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Author

Summers, Brandi Thompson

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Reclaiming the Chocolate City: Soundscapes of Gentrification and Resistance in Washington, D.C.

Brandi T. Summers, Ph.D.

Abstract

In Washington, D.C., Black residents have experienced unprecedented levels of cultural and physical displacement since 2000. Because of gentrification, the first “chocolate city,” long been defined by its blackness, has experienced shifts in the economy and commitments by the local government, that privilege policies that facilitate the displacement of Black families. Everyday struggles against gentrification have been of wide-ranging theoretical concern and pose an ongoing challenge for scholars in geography to understand the ways people resist gentrification and displacement. In this article, I show through an analysis of the anti-gentrification movement, #DontMuteDC, how Black people challenge the processes of gentrification by reclaiming space and resisting capitalist dispossession through cultural production. I demonstrate the relationship between Black sound aesthetics, gentrification, and a spatial politics of reclamation. I analyze the movement’s emphasis on go-go music as part of a process to (re)claim their place in the city, which I argue disrupts structures governing and managing normative space. I propose reclamation aesthetics as an analytic through which we can understand Black cultural production and Black place- and space-making practices as responses to socio-spatial inequities.

Introduction

“Go-go may be invisible to much of white Washington, but it’s as much a part of the city as pillars and monuments of its federal face...Go-go is Washington”

– Natalie Hopkinson

On Sunday, April 7, 2019, Howard University student, Julien Broomfield, posted a message on Twitter that went viral almost immediately. In her tweet, Broomfield wrote: “I’m not a fan of gogo but the dudes down at Metro PCS on Georgia [Florida Avenue] have stopped playing their music. Apparently, the new yt neighbors were complaining about the ‘noise’. Simply saying gentrification is an understatement.” The next day, Broomfield sent follow-up message: “Use the hashtag #DontMuteDC when you tweet about this! We have to start somewhere!” On that same day, April 8, several local news outlets in Washington reported that Central Communications, a MetroPCS/T-Mobile phone carrier and record store on the corner of 7th and Florida Ave NW in the historically-Black Shaw neighborhood, had been forced to stop playing go-go music on speakers placed outside of the store. A resident of *The Shay*, a nearby high-end residential building, had reportedly contacted various District agencies, including the Metropolitan Police Department and the corporate headquarters of T-Mobile, to complain about the music. News of the silencing spread rapidly, and prompted Ronald Moten, an activist and go-go music promoter, and Natalie

Hopkinson, a Howard University professor and go-go historian, to circulate a change.org petition, “Don’t Mute DC’s Go-Go Music and Culture,” in which they demanded that the music at 7th and Florida Avenue be turned back on. In the petition, which received over 80,000 signatures, they proclaimed that they “refused to be silent as gentrifiers malign, assault and attempt to erase this culture. #DontMuteDC.”¹ In the following weeks, thousands gathered for both organized and impromptu rallies that took place at various points in the city (including the intersection of 7th and Florida Avenue), where popular go-go bands played to a festive and receptive crowd. In tandem with these gatherings, Moten and Hopkinson teamed with additional community activists, go-go scholars, and enthusiasts to build a multi-pronged, grassroots movement to call out the violence inflicted upon Black Washingtonians due to capitalist dispossession and displacement while, at the same time, making cultural and political claims to the city.

Go-go is a musical subgenre that originated in Washington, D.C. and has been popularized throughout the region for more than forty years. The music is most often associated with soul, R&B, hip-hop, and most notably, funk music, but has diverse origins, with its strong West African, Caribbean, and Afro-Latinx influences. The late Chuck Brown, the “Godfather of Go-Go,” is widely recognized as the founder of go-go music, with his live shows in the early- to mid-1970s marking the beginning of the genre’s popular history (Lornell & Stephenson, Jr., 2001). With its syncopated beats, prominent basslines, and rhythmic percussion, go-go music was cultural and aesthetic kin to contemporaneous social and political movements like Black Power, and Afrocentric nationalism that were popularized in the 1960s and 1970s. Through its sound and performance, go-go became a major part of the local soundscape, emblematic of a native Black Washingtonian identity within the popular imagination.

As go-go music historians have pointed out, while the music remains popular in D.C., Maryland, and Northern Virginia (DMV), it never achieved commercial success outside of the region. Nevertheless, because of its limited mainstream history and potential, go-go’s marginalization has enabled a kind of freedom to intensify its identification with Black D.C. The production and performance of go-go have been ways that Black Washingtonians produced the city, and the policing of go-go was a similar but opposite effort, thereby showing how sound (and silence) are used to make the city. The “muting” of go-go music in one of D.C.’s most intensely gentrified neighborhoods epitomizes a cultural and political shift that accompanies neoliberal urban change

¹ <https://www.change.org/p/ronald-moten-don-t-mute-dc-s-go-go-music-and-culture>

precipitated by gentrification. This is a story of how sound aesthetics become central in the fight against capitalist dispossession, and how Black Washingtonians are both trying to assert their belonging to the city by reclaiming cultural property that has been “muted” by gentrification.

Washington, D.C. is presumably undergoing an economic “renaissance” as the city has experienced a tremendous growth in population, private sector jobs, and housing stock. Over the past several years, D.C. has consistently ranked as one of the highest among states with the strongest economy. Despite these advances, Black Washingtonians, specifically long-term Black residents, have been largely left behind. In fact, a 2019 study released by the National Community Reinvestment Coalition (NCRC) claims that Washington, D.C. experienced the greatest intensity of gentrification in the U.S. between 2000-2013 (Richardson, et al., 2019). More than 20,000 Black residents were displaced during that period by mostly affluent, white newcomers due to a meteoric rise in home values, increased investment and new amenities added to lower-income, traditionally Black communities. The NCRC report only confirmed what many in the region already presumed: that D.C. had undergone the unprecedented displacement of Black residents unlike any other city in the country. This profound demographic shift is having a dramatic impact on the physical, cultural, and political memory of Black D.C. that is too often obscured. Today, with its dense population of over 700,000 residents, D.C. remains largely segregated as the population on the eastern side of the city is almost exclusively Black, and mostly white on the western end. The toll of gentrification on the first “chocolate city,” has hit long-time Black residents hardest as shifts in the economy and commitments by the local government privilege policies that facilitate the displacement of Black families. Progressive shifts in politics and policies over the past forty years have not led to much change.

The impact of Black Washingtonians experiencing unprecedented levels of cultural and physical displacement has led some to claim that the culture and contributions of Black Washingtonians are being actively erased. The incident that sparked Broomfield’s tweet, and the larger #DontMuteDC movement, came one year after *Washingtonian* magazine published a marketing campaign featuring white and Asian D.C. residents wearing t-shirts adorned by the phrase “I’m not a tourist. I live here.” The controversial campaign featured no images of Black residents. Following the publication, various city leaders decried the images, claiming that the campaign provided a clear example of how Black Washingtonians were being actively ignored and erased in the face of rapid gentrification. In response, local activist Tony Lewis, Jr. and businessowner Angel Gregorio organized a photoshoot in which over 200 Black Washingtonians wore black t-shirts with the word

“Native” illustrated on the front. The intention of the “DC Natives” photoshoot was to represent and reclaim the image of “what DC really looks like” (Arnold, 2019).

In this article, I show how Black people make claims on the city, resisting a particular stage of gentrification through which the lived experience of urban Black residents is shaped within the context of capitalist dispossession and cultural displacement. By analyzing the #DontMuteDC movement, which centers go-go music as its primary vehicle to (re-)establish Black place and belonging, I explore how Black Washingtonians thwart the eradication of what makes D.C. a Black city. Go-go is the expressive, sonic apparatus that held this displaced population together through their memories and connections to each other and their city. For urban and cultural geography, struggles against gentrification have been of wide-ranging theoretical concern, especially related to residential and cultural displacement. I propose viewing the #DontMuteDC movement, and its use of go-go music as geographic acts (McKittrick 2006, p. 139), through the lens of *reclamation aesthetics*, an analytic through which we can understand Black political and placemaking practices as a response to contemporary socio-spatial inequities. In particular, I examine D.C.’s go-go music as a kind of subjugated knowledge, recognizing music as an effective way to map, tell stories.

Activism is an aesthetic, process essential to contestations over the organization of society, as actors mobilize radical forms and spaces of expression. By theorizing outside of visual culture, I focus on sonic geographies to understand who and what gets heard. Sound aesthetics are crucial to this spatial contestation, because unlike visual culture, “it is much more difficult to escape the rattle and hum in the space that [subjects] inhabit...[sound] forces subjects to bear witness to its occurrence and duration” (Weheliye, 2005, p. 111). Sonic language has both an aesthetic and a politics, therefore my analysis of go-go sound and performance aesthetics considers the spatial and temporal elements of the performances as well as the aural information that the music constructs within the context of the gentrifying city.

Struggles over the meaning of place, as Katherine McKittrick (2006) argues, “add a geographic dimension to practices of black reclamation” (p. 3). Reclamation aesthetics operate as a means through which Black residents navigate spatial inequities and reclaim the spaces from which they have been displaced. Culture and aesthetics have long been locations for encounters entangled with political, economic, and spatial inequities. Such encounters reveal questions about identity and the conditions under which people are able to remain in the city. Reclamation aesthetics, then, reflect possibility at the intersection of the aesthetic and the political, sound and race, the affective (sensual) and the critical. A possibility that invites improvisation, as AbdouMaliq Simone (2019)

argues, to better understand the “rhythms of endurance” (p. 10) that make up Black life in D.C. Using ethnographic observations, oral history interviews, and a case study analysis of #DontMuteDC, I demonstrate the relationship between Black sound aesthetics, gentrification, and a spatial politics of reclamation.

In what follows, I situate gentrification in D.C. within a wider frame of understanding Black displacement from the city. Then, I provide a brief background of go-go music and how the sound and performance have historically produced Black geographic space in the face of urban oppression. Next, I discuss what a reclamation aesthetics analytic offers for understanding the dynamics of neoliberal urbanism, displacement, and Black dispossession, of which resistance is one manifestation. Finally, I analyze the #DontMuteDC movement and how reclamation aesthetics work to spatially contest Black displacement that results from gentrification.

Sights and Sounds of Gentrification in DC

The Shaw neighborhood in northwest Washington has been central location for the cultivation and transmission of black life and culture in the city (Asch & Musgrove, 2017; Hyra, 2017; Hyra, 2015). The intersection of 7th and Florida Avenue is particularly relevant as a commercial district that is the center of several historic black neighborhoods, including U Street/Cardozo, Logan Circle, and LeDroit Park. Throughout much of the early- to mid-twentieth century, the area was self-sustained with hundreds of Black-owned businesses. Shaw experienced cultural and economic decline with the end of segregation and housing restrictions in 1954, which precipitated the exodus of black middle-class families to newly accessible suburbs, and the shuttering of local black businesses. Then, in 1968, the city was rocked by two days of uprisings following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The intersection of 7th and Florida Avenue NW was one of three commercial areas devastated by violence and destruction, and in its aftermath, development stalled for nearly two decades. The neighborhood experienced considerable disinvestment due to Black middle-class flight, the uprisings, and economic market shifts. Nevertheless, the area still remained an important location for Black culture, commerce, education and entertainment. In fact, the D.C. government made strident efforts to revitalize the neighborhood while designating it a “cultural designation district” – attempting to preserve its character and acknowledge its significance as a central, independent, Black cultural community (DC Office of Planning, 2004).

Over the past several years, Shaw has become a particularly attractive area for investment by developers, signaling a resurgence of the neighborhood’s commercial and residential landscape. With

this shift has come a precipitous decline in Shaw’s Black population and increase in white, affluent residents, as new commercial establishments, residential buildings, and entertainment venues cater to the tastes of these newcomers with high incomes. One notable example took place in 2012, when developer JBG Smith Properties bought the lot on the southwest corner of 7th and Florida Avenue—which had been the location of a popular farmer’s market and swap-meet for several years—to build a luxury, mixed-use residential and commercial building. JBG publicized the opening of the new building, *The Shay*, in 2015 with a five-story tall poster adorning the side of building that featured the overtly colonial image of a pale-skinned white woman wearing a powdered wig, coyly covering her mouth with a black and white lace fan. That the massive poster announced “SHE HAS ARRIVED,” only bolstered claims about the ways in which white residents have begun to take up and take over space with no regard for the residents and communities that had been formed and thrived for years before they “arrived.” Accordingly, clashes in culture and community get played out as white newcomers designate proper uses and boundaries of public space.

The rapid spread of gentrification in Washington, DC, especially in historically Black neighborhoods like Shaw, has been a popular topic amongst scholars (Summers, 2019; Asch & Musgrove, 2017; Hyra, 2017; Prince, 2016; Hyra, 2015; Hopkinson, 2012). Of particular interest is the dramatic shift in the racial composition of the U.S.’s first chocolate city. One *Washington Post* columnist points out that gentrification in D.C. today is distinctively different than gentrification of yesterday. People are not necessarily being displaced and replaced by “fancy, rich people,” instead the gentrification of today appears accessible as it revamps and reinvents common, traditional and popular items: donuts, cupcakes, coffee, beer, burgers, fried chicken, etc. (Dvorak 2017). Accompanying this shift in consumption and the commercial landscape is policy that has supported aesthetic changes to streetscapes in favor of more acceptable forms of historical preservation (cultural tourism), changes in the architecture, transit, and sidewalk space.

In addition to the deployment of visual aesthetic strategies in the urban environment have been changes to the rhythms and soundscapes of the gentrifying city, transforming what and how sounds are heard. Ongoing contestations over urban cultural landscapes highlight the significance of sound in understanding gentrification as not only an economic process, but also filled with aesthetic sensibilities. Gentrification introduces a multitude of sounds: incessant sounds of construction, barking dogs, car horns – all recognized as signs of growth in population and of development. Loud chatter and (rock) music blasting from beer gardens, sidewalk cafés, restaurants, and rooftop bars are interpreted by many as indicators of capitalist progress, urban expansion, and renewal, as young,

affluent, white newcomers move to the center city. In contrast, proposed measures like D.C.’s 2018 Amplified Noise Amendment Act, target primarily Black street musicians who perform in some of the most popular public spaces in the city (Dowd, 2018). These policies are an attempt to police “legitimate expressions of publicity, property, and propriety,” and criminalize “disturbing noise” that is all too often attributed to Black people (Werth 2019, p. 16). As Margaret Ramirez (2019) notes, “sonic borders between music and noise are also racialized, and when sound occurs in public space, spatial norms are often dictated by the structure of white supremacy” (p. 13). The policing of Black people and Black sound in public spaces is a defining feature of gentrification and urban renewal, as both operate “as bordering practices that create structural and cultural exclusion in city space” (Ramirez, 2019, p. 2).

To that end, if renewal is about an active silencing, erasure, and the forgetting of a marginalized past, processes of gentrification render certain sounds silent as they signal a history that must be forgotten. These soundscapes produce clear boundaries around who belongs and has rights to be in place, but also how people make use of the city. In other words, the sounds of gentrification reflect specific visions for public life and who belongs, namely the production of public spaces “where white bodies and desires and, most importantly, consumption, dominate, and shape the neighborhood” (Mirabel, 2009, p. 17). At the same time, drawing on sound makes claims for cultural rights to the city viable. Pushing up against the purported inevitability and totalizing impact of gentrification—a position that has become more common as gentrification enters the popular imagination—Black Washingtonians are using go-go as a mechanism to refuse exclusionary inclusion and inclusionary exclusion (Camp 2012). In essence, they appropriate the city by making claims on DC as Black: if go-go is Black, and DC is go-go, then DC is Black.

Go-Go *is* D.C.

Often characterized as “party music,” go-go is not only a style of music. *Go-go* can also be used to describe the location of where live performances take place. *A go-go* is the space where musicians and their fans would gather—in backyards, street corners, parks, restaurants, nightclubs, skating rinks, firehouses, community centers, and college campuses. Live performances enable musicians to actively interact with their audiences, as they engage in a call-and-response practice that “draw the geographical map of black Washington” throughout the entire performance (Hopkinson, 2012, p. 41). Paul Gilroy (1993) points to the prominence of the African musical tradition of call-and-response, which he sees as a way to construct a hybrid transatlantic Black political identity in a

contemporary world. As D.C. activist, Tony Lewis, Jr. describes, go-go evokes a “euphoric kind of feeling, that sort of—that experience gave to us, this spiritual, tribal, if you will, experience, man, that only can happen in the go-go” (Lewis, Jr., 2019). Drawing on both sensorial and verbal cues to engage the audience, the musical properties of go-go music having an impact on the body, not only biologically, but also subject-making processes, especially in precarious conditions. The schools, dancehalls, and community centers where go-gos took place were effectively “transformed into laboratories for the creation of new identities and identification” (Johnson, 2013, p. xii). The lyrical call-outs provide an opportunity for D.C.’s most neglected population, the poor and dispossessed, to place their neighborhoods on the map, since songs are often “full of names that are intelligible only to people who are knowledgeable about D.C. street life” (Gantt, 2010, p. 208). Tony Lewis spoke about the significance of go-go music and go-go performances to the affirmation of Black life in D.C. He said:

We felt invisible in many ways and so when we went in those go-gos, we felt visible, we felt like we mattered. Go-go is personal to us. And when you come in, they say, ‘Hanover—First and O [Streets]’—you know, that’s my neighborhood, that’s where I’m from, and at a moment in my life, we willing to die about that. That sort of affirmation of our existence meant everything to us, you know what I’m saying? (Lewis, Jr., 2019).

The naming of different neighborhoods and blocks produced a cultural geography of the city shaped by those Black Washingtonians who were most “disenfranchised, ignored, but still ebullient, living for the groove and for each other” (Maskell, 2016, pp. 121-122).

For Black Washingtonians, the act of “[r]eclaiming or reusing urban public space was one key component of go-go” (Maskell, 2016, p. 133). Both the production and consumption of go-go music, especially in Black neighborhoods, provided Black Washingtonians provided a way to make their own city. Go-go music defined Black space in D.C.: after disinvestment of neighborhoods, businesses and schools; devaluing of land; white exodus to the suburbs – taking jobs and other opportunities with them – D.C., like other chocolate cities, cultivated a robust repertoire of music, arts, and culture that was specifically urban, sensual, gritty, and uniquely Black. Nevertheless, this contested site made room for Black Washingtonians to “voice emancipatory political projects, and articulate” local identity (Guilbault, 2007, p. 3).

In Washington, D.C. and its surrounding Black suburbs, go-go has historically been a spatial practice of resistance, a way to claim space and shift its meaning in the face of hyper-surveillance, disinvestment, and the criminalization of poverty. The sound and performance of go-go deploy what

Alex Werth (2019) calls *racial reverberations*, by enabling Black residents to “generate new forms of music and movement as an energetic response to legislative, discursive, and material attacks on their spaces of recreation and connection” (p. 15). The music and its performances enabled Black people to mark space in the city even as Black spaces were disappearing.

Reclamation aesthetics

Scholars frame reclamation and gentrification as something developers and new white residents engage to replace old, industrial aesthetics and fix what has been broken over many years (Howell, 2005; Zukin, 1987). This ideology follows the logic of a “back to the city” model that says the influx of white residents into previously Black and brown neighborhoods as a “return.” This “back to the city” movement is discursively framed as a reclamation project to justify white people taking over Black spaces (Hyra, 2015). Reclamation by gentrifiers presumes that they are coming back to take what is theirs. As Brown-Saracino (2010) points out, urban “pioneers” celebrate their ability to reclaim space through gentrification, bolstering the arguments for gentrification as a positive phenomenon that improves the degraded landscape. I ground reclamation aesthetics in an analysis of how Black communities challenge displacement through sound aesthetics and resist these forces through a productive logic of spatial reclamation. This is intimately connected to an active production and affirmation of a Black sense of place (McKittrick, 2011).

Connecting go-go to the spirit of the city makes their claims for belonging and visibility much more legible. At the same, the terms of reclamation in the realm of sensorial life are not organized by a desire to seek white recognition to prove Black value. Instead, these terms establish D.C. as a Black city, defined by Black sound reflecting the rhythms of Black life. The notion of Black Washingtonian’s taking back the space, draws on a rich and radical political history in D.C. This contemporary manifestation is an emancipatory “enabling of new formations of social solidarity, especially as weapons against a neoliberal logic of privatization” (LaBelle 2018, 4). Using sound aesthetics to reclaim space and belonging grounds the aesthetic musical experience of listening to go-go as part of a creative resistance and cultural resilience that protects the Black community and their distinct cultural legacy in the city. Therefore, reclamation aesthetic practice does not involve simply taking up space, but specifically doing so in response to the systemic silencing and erasure of Black folks from Black cities, since the music articulates a Black soundscape “through which blackness can be read as an integral and meaningful part of the landscape” (McKittrick 2006, p. 139). To reclaim space in opposition to neoliberal privatization and racial

restructuring means that [Black] people gather, engage, participate, and build together—something that go-go music and performance explicitly invite. Go-go as a reclamation aesthetic practice, effectively conveys bodies through street as they occupy public space. In this way, Black Washingtonians enact a spatial practice that demands they are to be both seen and heard.

By positing spatial reclamation as an aesthetic politics that extends beyond acts of resistance taken up by excluded populations in gentrifying cities, reclamation aesthetics challenges the commonly held narrative that cities are spaces for which wealthy white people “naturally” return to. Drawing on what Simone (2019) theorizes as a politics of refusal, reclamation aesthetics engage a politics “defined not by opposition or necessarily resistance, but instead a refusal of the very premises that have historically negated...the lived experience of Blackness as either pathological or exceptional to the logic of white supremacy” (p. 22). Reclamation aesthetics, then, reveal unique experiences of Black people, and how these experiences influence their spatial imaginaries and practices to take back physical and cultural spaces from which they have been displaced (Lipsitz, 2011; McKittrick & Woods, 2007; McKittrick, 2006). Reclamation aesthetics reveal spatial acts through which Black people assert their place to counter the social and economic forces of gentrification—specifically re-establishing a Black geographic terrain in the face of urban restructuring, surveillance, and spatial segregation.

The following section discusses the emergence of the #DontMuteDC movement and frames its organization through the lens of reclamation aesthetics in order to highlight its significance in the ongoing fight against gentrification. #DontMuteDC engages a radical aesthetic politics that shows us how Black people experience and produce knowledge about the chocolate city. This knowledge enables Black people to organize around social justice issues that impact a shrinking Black population. Challenging the purported inevitability and totalizing impact of gentrification—a position that has become more common as gentrification enters the popular imagination—Black Washingtonians are using go-go as a mechanism to reclaim and rearticulate space in D.C.

Reclamation at the Final Frontier: #DontMuteDC

“So, the biggest thing for me is just people realizing, ‘hey, what steps can I take from here to make sure that when I come back to my city, even if I leave, I come back ten years later, I can still recognize where I am, I can still feel the love, and I can still feel the culture that was here when, you know, I was here’”

- Julien Broomfield

The Central Communications store on the southeast corner of 7th and Florida Avenue, NW has been an important mainstay in the Shaw neighborhood for nearly 25 years. Since opening its doors 1995, Donald Campbell, the 52-year old owner, who formerly ran several go-go clubs during the 1990s and early 2000s, has placed speakers outside of the store and played go-go music on the street, daily from 10am until 7pm. It became one of the few locations where the music could be consumed publicly after most clubs that played live and recorded go-go music had been shut down. Around the time the city started shuttering nightclubs and bars that primarily played go-go music, Campbell founded the retail store, while also selling tapes and CDs of live go-go shows. Since its opening in the mid-1990s, Campbell received little to no complaints about the music. For many D.C. residents, students, and tourists, the corner is known for having passersby surreptitiously break out into song and dance, grooving to the go-go beat. In many ways, the intersection of 7th and Florida has not changed since 1995, and Natalie Hopkinson remarked, “you always remember that you’re in the Chocolate City when you get to this corner” (Hopkinson, 2019).

By early 2019, Campbell started receiving regular visits from various city agencies (including the fire and police departments), who would measure the volume of the music at Central Communications to determine whether it met city standards. Each time, Campbell was told that he was in compliance. Although the officers would not identify who had lodged a complaint, it became clear that a resident from The Shay reported Campbell to both the local police department and the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA). In March 2019, Campbell started receiving calls from a resident who lived in The Shay, complaining about the “noise,” demanding that he turn it off. Once he declined, the complainant started contacting T-Mobile (who acquired MetroPCS), with whom Campbell had a contract to sell phones and accessories for the past five years, threatening to sue the company if the music did not stop. Although the volume of Campbell’s music did not violate any city ordinances, he was told by T-Mobile to “get rid of the music” (Kurzius, 2019). For fear of losing his contract with T-Mobile, Campbell complied, and on March 12, brought the speakers indoors, and began to play soft jazz music at a significantly lower volume. The change in sound was so drastic, that according to Campbell, twenty to thirty people per day would come in to ask if the store was closed and why the music was no longer playing (Campbell, 2019).

This “noise” playing from Campbell’s speakers was discordant to the rapid changes taking place along the commercial and entertainment corridor. At the same time, the music contributed to a cultural landscape that privilege Black visual art, performance, and sound aesthetics. By reporting Campbell to law enforcement and district agencies, as well as threaten his contract with T-Mobile, the complainant’s actions fall in line with the capitalist dispossession and cultural violence enacted against Black business owners that has resulted in the disappearing landscape of small Black businesses in the Shaw neighborhood and beyond. At the same time, the rapid growth of the #DontMuteDC movement reflects historically, racialized struggles over the social and political landscape of D.C.

As the hashtag #DontMuteDC spread online urging T-Mobile to allow Central Communications to resume its go-go playlist, Moten and Hopkinson collected over 80,000 signatures from supporters around the region. Several prominent local residents and politicians (including the mayor and several city council members) publicly urged the store to turn the music back on. The following day, a large group of people gathered in another popular intersection of the city, 14th and U Street NW, effectively shutting it down, as people gathered to dance and listen to (live) go-go music from the likes of popular D.C.-bred hip-hop artist, Wale. Similar events took place over the next several days and weeks at 14th and U Streets as well as 7th and Florida Avenue, some drawing over 4,000 people into the streets, ultimately garnering national media attention. Bands such as Rare Essence, TOB, Backyard Band, Mental Attraction Band, ABM, TCB, New Impressionz, What Band, and CCB all came to play and show support, as huge crowds of revelers danced and sang familiar go-go tunes. Playing a mixture of old school, “crank” (a style popularized in the 1990s), and the more recent melodic “bounce beat,” go-go artists highlighted a historical evolution of the music that connects multiple generations of listeners and performers, while creating a unified community in the street.

The musical performers and crowds at these events produced an aesthetic field that permeated the built and natural environments. You could hear the go-go sound from blocks away, while the ground pulsed from the beat of the drums and stomping feet of the crowd. The music’s distinct polyphony reverberated and hovered high above the street, penetrating the surrounding buildings. The gatherings produced shifts in the landscape, as the dancing, gyrating, stomping Black bodies reconfigured the rules of the road. Cars and trucks were unable to pass through busy intersections, while the sounds of car horns and cranes were deafened by the rumble of percussion instruments.

With its loud and continuous play, all day in an outdoor setting, the #DontMuteDC go-go shows disrupted a gentrified soundscape shaped by various technologies, restrictive policies, and noise ordinances. The sounds of gentrification invoke a sanitized absence of clamor that indicates a waning cultural vibrancy. The noise produced by urban development via construction best characterizes the sounds of gentrification because gentrification is a process *in process*. The sound aesthetics of go-go are connected to the diverse and evolving ways Black Washingtonians enact radical spatial practices, as participants dance, sing, and connect en masse, producing temporary forms of kinship and resistance. Social engagement produced through go-go is best exemplified by its ability to construct an architectural, three-dimensional space that puts both the performers and the audience to work. Call-and-response vocals add community connection to the rhythmic exchange. Shout-outs to individuals in the crowd, blocks, and neighborhoods offer an urban reality that is knowable as distinct from various operations of power, neglect, and dispossession that has made DC less welcoming to Black residents. The music contests normative notions of “progress,” in its call for people to draw on their pasts, their neighborhoods, and their communities.

As news of the controversy at Central Communications continued to spread, Ron Moten organized a press conference, on April 10, outside of the store where he had others speak (including at-large city council member Robert C. White, Jr.) about the importance of go-go music to the history of the city and rallied against the decision to stop the music. Moten and others spoke about the impact of gentrification in which new, white D.C. residents did not understand the history of the region and needed to recognize the significance of go-go music to the landscape. As he addressed the growing audience, cars and trucks driving by honked in support of the rally. Some rolled down their windows and let go-go music pour out of their vehicles. Others, including bus drivers and other city workers, paused their vehicles to profess their love of go-go music.

After Moten and others spoke, the store turned the music on and there was another impromptu dance party. Participants brought their children wearing jumpers adorned with hand-drawn phrases in support of go-go music. The young danced with the elderly. The scene was festive. There were men dressed in costume (from the D.C.-based show *Martin*) holding signs that said #DontMuteDC. Others distributed signs with similar slogans. There was a collection of news teams from local radio and television stations. People were in good spirits but there was an intensity to the crowd as many talked about the challenges ahead of them because of the impact of gentrification.

What became clear to activists, scholars, and residents is the importance of resisting the “muting” of go-go is implicitly connected to the suppression and obfuscation of Black space and

Black life in D.C.; not simply erasure. Gentrification accelerates the depoliticization, commodification, and gutting of Black culture and community, turning blackness into aesthetic symbols represented by designated landmarks in the built environment often consumed by white newcomers (Summers, 2019). The trouble with the music was not simply about volume, but of new white residents attempting to police both the sonic and spatial boundaries of the neighborhood (Ramirez, 2019). The distinction between noise and music is a question of aesthetic taste—tied up in conventions of class and race. As Jennifer Stoeber (2016) writes, white residents “often feel entitled to respect for their sensibilities, sensitivities, and tastes, and to their implicit, sometimes violent, control over the soundscape of an ostensibly ‘free,’ ‘open’ and ‘public’ space” (p. 2). Relatedly, longtime Black residents must contend with a new population taking advantage of the rent-gap, entering the city who maintain a commoditized view of place. Power over sound becomes weaponized, while the settler-colonial logic expressed by residents at *The Shay*, bolsters attempts to take over the sonic space and silence that which existed before their arrival (Ramirez, 2019; Stoeber, 2016).

In the weeks following the initial #DontMuteDC petition and go-go performances, DMDC activists extended the soundscapes, cultural, and political geographies of resistance to additional areas of the city (**Figure 1**). Organizers used the popularity of the DMDC movement to gain recognition by the state, and protest issues that directly impact Black Washingtonians, namely education, healthcare, and housing. Movement leaders used reclamation aesthetics to specifically address class and racial inequities that have become more pronounced with the introduction of gentrification and continued disinvestment. On the evening of May 24, #DontMuteDC organized a go-go rally in the parking lot of the United Medical Center, the last hospital serving two underserved wards in the city—communities where Black Washingtonians make up more than 95% of the population. Hundreds of protestors gathered alongside faith activists, faith leaders, and members of the D.C. Nurses Association to address several issues facing Black D.C. residents. The focus of the “GoGo 4 Justice: Bringing Community, Politics & Music Together” rally was to demand the city restore funding to the hospital, and thirty-one nearby schools that faced significant budget cuts. DMDC organizers also demanded that the city provide funding for a new building for the majority-Black Banneker High School as well as its relocation to the Shaw neighborhood. Finally, #DontMuteDC called for the incorporation of a city-wide curriculum that includes go-go history and culture at all D.C. public schools. As a result of their efforts, D.C. city council voted to restore \$22 million in funds to UMC and \$53 million to Banneker. On June 1, #DontMuteDC organizers

planned another rally to celebrate the restoration of funds and overall impact of the movement on the resurrection of go-go music and culture. At this rally, city council members Kenyan McDuffie and Robert White spoke about their support of the movement, its reach, and their intentions to bolster its momentum through the development of targeted policy (**Figure 2**). McDuffie announced his plans to introduce legislation that would make go-go the official music of D.C. and a proposed measure to establish May 20th as “DC Native’s Day,” while White spoke of his proposal to give returning citizens the right to vote in local elections, thereby providing men and women leaving prison an opportunity to vote and integrate back into society.



FIGURE 1: Scene from “Moechella” in downtown D.C. (photo by author)



FIGURE 2: Councilmembers McDuffie and White speak alongside Ronald “Mo” Moten at a #DontMuteDC rally at 7th and Florida Avenue (photo by author)

#DontMuteDC organizers point to the ways that the preservation and performance of go-go in the streets of Washington provide Black Washingtonians the opportunity to be heard and establish that the city is not a frontier waiting to be conquered. Community activist Tony Lewis, Jr. explains:

The sleeping giant is the native Washingtonian, and particularly the native Washingtonian, eighteen to forty, that group of people that you can see normally represented in those that are going to prison, those that are being victims of violent crime, those that are unemployed, those that are disconnected and disengaged. Right? Show that their voices can be heard, that they have a voice. And these gatherings around DontMuteDC has been training and showing them what can happen when they show up, and like, in the far-reaching impacts is that people are watching that, people see that. So now people have to understand when they're crafting policy and legislation that you have to have them in mind, that you have to have their well-being in mind. Because if not, that there's a group of people that can get

them to show up. So, we've already sort of seen some legislative gains already just at the mere fact that those people can maybe come to the polls one day (Lewis, Jr., 2019).

Oral interviews with #DontMuteDC movement organizers and interlocutors reveal that their impetus to preserve go-go music and culture ties directly to their desire to keep Black people alive and in place. Organizers deploy the spatializing effects of music and its potential to disrupt the structures that govern and manage normative space. Again, particularly relevant to the transmission of these aesthetics is the gathering of Black bodies in place as a way to reclaim space, expressing belonging despite physical and cultural displacement. Keeping Black bodies in place draws on a spatial politics employed by Black Washingtonians to challenge widespread displacement that has resulted from redevelopment, disinvestment, and uneven policy. While the political and economic reorganization of the city pushed go-go music out to the margins and out of the city, at the same time, this same reorganization bolstered activists to protest conditions in the city as they sought to reclaim the space that was both taken and reconfigured.

Events like these offer the potential to disrupt emerging political and cultural geographies that accompany gentrification: those that claim the sonic and social spaces of Black people. Continuing a radical cultural tradition that began in the 1960s and 1970s in D.C., #DontMuteDC uses go-go music as a lens for Black people to interpret the violence of gentrification and develop a new reality that centers social and economic justice (Woods, 1998). Cultural geographers point to the importance of music as a means of communication and plays an active role in the production of social, economic, and political geographies (Simpson, 2017; Atkinson, 2007; Reville, 2000; Smith, 2000; Woods, 1998). Black music, in particular, has long been used as a tool through which Black people have battled against oppression, forging and affirming Black life in the process. Writing about Sylvia Wynter's unpublished manuscript, "Black Metamorphosis," Katherine McKittrick (2016) identifies Wynter's argument about the musical aesthetics of Black cultural production as rebellion in the face of anti-blackness. McKittrick historicizes these practices as originating during slavery, on the plantation, where Black humanity was denied. Therefore, slaves used art, cultural production, and music to enact and confirm their humanity. Black musical forms like go-go, then, are "rebellious political act[s] that [are] entwined with neurological pleasure and the melodic pronouncement of black life" (McKittrick, 2016, p. 81). These projections offered by Black music, challenge dominant, normative narratives and affirm Black life. Ultimately, McKittrick argues that "*making black culture reinvents black humanity and life*" (2016: 85), intimately connecting Black sound to subversive rebellion *and* reclamation.

Conclusion

“[G]entrification’s happening all over the country, right, in most urban areas, and this is like a battle cry. We’re standing up, we standing up for the music, but we standing up like we’re not going anywhere. You’re not just gonna push us out and remove us. We matter, we have value, the music has value, we have value”

- Tony Lewis, Jr.

This article sought to demonstrate how #DontMuteDC has become a platform for multiple practices and modalities of political activism to preserve and enhance Black life in D.C. The movement’s emphasis on go-go music as a placemaking device disrupts structures governing and managing normative space, exposing Black placemaking as a historical, discursive, and productive process. The way we usually theorize placemaking is akin to place-taking, where white people come in and take over spaces that had previously been inhabited and cultivated by Black and indigenous people. The spaces are “redeveloped” according to the aesthetic demands of a new population, and rendered habitable (again). The article recalibrates placemaking, using it as a site to think about reclamation. The #DontMuteDC movement uses go-go music and gatherings to organize against gentrification as an effective tool to complement concurrent political efforts. Specifically, the movement uses sound to be certain Black people are heard in the city. The deployment of sound aesthetics and Black emplacement calls for Black subjects to be both visible and recognized by the state. The incorporation of these aesthetics into a political platform is not just a symbolic gesture; while these rallies present opportunities to congregate and celebrate alongside other Black people, they are targeted efforts to reclaim space and contribute to the ongoing efforts to fight displacement and capitalist dispossession in the city.

Thinking through the movement as an expression of reclamation aesthetics, the article focuses on how #DontMuteDC movement serves as a window to understand the socio-spatial violence occurring in gentrifying cities, and the ways Black people produce Black sound *and* visibility in a landscape where Black people are disappearing. These aesthetic politics actively resist gentrification, displacement, and dispossession by reclaiming spaces of productivity and possibility—unifying and mobilizing through a cultural and aesthetic practice that is inherently tied to D.C.’s identity. The rallies and performances generated by the movement, even while temporary,

disrupt processes of gentrification in two ways: by organizing people around common causes, and by keeping Black bodies in place—something that gentrification explicitly pushes against. Ultimately the implementation of reclamation aesthetics within the context of gentrifying landscapes reconfigures socio-spatial relations and creates new avenues to think about belonging and recognition. DMDC draws on aesthetics to not only make and maintain a temporary space for Black people in public, but also push to transform policy that will enable Black people to stay, thereby expanding the rapidly shrinking cultural geographies of Black Washingtonians and beyond.²

To reclaim space allows us to ask questions and offer narratives of what it means to stay in place, making legitimate claims to space and the meaning of space. Resisting displacement and dispossession is only one part of the story; reclamation opens up the possibility to imagine geographies that were never thought to be seen or heard. Reclamation aesthetics presume Black life as placed, not placeless. These aesthetics structure an epistemology of belongingness that counters the notion of containment or abandonment. The logic of reclamation aesthetics asserts that Black people not only have the right to stay in the city, but should also move fluidly throughout city spaces, even those that are designated by the state and elite actors as prohibited. Reclamation as inherently political because it is often the losers who are erased from history. There is an intentionality to reclamation—a designation of space as having been taken away, then implementation of a mechanism or process to take it back.

On October 30, 2019, D.C. city councilmember, Kenyan McDuffie, held a hearing to propose that go-go music be designated the official music of DC. The bill is intended to preserve traditions built over forty years, instituting go-go music in schools, incorporating go-go history as a cultural artifact. On the heels of McDuffie’s successful bid to establish “DC Natives Day”—celebrating the contributions and culture of native Washingtonians—the go-go bill came about as a direct result of the efforts spurred by the #DontMuteDC movement. Go-go music represents so much in this city, but what makes it especially relevant today is the way it induces “the creative, celebratory, playful, pleasurable, and poetic experiences of being Black and being around other Black people in the city” (Hunter, et al., 2016, p. 32).

² The popularity of #DontMuteDC has spread to other urban locations, like New Orleans (#DontMuteNewOrleans), where Black people face similar threats of displacement and dispossession and calls to silence their music, despite longstanding musical traditions.

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