues, "We can't rely on other people all the time. Sometimes we have to do it ourselves." In the long run, Eastside would like to block off this portion of 23rd between East 12th and East 14th and make it into a permanent cultural plaza. Neighborhood cultural events are thus not only emotionally and politically galvanizing, but productive of making and claiming a collective investment in space. As Elena would put it with regards to the BCZ, "We need to claim as much cultural space as possible…this is the time to get plugged in and claim your neighborhood," government directed development without displacement plans aside (Bay Area News Group, 2016).

Unlike many of the racial and economic justice organizations that lattice Oakland's dense political network, Eastside stands out in that they do not emphasize the development of jobs or housing in their community development strategies. Rather, the lead organizers and founders of Eastside Arts Alliance, Greg Morozumi and Elena Serrano, insist upon leading with arts and cultural development. This would seem a backward strategy, given that it does not appear to meet Black and Brown community's basic needs. What it offers, however, is perhaps more

[31] "Culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle." – Malcolm X

empowering, suggesting that everything that the community needs can be obtained by leveraging the collective power already present in one's neighborhood. Pride, familial connection, and self-determination - central aspects of Oakland's vibe - may be expressed through cultural demonstrations that do not require a permanent space or reliance on financial capital to occur. Such demonstrations are more than merely affective - they are expressive of the potentially revolutionary power of a people united against oppression.

Eastside began when Greg and Elena, working at La Peña Cultural Center in Berkeley, realized that the kind of third world international solidarity being practiced there needed to start by addressing issues in Oakland. The two organized the first of what would be an annual Malcolm X Jazz Festival in 2000; in addition to this, the two continued to put together events on their own in a variety of spaces. Specifically, Elena says, they chose to focus on the San Antonio district just east of Fruitvale, because that was "where that kind of coming together of Black, Asian, Latino cultures was all right there and Indigenous as well." Whereas arts organizations like the Black Dot collective[32] would accumulate properties to develop the Village Bottoms Black cultural space in West Oakland without the financial or social capital to back their vision, Greg and Elena slowly built a reputation, through community events and meetings, persistently attempting to convince funders and developers of the importance of cultural power[33]. Although "vibrancy" has become something of a buzzword for funders and policy researchers advocating for high-level municipal development, it has been difficult for these same actors to understand that the lively vibe of diversity and "authenticity" so valued in cosmopolitan life is also at the center of basic needs for poorer communities. This argument has taken time to build, as Elena explains:

> "We were really a struggling organization, so we would sit in on these…community meetings. For instance, there was a foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation…[and] so there were a lot of community meetings…[They said] we want to know what the San Antonio neighborhood needs. You know, we need everything. We need housing and jobs and something besides the police and all this. And these whole list would be being made and we would kind of put up, you know, but…we would lead with this: We have this amazing diversity of culture. This is our strength. This is like the strength of the neighborhood. And we were kind of pitching the cultural center space at these meetings as a space where we kind of focus on our assets instead of what we are lacking, focus on what we have, and come together with the idea of building power, enough community power to get all that other stuff done. And amazingly…what do you think we need first? [It] would go to the cultural center, you know, which kind of blew the Annie E. Casey people's minds because [that] wasn't even on their radar. You know, they had all these books about housing and jobs and blah, blah. So, you know, we built that kind of community support for it." (personal communication, October 21, 2020)

While their presence may have enlivened and mobilized the San Antonio community, Eastside needed its own space to sustain a regular group of supporters. The good faith they had generated in the neighborhood and among funders enabled them to get their foot in the door to purchase the

[32] This organization had its first cafe on 23rd and East 14th, adjacent to Eastside's current location.
[33] The Oakland is Proud block party events received funding from the National Endowment of the Arts, one of the leading arts and cultural funding organizations that has centralized the use of "vibrancy" and diversity in its metrics for the ways that are produces a community good.

building on 23rd and East 14th with the help of a $1 million dollar donation. Their ability to make neighborhood vitality visible and relevant to atypical philanthropist and government funders also represents an important means by which desirable and trendy representations of art and diversity are being leveraged for community good. Nevertheless, non-white cultural capital on its own was not enough to back a loan. "It's just really hard to sell cultural stuff as there's no financial return on investment. There's like a community building, power, building strength, resilience, joy, return on investment."[34] The organization was able to get an agreeable loan for the $3.3 million building that they finished paying off in 2015.

The social capital that Eastside accrued doesn't generate enough fiscal growth to matter much to a bank; it does, however, expand the social capacity of the center by developing new, economically stable spaces of interiority from which political and cultural power might be generated. This is important in two, mutually supporting ways: (1) facilitating a deep commitment to revolutionary Black study and (2) exposing more people to community organizing beyond time-bound events.

Black Study

The radical power of cultural organizing as it is rooted in the Third World and Black Liberation movements is central to Eastside's theory of community development. This is reflected in the recently opened book store adjacent to Eastside's main theater space: Bandung Books. In addition to being an instantiated reference to the Bandung Conference of 1954 that kicked off the third world Non-Aligned Movement of liberated nations, the bookstore itself features a wide range of used and rare books on such topics as critical race theory, art, Marxism, and anti-colonial historiographies. Greg Morozumi in particular takes Black study [35](Harney & Moten, 2013) quite seriously in the way he directs the center, staff, and its events. Greg, Elena tells me, is the one who makes sure that each of the Malcolm X Jazz festivals are not just events, but organized around a political theme each year. Staff meetings are regularly interspersed with designated discussion groups. Rather than continuing with mundane discussions about event organizing or fundraising, the staff, gathered around large fold-out tables and plied with generous helpings of red wine and Thai take-out, discuss the readings[36] that Greg has sent around.

The temporal, spatial and political imaginaries they study with and for in the everyday spaces of Eastside are live connections being re-wrought in ESAA's community projects. Figures like Angela Davis and Ericka Huggins are not only still active in political and intellectual activity writ-large, but maintain relationships with Eastside through Greg and Elena. Both grew up in or close to New York City, and have brought some of the political, relational and arts formations of Harlem, Newark and the Black Arts Movement with them into East Oakland. The kind of jazz and blues that Amiri Baraka critiqued floats as easily through the bookstore as familiar recollections of him, Sonia Sanchez, June Jordan, Kathleen Cleaver and Bobby Seale.

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[34] ESAA is adept at maneuvering the non-profit industrial complex of grant funding, but, at least in theory, rejects the need to justify or provide a measurable return on the granter's investment.

[35] "Study, a mode of thinking with others separate from the thinking that the institution requires of you, prepares us to be embedded in what Harney calls 'the with and for' and allows you to spend less time antagonized and antagonizing." (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 11)

[36] The discussion group I attended had Black Feminism as its theme and included a set of questions on readings by Gloria Anzaldua, the Combahee River Collective, Angela Davis and bell hooks.

Interiority

The day the former chairman of the Black Panther Party ambled into Bandung Books was an ordinary Thursday afternoon. The front desk was empty, as were the two love seats nested against the plate glass windows looking out onto East 14th. From the street, the bookstore appeared to be a quiet, colorful anomaly on the block. Behind the rows of short bookshelves, however, Eastside came to life. Here, the regular volunteers were crowded around a table, chatting about history, racism, and radical love, picking absently at a communal plate of fries and churros, sipping coffee or wine. One of Greg's vinyl albums played from the large entertainment set up against the adjacent wall, and the smell of someone's lunch cooking wafted toward us from the back kitchen. Greg was busy unloading a stack of books, *Seize the Time*, getting them ready for Bobby Seale to sign - gifts for the group of formerly incarcerated individuals who met here each week to talk and gain job skills. When he arrived, the center of gravity in the room shifted. Knowing he had an audience, Mr. Seale, a respected elder and important figure in his own right, had barely reached the back of the bookstore before he'd begun unspooling stories and hoary jokes. As Mr. Seale held court for some three hours, other volunteers, friends, neighbors and associated artists would saunter in and join the audience, interjecting, laughing, staring mutely, asking questions, all delighted by the chance, intimate encounter.

In the midst of an animated re-telling of Little Bobby Hutton's demise, I leaned over to one of the volunteers to comment that the bookstore - then only one year old - had made a significant difference in terms of making Eastside into a community space. In my previous attempts to connect with the center, I had b
een limited to engaging with Greg, Elena, and the other volunteers and artists at events, such as their weekly poetry slam nights or one of the larger, annual neighborhood festivals. These left scattered impressions amidst a haze of affect and sociality, and no real sense of place through which to build relationships. The back of the bookstore, however, held space, pressed each of us closer together in the matrix of Oakland's intimate networks of familiarity and political resistance.

Eastside advocates primarily for forms of cultural resistance that don't require permanent space and for public plazas in which such transient methods of political organizing might occur. Events and gatherings in public and public/private spaces are meant to develop a collective and emplaced sense of self. These connections prove important for leveraging social and financial capital toward a particular cause - be that a community center, development project, or political aim. Eastside's projects generated enough of a community support base to receive serious attention from funders, thereby giving them some grounds for obtaining a physical space. The center, and particularly the business rather than the theater, functions as a space through which familiarity and relationships among locals might be formed to sustain ongoing political and cultural organizing efforts. The feeling of comfort, twinned with connection to an inspiring, intergenerational and diverse set of leaders, imbues participants with what has best been described as Oakland's vibe. Such spaces of interiority, ones that intrinsically reject top-down development-oriented frames for cultural districting as with BAMBD, are therefore integral to long-term strategies of spatial reclamation.

The BCZ: A Decentralized Collective

"I wonder if culture can work." A Kenyan-American artist who has made himself at home at Eastside for years, and generally agrees with its priorities, wonders this aloud while standing in the threshold of the kitchen in Bandung Books. "Can it sustain us?" The answer to his question seems to unfold before and around us as people rush past, carrying steaming pots of Black-eyed peas, collard greens, yams, tamales, and mulled wine over to the theater space where ESAA's annual holiday party and crafts fair is happening. Cultural organizing may be a priority, but it cannot be separated from an economic and built investment in place that makes collective care and cultural production sustainable.

This is the thinking behind Eastside's proposal for an East Oakland Black Cultural Zone. True to form, as soon as Eastside joined OSNI's discussion about the BRT, they proposed cultural investment - designed around the social architecture of the public plaza - as a priority in any development plans. Elena had conceived of the idea of a Black Cultural Zone in conjunction with six other cultural hubs across the city: Eastside Arts Alliance (considered the "Third World hub") the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts in downtown Oakland, the Oakland Asian Cultural Center in Chinatown, Fruitvale Plaza, Intertribal Friendship House east of Lake Merritt, and 7th Street in West Oakland (although what exactly this may become has been posed as something of a question mark). Acknowledging the tendency in economic strategies to excise the cultural or community element, Elena told an interviewer, "Black people need places to live in Oakland, places to work in Oakland, *and* places to gather and celebrate…It's not just about making money, it's about building social capital." (emphasis mine, Bay Area News Group, 2016)

Once the Black Cultural Zone idea had taken root, Eastside along with its partner organizations[37], began gathering community support to identify and raise funds for the BCZ's physical location. Broadly, they established a 50x50 square block area in The Flats between High Street and the San Leandro border. And when their well-funded and bid for the historic Safeway headquarters site on East 14th fell through, the collective pursued their ambitious, multi-faceted and multi-sited plan for grassroots community development.

[37] East Oakland Collective, East Oakland Building Healthy Communities, Just Cities, and Allen Temple Baptist Church

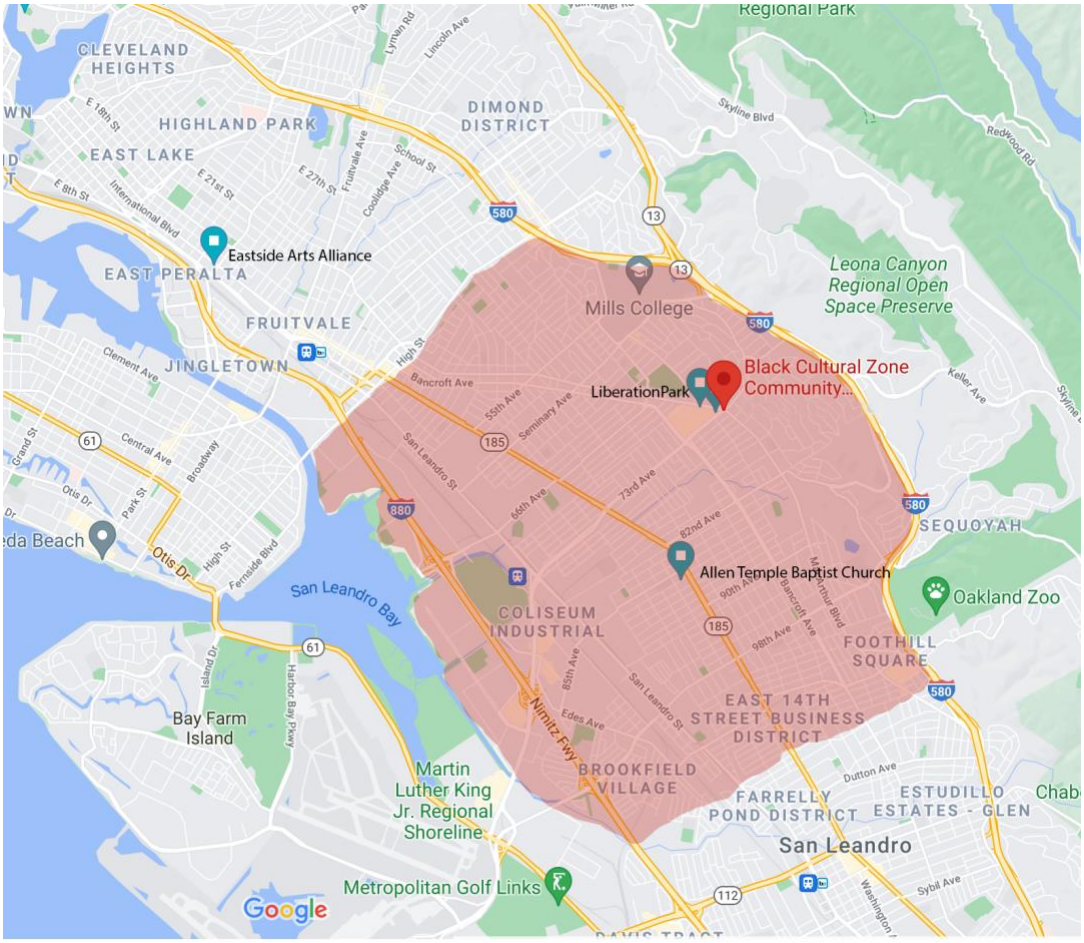

Figure 17: Map of the BCZ, shaded in red. Map by author.

The concept of the BCZ as a collective, multi-pronged organization grew out of its mycelial origin as one of many interconnected cultural hubs. This was initially accentuated by the prospect of attaining a large building site, for which they needed to draft concrete business occupancy plans. These included spaces designed around partners' needs, as well as themes of community resilience, entrepreneurialism, and cultural arts. A similar model would emerge in the creation of the Black Cultural Zone's CDC, established in 2019 in order to secure spaces across the 50x50 East Oakland zone for this web of interconnected interests. The BCZ CDC cultural hub model is organized around the following core tenants: place-keeping, strong economy, quality of life, arts and culture. Spaces are being designed around addressing each of these aspects, which, for the Collaborative, comprise a robust Black community.

One of the principal motives for establishing a CDC was to mobilize an aggressive real estate strategy to counter gentrification and displacement. Executive Director, and former commercial real estate director with another Oakland CDC, Carolyn Johnson (CJ) tells us that unless place-keeping[38] occurs the BCZ is "gentrifying ourselves out of [here]." Even with the purchase of a

[38] Roberto Bedoya of Oakland's cultural affairs commission, is widely credited with coining this term. Here, it references the substantial purchase of land, combined with preserving Black culture and history.

space like the Safeway building, CJ has maintained that they would still need to buy 25% of the commercial assets that surround it. Here is where the physicality of the BCZ's network strategy may give a grassroots approach to development a fighting chance. Purchasing a number of smaller properties that offer the potential for future build-out diversifies the collective's property portfolio, so to speak. Additionally, each node in this system - building or site "catalyst hubs" - are being proposed as "anchor institutions" to support the neighborhood's economic and local arts scene.

Being widely dispersed resists the concentration of cultural districting that is more amenable to either ghettoization, or Disneyfication. In addition to physical site diversification, the Collaborative calls upon a very wide range of community partners, and has a robust variety of cultural, economic, and housing-related goals in its development plan that makes it very difficult to clearly identify or target. Similarly to the way that the Panthers stationed offices and safety patrols in all parts of the city, the dispersed BCZ network becomes a community resource, rather than, a singular – and therefore vulnerable – racially saturated site for development or displacement. In fact, as a child, CJ watched the way the Black Panther Party crumbled as individual leaders were targeted in order to bring down the entire organization. She tells me that she resists being identified as the principal leader of the BCZ and instead reaches for the kind of people-power that is at the core of this project. She continues to add members in the hopes of becoming a massive network with synced communication between all aspects of the BCZ and its hubs. Anticipating that this project will exceed any government plan for a diversity quota or good PR campaign, CJ tells me that the city is "gonna get half of us…If they want to stop us, they tell their friends at the foundation, you know, we don't like them anymore or, you know, you tell the license, well go check on them. I mean, the same games they've been running forever. But you can't take out everybody."

By now, the BCZ has reached out to and keeps in touch with hundreds of Black-owned businesses, artists, residents, and community organizations. Similarly to the way that ESAA obtained its site through conscientious community support to get ahead of investors who might not otherwise back their building plans, the BCZ's network becomes a real source of social capital when, for instance, the CDC requires legitimation for its development or acquisition plans; community organizations and public figures who are a part of the collective can be called upon to reach out with letters of support for the BCZ.

The concept of the BCZ CDC, while unusual in its orientation toward Black culture as central to community development (even among historically Black CDCs), is not entirely unique. In a study of Black CDCs in the late 1980s, sociologist, Hayward Derrick Horton established a Black Organizational Autonomy Model (1992) that identified Black history and culture and extensive networking as being a key, distinguishing features of Black community development. More immediately, Greg was a student and close friend of Amiri Baraka, who in 1970 established in Newark, New Jersey what is likely the blueprint for the Black Cultural Zone in Oakland. Baraka's Congress of African People pursued an ambitious set of business, arts, health, educational, and social service development plans across a wide expanse of Newark's Black urban landscape to counter urban renewal policies. Their project represented "the first attempt to flesh out what the Black power experiment could mean for a new community life in a 'liberated zone.'" (Komozi Woodard cited in Rabig, 2012, p. 254) The tenets of the Black Power and Black

Arts movements are, suffice it to say, pillars of the BCZ strategy for meaningfully reclaiming space for Black people in Oakland.

What Elena and Greg introduced with the BCZ was a proposal for an anti-displacement development that rejected both a one-size-fits-all business improvement plan, and a top-down framing of culture as an image of diverse space that lacks Black, low-income community power. The BCZ, instead, positions Black spatial claims-making as a project of *gathering* – a form of social capital that draws upon individual and collective spatial experiences of vibe, which is repeated through familiar networks as a form of emplaced culture. In this sense, culture can work. Moreover, vibe can work.

Blackness, Vibe and Self-Repossession

Perpetuating vibe, as it is embedded in Oakland's Blackness, is important not only to the organizing power of the BCZ, but its strategy for spatial claims-making as well. In order for the BCZ to be a success and make additional site purchases, it needs to signal to city officials, funders, and the surrounding neighbors that this project generates value for the community through the economically and politically lucrative production of vibe. In this context, Blackness itself does not need to be defined; it is understood as an invitation into doing work that speaks to and benefits Black East Oaklanders. As such, the question that is at the heart of the BCZ's operations – "What does it mean to love and support Black culture?" – is open to community inquiry, suggesting that Blackness operates unnamed through the necessity of response to the ongoing crises of racism. As a named and consecrated site, Blackness doesn't hold water. Rather, it is understood to be the water of East Oakland. It is an action and a feeling shaped around embodied, spatial and temporal instantiations of oppression and resistance rather than a culture. It resists definition and invites creation.

The task force identified to represent this slippery substance is the BCZ's Arts & Culture working group. Before moving online, the meetings were hosted at Allen Temple Baptist Church. At their first meeting, I was surprised to find a dozen all Black people squashed together around a slim folding table in a rather small, interior office, with a few in seats pushed up against the wall. The room was filled with pink: peachy-pink walls, rose colored chairs, and the warm shade of affection between everyone present. Many of us were new acquaintances, but pastries, hugs and handshakes were passed around all the same – an extension of The Town's hospitality.

The question that opened the meeting - and which would continue to set the tone for our future meetings and projects: "What is your vision for a Black cultural zone, and how does that relate to arts and culture?" One artist described driving the streets toward his home in East Oakland from downtown. Along the way, he passed through Chinatown and Fruitvale. The BCZ, he explains, has to have a "vibe" just like those neighborhoods, an appearance and affectation that's so noticeable that "when people drive through, people know 'oh, this is *that* vibration.'" Later, another participant would elaborate that the vibe of the zone needed to be something apparent not only in its artwork and physicality, but its culture as articulated through "everything we [Black people] do." Exactly what Blackness is, or what that vibration actually entails, is not described beyond a description of large Adinkra symbols and murals to be erected in and around the zone. Another artist, responding to this ambiguity, says that rather than trying to come up with definitive answers about what Black art and culture is, it is the role of arts and cultural

workers to ask: in what way does art serve the community in which it is emplaced? How does it "reflect the stories, mission, dreams and struggles of the community?" Art is thus meant to represent the experiences of the neighborhood in order to generate a sense of cohesion and meaning for collective, place-based empowerment.

Many of the events that occur at the BCZ are framed around an idea of self-determination, the idea that "we" are the only ones who will save "us." Resilience - in the form of stable, affordable housing, land ownership, an insular economic network of Black-owned businesses, community-based safety systems, and arts and cultural plazas - and power are built from within. This is couched within, or co-produces, "vibe" as a sense of Black cultural connectedness. For example, an event, hosted by the BCZ, Roots Community Health Center, and the Brotherhood of Elders Network, was held to introduce community members and leaders within the "40x40": a 40 by 40 square block radius in East Oakland[39] as an area cited to be home to the highest concentration of 'people of African descent' in the county (30,000 people). The event began as many in-person events do: with a West African inspired blessing ceremony, in this case featuring an African drummer, and "Baba" Gregory Hodge pouring libations for the ancestors. As he completed the ritual, the next speaker stepped in to thank him for the "vibe you started us with." Vibe, in the arts and cultural sense, is often performed as a distinctly African form of spiritualism. The 40x40 took the shape of a metaphorical island, 40 acres, 40 days and 40 nights, the myths of salvation in which, ultimately, Black people saved themselves from utter decimation. Within this threatened oasis of Oakland's Blackness, long-standing Black and Latinx community members are being called upon to be paid block captains - a means of cinching the weave of communication between East Oakland community members and community organizations like the BCZ CDC. In this sense, the event was a call to arms, with rallying cries of 'we are all we have left.'

The vibe that held the event together - as well as the vibe of Oakland-based Black arts and culture - is also threatened, seemingly marooned on this 40 block island. The host, speaking after CJ had given her pitch about the BCZ, said "We want to make sure that vibe hasn't moved out of the area and if it has that they know they can come back here to this is a safe space where they can connect." Vibe, too, can be displaced. And while it may be connected to individual bodies, it necessitates a concentration of people, a gathering in a safe space - a space identified by residents as the kind of home they remember before crack seemed to dissolve the trust between community members. The Black Cultural Zone is thus a space in which vibe operates through the work and daily intimacies of Black community; this in turn provides the collaborative's arts and culture working group with the raw material for justifying and representing their spatial claims.

Activation: Occupation and Representing Vibe

That the BCZ has to navigate negotiations with developers, the city, and neighborhood stakeholders has produced some tension with regard to investing in arts and cultural projects that strike an appropriate balance between cultural branding and responding to community interests. The language of "activation" has arisen to describe the process of occupying spaces in a way that leverages the power of cultural branding for economic, mutual aid, and community empowerment projects.

[39] This extends from Seminary Blvd to the San Leandro border, the 580 to the bay front.

The first parcel that the BCZ CDC gained control over in May 2020 is a 53,160 square foot lot adjacent to the once popular Eastmont Mall. The lot is a triangular corner of that used to be only a collection of dust, weeds and the accumulated side-of-the-road detritus of years of neglect. Its longest, sharpest point lies stands out on the map at the intersection of Foothill Boulevard and 73rd Avenue, positioning it snugly and centrally within the "deep" of "Deep East Oakland." The lot itself is hemmed in by flimsy chain-link, with a low cinder block retaining wall defining the Foothill border. Over time, it has looked less like a neglected corner of East Oakland more like the beginnings of a community plaza. Large banners with the BCZ logo on them have been hung across the chain link along 73rd. The grounds have been cleared of much of the detritus and broken glass replaced by neat green turf for group yoga classes and a smooth dirt road that hosts small business booths, farmer's market and food stalls.

Figure 18: The site of Liberation Park.

The lot – now known as Liberation Park – was initially leased to the BCZ CDC on a month to month basis for six months, with automatic renewal after this point. The "activation" strategy pursued by CJ and the BCZ was meant to convince the city to sell the parcel to the BCZ outright. Anticipating skepticism from city and business officials with regard to what is an "unapologetically Black" set of projects, the collaborative quickly moved forward with cleaning up and occupying their new, temporary space (Black Cultural Zone CDC, 2021). The lot cannot afford to be slow or lifeless, an affect that slides too easily into the surrounding bleached landscape of economic listlessness. Activation is a bulwark against government closure, and also becomes a site of inspiration and gaining community trust. Says CJ, "The more we do activate this, they understand that they cannot give this land to someone else to do something else."

Rather than wait for tedious and cumbersome bureaucratic permissions to develop or renovate existing buildings or sites, the BCZ followed Elena's proposed community plaza model, which facilitates creative use of open spaces, like Liberation Park.

Notably, activation of the park begins with an arts and culture based form of intervention. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted an urgent shift toward mutual aid services, like PPE and meal distribution. Simultaneously, cultural events and mural paintings and mural acquisition on the heels of the Black Lives Matter uprisings became a primary method for bringing the site some vitality. Commercialization followed in September, 2020, with the initiation of the Akoma Sunday crafts and farmer's market. More permanent outdoor installations - like the BCZ's proposed roller rink - will be featured alongside mixed use development on the lot.

Upon first obtaining the lot, the Arts and Cultural working group was under some pressure to "activate" the site with murals and events that both encouraged and demonstrated the site's transformation. In the midst of the uprisings during the summer of 2020 after George Floyd and Breonna Taylor's murders, it became especially important not to fall into the trap of empty symbolism perpetuated by such acts as painting Black Lives Matter onto the streets where Black people had been killed. And yet, walking around downtown Oakland at that time felt a bit like walking into the cool splash of color that Eastsides murals had provided me; ornate paintings and quickly sketched aerosol designs glittered across the boarded up façade of downtown Oakland. Some artists in the collective insisted on focusing cultural energy on activist projects, like defunding the police, saying that "the spirit of Oakland is resistance and upliftment of our people," not its symbolic referent. Others, noticing the dearth of activist or artistic activity in East Oakland – where most Black people resided – emphasized the importance of messaging, not only for onlooking city representatives, but as a way of improving morale within the neighborhood.

The move to negotiate at least partial rights to these images on behalf of East Oakland Black communities also represents an intervention into the landscape of representational power in the city. BCZ arts and cultural organizers refused White-led organizations like the Oakland Museum or Art Murmur dictating how these images would be utilized, preserved, and ultimately narrativized. Rather than let the art become apathetic, a story about symbolic sympathy or a political show of Oakland's white-washed radicalism, organizers like Randolph Bell insisted upon re-centering the movement for and violence against Black bodies, Black people, and Black communities that had produced the downtown gallery of protest art. Said Randolph in an interview with The Guardian, "It's valuable to be the custodians of this art because history has been told by the winners." (Clayton, 2020) Preserving the artwork in a low-income, Black neighborhood meant that the discourse and political organizing needed to sustain the movement for Black lives - at the national and local scale - could continue. This act of preservation and re-narrativization of the representation of Blackness in Oakland constitutes a form of Black geographic image-making.

The BCZ was able to do this, in part, because they had the space to justify appropriate handling and presentation of the artworks. However, this act of reclamation was a mutually enriching deal. Liberation Park - at that time still not much more than a dusty lot with a shipping container for storage - needed this kind of visual *activation* to demonstrate their ability to serve the

surrounding community, and make good use of the space. The images not only helped the BCZ look good - physically and politically - but offered the potential for strategic economic development. At a discussion for Black artists involved with the protest art, the conversation turned toward recognizing the value that these images, and images produced by Black artists historically, had produced for the city. Some discussed using the images to fundraise for Black artist space in the city. Others rejected the outright economic utilization of these paintings. One artist, who had done work with the Oakland's First Friday's festival, rejected a capitalist appropriation of the murals. He explained that he understood how the city had appropriated Black artistry in order to gentrify the city. Their purpose was to "reframe Oakland as a non-violent space full of arts and culture…and used that as a driving point for luxury development." In the same statement, the artist excoriated the idea that this artwork was put to use with capitalistic intent. And yet, recognizing the value of these art pieces got people in the room thinking about how to leverage it for the purposes of self and community economic empowerment without objectifying the art (thereby exposing it again to the exploitative processes of gentrification). The BCZ representatives in attendance insisted that one way to do this was by gaining control over cultural assets to develop the power needed to "build our own Allensworth, our own Tulsa."

Activation has thus toed the line between political optics and a community vision. What members of the collective have unanimously been able to agree upon is that their spaces be used by and for the purposes of centering Black Oakland life. Whether through rallies, performance arts, community dialogues, or impromptu healing circles, Liberation Park has, thus far, been a staging ground for uplifting vibe as it is produced in and through an enlivened and pre-existing Black sense of place.

The BCZ's activation and reclamation of protest art, and installation at Liberation Park, is a clear refusal of Black aesthetic emplacement. The development and activation strategies of the BCZ are oriented around a concept of Black community power (inherited from the Panthers and Black Arts Movement), and concerns over preserving a Black sense of place oriented around vibe and Black life. Their work to re-appropriate these images helped to co-produce a physical space for the continuation of autonomous artistic practice and economic collectivity that is generative of vibe. These strategies also demonstrate skill in navigating the landscape of power that may foreclose the BCZ's efforts. Eastside is adept at leveraging the trendiness of cultural work in the funding world toward the BCZ's more radical aims; and CJ consciously markets the Black Cultural Zone as a boon for the city's diversity-based redevelopment plans.

And yet, while murals are an important part of claiming cultural space, their meaning, use and value are contested, as demonstrated by conversations amongst Black artists. At the same time that BCZ members are critical of capitalist development, they recognize the value of reclaiming visual representations in order to develop their own sustainable space. In spite of calls for self-determination and economic liberation, being completely independent of financial and governmental bodies is not possible here. This is the central contradiction of emancipatory framing. Emancipatory framing thus offers a way of understanding the insufficiency of Black representation as, alone, being enough to establish spatio-political power in place. Visual representation may be a symbolic placeholder, but it is not a place-maker. It must always exist in tandem with political and economic activism. Nevertheless, the question arises: to what extent

can a Black cultural zone also be a zone of liberation, given the limitations and unfreedoms inherent in land acquisition?

In the following section, I examine the way that "Land is Liberation" is circumscribed by the racial capitalist and quasi-colonial ethics that the production of a defined Black space demands. The way that the BCZ and its affiliates confront this contradiction – between communalism and neoliberal entrepreneurialism, liberation and privatization is central to *emancipatory framing*.

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It's 9:40 PM and the sun has only just set, the sky still glowing behind the skeletal silhouettes of a growing downtown. Hours previously, when the sky had just begun to graze between a bright blue and a dusky gray, the explosions had begun. These days, it's hard to tell the difference between fireworks, flash booms, and gun fire. Every night for the last few weeks, the soundscape has been crowded by demonstrations of rage and joy. Tonight, however, the ripping sound of canon-fire and the undulating light illuminating the underside of the creeping summer fog, tells me that these are fireworks, set by the stubborn resolve to announce Black joy, and liberation. Because today is Juneteenth, the Texan "Black Independence Day" that has gained sudden attention in the wake of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor's murders. Today marks the crest of another wave of catharsis, after months of masking, of remaining indoors, of economic crisis, of fear, of death, of still holding our breath.

It's 9:40 PM and I am riding my bike down Grand Avenue. I swerve to avoid the density of celebrants in cars trying to find, or leave, semi-legal parking spots around the lake. On the way, I pass the Grand Express Liquor and Grocery Store that I've come to recognize for its bright yellow and red sign, sunset swirl mural of a bearded Black man, and the groups of Black folks who tend to hang out in vintage muscle cars in the parking lot. Tonight, it's jammed with three times the usual number of people, all talking, laughing, playing music. At the next intersection, the red light, stopping already stopped traffic, colors the sudden release of smoke from firecrackers that have been set off in the middle of the street. I glance over in time to see the shirtless silhouette of the man who's just set them off. He has his arms up, spread out in a sign of gleeful success. I tense at the image. Blink. Firecrackers, not tear gas. Hands up, not in supplication to police just to live, but as a joyful affirmation of Black life. I can breathe, a sigh of relief.

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A Matter of Monopoly

At 9:40 PM, I had just left the stretch of Telegraph Avenue that I always associate with a milling kind of Blackness: that close warmth you find on a nosy neighbor's stoop, the leaning over the veranda railing chats, that place where the direction of traffic on the street is less consequential than the loping direction of conversation. The kind of Blackness that sticks around to meld seamlessly into the night. The kind that feels like community but is marked by developers as blight. It was the perfect setting for the Eastside Arts Alliance and performance artist, Amara Tabor-Smith's, first in a series of community "Porch Chat" conversations. Fittingly, at the crossroads of Oakland's Uptown gentrification and visible Black displacement on Telegraph, the conversation topic for the evening centered on Black displacement and land ownership. We gathered a hazy circle of folding chairs on the sidewalk outside of two storefronts that each housed something of the imaginary: the first is a branch of Chapter 510, the non-profit devoted to youth creative writing programs, and the second an untitled, but unofficially named storefront, "Conjure and Mend." The latter is run by our hosts for the evening, Amara and Regina Evans, a bold yet soft-spoken Black woman in her 50s dressed in billowy clothes, and followed around by an even quieter German shepherd. Inside the cramped front room shared by the two storefronts, a table has been laid out with trays of take-out from the Jamaican restaurant down the street; and

as people arrive to participate in the conversation, they are invited to take up a chair and grab a plate of food. When Regina pauses in her swishing around, tending to the space with her skirts billowing around her, she sits heavily in a chair at the far end of the circle to sips from an IPA that someone has brought her, or take a drag from a cigarette (another gift). She is a sentinel of this stretch of sidewalk, and her presence welcomes in the aura of colloquialism that is the intent for these Porch Chats - to invite the wisdom of a community at the street level. All of the store owners and neighbors - housed and unhoused, by appearance - who pass by nod, say hello, or joke about how good the food smells. Occasionally, I'm startled to hear her raising her voice and shouting a greeting to someone across the street.

The small collection of chairs, split in half to make way for the occasional sidewalk traffic, gradually filled. Most of the people in attendance are friends of Amara's, though we receive a few surprises. The first was a young Black man wearing a wood bead necklace and shorts that looked too hopeful for the Bay Area summer chill. We were only a group of four or five when he walked rather confidently into the circle and asked if he could join us. It was only Amara's stammering pause in the midst of what she was saying that told me that he was an unexpected guest, and a testament to what we hoped was the welcoming public atmosphere of the whole event. Amara invited him to get some food before stopping herself to tell him to put on his mask first.

The conversation opened with everyone present watching a video of Kimberly Jones talking about the depths of the economic disparity between Whites and poor Blacks in the US as a basis for understanding why looting has been such a common response in the midst of Black Lives Matter protests (Jones, 2020). In particular, we focus on the latter part of her speech, in which she uses a 400 year-long game of rigged monopoly to explain the way that the small pockets of Black wealth and land ownership - in places like Tulsa and Rosewood - have been systematically destroyed and/or undermined. At one point she emphatically responds to the rhetorical question, 'Why do you burn down your own neighborhood?' by saying "It's not ours! We don't own anything!" Yet, what is the usefulness of honoring private property when that same concept of privacy, ownership and wealth has not and cannot be extended to Black people? Indeed, the so-called social contract that assumes fair and equal treatment has, in Jones' words, been broken.[40]

Although Jones points out that the issue of today's violent upheavals is a factor of a capitalist economy built on enslaved African labor, the conversation that unfolds within our circle that night never fully disentangles itself from capitalism as a starting point for Black freedom. Instead, the discussion begins from the premise that ownership, privatization, and the accrual of value necessarily underwrite any plan for collective liberation. And so our conversation hinged around: Why *don't* we own anything? And what's stopping us from creating our own all-Black towns? That this became the basis of our talk mirrored the apt final line of Jones' monologue; pointing a finger into the camera she says with icy clarity, "And they are lucky that what Black people are looking for is equality and not revenge."

The path to equality is paved by capitalism. What we discussed was how to walk this path. And while the city of Oakland has never and will never belong to Black people, pieces of it have. From the corner, micro-community garden space where she sits with her beer, Regina comments

[40] What she doesn't say here is that it never existed for non-persons categorized as Black.

in a low voice that there are a lot of wealthy Black people in the bay who are “super quiet.” She tells us that in the late 1980s into the early 1990s, 80% of fourplexes were owned by Black women, one of whom was her own mother. Regina explains that they got caught between the gentrifiers and the protestors who were trying to keep rent down. The cap on rent for older buildings affected these women the most, even though they were the people who were trying to look out for their tenants. “This stuff is going to fall over” she says matter-of-factly, gesturing at the street around us. “It fell over in the 80s.”

Regina is an artist, business owner and sex-trafficking abolitionist. Through her artwork and outreach, Regina creates havens for vulnerable young people and women who have been caught in Oakland’s pernicious sex trafficking economy. She works, for instance, in collaboration with Amara on the ritual performance project, “House/Full of Blackwomen.” The women involved are known for occupying a street or site unannounced, floating past onlookers dressed in billowing white skirts and veils, white lanterns held aloft. Their haunting presence represents Black women and girls who have been lost to the area due to trafficking and housing insecurity. Yet her own relationship to property and homelessness is thick with seeming contradictions. At a time when many middle class Black families had begun to leave Oakland in the 1980s, Regina’s family, among the first to desegregate the notoriously White and wealthy “Oakland Hills,” held onto some of their property assets. This would end up being a lifeline for Regina. After successfully owning and operating a fashion boutique in Sydney, Australia, Regina says that “spirit” called her back to Oakland to do abolitionist work. She gave up everything and struggled with housing and food insecurity for years upon returning to the Bay Area. The rental income she received from the property she inherited from her mother helped to sustain her. In spite of this income, Regina says that she was still struggling to get by. "I was helping so many people, so I didn't have enough from myself.” The mutual aid she received from her business and artistic partners, colleagues, as well as from the women she is helping has become an important part of her livelihood.

Learning, perhaps, from the culture of Black wealth in Oakland, Regina keeps her work “quiet,” enacting abolition through underground, sometimes anonymous forms of performance art and generosity. Like her parents and grandparents, who quietly accrued monetary capital to own property, her quietness is accompanied by a strong support network. She completely rejects the non-profit industrial framework for describing and receiving money for her work, eking out emancipatory pathways outside of its representation. Instead, the networks of care insulate and protect her, allowing her to maintain a veil of powerful, protective illegibility. “I work off resources more than I do money.” To be well-resourced, to be able to claim ownership over something, means more than having money. Economic empowerment is tantamount to collective, social investment.

And so, the problem of Black ownership - or lack thereof - according to the newcomer young man, is the culture of individualism that Black communities have bought into. His friend who joined a bit later speaks fervently of how we’ve lost touch with intergenerational knowledge. She turns the central question about land ownership toward “What’s stopping us from living cooperatively? What’s stopping us from buying empty lots and putting tiny homes on them?” In response, Amara asks if we think that communal living and all-Black towns are beyond the imagination of what’s possible for or within Oakland. One of the few White people in the circle,

a young man with a queer affect and dressed in an over-sized red suit jacket, joins the refrain of "no's" from around the circle. He also calls for a change in mentality away from individualism and a fetishization of house flipping. It is time to instead "*make Oakland more Oakland*" by advancing an ethic of communalism.

The dreams, possibilities and limitations of Black communalism and self-determination were passed around the circle, sparking like a hot, live wire. All around us, celebration and outrage around the very same issues of Black emancipation were sending fireworks into the darkening sky. And in between us, the grim reality of the economic, social and physical death faced by Black people every day loped along the sidewalk, as the second surprise visitor we received that evening entered the circle. She was a Black woman struggling with her many heavy bags, who asked if we had anything to give her. No one offered money, so she asked instead for food. Amara paused and, unlike the unknown young man who joined us, the woman was asked to wait outside while Amara went inside to make a plate for her. The apparently unhoused woman sat down at the far end of the circle and ate silently. She was not excluded from the conversation, but nor was she invited in. And so when she was done with her food, she got up and walked heavily away without much notice. She was not the only one who solicited food, money or attention from the group. A couple walked through at one point — a wide eyed and smiling Black man with a White woman asked for money to get some sodas for themselves. Regina went in and gave them bottles of water instead, which they took reluctantly, faces crestfallen at this compromise.

Homelessness limped along the edges and straight through our conversation, and with it the implicit threat of displacement, of eviction, poverty and premature death. The ethic of care and community that seems to underpin an understanding of Oakland *as Oakland* was literally both central and peripheral the circle of dialogue. While the visibly unhoused who walked by were not ignored, and given nourishment, we did not share the petty change they requested. We kept them just on the outskirts of our collective imaginings. In talking about communalism, we asked for wealth to be shared but were unwilling to give it in response to a direct request. In discussing Black land ownership, we talked about equality and playing a game of Monopoly wherein the plays weren't rigged, wherein developing land might not mean displacing the poor and/or Indigenous. But what would revenge look like? What would it look like to end this endless game of Monopoly by flipping the board over, displacing all land claims, sending paper money scattering to the floor? Although many were critical of capitalism and in fact hold anti-capitalist ethics at the center of their politics, the fight for Black lives *mattering*, of having social substance, currently comes to: how do Black people have value? If this can never be achieved within a White supremacist structure, and this structure cannot readily be escaped, how do Black people see themselves reflected, empowered and supported except within the quiet network of other Black people? This is the function of the Black Cultural Zone.

Oakland becoming more Oakland is thus necessarily enframed at once by neoliberal self-determination (a hustle, always in tension with Whiteness) and an ethic of care formulated through Blackness and vibe. While I would argue that this imaginary of Black land ownership does not escape a White spatial imaginary of property relations that always creates an Outside, it does make room for expansive spaces of interiority, for the contradictions of moneyed insecurity and devaluation, for a Black geographies of *les damnes*, for the "deep, deep" of East Oakland.

The Deep Deep: Care in Semi-Permeable Spaces

About a week later, I attended a rally hosted by the Black Cultural Zone at Liberation Park. It served as a continuation of the ongoing movement for Black Lives that was enlivening the streets every other day. Moreover, this rally enacted a geographical extension of the conversation to consider where exactly these Black lives that seem to matter are. Lake Merritt had - and remains - occupied as a hotly contested reclamation of Black economic autonomy at the gentrified heart of the city. "Deep East Oakland," on the other hand, has typically been sidelined in political, cultural, or economic considerations[41]. And yet, according to Carolyn Johnson, it is where 40% of Oakland's remaining Black population resides. Just beyond the chain link fence surrounding the rally, a few of Oakland's growing houseless population listen and watch from a slight distance, and stoop to take what relief they can on the shaded benches at the bus station, or inside the booths of the nearby McDonalds.

To refute its marginalization, the tagline for the rally, which had been printed onto hundreds of Black T-shirts, signs and banners (all freely distributed to participants) was "Deep East Oakland Matters." The logo circulated at the rally, along with the concept of making the Deep of East Oakland matter is its own Black geographic image, asserting the importance of Blackness and Black bodies to the imaginal center of Oakland. The design for this logo featured a Black fist raising up out of a network of thick roots, a symbolic nod to the official Oakland oak tree logo. This image re-imagines Oakland's municipal symbol - an oak tree depicted without roots - to draw attention to the literal and figurative roots of this emblem. In discourse about Oakland's culture and racialized displacement, many activists and business owners use the metaphor of the city's "roots" to talk about its cultural origins and the rights of Black and Brown communities to remain here. The "Deep East Oakland Matters" symbol renders the bodies and experiences of Black people as integral to the functioning of the city of Oakland. Its depiction of the fist serves as both a reference to racialized bodies[42] and, more importantly, to the Black Power salute, "All Power to the People" that is still recognized and recited here. The evocation of the *deep* is both a refusal of the marginalization of East Oakland's Black community, and, in conjunction with the word "matters," an instantiation within a rooted network of care, and reclamation.

[41] It is because of this marginalization that some people reject the use of "Deep" in referring to this part of East Oakland.

[42] The fist being severed from the rest of the Black body here is also indicative of the way that Black people have been figuratively dismembered through the process of Black aesthetic emplacement, and divorced of places that serve as extensions of the physical and social body. The significance of "deep" expresses both care and concern over being pushed away, hidden the obfuscated corners of Oakland politics. That this bodily symbol of Black Power is being sutured to the emblematic body of Oakland yokes the fate of the city to the fate of Black East Oakland residents.

Figure 19: Oakland logo.

Figure 20: BCZ T-Shirt design. Photo by author.

The BCZ is an instantiation of care that, rather than taking private housing or business as its basis uses the cultural community plaza as a model for building political resilience against further dispossession. Yet, the immediate and growing needs of those who have been left unsheltered due to the gentrification of their neighborhoods tends to overshadow this work, under the justifiable position that there can be no community without accessible housing for those residents who are culturally defining the region. While this has generated conflicting strategic interests among some of the collaborative members, I do not think that these are not mutually exclusive strategies. The BCZ culture-oriented model offers an alternative perspective in which Black culture occupies a "zone," a permeable, never-fixed space that, in its dispersed geography, resists gentrifying representations. It operates on historicity and a futurity that generates pride and hope, making room for the renewed prospects of interiority. Reclamation performed with the BCZ's ethic of care takes what is available now and organizes it – into food banks and PPE distribution. The invisible/forgettable produce this Black geography; it is both marginal and central to a process of spatial production that is contextualized by and refuses the structures of racial capitalism.

Candice Elder is the executive director for the East Oakland Collective and someone I have witnessed first-hand administer food, health supplies, and a listening ear to dozens of dispossessed people housed in Oakland's smattering of shanty-towns and tent encampments. Her organization is one of the leading non-profits affiliated with the Black Cultural Zone, and played a central role in collecting donated meals and PPE very shortly after the shelter-in-place orders had gone into effect in the Bay Area[43]. The day of the rally, she stepped up onto the flatbed of a

[43] As of October 28, 2020, the drive through meal distribution has provided almost 150,000 meals to East Oaklanders.

truck and kicked off the event with an invocation of what her love for Oakland means. In a voice that would resound even without the portable microphone, she introduced herself before saying,

> "I am from deep east. The deep deep. I [was there] during the 80s and we all know how that was. I'm here to say that deep east Oakland is loved and cared for. Oakland takes care of fuckin Oakland."

Of course, the Oakland that Candice was referring to here had little to do with city politics or institutions. The claps and cheers she received upon saying this reflected the function of "Oakland," and specifically "Deep East Oakland" as a signifier for the communal efforts of poor Black communities. Making this Oakland "matter" is a function of building power and the ability to enact care, to protect all Black East Oaklanders from complete invisibility (or hypervisibility) – including those who have been forced into a form of homelessness as a function of displacement. Perhaps in contradiction to how the Oakland of the 1980s looked or felt, Candice announces that it is, now, cared for through projects like the BCZ. This site in particular makes temporary spaces of interiority, tucked between 73rd and Foothill. It is semi-public, semi-permanent, and semi-permeable; and in its incompleteness lies the possibility for alternate ways of being within a geography designed around Black poor invisibility/forgettability.

Although a line is being drawn, reclaiming something of the rigged Monopoly board, it is not an entirely closed circle or a complete re-enactment of hegemony. Mutual aid efforts ushered outsiders in; and the day of the rally, the plaza broke down its own borders to overtake the street with a group that was scarcely sizeable enough to stop traffic. Nevertheless, we managed to interrupt the cars along this busy stretch of road for long enough that a Black couple in an SUV was able to step out and raise their arms in triumphant support. All this is an effort to build robust community support to enable an effective system of mutual aid for individuals and families in need, housed or not.

In this sense, to be in the "deep deep" of East Oakland is to be within the deep and wide network of homes that have made life here possible. It is to be deeply cared for. The deep deep has resonances of the deep south, which has found its way here in "The Town," in the lilt of voices, in carceral plantation futures. It reverberates with the contradictions of "no there there," of being placeless and displaced, the last place anyone would expect to look, which is exactly what will save Black Oakland. The deep deep is the last place to go before turning right back around, to Antioch, to Sacramento, to Texas, Louisiana and Arkansas. Said CJ, responding to my questions about Blackness in Oakland, "we have nowhere geographically left to go. We are at the seaboard…and so all you can do is turn around and face forward." The deep is cornered, and so calls forth a hustle and fight to stay put, and to protect its own.

The deep deep evokes a well of emotion, of fight, of history and hope. It plants itself here, and confirms that whatever arises from the BCZ, it cannot be merely a reclamation of land, housing or jobs; it has to *feel* different. It has to have a sizzle of "oh, this is *that* vibe," the cool splash of color, the evidence and promise of care, of places to feel seen and to be alive in the full mattering of one's embodied experience.

Congregation Sites

The BCZ is a project of reclamation. As such, it is also a project of return and a means of consecrating sites that fostered sites of interiority and connection for *les damnes* of Oakland's Black geography. That Liberation Park is situated within the grounds of the Eastmont Mall and an adjacent row of churches means that this site acts as a kind of spatial and temporal threshold between the Black Oakland of the 80s, the present, and a planned future.

Eastmont Mall was an economic and cultural hub in its own right for Black East Oakland communities of the 1980s and 90s. At a time of economic abandonment and high unemployment, the mall was a beacon of market-based care. The mall opened in 1970 on the site of the Chevy auto plant, whose closure initiated some of the first flights of industry away from the city after WWII (Walker, 2018). Although the decline of the city's development and capital was already well underway, the mall signified some of the remaining hope that developers had that Oakland could still be a retail center.

As more Black families moved into East Oakland, its reputation as a desirable real estate site flagged. Yet, by the 1980s, the mall was thriving as a site of Black community space and consumption. In a *Tribune* article from 1980, "Eastmont Mall success story," the managing partner of the Eastmont Mall, Michael Lapin, described its success as being due largely to the promise of the burgeoning Hegenberger strip area as well as the purchasing power of a Black neighborhood that still retained some of its middle-income earners. "Some retailers have wanted to move into Eastmont Mall in order to be close enough to market to more affluent surrounding areas, such as the Oakland Hills,' said Lapin. 'Eastmont gets business from the Oakland Hills, but that is clearly a secondary market for us." (On, 1980) Yet, much like the tone of much of the development advertisements at this time, there's a slightly apologetic, panicked quality to the manager's pitch for the mall. Countering "misconceptions" about East Oakland is a preoccupation. Said Lapin, "East Oakland has been an area of transition, but it's finding its identity." Unfortunately, the kind of identity that developers and investors desired never materialized. By the 1990s the intensity and violence of the drug trade in Oakland, East Oakland especially, had gutted the community that provided the mall with the majority of its customer base. Within 10 years, the mall was failing, and in fact was considered already a failure in the 70s by developers who would buy the mall in 2015. The kind big of department stores that had attracted Black middle income families in the 50s and 60s began to pack up in the early 90s. This section of East Oakland has remained mostly underdeveloped and a site with no "there" there worth advertising. And yet, Eastmont Mall was at one time described as being "the spot" for Black youth and style. Today, the Mall is known as the Eastmont Township Center; former department stores are now home to senior center, police station, a Planned Parenthood.

At the center of the mall and its mid 80s renaissance as a Black community hang-out spot was Jim Copes, creator of a line of custom T-shirts, hats, and other merchandise, and a man whom Mayor Elihu Harris declared the "Mayor of Eastmont Mall" during his tenure as a merchant there. This comes as no surprise given that Copes, as he prefers to be called, has a way of making himself known. A natural businessman, Copes will talk to anyone who will pause long enough to listen and he doesn't forget a face. Indeed, during our interview sitting by the pergola at Lake Merritt, Copes would frequently call out to a familiar passer-by. This included one white-haired man, stooped and shuffling past with a large upright bicycle, whom Copes recognized as a

frequent shopper from his days selling merchandise at the Berkeley flea market in the early 70s. In addition to a long memory, Copes conveys a deep compassion for and commitment to his communities, as well as a powerful sense of justice. This was what motivated him, during his days at the mall, to get to keep the mall clean, to break up fights, and to get to know the other merchants.

> "People would come to my stores, that's why I'd call it the Mecca. Because it attracts all people. White, Black, Chinese, everybody every age they end up talkin to each other. You know? And we create the community space. It's the Mecca." (personal communication, July 7, 2020)

Copes sought to make his stores into a kind of refuge that he saw as being necessary, especially for Black youth who had been caught up in the suffering caused by drug addiction and the gang economy. In a 1991 interview with the East Bay Express, (one of many news clippings which Copes displays proudly at his vending booths and on his website) Copes is quoted saying that, "At this store, I try to show the kids someone cares about them and their friends. I provide opportunities for kids to express themselves." (Auchard, 1991) In addition to his own designs, Copes was known for taking custom orders. At the time of this interview, these included memorial insignias for recently deceased young people caught up in neighborhood gun violence. Copes would extend this show of care by offering support to the 14 and 15 year-olds who were forced to buy new clothes multiple times per week because there wasn't anyone taking care of them at home, hiring locally, and supporting fundraisers. "Everybody needed and wanted help…And we were always there for them. They knew they could come to me and my mother, we were gonna take care of 'em, and they knew it. If you were selling chicken leg dinners or fish dinners or whatever raising money we would help and get our friends to help." He expected and sometimes demanded this same kind of communal reciprocation from his fellow merchants, once spending several days jockeying other vendors at the mall to buy yearbooks from Castlemont high schoolers. The way he explained it, "These kids keep you alive."

Copes' presence - and that of his equally well-known mother and collaborator "Granny Goo Goo with the Quickness" - used his business to create spaces of community intimacy, respect, and mutual support. He sought to convey this sense of Oakland through his shirt logos. In the same 1991 article, the author explains that Copes was attempting to create new regional allegiances that veered away from gang turf and toward hometown pride. In so doing, shirts that read "Oaktown's Kickin It" and "I Hecka Love Oakland" were primarily a form of positive city re-branding for Oakland residents. When famous musical artists like Too $hort[44] and Tony! Toni! Tone! began to wear his merchandise and circulate Copes' lingo, specifically the idea of "Oaktown," his brand of Oakland gained more widespread attention.

By the time I met him, Copes had been recognized with an honorary day (September 29, 2019) by the city for his contributions to Oakland's popular culture and, specifically, that he is the one credited for Oakland's beloved nickname. When coining the term "Oaktown," Copes said he was looking for a way to capture Oakland's "flavor." His mother responded to the phrase by saying "OakTown? Boy, that sounds like the country," (SF Chronicle) a characterization that is not far off the mark given the city's Southern roots. That Oaktown seems "country" is appropriate to the

[44] The Oaktown phrase appeared in many of Too $hort's songs, like "Dead or Alive," or, "In tha Oaktown,", often referenced "Oaktown style."

formation of Oakland that Copes has been branding for almost 50 years: a space that is rooted in a network and ethic of care.

Oakland branding has taken up an iteration of Oaktown, "The Town," as a means of emphasizing its distinction from "The City" across the bay, and to invite a commercialized sense of Oakland's neighborly vibe into its advertising and development plans. What these constructions lack, however, are spaces of interiority – a built in semblance of openness and a moral orientation toward giving to the communities that have sustained a sense of liveliness here. Without this, businesses, according to Copes, lack their own sense of commitment to place. In his own words, "Don't be no kinda like Oakland…Be in the community, stay with the community, help support the community."

The Church

The corner opposite the BCZ and Eastmont Mall, 73rd and Foothill, has been marked with a laurel decorated archway that reads "EASTMONT." A few signs hang from the lampposts that dot the business district of this part of MacArthur Blvd. *Eat, Drink, Shop, Play: Heartlands*[45]. Unlike the Latinx business district a few miles west in the San Antonio district which was brightly painted and bustling on a Saturday morning, this point where Foothill and MacArthur meet, feels thin and weary, as if the sun beating down on this treeless street has washed the life out of it. Squeezed between the shuttered storefronts, grassy empty lots, tattoo and martial arts studios are a number of churches. Around the corner on 73rd, where small storefronts give way to fast food, chain stores, and the Eastmont Mall itself, more Baptist, Pentecostal and AME churches dot the busy four lane thoroughfare. Here, at a church on 73rd, is where Chris Wakefield (whose pronouns are he/him and she/her) says that he found his second home. Having grown up moving between family members and homes in East Oakland neighborhoods, Fremont, and Sacramento, church family was just as important as biological family.

The Black Cultural Zone, while not a faith-based organization, is built upon the organizing infrastructure of the Black church. Prior to the mall's rise as a central locale, or "Mecca," for the East Oakland Black community, it was the church, most notably one of the core organizers of the BCZ: Allen Temple Baptist Church. In her recollections of Oakland, Regina tells me that "Back in the day Allen Temple was poppin. I mean, it was like man, like everybody used to come through there, like, it was very politically active. And active in the community." As part of their work to build community power, Allen Temple, a more than 100 year-old East Oakland institution, began its own CDC and in 1981 completed their first development project of senior housing. Several years later, under the leadership of J Alfred Smith, the church expanded its social services and community development program to include tutoring and mentoring programs, a mini-market, a credit union, a blood bank, a radio station, and a professional organization. (Smith, 1983; Smith, 1986)

Both the church and business spaces have been primary gathering places in East Oakland – and, as a result, recipients of a concentration of community-based financial support. The ways they have given back have been critical to Black community development. In addition to their services, the way that these spaces were financially and physically stable contributed to a sense

[45] These banners, and especially the "Heartlands" reference, may be part of an attempt to rebrand this neighborhood, just east of Seminary Blvd and the more affluent areas around Mills College.

of community stability. The church provided Chris with literal homes as she and her family struggled with housing insecurity growing up. Business spaces also shored up his understanding of his family, Oakland and a sense of home. Similarly to the way that Copes talks about the function his business played in supporting the community, Chris conveyed the importance of his family's business, Dorsey's Locker, in providing a safe haven for ordinary Black folks in Oakland, as well as for political organizers like the Panthers. Like other Black congregational spaces, Dorsey's invited a working class audience with an "air of…casual energy." He regrets not having been able to inherit the business; because although Chris now co-owns her own cannabis-product line, the physical space itself is what appears to be the most valuable asset of a Black-owned business. "We need more spaces that are specifically ours that are actually safe."

While the appropriation of space is necessarily capitalistic, the way that these spaces have functioned historically, and continue to provide stable networks of care does something to the principle of capitalism. Says Chris,

> I think [in]…late stage capitalism, things are coming to a breaking point in income inequality. This assumption that we have to be competitive in order to survive and we have to like squash people in order to get ahead is rejected a lot here. And I feel like the more that we tap into that the *spirit of communalism* like understanding that we are a village like we do [support each other], the more we kind of like test that out in different ways and like whether it's the East Bay Permanent Real Estate housing collective, like buying back buildings, helping people facilitate actually taking community ownership of their living space. Or whether it's just some people getting together talking about how they got into currency trading. Or like whatever it is. People are still figuring out ways to support each other. And I think that's an invaluable [asset.]

The BCZ is similarly invested in alternatives to capitalist models. The creation of a decentralized zone and integrated network has made the potential for developing new currencies possible. "Cowrie Currency," so called as a reference to the way that cowrie shells were once used as money in West Africa, is being developed as a form of cryptocurrency that can be exchanged with designated BCZ partners. A core principle of this currency is the idea of mutual aid, defined by the collaborative as the "voluntary and reciprocal exchange of goods and services for mutual or community benefit." (Okwelogu, 2020) While the currency is likely being designed to be traded for the US dollar, it primarily functions as an equitable form of labor-time exchange, in which one hour of hair-braiding can be banked for 1 hour of any other service. This form of currency also rewards ways of interaction - the ways that people support one another in such a way that lends itself to something called 'community' 'Oakland' or vibe - rather than relying exclusively on value accrued through investment in property. Value arises from how well people are supported, and social capital becomes the return on investment.

Conclusion

Sunday mornings at the Akoma Market in Liberation Park feel like gathering. The brightening of murals against the once-dull retaining wall, the thrum of music and steady chatter makes the market a ritual, a weaving together the fractured seams of East Oakland. In bringing together the business and church spaces of Black Oakland's past with the liberatory potential of the Black Arts movement, the BCZ is re-assembling, and re-defining, a Black sense of place[46].

Place is claimed as a function of historicity and relationality. It is made and more importantly *developed* through an operationalization of vibe that transects Oakland's temporalities and localities. The BCZ leadership reflects and enlivens the radical political strategies of the 60s and 70s. That the logo includes a Sankofa symbol[47] signals the importance of Oakland's storied past in the creation of Black Oakland cultural space. Black place and the claim to cultural property here also still relies upon the economics of racial capitalism. To a certain degree, this project is only made possible by the way that vibe has been exploited as part of the city's diversity campaign. It is only through the partial appeasement of these desires that property rights, permissions and external funding can be predictably counted upon. Vibe too is made through the pressures of neoliberalization and racialization as hustle is rewarded, nested within ethics of care and self-determination.

Liberation Park will never be a completely liberated space so long as the models for freedom are still constructed within an exploitative economic system that ghettoizes cultural corridors and produces inequality. But, that the BCZ resists this – through distributed, non-linear processes of development, alternative currencies and strategic embodied occupation – makes alternatives possible. It interrupts the logic of Oakland's development that insist upon producing corridors of "there-ness." It makes, instead, corridors of the alleys between functionally defined spaces, an interior space from which reclamation emerges. What the BCZ offers is the weave of collectivity, a feeling that arises in the back rooms of stores like Copes' in churches and now in artistic spaces that call people together. The break in a two-dimensional framework for development is emancipatory framing, a reassertion of vibe and the way that it functions to make a Black sense of place livable.

[46] In recent years, as church membership has waned, church properties have been increasingly used as locations for social justice organizing. Additionally, Regina suggests that the arts have supplanted the church as a means for connecting with community, meaningful causes and transcendental experiences. Given the origin stories of both the BAMBD and the BCZ, it may be fair to say that the arts have taken on a sacred practice of place-keeping, vibe-making, and care-taking. As Regina says, "the spiritual power base now rests on the artists."

[47] Sankofa - "returning to the source" - which not only is a reference to the collaborative's Afro-centric influences, but to the idea that the BCZ is returning to the roots of Black Oakland and a Black nationalist history in moving forward with its development plans.

Conclusion: Vibe in the Spotlight

Oakland was showing off. Again. Quieter this time.

Scant pink and blue clouds threaded through a dimming summer sky over Lake Merritt. The lights of the Tribune building and the Grand Lake Theater that mark the iconic bookmarks of the city's stilted skyline glitter all the more proudly on nights like this. Walking the long eastern shore, I could see just ahead of me on a small landing the illuminated silhouettes of invisible figures - a string of human shaped lights. As I approached, I saw that it was a Black man draped in colored lights, and he was tying a white ribbon around a Black woman's head and hat. Both were dancing. The woman waved at my friend and me, telling us to come join them, smiling in a warm, familiar way. It was not just an invitation to join the show, but, in the midst of the reverberating beat, to be in relation, to turn away from the spectating gaze, away from the lights of the skyline, and - between the four of us - into the collective movements of our bodies, shrouded by glittering light.

To be immersed in this fleeting, yet tenacious networked movement feels like Oakland's vibe to me. Earlier that same evening, I had, by chance, encountered a favorite music artist who had previously been based in DC. That she knew a number of the same Black Oakland artists and friends I knew or had performed with, should not have surprised me. But it evoked a sense of wonder at the diligent web of support and Black spatiality that has arisen in the wake - and in defiance - of displacement. Walking around the edge of Lake Merritt that night, like walking stretches of 14th and Telegraph, became an opportunity to see Oakland beyond the veil of its beloved symbols. The necklace of lights that drape the lake's hunched shoulders were ushered aside, re-strung in color across the broad backs of Black people sheltering themselves in the private shadow of their own lights.

Lake Merritt might not be the space in which Oakland's vibe is crafted, but it is certainly its stage. Both Juneteenth and "BBQ'n While Black," have drawn crowds here thick with the variety of Oakland's Blackness that was once described at Festival at the Lake in the 1990s. These festivals are a demonstrative reclamation of Oakland's geographic image, a rebuke of the formal and informal policing of Black bodies in public spaces, and an assertion of the centrality of Blackness to Oakland's commoditized desirability. And yet, this is not vibe, but an invitation into the entrepreneurial visions and spaces of organizations and businesses. The presence here is oriented toward spectacle, the kind of disruptive (un)visibility that Sunflower demands in her images. And everyone here is hustling a product or an impeccable image: Young girls wear themselves vibrant in varying colored braids, women with hair in wrapped in regal African print, or worn in kinky coils flowing freely down their shoulders, across tight dresses, mid-rise shirts, and pressed Warrior's jerseys. A Cadillac is parked on the shore with its wheels jacked up about 2 feet off the ground and the front tires akimbo so that one of them was completely lifted off the ground and angled out to the left, as it if were frozen trying to elbow another car out of the way. Rows of pop-up tents shelter tables laden with homemade cowrie shells jewelry and crystals wrapped in coiled metal, Black Lives Matter shirts, hand-sewn cloth masks, natural

health care products, aguas frescas, Cambodian beef, Texas BBQ, lemonade, and one man yelling over the press of people, "$10 to take a shot with me!"

In the midst of the overwhelming scene unfolding me, I see the people I know, deejaying or hocking their artworks on blankets spread out on a small plot of grass. I see people I don't know who kinship in my face anyway. The familiar is a threshold into the backstage of it all, the underground, errant tethers to the back room, in-between spaces that make Oakland, *Oakland*. Beneath the images – that of the city and the countervailing narratives of those gathered around Lake Merritt's shore – is the relation, the ethic of care, the interior structures that drive the economics of vibe.

…

Vibe, I have argued, represents a porous threshold between the racialized experience of inequality in place, and its material production. As much as it may be productive of creating an 'elsewhere' beyond our current spatial imaginary, vibe is a product of the very same racial capitalism that structures Black space, as both carceral and liberatory. And yet, it cannot be developed in a linear sense. It has always been a function of affect, the "thousand and one intangibles" that is organized around and organizes a politics of place.

In each case study explored, vibe has been understood to be a relational feeling between people, interior spaces, and a broader sense of place in Oakland. Interior spaces function as a physical and metaphorical juncture that bring together the intimacy, care, shared experience and familial knowing in carceral Black space with the outward development of economic hubs as gathering spaces, and spaces of relation. Representations of vibe in its outward expression - through the arts and festivals - are commoditized to support the interior spaces where those relationships of care, and the practices of creative and/or political expression that arise therein, are nurtured. Such representations have driven mainstream Oakland development, but are not, themselves, the vibe that people seek and express. Additionally, the purposeful development of Black cultural space as a way of perpetuating the city's identity for the sake of progress, posterity and consumption further alienates vibe from its origins in Black and working class gathering. It is in this sense that vibe cannot be reproduced. The perpetuation of Oakland "as Oakland" thus paradoxically relies upon the production of backroom/in-between congregational places for the those who have historically been most marginalized from Oakland's image, and displaced from its actual spaces. The Black radical imaginary (and, relatedly, the historic significance of the BPP) that motivates and is a product of such spaces centers the arts as a means of articulating radical divergence from the state and capitalist accumulation. Emancipatory framing here becomes a way to explain capitalist development strategies leveraged to protect Black spatiality that is both central and always in opposition to capitalist development and the racialized production of space.

Under the twin spotlight of racial reckoning in the wake of George Floyd's murder, and the heightened precarity produced by COVID-19, the politics of emancipatory framing is particularly relevant. Closeness remained in spite of social distancing, and care became a pronounced demand of Black space. Every market is saturated with images of Black people and messages supporting the movement for Black lives. Blackness is not only an economized vibe,

but a political one. Artists, recognizing this, are taking advantage of this political moment to link movements to defund the police with movements to increase funding for Black and Brown cultural workers. This has manifested as demands for a greater arts budget and funds to support artists and cultural centers with rent to defray the risk of displacement. In so doing, they call attention to the hypocrisy of government branding that relies upon the materialization of vibe through the arts, and demand that these representations be grounded in real investment in Black space. It is not a demand for sovereignty or total liberation, but space that is actually safe enough for relationality to continue. While the Lake Merritt stage will continue to host transient clusters of vibe, the politics of reclaiming space through the workings of the market and the state are key to maintaining vibe as a central threshold for Black survival, life, and change.

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