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The story of property: Meditations on gentrification, renaming, and possibility

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Abstract

Property is a story. We assign land and resources legal status, and we narrate this as ownership and power. The interlocking loans, credit, and debt from which housing markets are compiled are built through narratives about value and its origins. The urban landscape, which is made by those markets, is produced through a confluence of human decisions, made with information about conditions and access. This information is based in stories—stories about what will sell, whether risk is viable, and what constitutes risk itself. These interlocking stories produce processes such as gentrification, one of the key contemporary challenges of booming cities in the Global North. Stories about the value of property, the primacy of growth, the role of race in valuation, and the urgency to invest in the urban landscape all shape gentrification. Meanwhile, stories from below have power too, offering important reframing. This paper examines two gentrifying neighborhoods in the San Francisco Bay Area, analyzes the role of narrative in framing urban change there, and identifies counter-narratives that offer tangible alternatives with the potential to drive decisions around urban development. In sum, this paper foregrounds the role of narrative and storytelling in defining the economic forces such as property that shape urban places.

Keywords

Gentrification, race, property, urban change, counter-narrative

Introduction

Property is a story. We assign land and resources legal status, and we narrate this as ownership and power. Housing markets are built through stories. The interlocking loans, credit, and debt from which markets are compiled are built through narratives about value and its origins; these stories are the foundation of the legal structures of markets. The urban

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landscape, which is made by those markets, is produced through a confluence of human decisions, made with information about conditions and access. This information is based in stories—stories about what will sell, whether risk is viable, and what constitutes risk itself. These interlocking stories produce processes such as gentrification, one of the key contemporary challenges of booming cities in the Global North. Stories about the value of property, the primacy of growth, the role of race in valuation, and the urgency to invest in the urban landscape all shape the contemporary city, and define the rollout of gentrification, if it comes.

Meanwhile, the stories contained in our cities go far beyond this. For each narrative about the exchange value of place, there are countless alternatives about how to understand cities and our role in them. These counter-narratives, often emerging from the grassroots, can chart a path toward a more humane urbanism. This is a paper about the tension between these tendencies—the stories of the market and the counter-narratives that challenge them—in two San Francisco Bay Area neighborhoods. It is about the competing stories that shape our cities in the era of gentrification.

I argue here for an investigation of these stories, which shape the experiential and material conditions of property. In particular, I focus on places in which rapid change is accompanied by discursive shifts in the form of renaming, a moment that offers an important window into the stories of place and property. Although many cities are struggling to bring new investment, the "wicked problem" of gentrification (McGrath, 2016) has expanded in recent decades to become one of the core challenges of urbanism in the polarized US context, where we see either extreme poverty or extreme wealth, with less and less in between.

The stories of gentrification are important to revisit at a time in which popular culture has taken up gentrification broadly. In the mainstream, gentrification has become not just an analytic through which academics look at urban change, but also appears as essentially the next stop for urbanism, an inevitable step. This seems to be the case in studies of places as apparently divergent as the struggling metropole of Detroit as much as it is in oft-booming cities such as San Francisco.

In the hands of pop culture, whether through newspaper articles or social media discussions on gentrification, of which there are many—this "inevitability" narrative of gentrification obscures the other stories, the ones that offer critical questions or alternative futures. One is often left with the idea that "it's all over" for a given place, which is said to have changed beyond recognition. Without dismissing the enduring and dramatic impacts of displacement in gentrifying communities—impacts that continue to be quite severe—this paper highlights the possibility for the counter-stories that this inevitability narrative can obscure, the ones that offer either practical alternatives or a path toward them. I argue here that those hidden stories are meaningful counter-narratives that can lead the way to what McKittrick (2006) calls "more humanly workable geographies." They are road maps for another kind of city.

To unpack the role of stories in shaping cities, this paper examines two gentrifying neighborhoods where counter-narratives have offered tangible counter-histories. These counter-stories appear not just as ways of understanding urban change. I argue here that they can shape change as well, with the potential to drive decisions around policy, economics, and urban development in important ways.

This is an essay about questions and discourse and the future that we choose. The research here is the product of key informant interviews, primary-source analysis, historical-geographic research, and participant observation as a resident of neighborhoods experiencing displacement-heavy gentrification in the Bay Area for the last two decades. A study of this period elicits a contradiction: although the importance of economic cycles,

of a long-term rise and fall of fortunes, is evident in shaping the city, the contemporary sense of place in the Bay Area sometimes feels static—even as it changes. Somewhere around the time that the second tech boom (Web 2.0) took firm root, a story began to circulate about gentrification. The process had been underway for some time in the region, with a round in the 1970s, for example, that created the political context for the creation of San Francisco's rent control law, and another round in the 1990s, as Internet titans such as Google and Yahoo emerged in Silicon Valley. In the app- and gig-economy-dominated 2000s, perhaps because of this already long history of gentrification, a sense emerged that perhaps *gentrification was the city itself*. What I mean by this is that a widespread belief was repeated in the media and among residents of gentrifying places that the totalizing impact of gentrification on communities was perhaps unavoidable, and its transformation of cities across the Bay Area was becoming permanent, such that there was essentially no city other than the gentrified one.

Indeed, there is a way in which contemporary gentrification, particularly the stage that Chapple and Zuk (2015) have called "advanced exclusion," feels like the end of a road, the last stop on a long train ride toward an exclusive fortress urbanism. But we know that economies cycle, that cities boom and bust, and that the luck of one capitalist place comes at the expense of others; political-economic history makes this clear (Harvey, 1982). This can be hard to recall in the midst of the cultural signifiers of gentrification, that rather homogenous set of urban experiences made visible through trendy cupcakes, tech logos, and cafes that feel like Silicon Valley clean rooms. This can be even harder to see in the midst of waves of eviction and displacement that unsettle the fabric of historic communities.

This essay began as an attempt to reconcile this apparent contradiction, of a situation in which rapid urban change is producing urban homogeneity. Soon it became something else, a meditation on urban change and the role of storytelling in shaping and defining that change. In the pages that follow, I begin to build the claim that the economic process of gentrification is built through stories. I argue that storytelling frames how we live out urban change, what we remember, and how we imagine the future. Next, I suggest that contemporary gentrification in the Bay Area offers examples of key narratives that shape the city, from both above and below. Those narratives exist in many forms; I use two neighborhood case studies to look at the way that place-names and rebranding can shape urbanites' sense of the possible. Finally, I argue that attention to grassroots narratives that come from actually existing urban practices generate an essential urban imaginary that makes way for a more expansive sense of both the urban and the human.

In the next section, I look at the story of gentrification itself, and offer a deeper dive into my analysis of the larger relationship between urban stories and actually existing urbanism. Next, I turn to two Bay Area neighborhoods—San Francisco's Bayview–Hunter's Point and Oakland's northern borderland—as cases that offer clear examples of the way that stories frame urban change as well as alternatives to it. I conclude by returning to the search for "humanly workable" geographies and their connection to Avery Gordon's (2004) call for a glimpse of "elsewhere," in which she suggests that grassroots change requires an expansive imagination at its foundation.

What we talk about when we talk about gentrification

What does it mean to study cities, to live in cities, to bear witness to urban change? These days, it means weighing in on an old imbalance: the tension between the uses of place versus the marketing of the same. Amid the rise of interest in "place making," a social practice that seems to indicate an interest in human connection (Chase et al., 1999; Douglas, 2018),

the market's allure persists, turning the impulse to connect into an opportunity for profit. Yet, even as planners and community groups strategize about livability and creative reuses of place, accumulation through dispossession continues to burn through US cities (Fields, 2017; Harvey, 2005). To live out urbanism, perhaps more than ever, is to live a life of property, *über alles*.[1]

There are many ways that this plays out, but in many metros of the Global North, the property relation of gentrification seems to be nearly everywhere—not just in the material of the streets and buildings. It's in the blogosphere and in the streets, on newspaper front pages and food sections. It appears in social media, and it rears forth in political claims when communities on the edges of café districts bear another round of eviction and relocation. Gentrification, the replacement of one class of people by another—whether through rent hikes, small business squeeze-outs, or race–class exclusions written in to property deeds— persists, as do our debates about its dynamics.

Early-stage gentrification is often welcomed as a sign of capital interest in long-starved places, and new economic investment can bring hope to such places (Vigdor et al., 2002). Even so, fully fledged gentrification comes with the experience of relatively total transformation, particularly when one group dramatically diminishes, such as Latinos in San Francisco's Mission District, whose urban footprint shrank significantly in the 1990s (Chapple and Zuk, 2015). The late stage of gentrification often brings a sense of finality and loss, with public conversations tracing a pervasive feeling that one city is "vanishing" while a shinier but blander and more racially homogenous metropolis takes its place (Moss, 2017; Solnit and Schwartzenberg, 2000).

To understand these cycles, it helps to go back to basics. Language is an imperfect science. Yet, Ruth Glass's 1964 observations in London, where she brought "gentrification" into academic discourse, were crisp:

> One by one, many of the working class quarters have been invaded by the middle class - upper and lower . . . Once this process of "gentrification" starts in a district it goes on rapidly until all or most of the working class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed. (Glass, 1964: xvii)

Glass's insights have been revived and dissected many times, and now more than a half-century of research has debated gentrification's typology as cultural or economic, driven by artists or other populations, or driven by capital's tendencies, and so on (Newman and Wyly, 2006; Slater, 2017; Smith, 1996; see Brown-Saracino, 2010, and Lees et al., 2008, for thorough treatments of the literature). Most recently, as millennials spilled into cities after the 2008 economic crisis, gentrification has also become a commonplace in popular US media (e.g. Buntin, 2015; Florida, 2015). As the idea has risen in popular consciousness, the meaning of the term has become less clear, as is the way of language and ideas when academic analysis jumps into the mainstream. In the hands of the media, indeed, gentrification has become fuzzy and mutable—a trend to watch rather than a major urban challenge that has significant impact on the human/urban condition.

One powerful story in the academic literature is that gentrification is a "natural" part of urban change, part of the inevitable turnover of people and place (Freeman, 2005; Vigdor et al., 2002). This is a vision that builds from the ecological urban theories of the Chicago School (Park and Burgess, 1921). Others decenter displacement, viewing gentrification as a process of revitalization, with both good and bad effects for the communities that live through it (e.g. Freeman and Braconi, 2004). Some of this research has shown that the de-concentration of poverty that arises in the early stages of gentrification can be beneficial

for some long-time residents (Duany, 2001; Freeman, 2006; Vigdor, et al., 2002). Indeed, if one views gentrification as simply a rising tide of new investment, then the notion of a little bit of gentrification as supportive for a distressed neighborhood seems reasonable. Freeman's research, for example, suggests that it is a question of succession—as one group moves out and leaves openings, another group fills them in (Freeman, 2005).

Other research, however, urges that we view gentrification at a broader scale—across both time and place—which changes how it looks. While the debates around gentrification initially focused on housing, scholars later grew concerned about many other dynamics that are reshaped by gentrification and which represent what we think of as "urbanness." In addition to Glass's "working class quarters," there was an impact on the middle class, on small businesses, and on urban culture writ large and small. In the US context, racial exclusion is nearly always a central aspect of the process as well, with communities of color disproportionately experiencing forced dislocation. These dynamics, all linked around everyday urban life, play a role in changing not just the feel of places through cultural signifiers, but also access to neighborhoods in which the cost of everyday life dramatically rose, with the phrase "priced out" appearing regularly in newspaper headlines.

As gentrification's impact morphs over time, traveling through different economic sectors of a community, the lion's share of research has found that what we perceive as gentrification is both ontologically and materially founded in displacement (Newman and Wyly, 2006). Put another way, in the short term, a small outmigration could have positive impacts on a given community, particularly in cases where struggling families receive large sums for homes that they are ready to leave in any case. In the long term, or at a broader geographic scale, however, these same patterns may not look the same, and that trickle of outmigration tends to become a flood that washes away communities.

It seems that those moments in which a community is balanced between rising investment and displacement are empirically dependent on scale and time. These are the moments just before the arrival of what Jane Jacobs called "cataclysmic money"—that avalanche of capital that runs roughshod on the delicate ecosystems of urban neighborhoods (Jacobs, 1961). These places need investment, but they have typically been disinvested for so long that investment without attention to the needs of existing residents often leads to their displacement.

To some extent, the contours of this debate reflect the fact that gentrification moves unevenly. Sometimes, it looks like a line of bulldozers with police backup or Sherriff-led eviction squads. Often, it inches along with organized urban planning charrettes where community members weigh in on "livability" metrics that define acceptable urban life, with race- and class-coded imaginaries (Rutland, 2015). Even if it moves slowly, though, the on-the-ground experience of this can feel anything but gradual. Again, it's a matter of scale. After years go by, the affective experience of gentrification is often counterintuitively sudden, as if the place had changed in an instant. The experience differs by vantage point, class position, and one's relative relationship to that cataclysmic money.

Ultimately gentrification is tied to the economic machinery of our existence. As I have suggested elsewhere, it is essentially "capitalism playing out in the landscape," the urban form of our political economy (Brahinsky, 2014b). If capitalism requires the revitalization of fallow spaces to support new growth, and if that new growth is the essential ingredient in economic expansion, then the remaking of "under-producing" urban space is a fundamental dynamic of capitalist urbanism, compressing space with time (Harvey, 1982).

The metaphors that move capital are fueled by emotion and power. Smith (1996) defined the revanchist, or rage-driven, 1980s transformation of New York as the result of a largely white upper-middle class "taking back" the central city after decades of focus on the

suburbs. A discursive battle played out over real estate development and evictions, in which realtors bluntly wrote about the city as a "frontier" and explicitly called up the ghost of Manifest Destiny, with its implied right to conquer. Decades later, that conqueror metaphor continues to arise alongside and embedded within property development and capitalist strategies, perhaps still in the brashest form in New York City, where developers continue to zero in on the "real estate state" (Stein, 2019). Property is still sold through an explicit recruitment of white newcomers as nouveau aristocrats or as "pioneers." The racial over-tones of the pioneer metaphor are central to the image, suggesting that communities of color that live in disinvested neighborhoods are there for the conquering (e.g. Dinzey-Flores, 2016). Packed within the metaphor is the disturbing notion that they are wild, "other"— that they could be viewed as outsiders in their own neighborhoods.

Similarly, in San Francisco, the NEMA luxury housing complex has claimed the explicit role of "lifestyle pioneer" in its advertising materials. This sales pitch came in a gush of high-tech and high-rise living that places the nouveau riche high above the city's poorest (Swan, 2013). The NEMA tower presides over a city block where houseless people struggle to survive as police target them for voter-approved "quality of life crimes," which include sitting down on the sidewalk when one is exhausted. Although it is the homeless who brave the elements, they are not also known as "lifestyle pioneers."

As the colonizer metaphors suggest, race is central in any study of gentrification, and it's important to unpack how this works materially and discursively. We know that race is socially and politically constructed, not fundamentally biological (Harris, 1993; Omi and Winant, 1994). And there is a growing literature about the ways that race is built and sustained specifically through spatial practices like race–class segregation, with key research on this using redlining and suburban expansion—both of which play important roles in gentrification—as case studies (Freund, 2007; Fogelson, 2005). Others have investigated the way that re-segregation is now hardening the racial and economic lines that years of Civil Rights legislation had sought to erode (Chang, 2016).

Race is also central to the discourse of gentrification, defining how communities under-stand what is taking place; often, race stands in for class and for the economic/displacement effects of gentrification. Racial stories create the economic possibility for gentrification as well, particularly in the way that they are used to define land values (e.g. Freund, 2007). This has implications in neighborhoods that have been largely non-white, for example, in that the property system views those places as less valuable. This makes majority-non-white neighborhoods particularly vulnerable to gentrification, with racialized property devalua-tion feeding a "rent-gap" dynamic, as defined by Smith (1996). That is, the distance between potential and actual rent in a given neighborhood is tied to the potential for gentrification. As neighborhood value declines, this "rent gap" grows—until it reaches a point where, Smith theorized, the potential profits compel investors to return. So, while Smith wasn't focused on the role of race as a central factor, the connection is clear. If race is used to define value, and if majority-non-white neighborhoods are thus devalued, then race is a key factor in that expanding rent gap. Therefore, racial devaluation of property drives the extremes of gentrification.

Meanwhile, racial stories are also used to build power from below, among those who are resisting purely market-led change. Communities draw on the construction of race as a cultural unifier, and they build community power using analyses of racial problems such as the above-mentioned land-valuation problem (e.g. Huante and Miranda, 2019). Those analyses can form the root of a different imaginary or sense of the possible. Racism is thus a constraining factor in the ways that it is used to define property value systemically from

above. Racial identity, however, can also be a cultural tool for retelling urban stories from below, and creating new options for communities and cities.

In this section, I have offered a brief history of gentrification, highlighting key debates in the literature and suggesting that displacement and race are central factors in my analysis. In the next section, I look more broadly at the role of stories in shaping human experience, and I introduce the two neighborhoods that form the cases of the second half of this paper.

The stories of the urban economy

Writer and California chronicler Joan Didion observed that stories shape human life in profound ways. "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," she wrote, suggesting that the narrative impulse itself was a foundational human function, like breathing (Didion, 1979). More than just a way of understanding, stories shape our belief systems and interpretations of events. As linguist George Lakoff has shown, the observations we repeat are not only observations. Rather, when they are repeated, our observations shape our neurology and the way we understand possibility. That is, our language creates brain patterns that define our perception of our options (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). In the urban context—in which property relations are core to the everyday urban experience—this suggests that stories about race, class, and value shape how we understand and practice economic investment, as well as ideas about property and people.

For example, when lenders followed directions, as many did in the 1930s and 1940s, to avoid investing in particular neighborhoods via redlining maps and word of mouth among realtors and bankers, they were repeating stories about the relationship between race, class, and value. A social process driven by race–class exclusions unfolded, shaping both land values and life chances, as working-class people of color were constrained to neighborhoods with, for example, crumbling housing or regularly polluted air (Pulido, 2000; Sugrue, 1996). With these stories, which drove economic and urban planning processes, urban segregation deepened, and the "second ghetto" was born, re-cementing race–class divisions of prior eras (Hirsch, 1983). In this way, the stories that suggest that poverty, cultural practices, or immigration status, for example, define land values, and play a central role in the reproduction of capitalism's racialized property markets.

The rental market trades in stories as well. When one landlord urges another to raise the rent on a newly vacant unit to match the cost of his own tenant's rent, this is the housing market in action, propelled by a story. With just one small urging—a story about what value could be, about what profits are warranted, and about what tenants could be required to pay—the market ticks upward, speculatively. Unchecked, these economic stories can lend a sense of inevitability to capital-driven urban change.

Weber (2016) shows this in her study of urban development cycles in Chicago, where she unpacks the ways that realtors and other actors propel the financialized remaking of the city using commonsense narratives (in the Gramscian sense) to shape financial outcomes. In Weber's Chicago, ideas (conveyed through stories) about obsolescence and when to expect an economic crash shaped actual economic outcomes. She found that metaphors used to explain economic cycles, for example, shaped the real experience of economic cycles themselves. "The idea of a cycle acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is a theory of action that compels particular kinds of action and that is itself enacted through historically and locally specific professional practices" (Weber, 2016: 588). Weber does not suggest that metaphors alone create economic outcomes, but she argues that repetition of metaphors or stories about how the economy works play a central role in shaping them.

Building on this, in order to create a different kind of city, there is a compelling need to excavate alternative stories, to find the metaphors that might play a role in shaping more socially just development. In this section, I have offered a very brief discussion of the relationship between storytelling and human experience, with an emphasis on the ways that urban economic factors are shaped by metaphor. Next, in the second half of this paper, I look at two cases in which stories about urban places are shaping urban change, and point to the ways in which storytelling and metaphor shape human interaction with the city and with property.

Place-names as signals: The San Francisco Shipyard

Stories frame how we live out urban change; they shape what we remember, and how we imagine the future. Stories can also emerge as agents of change through practices, for example, like place-name revision. That practice often comes in service of marketing or selling real estate; for example, via rebranding tactics, often led by a realty company or planning agency, that offer a new neighborhood name to suggest a break with the past, as when New York's Lower East Side became the East Village, or when South-Central Los Angeles became South LA. In this section, I argue that the new stories about urban change that emerge through practices such as place-name revision can reshape our understanding of—and potentially our actions in—urban places. In these examples, renaming or rebranding acts as more than simply a ploy to make a sale. Still, like any tool, the narrative power of storytelling can both empower and disempower, and I look at both of these possibilities.

I draw in this paper on two Bay Area neighborhoods that contain interesting parallels as well as divergences: San Francisco's Hunter's Point Shipyard, located in the Bayview–Hunter's Point neighborhood, and Oakland's "NOBE," a borderland neighborhood that
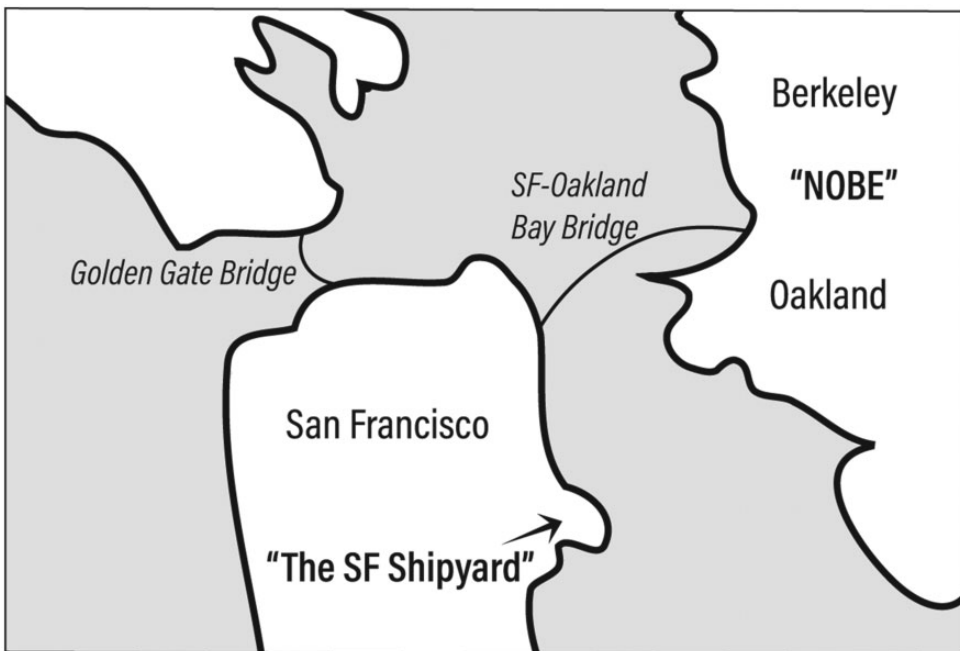

Figure 1. Map, by author, with "The San Francisco Shipyard" and "NOBE" highlighted in relation to the cities of San Francisco, Oakland, and Berkeley.

overlaps North Oakland and South Berkeley in the East Bay (see Figure 1). These places experienced distinct types of gentrification in the early 2000s: one case was propelled by a state-directed redevelopment mega-project, the other largely through widespread residential upgrading. Both have long histories of struggle over urban transformation with legacies that shaped African American politics in each city, and both have experienced new rounds of restructuring—both economic restructuring and what I think of as narrative restructuring. Both are offered briefly here as representatives of broader changes underway in the region, which are paralleled in other cities as well. At the same time, the two have unique trajectories that are important to trace in their own right.

Let's begin at the Hunter's Point Naval Shipyard, an area subject to ongoing mega re-development in the southeast corner of San Francisco. The shipyard offers both the central hope and main challenge for the historically working-class Bayview–Hunter's Point neighborhood that surrounds it. The tension between hope and challenge is highlighted by a recent renaming of the property by a real estate developer, who shortened the historical name to the more geographically generic "San Francisco Shipyard." It was a small move, but in deleting both "Hunter's Point" and "naval," the renaming seeks to associate the place with its long-ago maritime history rather than the more-recent half century of racial and political struggle for which the area is known. Prior names, such as those given by the Ohlone who lived here before this land was called San Francisco, were even further buried. This section offers an overview of this erased neighborhood history and then moves to the economic conditions of the 2000s to contextualize the renaming and its relationship to gentrification.

Naming (not unlike mapping) has the mysterious power both to claim and to court, particularly in a context of rapid change. A new place-name announces to old-timers that things have shifted. It alerts newcomers to possibility. More generally, it sparks a particular imaginary. Urban renaming speaks to the individual consumer, but the message is heard loudly by "place entrepreneurs" as well (Logan and Mollotch, 1987). These are the representatives of the banks, mortgage lenders, realtors—that web of commercial urban life that moves property from hand to hand, and which has so much power over the shape of communities. Renaming can be world shaping, signaling the potential for a fresh start, and perhaps the clearing away any apparent messiness of the past. What is seen as messy by today's real estate boosters, however, sometimes constitutes the core histories that make community.

Since closing down military operations in the 1970s, the Hunter's Point Naval Shipyard has been the subject of decades of planning for redevelopment. Actual redevelopment has been slowed by the materiality of the shipyard's military legacy. The US Environmental Protection Agency designated major sections of the shipyard as toxic under the federal Superfund program in 1989; the place was acknowledged at the time as one of the most toxic in the country. This status was the result of decades of military activity, layered upon decades prior of heavy industrial use.

This shipyard had first served as a key industrial place for the Bay Area beginning in the mid-19th century (Kelley and VerPlanck, 2010). It later functioned under military control for much of the 20th century as the neighborhood around it transformed demographically. The area was predominantly working class since the city's founding, but the racial/ethnic shift from largely Euro-ethnic to largely African American and Asian (particularly Chinese American and Samoan American) marked the Second World War and postwar years as a time of major social transition.

As the US military's withdrawal from the shipyard accelerated through the end of the Cold War, the struggle over remaking 500-plus acres of property, some of which required toxic remediation, consumed the community. The plans have shifted across the decades and have been the subject of ballot initiatives that drew the attention of the city at large.

The most recent plans—some of which are underway already—include hundreds of housing units, retail and commercial development, and a bayside park. Meanwhile, urban change has continued to cycle forward in the surrounding neighborhood, with gentrification pressures spilling over from the central city (Brahinsky, 2012).

For more than a half century, the name Bayview–Hunter's Point and the Naval Shipyard itself had been associated mostly with the working-class African American community that settled there during the Second World War. Many chose the place because of the good jobs available at the shipyard. Others arrived to join them as waves of urban renewal pushed Black people out of other San Francisco neighborhoods, while Euro-ethnic families left for expanding nearby suburbs. In the postwar period, the community faced extreme economic disinvestment, and homeownership—which was high in the area in part due to good shipyard wages—couldn't protect the neighborhood from the struggles that faced most majority-Black urban neighborhoods across the country, including economic disinvestment and heavy-handed policing. The media tended to cover only the worst challenges, such that "Bayview" and "Hunter's Point" were widely associated in the press and public discourse with gangs and crime.

To some, however, these names also recalled Black-led activism and community organizing that threatened white social and political power—a lot like the city of Oakland, visible across the San Francisco Bay from the cliffs abutting the shipyard. This, then, was the context in which the discussions about remaking the naval shipyard took place. Public opinion among San Franciscans was starkly polarized. Depending who you asked, the story was that redevelopment would either entirely resurrect or completely replace the existing community (Brahinsky, 2012).

Although the method and scope of required toxic remediation at the shipyard was still contested, new housing developments on the edges of the property broke ground in 2013. About two years later, real estate developer Lennar Urban abruptly renamed the place as simply The San Francisco Shipyard, deleting "Naval" and "Hunter's Point," and thereby scrubbing away associations with militarism and race.

Now, the renaming did indeed lean on one sense of history; the new sales website featured archival photos of 19th-century ships and the navy's striking 500-foot gantry crane. The 8400-ton crane has been cemented into the shipyard's new story, and remains on the site as a monument to engineering. The image of the crane has been used on sales materials and around the housing development as a symbol of the property more broadly, even working its way into a children's jungle gym on the site.

The military-industrial chic aesthetic, however, covers the shipyard with a thin historical skin that avoids the legacy of the economically struggling working-class community of color. With a stroke of renaming, so much could be buried, from the 60-year story of Black migration in and out of San Francisco to the legacy of Black, Asian, and working-class white struggles for power and belonging in the neighborhood—where women had led the community in redirecting urban renewal toward community benefit in the 1960s (Brahinsky, 2014a). Other histories of this place, as a fishery and major source of international trade for Chinese newcomers or the place from which those same communities were driven out in later years, were also silenced. Much older stories about the shell mounds that were here—sacred burial grounds tended by native communities prior to colonial urbanization—are also invisible.

The renaming was also part of a larger process that sought to eliminate not just critical histories but also critical questions about the toxic side of the military legacy, which had marked both people and place as wasted (Dillon, 2014). This erasure of the military-toxic legacy here becomes more poignant as time goes on. In 2014, whistleblowers for a contractor

at the shipyard revealed that soil testing and cleanup that had been underway for years was largely faked—even though new housing was already up for sale, and development continues, on the edges of the project (Fagone and Dizikes, 2018). With these erasures, "The San Francisco Shipyard" offers up history as a commodity, leveraged to sell property, rather than as a reflection of the human experience of people who are still present or those who have fought to make the neighborhood.

With its emphasis on the old-timey history of the place—rather than the decades of struggle over poisoned soils and underground waterways—the shipyard directs the public to linger in nostalgia about a misty past rather than deal with the harsh toxic realities of the present. To be clear, these toxic realities are economic problems, both in the cost of the clean-up and the in the way their presence steers buyers away. To the extent that toxicity can be downplayed, more condos will sell, with a notable impact on the surrounding residential neighborhood.

Meanwhile, it's these same nearby residential blocks that hold counter-narratives for those who know where to look. Just up the hill from the shipyard are streets named after activists who had pushed for a different kind of community vision during the era of urban renewal. Westbrook Court, Bertha Lane, Cashmere Street, and others reflect the legacy of women's activism that fought top-down power. In the 1960s and 1970s, Westbrook and a group of women called The Big Five worked to redirect redevelopment dollars—which had previously been used largely to eviscerate the Fillmore District in the central city—toward affordable housing and a community park. The freshly paved streets were named for the women of Bayview–Hunter's Point, offering a bottom-up story about activism and power in which working-class Black women organized to re-envision the fate of their neighborhood (Brahinsky, 2012; Brahinsky and Tarr, forthcoming 2020).

With The San Francisco Shipyard's dominance, however, new residents to the area are recruited through a market-driven storytelling that elides the existence of these stories of social struggle, focusing on the much older history of the 19th-century waterfront—one that suggests a largely white racial history. (The truth there is also more complicated—19th-century shipyard workers were often immigrants not yet fully incorporated into American whiteness, which was an expanding concept at the time; e.g. Jacobson, 1998.)

The case of the shipyard presents us with multiple concepts to unpack, but for the purposes of this paper, I focus on the ways that development and change in the neighborhood are framed discursively, and how the neighborhood trajectory fits into the political economy of the region at large. The redevelopment of the shipyard could never have begun to happen without a large, well-funded, and well-connected set of contractors. Given the history of deep poverty and racially motivated disinvestment in the neighborhood (by capital)—plus the legacy of toxicity at the shipyard itself, and some accidents of historical geography that keep this area of San Francisco physically separate from the rest of the city—the small-scale granular gentrification that has transformed places such as the Mission District has taken a long time to appear here. Instead, during the years in which the Mission became an internationally known case study in displacement (e.g. Maharawal and McElroy, 2018), gentrification in Bayview–Hunter's Point, just a mile from the Mission, required large-scale state-led intervention.

Bayview's change at that time involved the complicated transfer of the shipyard property from the navy back to the city, the intervention of the county redevelopment agency (which effectively froze nearby development for years while shipyard plans were drawn), and the stewardship of Lennar—one of the nation's largest homebuilders. This is essentially "third-wave" gentrification as theorized by Hackworth and Smith: heavy state intervention

focused on an area that requires major capital investment to establish even a baseline for new development (Hackworth and Smith, 2001).

Following the lead of the shipyard, however, the broader neighborhood did eventually begin to change. New restaurants and residential upgrades began to match the high-pitch of the rest of the region, with US$9 avocado toast (a now-classic cultural signifier of California gentrification) no doubt not far behind. By 2017, a more molecular "first-wave" gentrification was underway as well that is characterized by the uneven appearance of small boutique shops alongside dramatically rising rents and housing costs.

Stepping back, one cannot claim causation between the renaming of the shipyard and the appearance of high-end restaurants on a nearby business corridor. But as the story of the neighborhood changes, and as the histories of political struggle are erased by shifts like the shipyard rebranding, both large-scale and molecular gentrification face a path of less resistance. Indeed, the activists who have long challenged the navy and the Lennar Corporation, pushing for a full cleanup and for local jobs, among other things, are slowly losing their homes in the area. Many are finding their way to the urban fringes beyond San Francisco, in a regional racial restructuring environment that scholars are aptly calling "resegregation" (Chang, 2016).

This section of the paper focused on the ways that the Hunter's Point Naval Shipyard's renaming came as part of a larger package of neighborhood gentrification, from state-led redevelopment to the emergence of granular small-scale changes. I argued that the renaming is not the cause of these changes, but rather that it marks an important moment in the trajectory of gentrification here: the erasure of "Hunter's Point" and "Naval" from the shipyard's name came just as new housing broke ground. That housing was sold and prepped for sale, even as challenges to the corporate clean-up of military waste—evidence, specifically, of faked-clean toxic soil—appeared in the news.

The erasure of important race–class struggles in the area isn't accomplished with the stroke of a pen. I have argued here, however, that the erasures accomplished with such renaming play a central role in smoothing the way for gentrification and its attendant residential and commercial displacement. In the next section, I turn to Oakland, where another kind of contestation over space is unfolding in another gentrifying neighborhood.

Rebranding history: North Oakland/NOBE

Now, we'll cross the San Francisco Bay to the East Bay's NOBE (not to be confused with the NEMA development in San Francisco mentioned earlier). As a researcher, I'm not entirely comfortable using the name NOBE here, given that very few, if any, locals use it. But since it pulls together several micro-neighborhoods in this study—including Bushrod, Santa Fe, Gaskill, and Lorin—and because the name itself embodies the story of property here, it's useful in this paper. In this section, I look at some of the stories that built this area, including the attempt to rename it as NOBE sometime around 2012. I then look at the intersections between place-names and the socioeconomic conditions of place, which have accompanied gentrification. I argue here that the renaming that accompanies gentrification is important to unpack, in part to tease out the stories that shape the experiential and material conditions of property.

NOBE stitches together slices of three cities—Oakland, Berkeley, and Emeryville—into one unit, perhaps aspiring for the hip sheen of New York's SOHO and other places like it. Gentrification's changes thrive on acronyms such as this, perhaps because they offer a vague identity that can be interpreted by the user as needed. It's something like the way houses are sold in those very same neighborhoods: they are remade to look neutral, historical but

without *specific* histories, for maximum value. Meanwhile, as with other places transformed by realtor acronyms, the name NOBE applies to an area that contains multiple histories, with a legacy of racialized political struggle. In fact, the conditions here were part of the inspiration for the creation of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in 1966. Some of the party's founders lived here and organized together at the community college that once anchored the neighborhood.

The NOBE zone is a quadrangular repackaging of neighborhoods that are noted by Chapple and Zuk (2015) as generally experiencing ongoing or middle-stage gentrification. The area has seen uneven but amplifying residential and commercial displacement for some time. Various markers of gentrification are evident, including dramatically rising real estate values, which ticked up quickly in the post-2008 crisis years, after a particularly strong round of foreclosures scraped a hole in the neighborhood's housing stock. The buildings range from single-family bungalows to apartment complexes with a dozen or so units; commercial activity is contained within small multi-block clusters, and the feel of the area is relatively low density, with wide streets and ample space for both bicycles and cars, even on blocks with multi-unit buildings. Front yards are tended for the most part, but they are noticeably more "homegrown" in style than those in the Rockridge neighborhood about a half-mile east, where many homes are magazine ready.

Race is a particularly potent fault line in NOBE. In the center of the neighborhood, you can find the places where Huey Newton and Bobby Seale attended college and where they collaborated with many others on the ideas that became the foundation for the Black Panther Party. These were political claims such as self-determination for Black people, broadly decolonized public education, and free breakfast programs through which community organizing could be anchored (Bloom and Martin, 2016). The stories of their political work, and the urban conditions that produced it, live unevenly in the area. There is a bakery that sells generous cakes and serves as one of the few visible monuments to the Panthers, with the claim that its walls housed Panther newspaper operations for some time. There are also a few placards on sidewalks and lampposts. Sometimes, there's a freshened graffiti tag at the entrance of one of the local parks that reads "Black Panther Park." It lasts for a few months until the shuffle of passersby rubs it away, a palimpsest that requires local knowledge to understand but which offers a story of a challenge to power that addressed everyday urban problems.

A more visible story in the NOBE of the 2000s is told through the revamped postcards of front yards when (largely one- to three-unit) houses are flipped and applied with sultry paint and postmodern horizontal fencing. As a result, like in so many identically transforming places across the country—from Bedford-Stuyvesant, NYC, to Pilsen, Chicago, to Boyle Heights, Los Angeles—the area is now known for its rising "curb appeal" and for its proximity to downtown San Francisco, just 30 minutes away. The NOBE moniker was likely produced by realtors, presumably looking to spin the area as something new and fresh. A 2015 sales video describes the area as remade and ready for investment, as if communities had not been already living and working there. A local activist group countered with an annotated version of the video that accused the realtors and their clients of "blatant exploitation" of the neighborhood in the interest of sales (Levin, 2013). A website outlining the NOBE concept a few years later still pitched it as "coveted" by a variety of potential newcomers, including, "professionals, hipsters and families alike for its central location, cultural diversity, great climate and homes with choice architectural details and high walkability" (NOBE Neighborhood, 2018). And though the NOBE name only seems to be applied in realtor or research contexts, the story that it offers of availability to buyers over the course of several years was used to support the area's meteoric real estate rise,

with home values doubling in the course of just a few years, and rents following suit (Robinson, 2017).

The story of rising rent is prominent, but what is less discussed is how former residents made way for this real estate revival. Maps produced in 2012 by the Urban Strategies Council revealed that a great shift had played out after the 2008 crisis, with mass foreclosures across the area followed by a sweep of purchases by institutional investors, known to be the least forgiving of landlords (King, 2012). At around the same time, the county implemented a controversial gang injunction that overlapped the realtor-defined borders of NOBE, which explicitly limited young men of color from congregating (Cadji and Alkon, 2014). The gang injunction boundaries and the NOBE boosterism may have worked together to reshape the neighborhood. Youth of color were criminalized on many of the same streets that were hyped up by realtors and developers as ready for purchase.

Essentially, the injunction became an actor in the neighborhood in two ways: it was inspired by the clamoring of residents (many of them new to the area) who had demanded increased policing. It in turn may have paved the way for new home sales, given that it lent an appearance of safety to the neighborhood to outsiders. These local dynamics also intersected with more regional and global processes. That is, the injunction stifled social activity by young men of color just as the Bay Area real estate market shifted from high to super-high gear.

At the ground level, many longtime residents remain and live alongside newcomers, who tend to be younger and wealthier, given the higher cost of entry to the neighborhood. A locally produced video series about NOBE calls it "the North Pole," suggesting the new dominance of white people in the area. The feeling of the neighborhood is something like what Butler and Robson (2001) describe as "tectonic," where social relations function metaphorically like tectonic plates, slipping past each other, almost imperceptibly—until the movement erupts in a sudden tremor. It's a metaphor that feels particularly apt in this area, since NOBE rests precariously on the western edge of the Hayward fault, which geologists note is overdue for a quake.

Like the shipyard area in Bayview–Hunter's Point, NOBE is a place where working-class communities, often communities of color, struggled through long periods of disinvestment, surviving the many forms of redlining that directed capital away from the community. Like Bayview, neighborhood displacement in NOBE has been thorough but not totalizing. This is part of what makes a gentrifying round of neighborhood change so poignant. It often involves the elision of still-present people and the historical erasure of others, the "slow violence" (Nixon, 2011) of urban disruption. While geographers have long studied the spatial implications of uneven development (most classically, Smith, 1984), this remains worth noting again in these San Francisco cases because the news-media story about gentrification often suggests that communities are obliterated by it. Understanding the uneven nature of gentrification, and holding it central in an analysis of these places, is a reminder of the myriad stories of property that remain.

In the above two sections, I told just a few of the stories of property that frame "The San Francisco Shipyard" and "NOBE." I focused on the way that renaming in these places has helped erase histories of social struggle, in which working-class communities sought to shape their own urban futures. I also emphasized the uneven nature of change in these places, which I argued offers clues toward other kinds of stories. In the final section of the paper, I look at an example on the Berkeley–Oakland border, also geographically centered in NOBE, which opens up possibilities for a different urban narrative.

There or elsewhere, against inevitability

Avery Gordon writes that in order to surpass or move toward a new world or utopic vision, one must find a "glimpse of an elsewhere or an otherwise" (Gordon, 2004). Sometimes, though, it can be hard to gain these glimpses: the blandness and cultural homogeneity of gentrification's "structure of feeling" (Williams, 1977) can be totalizing, obscuring evidence of creativity or history. In her work on what she calls "the gentrification of the mind," Sarah Schulman writes that the elimination of diversity that comes with gentrification—among people, businesses, cultural spaces, and so on—tends to also wipe the consciousness as well, crushing creative thinking (Schulman, 2012).

This paper takes seriously Schulman's and Gordon's call for the re-cultivation of the imagination and creativity. To find a way around the inevitabilities of property—as it is currently constructed through legal and juridical means—there must be dreams or perhaps alternative stories. In this final section of the paper, I turn to a contemporary urban counter-narrative in North Oakland, where a row of tents on a sidewalk's edge offers a route toward an elsewhere. This could be a road map for a story around gentrification's inevitability.

In Oakland, people like to quote Gertrude Stein's commentary on the loss of place. "There is no there there," she wrote, intending to suggest that her childhood home in East Oakland had utterly transformed, such that her own sense of the place seemed like an historical artifact (Stein, 1973). The misapplication of her words, to refer to Oakland more broadly as empty and placeless in general, has stuck for a long time. Meanwhile, there's something about the framework of returning to place and longing for the past that is useful for thinking about rapid urban change. To live in a contemporary gentrifying city is simultaneously to experience the packaging of place as well as the loss of it. There is, simultaneously, there and the loss of there. As the urban tectonics metaphor implies, and as research walks through NOBE and the naval shipyard neighborhoods reveal, even highly gentrified places are not all one thing and not all gentrified. Careful attention shows that the economy of neighborhood change is uneven, not entirely totalizing, and uneven geographies may offer us new stories of property or old ones that demand revival.

Public art often serves as a guidepost past and future, a mark of what once was, while offering an imaginary for collective futures, and the Gertrude Stein commentary has appeared in multiple art projects over the years across the city of Oakland. One of these stands at the Oakland–Berkeley border, where the BART commuter train swoops from its elevated tracks into a tunnel. Two six-foot tall words stand in a grassy triangle. Face Berkeley and you'll read the word HERE. Turn to face Oakland, and you read THERE (Gilman, 2019). When the train system was completed in 1971, these tracks created a visual and sociological boundary in the middle of the neighborhood, and the "urban renewal" programming that carved space for them generated a local revolt.

Fifty years later, as the housing situation worsened in the region in 2017, the HERE–THERE triangle became the center of one of many new tent camps sheltering people without homes. The encampment grew, filling out the space around HERE and THERE with some 20 tents at first and then more. Some residents unfurled political banners with commentary on the state of the housing crisis and rising inequality. Urban camps like this are typically met with a police response in the Bay Area, and this one eventually was, but before and after the police arrived, some housed neighbors and local shop owners responded with empathy to the HERE–THERE camp. One community effort funded temporary toilet facilities that became a semi-permanent monument to neighborhood compassion.

The unpermitted HERE–THERE camp faced legal action from the various entities that own the land and adjacent sidewalk, and the state-owned land involved in the camp was soon blocked off with an imposing iron fence that circled the HERE–THERE structure, making it unreachable from the sidewalk. The tent camp later reorganized in thinner fashion along the bits of public space that were still available just a few feet away, and eventually someone recreated HERE–THERE on the fence itself, weaving the words with textile art, nearly as large as the original, though less permanent. Legal and political battles with the City of Berkeley, which owns the strip of land that was still occupied in 2019, continued. But the nearby community seemed to tolerate it, perhaps because it didn't abut private property, and the temporary toilets became a fixture.

The presence of the homeless camp in the center of the neighborhood embodied questions about what it means to retake urban space, to practice what some have described as "homefulness" (Boucher, 2011) in an exclusionary place. The dual meanings of HERE–THERE pervade the area. On the one hand, real estate blogs continue to boast about the area's marketability, a practice that relies on the elimination of messy histories of community struggle. On the other hand, people without homes claim a central intersection in a highly visible way; in doing this, they both demonstrate and operationalize the urgent need for shelter, community, and home. Many of the residents of the camp describe their long connections to the neighborhood, where some had lived prior to becoming homeless. Some speak of deep connections to the politics of the area. Supporters hope the visibility of the camp will spur public policy action on affordable housing.

Although it is unstable and deeply imperfect, the tent camp by the BART tracks offers more than just a symbol of the region's inequality. The space of the camp makes the need for other options visible even as the surrounding area is marketed as "hot" real estate. To maintain the camp, in friction with the rise of exclusionary urbanization calls on an imagination of elsewhere, and the refusal to leave a place that has been home (given that about 70% of people without homes in the Bay Area became homeless here). This is a story, a narrative that counters the historic erasure represented by the creation of "NOBE."

To remember what once was and what could be amid the erasures of gentrification, perhaps we need reminders of the possibility of another kind of city, the seeds of a story of what kind of society we want to build. The art of HERE–THERE is one of those reminders; the "art" of the homeless camp itself is another, offering an oppositional vision that suggests that the interstitial spaces of the city might sustain life and home for those without the means to enter the real estate market. It is the art of grassroots occupation, reclaiming the very ground of the city, demonstrating what "workable" geographies might look like.

The camp offers a material representation of the Lefebvrian call for a collective "right to the city," and revives the potential for an imaginary that can support the creation of a new kind of neighborhood map. Perhaps there is one that can accommodate a fuller scope of the human story, beyond "property," with its stories of relative value that hold so much sway over urban life. The claim of the tent camp is a claim to space and shelter. It is also a claim to the historical experience of these streets, where people have continually demanded a different kind of urban place, a vision of an elsewhere that might reclaim both the urban and the human.

In closing, this paper has sought to excavate the role of stories in shaping our understanding of property, the very bones of urbanism. The paper looked at the rise of gentrification in booming US cities, and focused particularly on two San Francisco Bay Area neighborhoods where the fault lines of race and class cut across the experience of neighborhood change. I argued that attention to stories from above alongside those from below might offer an important counterpoint to the generalized affect of inevitability that is emerging in gentrifying places such as these.

The names that places hold can bring forth memories of the past, or they can obscure the lives of people who are not yet gone. Tending to place-names as key markers of gentrification and urban change and as important signals of the way that we understand the meaning of property enriches the conversation about urban change and offers alternative visions for the future. While this paper did not explore specific policy ramifications of this work, I argue that unpacking the counter-narratives of gentrifying places can reveal the unevenness of gentrification, the histories that shaped places before cataclysmic money arrived, and can offer a glimpse of elsewhere—an imaginary that could foster an alternative vision for stories that restructure regulation, policy, and law to shape a different kind of place.

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Note

1. Jello Biafra offered an apt metaphor for the totalization of a given regime in the song "California Über Alles" (Greenway and Biafra, 1980).

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