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Community History

Geographies of Displacement: Latina/os, Oral History, and The Politics of Gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District

NANCY RAQUEL MIRABAL

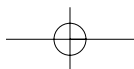
Abstract: During the 1990s and early 2000s, working-class and poor neighborhoods in San Francisco underwent dramatic economic and racial changes. One of the most heavily gentrified neighborhoods was the Mission District. As a result of local politics, housing and rental policies, real estate speculation, and development, thousands of Latina/o families were displaced. Using oral historical and ethnographic methodologies, print media, archival sources, and policy papers, this article traces the gentrification of the Mission District from the perspective of the Latina/o community. It also examines how gentrification was articulated as a positive turn within the larger public discourse on space and access.

Keywords: San Francisco, Latina/o, The Mission District, gentrification, oral history, displacement.

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The redevelopment process [in San Francisco] is but a more sophisticated wrinkle in the long American tradition of land grabbing.

—Chester Hartman¹

Slowly, everybody around me started to move away.

—Liliana González²

A lack of affordable housing is one of the city's greatest challenges.

—San Francisco Mayor, Gavin Newsom³

Introduction and Process: The Practice of Community Oral History

In a small makeshift room filled with metal folding chairs and half-empty bookshelves, I listen to three anti-displacement activists speak on the gentrification of the Mission District. There, in the back of the Modern Times Bookstore on Valencia Street, we listen to stories about real estate speculations, housing shortages, gang injunctions, displacement, and the exodus of people of color to the suburbs. As the voices of customers browsing and buying books in the front room inadvertently interrupt the speakers, I am reminded of the irony that in getting to this talk, I walked past several trendy restaurants, bars, boutiques, cafes, and furniture stores that did not exist only a few years ago. I think of the last review I read of a restaurant in the Mission District, a review that couldn't help but locate the reader in a land-locked, ephemeral space of transition and geographical fantasy: "Somewhere between grit and gentrification lies Mission Beach Café, a gorgeous little eatery where diners can enjoy California cuisine such as ginger-infused gazpacho and grilled scallops."⁴ There are no beaches in the Mission District, but there is an ever growing "somewhere between grit and gentrification," and I am in the middle of it.

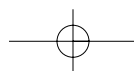
This is not the Mission District of eight years ago when I launched the Community Oral History Project with a group of San Francisco State University students and concerned local activists. I was no longer sure of what it meant to finally finish when, despite the hard-fought gains of dedicated activists, little had changed. It was then that I realized that this oral history, this analysis, has no end, because gentrification and displacement have no end. The gentrification of the Mission District, like that of other neighbor-

1. Chester Hartman, *City for Sale: The Transformation of San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 56.

2. Interview of Liliana González by Alberto Espinosa, *La Misión: Voices of Resistance*, directed by Nancy R. Mirabal, San Francisco State University, 1999.

3. Sara Phelan and Tim Redmond, "Our three-point plan to save San Francisco: A radical approach to affordable housing isn't just an option anymore—it's imperative." *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, September 19–25, 2007. The quote is in reference to the San Francisco 2007–2008 draft budget.

4. Paul Reidinger, "Beach Boys," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, August 8–14, 2007.



hoods in San Francisco, continues regardless of the dot-com bust and the slowing housing market. It continues after the protests, after the packed planning commission meetings, after the demands to end evictions and construction of expensive condominiums and work/live lofts. I have worked for eight years conducting oral histories, working with individuals and agencies in the Latina/o community, and collecting primary sources, and the Mission District remains in flux, consistently pivoting and threatening to change even more, and at a faster rate.

At times, the project took its toll. There is no doubt that to conduct oral histories, especially those tied to loss, erasure, emotion, and death, is, as the anthropologist Ruth Behar has called it, ‘a vulnerable act.’⁵ By collecting oral histories of displacement we recorded endings: the end of businesses, nonprofits, community agencies, local arts programs, and the affordability of homes. The interviews often made references to what had been lost, removed, and replaced. However, for others, the endings symbolized nothing less than a new beginning. The interviews of those at the forefront of gentrification, of those involved in the planning and restructuring of communities, were filled with images of a “new life,” of a period defined by revitalization and reemergence.

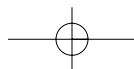
Despite the breadth of the oral history project, this article examines a two- to three-year period (1998–2001) when gentrification was seen as a panacea to the city’s ills, and concerns over displacement were, for the most part, ignored by local politicians, city government officials, and the business owners and employees moving into the area.⁶ We considered this period to be an in-between moment characterized by chaos and consciousness, and wanted to focus on a time when ideas and thoughts concerning the politics, impact, and future of displacement were still unfolding. Conducting oral histories of people affected by gentrification made it possible to capture the *immediacy* of the moment, to, as the oral historian Paul Thompson has written, “pin down evidence just where it is needed.”⁷ This meant collecting oral histories, primary sources, data, and creative works at a critical juncture in the gentrification of the Mission District.

The project began in 1999 as an experiment in my Latina/o oral histories, theories, and practice course at San Francisco State. Believing that something was changing in their neighborhoods, the students decided to forego the syllabus and investigate the reasons for the economic and political changes in the Mission District. We designed a community oral history that would include as many voices and sources as possible. Since no single group could fully explain or respond to the changes, we interviewed a number of different people, including those who promoted gentrification; those who resisted; those

5. Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

6. These included real estate agents, developers, software company employees, new business owners, local politicians, and recent residents of the Mission District.

7. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9.



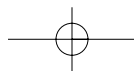
who were unaware, but concerned; those who believed it was a necessary evil; and everyone in between.⁸

The questions that first shaped the project were deceptively simple: Why were so many Latina/o families being forced to leave? Who were the expensive condominiums and work/live lofts being built for? Why were expensive restaurants, boutiques, and other upscale business opening up in a traditionally working-class and immigrant community? In turn, why were so many older businesses, agencies, and organizations that catered to the Latina/o community closing? In short, what did gentrification mean for the Latina/o, immigrant, and working-class community in the Mission District? What did it mean for the future of San Francisco? The questions pointed to larger issues concerning the politics of place, privilege, and access. It caused us to think deeply about the relationships among class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender, and their impact on how we remember and use geographical as well as imagined spaces. In addition to the commonly accepted notion that spaces are defined and driven by capital and economics, these oral histories illustrated how those same spaces are also racialized, gendered, and rendered heteronormative. In her brilliant analysis of temporal geographies, the literary critic Mary Pat Brady sums it up when she writes that “spaces are not neutral.”⁹

The project soon moved beyond solely documenting the experiences of Latina/os to demanding an integration and reconfiguration of urban theory and policy, globalization and global circuits, transnational migrations, and trans-locality. As the theoretical parameters of the project became more complicated, we expanded our uses of oral history and methodologies by contextualizing them within a larger framework that included primary and secondary sources, theory, and data. For instance, a number of oral histories referred to the large number of Latina/os being evicted and displaced. If this was the case, we wanted to know why and at what rate. We wanted to learn more about the policies and practices used to evict, and determine how city government and officials have historically handled the politics of displacement and revitalization. But more importantly, we needed to know where *and* if oral historical documentation, as a source, fit within the larger narrative of displacement.

8. Everyone interviewed was aware of the project's aim and focus. If requested, respondents were allowed to see the questions before being interviewed, to go off the record, or not to answer specific questions. They had the right to pull their interviews if they felt in anyway uncomfortable and were given access to all of the interviews in the project through our Web site. All participants who were interviewed signed release forms and were made aware that they would be part of a larger community historical project, including subsequent lectures, talks, and publications. So far the interviews, sources, and archives have been made available to students, faculty, activists, and nonprofit organizations. (The tapes have yet to be formally deposited in a public institution and are in my possession. I am currently working on organizing and archiving the tapes for deposit.) For examples on how the project has been used outside of the Community Oral History Project see Jean Kawahara's master's thesis, *Space, Race, and the Power of Place: The Gentrification of Culture and Community*, College of Ethnic Studies, San Francisco State University, 2003, and the Latina/o Activists oral history project archived at AcciónLatina.

9. Mary Pat Brady, *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 7–8.



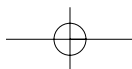
Recognizing and accepting that oral histories are, by their very nature, imprecise and subjective allowed us both to understand and to use the future and longing as key elements in the study. Oral histories as method are invaluable because they reveal not only what happened, but also what *could* have happened. There is movement in dialogue; an opportunity to interpret and recast actions and experience. In his analysis of the importance of oral history, Alessandro Portelli aptly expresses this fluidity when he writes that oral sources “tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.”¹⁰ Oral sources and interviews provide a discursive site where subjects can hope, imagine, consider, emote, and even regret.

Within a year, the oral history project had grown into a community-directed project that included local activists, artists, politicians, poets, archivists, scholars, and writers for the local bilingual newspaper, *El Tecolote*. As the project grew, a collective of mostly students and local activists decided that the project be directed and informed by a scholar-community paradigm that expanded beyond the academy. This entailed participating in community workshops and supervisor and planning meetings, sharing information and histories with nonprofits and community agencies, and meeting with a local community archive, *Freedom Archives*, to learn how to publicly archive the final oral histories and sources. We also designed a Web site where we could post the oral histories, publicize community meetings and talks, and make available in English and Spanish information on how to resist evictions as well as list academic and scholarly articles on gentrification and displacement. The aim was to merge multiple uses of knowledge within a community-centered and activist setting. However, as anyone who has ever attempted such a venture can attest, the transition and movement into community-based scholarship is never easy. We redefined what constituted knowledge, theory, and authority from multiple perspectives to create a directive towards what Michael Frisch has called a “shared authority” where knowledge is both de-centered and weaved into a larger narrative where different voices, experiences, beliefs, and practices converge.¹¹

This did not mean, however, that we were not faced with questions concerning power and representation. One of the main objectives of the project was *not* to provide any answers or solutions, but instead to allow narrators to speak and express themselves, all the while knowing that we were not always getting the full story. Gentrification and displacement are very contested processes that can easily polarize communities. There was no middle ground. We accepted the silences, the unwillingness to answer questions directly, the looks and hand gestures, the requests to see the questions beforehand, the

10. Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different?” In *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Parks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 67.

11. See Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Buffalo: State University of New York Press, 1990).



suggestions that we “not ask those questions,” and the constant inquiry into what we planned to do with these oral histories as part of the process of oral historical documentation. The last question proved to be the most challenging: outside of creating an archive of a community, a place, and a time that was quickly disappearing, could these oral histories be a tool for navigating political intervention and solutions? Could they evolve into methodological strategies for reconstituting the meaning and uses of oral historical work?

An Ambiguous Blessing: The Politics of Spatial Reinvention

It was not that, in general, the naming of political or religious sites as “new” was in itself new. . . . But in these names “new” invariably has the meaning of “successor” to or “inheritor” of something vanished. “New” and “old” are aligned diachronically, and the former appears always to invoke an ambiguous blessing from the dead.

—Benedict Anderson¹²

We are not in their plans.

—Rosario Anaya¹³

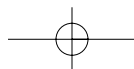
During the mid- to late 1990s, San Francisco was changing once again. A familiar and yet disturbing process, the gentrification of working-class neighborhoods, had resurfaced with a speed and precision that had not been seen for years. Housing prices soared, new businesses opened, rents were at their peak, and thousands moved into the city to participate in what newspapers, politicians, academics, and business leaders were calling the dot-com boom. So all-encompassing were the changes in the Mission District that *The New York Times* reported, “no vacant lot was safe.”¹⁴ It was a heady time when the past meant nothing and the future was everything; where youth, hard work, and a willingness to put all on the line were enough to “make it.” Technology, space, information, economic investments, education, housing, careers, and the future were all subject to re-evaluation and re-definition. The times were changing, and those who could not keep up with the fast-paced momentum spurred by technology were sure to be left behind. A columnist for the *Wall Street Journal*, Kara Swisher, characterized this moment, in particular 1998, as a “real turning point.”

All of a sudden, everyone was into the Internet in a big way. Every third day I’d run into someone who was worth \$400 million instantly. Everybody was getting VC [Venture Capital] funding. Jeff Bezos [founder of Amazon.com] was

12. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso Press, 1991), 187.

13. Interview of Rosario Anaya by Roberto Eligio Alfaro, *La Misión: Voices of Resistance*, directed by Nancy R. Mirabal, San Francisco State University, 1999.

14. Evelyn Nieves, “Mission District Fights Case of Dot-Com Fever: San Francisco Enclave resists Changes,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2000.



everywhere. I later joked that he was on more magazine covers than Britney Spears. But he was an icon.¹⁵

Within this emerging public discourse on technology, investment, and capital, few discussed the gentrification of the Mission District. In a time of supposedly no rules, few restrictions, and little adherence to past policies, the changes taking place in San Francisco were not forward-thinking at all. In fact, they were quite predictable, with neighborhood patterns well known to city officials, planners, speculators, investors, and corporations.

The emphasis, if not mythology, of the dot-com boom as the economic salvation of late twentieth-century capitalism led to a collective belief during the late 1990s that gentrification, despite all of its potential drawbacks, was a positive and necessary byproduct of the growing Bay Area prosperity and wealth. For many Latina/os in the Mission District, this was not the case. The Mission, which had and continues to have the highest concentration of Latina/o and Latin American immigrants in the city, with an estimated 48 percent of residents in 1997 identifying as Latina/o, also had the highest number of renters. Close to 70 percent of Mission residents rent their homes.¹⁶ This left the Latina/o residents of the Mission District vulnerable to eviction and displacement during the height of the dot-com boom.

By the late 1990s and early 2000 more than 1,000 Latina/o families had been displaced. The number of rental evictions almost tripled from 965 in 1993 to 2,730 in 2000. Owner move-in evictions rose from 433 in 1996 to 1,253 just two years later in 1998.¹⁷ From 1994 to 1998 the median rent for a vacant, one-bedroom apartment in San Francisco increased more than 56 percent, from \$800 to \$1245.¹⁸ In June of 1998, the *Bay Guardian* reported that 73 percent of all low-income renters in San Francisco and Oakland were spending more than 50 percent of their income on housing.¹⁹ On Valencia Street, 50 percent of the businesses that existed in 1990, mostly local operations that catered to the low-income Latino community, were gone by 1998.²⁰

15. Kara Swisher quoted in Kevin Berger, "What Just Happened Here? The Dot-Com Years," *San Francisco Magazine*, April 2000, 60.

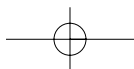
16. San Francisco Neighborhood Profiles, "The Mission District." Report prepared for the San Francisco Planning Commission, 1997. The report does not provide information on the numbers of undocumented Mission District residents. It is possible that in the late 1990s the numbers were closer to 80 percent. The numbers of Latina/os however, as the 2005 census has noted, have steadily decreased. It is estimated that while home ownership among white residents has increased, the population of Latina/os documented and undocumented remains close to 65 percent.

17. See Beatriz Johnson Hernández, "The Invaders," *El Andar*, Fall 2000, 55, and Daniel Zoll, "The Economic Cleansing of San Francisco: Is San Francisco Becoming the First Fully Gentrified City in America?" *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, October 7, 1998, respectively.

18. Simon Velasquez Alejandrino, "Gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District: Indicators and Policy Recommendations," *Mission Economic Development Association Report*, Summer 2000, 17–18.

19. Angela Rowan and Gabriela Roth, "The Mission: Lofts and Lattes." *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, October 7, 1998.

20. Alejandrino, "Gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District," 21.



By the year 2000, close to 50,000 people left the Bay Area because they could no longer afford to live there.²¹ According to the 2000 Census Bureau and the 2005 Census Bureau's American Community Survey, 10 percent of San Francisco's Latina/o community moved out of the city. In a city of close to 719,077 residents, the Latina/o population decreased from 109,504 to 98,891 residents. What makes the numbers for Latina/os even more remarkable is that, according to the same census, San Francisco was the only major city in the United States to experience loss in its Latina/o population.²²

Born and raised in the Mission District, Liliana González and her family were forced to leave their home. Evicted by a landlord who wanted to charge more rent, her family separated and was forever changed. Never again would they live in the Mission District.

In my house we had my aunty, 6 cousins, me, my brother, my mom, and my dad. That's just something people got to do to survive. You're going to find 12 people in a house with three rooms because that is the only way you can afford rent. So we all went our own ways [after being evicted]. All my cousins went to Oakland. My dad went to El Salvador, and me, my mom, and my brother went downtown, we were all separated.²³

González and her family were one of many in the Mission District caught up in the frenzy to escalate rents. As record numbers of people moved into the area, landlords raised rents, sold buildings, evicted long-term tenants, and did everything possible to make a profit.

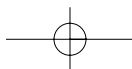
In his invaluable study on gentrification in the Mission District, Simon Velazquez Alejandrino argues that Owner Move-Ins (OMIs) "accounted for roughly a third of all evictions in San Francisco in 1999 alone, and were by far the most common type of eviction in the city." The second most effective policy was the Ellis Act.²⁴ Again, according to Alejandrino, in 1999, 16 per-

21. Kelly Zito, "Expanding or Ready to Burst?" *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 26, 2000.

22. An important component to the displacement of African-American and Latina/o residents is the movement to Bay Area suburbs such as Richmond, Vallejo, Sacramento, Antioch, Pittsburgh, Tracy, and Stockton, in what some have called a "multicultural migration" out of the city. Since San Francisco has been scripted as a city that is "too expensive" and unattainable for families and working people, the housing developments in the suburbs have become an attractive option. There is no doubt that the homes have more square footage and are more affordable. Yet, many of these developments are located hours from the city, making commutes to jobs extremely difficult and connections to old neighborhoods almost impossible. These "multicultural migrations" have resulted in an increase in African-American and Latina/o communities in many of these suburbs.

23. Interview of Liliana González by Alberto Espinosa, *La Misión: Voices of Resistance*, directed by Nancy R. Mirabal, 1999.

24. According to Alejandrino, Owner Move-Ins (OMIs) "allow an owner to evict a tenant if the owner resides in the building for 36 months following the eviction. After this period, the owner can return the unit to the rental market." The San Francisco rent control ordinance only applies to occupied units and sets no rent restrictions on newly vacated units. Therefore, following an OMI, landlords can re-rent the unit at market rate. Tenant advocates argue that landlords use owner move-in evictions to escape rent control. The Ellis act was enacted in 1986 by the state of California to allow property owners to remove all their properties from the rental market and



cent of San Francisco's evictions were attributed to the Ellis Act. That same year, 14 percent of the Ellis Act evictions occurred in the Mission District, even though it only has 9 percent of the city's rental units. In terms of expense and access, Alejandrino cites the California Association Realtor's Affordability Index of 1999–2000 to show that only 17 percent of Bay Area households can afford a median-priced home. In comparison, 31 percent of California households and 53 percent of U.S. households can afford a median-priced home. The Mission District has the lowest overall percentages of home ownerships in the city, with 16.1 percent owning homes, as opposed to 34.5 percent citywide.²⁵

For Peter Plate, a Mission District author, the evictions were directly related to the large number of dot-com companies moving into the area. "By the year 2000, the Mission must have had something like 200 dot-com companies in a two-mile radius." This, Plate argues, led to "the highest residential eviction rates in the country."²⁶ The displacement in the Mission was so extensive that it was "making news across the country and Europe in terms of the influx of dot-com companies and the impact they were having on our neighborhood."²⁷ In his description of San Francisco politics during this period, Plate sizes up what he considers the arrogance of planners, real estate developers, dot-coms, and local government officials who believed they could "socially re-engineer" the city.

There was a real hubris in real estate developers, dot-coms, and the planning department at City Hall. They thought they could socially re-engineer a city without consulting the people who have lived here for generations. They failed totally, created a mess, and left it behind.²⁸

Those enamored with the dot-com boom, with its potential riches, did not want to face its "ugly" side. By focusing on the new restaurants, bars, the dot-com parties, and the new work/live lofts, it was easy for those moving into the neighborhood to rationalize the large numbers of evictions, the displacement of long-term residents, the uprooting of families, and the end of community agencies and organizations as simply a necessary part of the economic (r)evolution of the Mission District. Evan Rose, a senior associate at a San Francisco architectural firm, echoed a familiar sentiment when quoted in the April 2002 edition of the *San Francisco Magazine*: "I'm not one of those people who got all upset like, 'Oh, the gentrification of the Mission' or 'Look at all

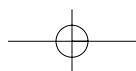
to evict all tenants. Owners must give tenants first right of refusal if the unit is returned to the rental market. Owners must also pay \$4,500 to low-income tenants and \$3,000 to elderly or disabled tenants if evicted under the act. The act was infrequently used until the onset of gentrification. Simon Velasquez Alejandrino, "Gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District," 20–22.

25. Alejandrino, "Gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District: Indicators and Policy Recommendations," 13.

26. Peter Plate, in Berger, "What Just Happened Here? The Dot-Com Years," *San Francisco Magazine*, April 2002, 144.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.



these lofts!’ That’s the nature of a city. Cities grow and respond to growth pressures.”²⁹ By attributing the changes to growth pressures, Rose expressed a common sentiment that gentrification is an organic, natural, and even random process, shaped by an uncontrollable market economy.

However, as the geographer Neil Smith has argued, gentrification is a calculated process designed to benefit developers, real estate companies, speculators, and investors. The term “gentrification” was coined in 1964 by the British sociologist Ruth Glass to explain the economic dimensions of neighborhood changes. According to Glass, “Once this process of ‘gentrification’ starts in a district it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working-class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed.”³⁰

Neil Smith uses Glass’s definition to show how the “economic geography of gentrification is not random.” He makes explicit the deliberateness with which real estate agents, developers, and investors signal and initiate gentrification: “developers do not just plunge into the heart of slum opportunity, but tend to take it piece by piece.” Next come the loan officers who are instructed to take down “their old maps with red lines around working-class and minority neighborhoods, and replace them with new maps sporting green lines.” The green lines signal that now loans will be made available to middle and upper-class residents who, with the assistance of city services, planning commissions, and politicians, embark on the revitalization of a given neighborhood.³¹

Tracing the history of urban development in San Francisco, Chester Hartman observed that there was a correlation between renewal and race, specifically the exclusion of populations of color for whites. Describing the dilemmas faced by officials during the redevelopment of the South of Market area in the late 1950s, Hartman cites how “the changing face of San Francisco into a ‘city of color’ with increasing African, Asian, and Latino populations” was a major concern for Mayor Christopher George and the director of the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, Justin Herman. The thought of having working-class African-Americans and Asian-Americans living so close to the economic center was seen as an obstacle to attracting corporate investors and developers.

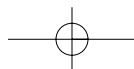
It was becoming apparent that urban renewal could be used to displace the city’s minorities and recapture the centrally located residential areas they had inherited after whites moved out, an opportunity not lost on [Mayor George] Christopher who reflected the attitudes of the city’s Anglo-European politicians and small businessmen.³²

29. Evan Rose, quoted in Berger, “What Just Happened Here? The Dot-Com Years,” *San Francisco Magazine*, April 2000, 71.

30. Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge Press, 1996), 23–25.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Chester Hartman, *City for Sale: The Transformation of San Francisco*, 17.



In this quote Hartman explains how urban renewal and the politics of space are connected to the preservation of whiteness. When it comes to gentrification, whiteness holds currency. For it to be successful, whiteness has to be embedded within a language of space that is rarely articulated as part of a larger revitalization strategy. There is also an acknowledgement, unspoken or otherwise, that the displacement of populations of color will eventually lead to the redefinition of communities and neighborhoods on the basis of whiteness. In other words, creating spaces where white bodies and desires and, most importantly, consumption, dominate and shape the neighborhood.

Whiteness and its uses can, as Jason Espinoza's oral history reveals, change how we remember and use space. Areas that individuals and communities have collectively labeled as "bad" can easily be transformed for the *better* once white consumption and white bodies access them.

There's a different mix of people coming in and out now. Got a lot of Caucasian people in and out of the Mission which you never actually, you know, seen. I mean we got people walking around at like two or three in the morning in places that you know me, myself, and my group wouldn't go to a few years ago.³³

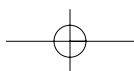
For the collective memory of space to be reconstituted, there needs to be a mutual *forgetting* of what came before the constructions of new buildings, restaurants, and businesses. Those who move into a community must agree to forget. The forgetting is critical to the creation of sites based on gentrified consumption, and as such cannot operate otherwise.³⁴ One of the more chaotic elements of gentrification is the point of transition where longstanding residents are left with negotiating disparate memories of space and belonging, while at the same time, new residents redefine space on their own terms, with their own narration.

In his oral history Mission District resident José Daniel Cruz Solis comments on the competing spatial narratives brought on by revitalization. When asked why he believed so many Latina/os were being forced out of the Mission District, Cruz Solis explained that the displacement happened "because of the kind of businesses" moving into the neighborhood. "There are the expensive restaurants, which our people cannot afford. I definitely cannot afford to go. Then, there's [sic] also clubs that are opening up, and everything else, it's getting too expensive."³⁵ Unlike other interviewees, Cruz Solis primarily identifies an economic and class-based argument as the main reason for the displacement and exclusion of Latina/os, whom he refers to as "our people." For Cruz-Solis, the fact that "our people cannot afford" to live

33. Oral History of Jason Espinoza, by Nicole Espinosa, *La Misión: Voices of Resistance*, directed by Nancy R. Mirabal, 2004.

34. See Yong-Sook Lee and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, eds., *Globalisation and the Politics of Forgetting* (London: Routledge Press, 2005); and Norman Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso Press, 1987).

35. Oral History of José Daniel Cruz Solis, by Isabel Pulido, *La Misión: Voices of Resistance*, directed by Nancy R. Mirabal, San Francisco State University, 1999.



in the neighborhood is not random. One of the first signs of displacement is gentrified consumption, the hallmarks of which are businesses—expensive restaurants, antique stores, upscale bars and lounges, boutiques, specialty food stores, cafes—that are deliberately built to attract wealthier populations to the area. Their arrival signals that older businesses—liquor stores, check-cashing store-fronts, furniture rental businesses, pawn shops—which cater to the poor and working-class populations, will be replaced, eventually forcing this community to travel outside of their neighborhood to get their needs met.³⁶

The “street,” as the philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre has argued, is a “network organized for and by consumption.” Once a community can no longer afford to consume, they are forced to make different choices, ultimately leaving the area. For Lefebvre, the street is no longer a space for making and sustaining community. Instead, it is a site where gathering without consumption, without an economic purpose, is considered suspect, where “the first thing power restricts is the ability to linger or assemble in the street.”³⁷ That the street needs to be controlled, if not patrolled, as Lefebvre asserts, to privilege consumption is a major consequence of gentrification. For José Daniel Cruz Solis, the policing of space was a direct result of the influx of white residents uncomfortable with young Latina/o male and female bodies occupying and using “the street.”

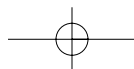
I remember it was cool to walk down the street really late at night. But then it became, you know. Cops were coming every night harassing people of color and telling them “oh, it’s too late for you to be out on the street.” But when it was white folks, I never saw that they [the cops] approached them, you know what I mean? So that’s definitely something that I noticed.³⁸

The malleability of the street, its ability to transform into sites of consumption, is what allows neighborhoods to change so easily. By shifting markers of consumption, space can be redefined in ways that reflect the desired class, race, and ethnicity of certain neighborhoods. It can be, as *Instituto Familiar de la Raza* founder Concepcion (Concha) Martinez Saucedo has noted, a form of control, of demanding that we consume at all costs.

36. An interesting twist on consumption was the building of a “cheap” store in an expensive neighborhood. In June of 2007, *The San Francisco Examiner* reported that residents of Pacific Heights, a wealthy neighborhood, resisted the proposed construction of a 99 cents store in the neighborhood because the “proposed bargain store would clash with the high-end neighborhood, attract people from outside the area, and pose a safety risk.” *The San Francisco Examiner*, June 11, 2007.

37. Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 20.

38. Oral History of José Daniel Cruz Solis, by Isabel Pulido, *La Misión: Voices of Resistance*, directed by Nancy R. Mirabal, San Francisco State University, 1999. In 2007 San Francisco City Attorney Dennis Herrera implemented a “gang injunction” in the Mission District designed to “police” the street and insure that suspected gang members not have access to specific public spaces. If certain gang members were found in areas deemed “off-limits” by the city, they were to be immediately imprisoned.



I went out the other day to check out the Sony Metreon movie houses. There was this bombardment of sound and consumers. I noticed there wasn't even a chair anywhere because they want you to walk around and buy things. You know, and most of the time we aren't even aware of that, and we're moving in little circles and there we are, doing that. So part of my job is to raise those kinds of issues. They're really about politics in a way, about consumerism, and how that consumerism takes us away from the path of respect of quality and of sharing with other people.³⁹

A recognized and respected spiritual leader in the Mission District, Saucedo sees the chaos and distraction of consumerism as being deeply tied to lack of spirit. "Let's look at the whole society of this U.S. of A, U.S. of Advertising, it says it all. It says in the larger society that the context is material. But it's not what you have, you know, but who you are. Who is this being? Who is this spirit?"⁴⁰

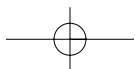
Gentrification is often articulated as solely an economic process, one devoid of any social implications or impact. It is imagined as being without race, gender, sexuality, emotion, or spirit. By casting gentrification as primarily an economic byproduct of a growing economy, dot-com or otherwise, it is possible to avoid, even ignore questions of difference and the role they play in the disability of certain populations and the privileging of others. And yet, as Doreen Massey has argued, spaces are racialized and gendered. Spaces have meaning, and how they are used, controlled, and accessed reveals a set of power relationships that are always in dialogue with patriarchy, heteronormativity, and masculinity. Questions of ownership, privilege, and development echo a larger patriarchal discourse where gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities must negotiate different landscapes of power. As Horacio Roque Ramirez has documented, how gay and lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities operate spatially, whether through movement, use, or ownership, is often dictated by a masculinist, heterosexist discourse that expects these communities to reside in certain neighborhoods, move spatially with purpose, consume (i.e. no loitering), avoid going out late at night alone, dress in a certain way, avoid public displays of affection, and so forth.⁴¹ The belief that space operates without meaning and outside of market forces that are not affected by social, political, and cultural conditions belies the fact that space not only invokes meaning, it reinvents it.⁴²

39. Oral History of Concepción 'Concha' Martínez Saucedo, by Natalia Lopez-Whitaker, *La Misión: Voices of Resistance*, directed by Nancy R. Mirabal, San Francisco State University, 1999.

40. Ibid.

41. See Horacio Roque Ramirez, "'That's My Place!': Negotiating Racial, Sexual and Gender Politics in San Francisco's Gay Latino Alliance, 1975–1983." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. 2 (April 2003): 243. According to Roque Ramirez, one of "the enduring challenges for the Gay Latino Alliance (GALA) members was the public negotiation between Latino and gay communities.

42. For more on space and meaning see, Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1991) and *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Min-



No Neutral Spaces: Translocality and Politics of Renaming

And now there's a restaurant that seemingly intends to rename its neighborhood, as well as entice the hungry hordes. I've hitherto thought of the area where Nopa is as the Western Addition, never a drawing point, but the name, we're told on its Web site comes from its location north of the Panhandle. (Reminding me that a portion of the Tenderloin has been somewhat optimistically renamed the Tendernob.)

—Meredith Brody⁴³

On my first trip to the restaurant, as I searched fruitlessly for a place to put my car, I concluded that Nopa must be short for “no parking.” But it turns out to be one of those trendy acronyms popular with real estate agents far and wide. Nopa stands for North of the Panhandle. . . . Never mind that its actually north-east of the Panhandle. Noepa would look strange on paper, and diphthongs drive property value down.

—Josh Sens⁴⁴

When the restaurant Nopa opened in the Western Addition, reviewers could not help but comment on the meaning of the name Nopa. Short for North of the Panhandle (the Panhandle being a narrow stretch of Golden Gate Park), the name Nopa represented a geographical and translocal dilemma that pitted desires for urban renewal against past memories of gentrified chaos. Did Nopa name and define the neighborhood or was it a geographical misnomer designed to attract people who would otherwise never travel to a “bad” neighborhood to eat at a “good” restaurant?

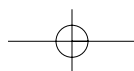
While Nopa, like other new restaurants, signaled change, it was the only one to use geographical renaming as a moniker. This did not go unnoticed. By naming the restaurant Nopa, the owners were not only using what Meredith Brody writes are “cute acronyms,” but attempting to rename the entire neighborhood in which it is located. It's not surprising that a restaurant would employ such a practice. What is surprising is that the term Nopa, with all of its geographical imprecision, was so quickly welcomed and adopted by so many living in San Francisco.⁴⁵ Within a few years of the restaurant's opening, the

nesota Press, 1994); Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso Press, 1989) and *Postmetropolis: Studies of Cities and Regions* (Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 2001); and Daphne Spain, *Gendered Spaces*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

43. Meredith Brody, “Will Nopa be the new SOMA? Could Be. Restaurants open, neighborhood follows,” *San Francisco Weekly*, June 14, 2006.

44. Josh Sens, “Westward Ho,” *San Francisco Magazine*, August 2006, 84–86.

45. While the policy of renaming is a collaborative effort among speculators, developers, businesses, and real estate agencies, it is the real estate agents who “sell” the renaming to prospective homebuyers who might be nervous about buying a home in a “bad” neighborhood. Renaming can also be seen as a vain strategy in that it allows buyers to proclaim that they have bought a home in a “new” area—albeit an artificially renamed area. This is an insidious but effective policy that has allowed real estate agents to turn “bad” properties into appealing ones, thus cre-



surrounding area is now commonly referred to in newspapers, magazines, and real estate listings as Nopa.

Both reviews of the restaurant are good. But this is where the similarities end. While Brody's review delineates the gentrified currents in the restaurant's name, "Will Nopa be the new SOMA? Could be. Restaurants open, neighborhood follows,"⁴⁶ it makes no mention that the community being re-named is a historically African-American and Japanese-American community that was ground zero for the San Francisco redevelopment agency's aggressive revitalization programs of the 1960s and 70s.

Sens, on the other hand, uses gentrification to connect the geographically provocative name of the restaurant with development, speculation, and real estate ("Nopa stands for North of the Panhandle. . . . Never mind that it's actually northeast of the Panhandle. Noepa would look strange on paper, and diphthongs drive property value down"). Even when reviewing the photography exhibit hanging in the restaurant, Sens can't help but note that one of the photographs exhibited is of a past Western Addition landmark, the Church of John Coltrane, which was "evicted a few years ago."⁴⁷ Discussing property values, translocality, ironic photographic imagery, and evictions in reviewing a restaurant is usually not common practice among reviewers. However, as Sens observes, there was something deliberate about using a restaurant's name to distinguish the restaurant from past definitions of community and mark it as anything *but* the Western Addition.

The process of renaming and remapping is not new. When discussing the politics surrounding the renamed South of Market (SoMa) area, Chester Hartman writes of how developers and planners used renaming as a tool to eradicate a neighborhood's history. "One of the greatest injustices in the South of Market redevelopment has been the callous obliteration of the neighborhood's past. The name chosen by the redevelopment agency to dignify the project, "Yerba Buena" (Spanish for "good grass" or "good herb"), was the name of the original Spanish settlement that in 1847 became San Francisco." He goes on to explain that, while preserving the old pioneering name serves public relations, "in reality the project represents the destruction and eviction of a human past not regarded as worth acknowledging, much less honoring."⁴⁸

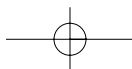
And yet, regardless of the actions of redevelopment agencies and real estate agents, there is no guarantee that lasting spatial change is possible, that communities will transform and evolve with nothing to signal the past. There are always hauntings. In many of the interviews, the informants resisted the

ating an important and needed step in the gentrification of a neighborhood. For details on how renaming operates in other communities see Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge Press, 1996) and Arlene Davila, *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos and the Neo-liberal City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

46. Meredith Brody, "Will Nopa be the new SOMA? Could Be. Restaurants open, neighborhood follows." *San Francisco Weekly*, June 14, 2006.

47. Josh Sens, *San Francisco Magazine*, August 2006, 85.

48. Hartman, 56.



politics of renaming and were quick to cite what they considered to be the *real* name of a neighborhood, “I know people consider this the Valencia corridor, but it’s still the Mission to me.” “I don’t know why they call this neighborhood Lower Pacific Heights, it’s really the Western Addition.” “Where is the Tendernob?”⁴⁹ For renaming to succeed communities have to agree to mutually forget, and that’s not always possible or desirable. There are always reminders that *this* neighborhood was once *that* neighborhood with overlapping and changing meanings of community, experience, and historical memories; a spatial palimpsest that undermines any possibility for complete and total forgetting, even if it’s a name of a new restaurant with good reviews.

The “New Mission”: The Politics of Latina/o Displacement

But by night it becomes clear why the Mission is at the center of one of the most tense battles over the future of San Francisco in decades. This is when the newcomers—mostly young white and affluent—come home from the jobs that afford them \$700,000 loft condominiums in former warehouses, and when the limousines pull up to the bistros that have taken over the butcher shops and bakeries on Valencia Street. This is when the warnings—“Artists Evicted!” stenciled in red paint on the sidewalks, posters that say “Gentrify Me” under the head of Medusa, graffiti that says “Dot-Com” with a line across it on buildings in progress begins to make sense.

—Evelyn Nieves⁵⁰

This story does not end with a happy ending or with words of wisdom. But let me be clear, gentrification is not a good process. Gentrification destroys lives and displaces pregnant women. This process whitewashes murals that were public dedications from family member to family member. It is a process that kills community and historical landmarks. The process is wrong. The process is wrong. The process is wrong.

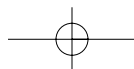
—Roberto Eligio Alfaro⁵¹

During the height of the dot-com boom, asking questions about gentrification and the displacement of Latina/os went against the grain, against the growing belief that this time of boom, this time of massive recovery was here to stay. The new businesses opening up in parts of the Mission District were symbols of revitalization and renewal. In the mid- to late 1990s, mainstream newspapers including the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *San Francisco Examiner*,

49. See community oral history project, *La Misión: Voices of Resistances: A Community Oral History of Gentrification in the Mission District*. Directed by Nancy R. Mirabal, San Francisco State University, 1998–2004.

50. Evelyn Nieves, *New York Times*, November 5, 2000.

51. Roberto Eligio Alfaro, “Reflection: Oral History of Rosario Anaya.” Student interviewer and participant, *La Misión: Voices of Resistance*, directed by Nancy R. Mirabal, 2000.



and the *San Francisco Magazine* applauded the changes taking place in an area that for too long had been “depressed, crime-ridden and blighted.” The printed media celebrated the development of “restaurant row” on Valencia Street and cheered each nightclub, bar, and business that opened in the Mission District.

Oxygen bars, expensive restaurants, and high-end boutiques were built next door to liquor stores, *taquerias*, thrift stores, and *botanicas*. This did not go unnoticed by the owner of the *Botanica Yoruba*, Justine Saunders, who observed in one of the interviews:

There has been a very aggressive renovation of sorts, where buildings on Mission Street and Valencia have been renovated. And they're really *chi chi frou frou* upscale restaurants, there are boutiques where there used to be a grocery store. It's interesting because a year ago on 24th between Mission and Valencia there used to be a little popsicle store called Latin Freeze and that was a given. You knew Latin Freeze was going to be there like forever and they closed its doors.⁵²

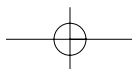
Saunders' memory of space, of the role that businesses play in reinforcing a distinctly Latino-identified community, speaks to how local businesses like bodegas, taquerias, and hair salons (*peluquerías*) are reinterpreted by Latina/os as both community and culture. Thus many see the closures of these businesses as not only examples of gentrification, but as symbols of a larger cultural erasure and communal exclusion. When asked about gentrification, Milagros Acosta, a childcare provider and community organizer in the Mission District, referred to culture deletion as the most detrimental part of neighborhood change. For Acosta, the changes were a result of younger, non-Latina/o residents moving into the area and “taking out our culture.”

En mi opinion, puedo decir que la Misión ha estado cambiando en una forma bastante grande. Se puede notar primeramente, las personas que están moviendo a esta area. Originalmente aquí habíamos más latinos pero hemos estado viendo que están moviendo otras personas que no son latinos, otras gentes más joven que tienen deseos de progresar; estan sacando practicamente nuestra cultura y están trayendo un movimiento diferente.⁵³

In my opinion, I can say that the Mission is changing a great deal. It is noticeable primarily by the people who are moving into this area. Originally, there were more Latinos, but we are seeing that other people are moving in who are not Latinos, younger people with ambition. They are practically taking out our culture and bringing in a different one.

52. Oral history of Justine Saunders, by Christa Jago, *La Misión: Voices of Resistance*, directed by Nancy R. Mirabal, 1999.

53. Oral History of Milagros Acosta by Vicki Gomez, *La Misión: Voices of Resistance: A Community Oral History of Gentrification in the Mission District*, directed by Nancy R. Mirabal, 2000.



The whitewashing of one mural in particular symbolized for many Latina/os what was seen as the white-washing of Latina/o culture in the Mission District. On July 25, 1998, one of the more famous and beloved murals, the “Lilli Ann,” by Jesus “Chuy” Campusano, was whitewashed after the building it adorned was sold to the Robert J. Cort Family Trust, a major investor in San Francisco real estate. In 1986 Campusano was commissioned by the city of San Francisco to design and paint the mural. It was soon recognized as a national landmark. Its whitewashing, the Cort Family Trust reasoned, was to provide advertising space for the new tenants’ dot-com company logo.

By the time the mural had been whitewashed, Campusano had died, and his children and fellow muralist Elias Rocha owned the copyright of the mural. According to the Federal Visual Rights Act, Campusano’s children and Rocha should have been given ninety days notice before anything was done to the artwork. Because they were not notified or given the opportunity to discuss alternative plans with the Cort Family Trust, they sued the trust for \$500,000 in damages and won an order blocking the trust from further tampering with the wall. Although Campusano’s children and Rocha won their case, the win was bittersweet. The mural was lost forever, and there were no plans to replace the “Lili Ann” with a similarly themed mural. The incident was widely regarded by longtime Mission residents as a powerful and public symbol of the dot-com industry’s usurpation of the Mission District’s history and public culture.⁵⁴

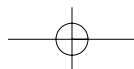
Despite the conflict, some, like Roger Herrera, a city planner in the San Francisco Planning Department, considered the changes to be a positive turn for the community.

In community development, you want kind of a grassroots enrichment of the community, small businesses becoming stronger, the markets becoming more vital. But, you also have the concern that if things become too successful then you have what is called gentrification, where you have a supposedly higher income group, the yuppies, moving into a lower income area and buying up properties because they are cheaper there and *displacing* some of the existing residents that were there to begin with.⁵⁵

According to Herrera, it is when redevelopment becomes too “successful” that it becomes difficult to control and maintain “growth” within and among the community.

54. During the 1970s murals were commissioned on the side of buildings in the Mission District. The murals depicted events, people, and images associated with different Latina/o cultures and communities, affording the community a distinct Latina/o character. However, as a result of gentrification, many of the buildings with murals were sold and the murals whitewashed. See Lynda Gledhill, “Mission Mural Rescued From Wipeout by Judge, Artist gets a chance to protect wall art,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 4, 1998; Bob Armstrong, “Developer Whitewashes Mural,” *The Progressive*, April 1999; and John Leños, “The (Postcolonial) Rules of Engagement: Cultural Activism, Advertising Zones and Xicana Digital Muralism” (article in possession of author).

55. Oral History of Roger Herrera by Daria Espinoza, *La Misión: Voices of Resistance*, directed by Nancy R. Mirabal, San Francisco State University, 1999.



Herrera was not the only one to exhibit ambivalence concerning the renewal of the Mission District. Milagros Acosta, the childcare provider who, earlier in her interview, critiqued the loss of culture in the Mission, nonetheless viewed some of the changes as positive. The construction of new homes and offices in the Mission was, for her, “un cambio muy positivo en estos días en la Misión” (a very positive change currently here in the Mission).⁵⁶

Others, like Jason Espinoza, did not see the construction and housing boom favorably. A local teacher who was forced out of the Mission District because of high rents, Espinoza considered the seemingly never-ending construction of new buildings and homes as evidence that the older, long-standing communities were being deliberately uprooted.

It's all different, it's all changed I mean like rents have gone up sky high, property in this area has gone up sky high. A condominium up the street like two blocks from here was considered a bad area like two years ago is now going for like seven hundred grand. So people who grew up here can't afford to stay here anymore.⁵⁷

In making the connection between expense and exclusion, Espinoza sums up what for many was a central dilemma concerning gentrification: the inability of those born and raised in a community to continue to live there.

This concern was also shared by bilingual teacher Betty Pazmiño, who thought that the high cost of homes was a strategy used by developers and real-estate agents to control the “type” of people moving into the Mission. “I've lived here for ten years now on this block and so many people have lost their home that they've rented for years. Just across the street a one bedroom sold for \$400,000 two weeks ago.”⁵⁸ At the same time, Pazmiño understood that the construction of expensive homes, as well as the inflated real estate market, were factors that led to displacement.

We see it [gentrification] all around us. I mean, God, right here on Bryant and 20th they want to bring downtown offices now over here. I mean, come on, this is our home. You know. We're not going to be an extension of Market Street here. What's going on? So, there's major, major meetings around that. So the sign in my window says “No Downtown Offices.” It's definitely a battle.⁵⁹

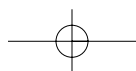
A bilingual teacher in the Mission District, Pazmiño knew there were some fights she would never win. In 1998 the people of California voted to pass Proposition 227, which required that all public school instruction be conducted

56. Oral History of Milagros Acosta by Vicki Gomez, *La Misión: Voices of Resistance: A Community Oral History of Gentrification in the Mission District*, directed by Nancy R. Mirabal, San Francisco State University, 2000.

57. Oral History of Jason Espinoza by Nicole Espinosa, *La Misión: Voices of Resistance*, directed by Nancy R. Mirabal, San Francisco State University, 2004.

58. Oral History of Betty Pazmiño by Danielle Cruz, *La Misión: Voices of Resistance*, directed by Nancy R. Mirabal, San Francisco State University, 1999.

59. *Ibid.*



in English.⁶⁰ For Pazmiño this policy, along with gentrification, created an ironic and painful situation. Pazmiño worked closely with bilingual teachers who, after the passage of Proposition 227, were being told to pack up “all your Spanish stuff, to give it away, throw it away. We’re not using it anymore.”⁶¹ Yet, at the same time, when it came to the question of bilingualism versus language immersion courses for Anglo children, there did not appear to be the same linguistic bias.

We don’t want certain people to be bilingual and be proud. Now if you switch it around and an Anglo child becomes bilingual, who’s gonna get the job? Will my daughter get the job or this little white guy who speaks both languages? People are like, yes, let’s send him off to the global market and he can become our representative in Mexico, whatever. That’s why these immersion programs that have white kids in them get so validated. They’re like isn’t it wonderful, they’re learning a second language! I don’t know if you get that. It really bugs me, that part really bugs me.⁶²

It is no coincidence that many of the interviews mentioned the state of education and schools in the Mission District. Three major factors contributed to the crisis: new residents who either had few children or none at all, the perceived lack of good schools, and the demand to build private and charter schools to educate the children of newer residents moving into the community. In his oral history, Jaime Osorio commented on how changes in demographics and population influenced local public schools. “With gentrification there’s not a lot of families living in the Mission, and also the people who live there tend to be single or not have kids so it takes away from that family environment.”⁶³

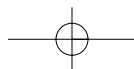
The high eviction rates, the increase in dot-com companies, the changes in the public schools, and the unaffordability of homes were further exacerbated by the construction of work/live lofts. Designed to appeal to the lifestyle of dot-com and technical workers moving into the Mission District, Potrero Hill, and South of Market, the work/live lofts were sold as spaces where you could both live and “start-up” a dot-com business. With the work-

60. Proposition 227, known as the English Language in Public Schools Initiative Statute, required all public schools instruction to be conducted in English. It was passed in June of 1998, with a clear majority of California voters supporting the proposition. It did, however, provide some limited provisions for bilingual education. Requirements may be waived if parents or guardian show that child already knows English or has special needs, or would learn English faster through alternate instructional techniques. The second provided initial short-term placement, not normally exceeding one year, in intensive sheltered English immersion programs for children not fluent in English. Both allowed for some form of bilingual education and immersion programs to exist. See California Secretary of State, Primary 98, Proposition 227.

61. Oral History of Betty Pazmiño by Danielle Cruz, *La Misión: Voices of Resistance*, directed by Nancy R. Mirabal, San Francisco State University, 1999.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Oral history of Jaime Osorio by Harold Rubio, *La Misión: Voices of Resistance*, directed by Nancy R. Mirabal, San Francisco State University, 2004.



space designation, developers were able to circumvent local zoning, planning, and taxing policies. The lofts were also very expensive, making it almost impossible for anyone except those whom Dashka Slater called “San Francisco’s newest nobility—the feckless, free-spending, dot-com generation,” to afford them. As formerly undesirable neighborhoods became chic, small businesses and long-time residents were finding themselves priced out of the market.⁶⁴ The work/live lofts were controversial from the very beginning. The construction brought about quick and visible changes that were not always welcomed by long-term residents. Slater vividly describes the growing tension among residents in her description of what she calls “Silicon Valley’s colonization of San Francisco.”

Streets once traversed by tractor-trailors and jalopies are now dominated by jeep Cherokees and Mazda Miatas. As San Francisco increasingly becomes a city of the rich, the white and the young, the hulking façades of the new live-work buildings have become the architectural representation of Silicon Valley’s colonization of San Francisco.⁶⁵

The politics and problems surrounding the work/live lofts soon galvanized local activists, who used the lofts as examples of a housing and spatial policy employed to displace working-class residents. Rosario Anaya, the executive director of the Mission Language and Vocational School in the Mission District, questioned the ubiquitous work/live lofts in the area and their impact on affordable housing for families.

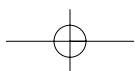
Around the school we are surrounded now by work/live spaces that you cannot touch for less than \$1,200 dollars a studio or a 1 bedroom apartment. I don’t know how many people could afford that, especially when they have a family. That’s [work/live lofts] for one or two persons, not for a family. Our average families have at least four kids, plus two adults, that’s six, see that’s not for us.⁶⁶

As Anaya points out, the lofts were not designed with families in mind, nor were they created for the residents already living in the Mission. Instead, they were intended for a population that developers expected would eventually move into the area: single, wealthy, highly educated tech workers. For Anaya, the city government and planning commissions are the ones to blame for dictating land-use policies that only had the rich and powerful in mind. Yet, as she makes clear, residents need to organize and demand an end to gentrification in order for things to change.

64. Dashka Slater, “Neighborhood Bully: Loft Builder Joe O’Donoghue is Rearranging the Face of the City. You Got a Problem with That?” *San Francisco Magazine*, February 2000, 33–40.

65. *Ibid.*, 34.

66. Oral History of Rosario Anaya conducted by Roberto Eligio Alfaro, *La Misión: Voices of Resistance*, directed by Nancy R. Mirabal, San Francisco State University, 2000.



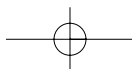
I feel bad that the powers that be in the city did not make the changes that would have resulted in a win/win situation. On the other hand, I think we cannot stop from looking at ourselves. We should have been able to raise our voices loud and clear to see that the powers that be took into account the residents that were living in this area. I think that we are going to have the same thing happen in Potrero Hill, in Hunter's Point, but maybe it's going to be a little bit better. I think they have learned quite a bit from the experience in the Mission.⁶⁷

Anaya's call for Mission District residents to "look" at themselves was soon heeded. By the early 2000 antigentrification and antidisplacement coalitions were organized. While there had been much activism by white, working-class residents, Latina/os were now organizing in large numbers. The building of homes that privileged the housing of the "digerati" over families was the impetus needed to organize. For activists, the work/live lofts, in particular the Bryant Square developments, were the rallying point for large-scale protests.

From 1999 to 2000, local agencies, activists, arts organizations, and nonprofits banded together to defeat Proposition K, which was backed by Mayor Willie Brown. It allowed a one-time lifting of a ban on new projects, and exempted certain areas from growth limits. In response, the antigentrification coalition sponsored Proposition L, which banned new developments, including work/live lofts in the Mission and South of Market areas. In 2000, Proposition K lost and Proposition L won by a decisive margin. The passage of Proposition L, along with the take-over of the Bay View Bank by the dot-com company BigStep.com, which displaced over twenty small businesses and nonprofits serving the Latino neighborhood, were the turning points for organizing protests and demanding the resignation of Mayor Willie Brown and pro-gentrification supervisors, many of whom would lose their seats to antigrowth politicians.⁶⁸

67. Ibid.

68. In 2000, activists, nonprofits, and community agencies created a coalition aimed at protesting gentrification in the Mission District. Organized primarily by the Mission Antidisplacement Coalition (MAC), MAC led a series of protests and in August of 2000 an important march down Mission Street. Long-term residents, including a number of Latinos, held signs describing the number of years that they had lived in the Mission. The eviction of important and necessary nonprofits from the Bayview Bank, such as the Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, the California Nurses Institute (a nursing training school) and the San Francisco Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, angered residents who saw the takeover as a deliberate attempt to weaken their communities and force them from their neighborhoods. The loss of over two dozens nonprofits and businesses significantly affected the Latino community. See Vanessa Hua, "Reversal of Fortune: Buildings that symbolized the gentrification sweeping San Francisco try to fill empty floors amid dot-com collapse," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 4, 2001. A key component of the protests was the use of public art to inform and organize Latina/os. The digital arts project of *La Galeria de la Raza*, the youth art program of Inner City Public Arts Project and the Precita Eyes Mural Arts, were a few of the organizations that produced artwork specifically on the question of displacement and resistance. A powerful tool was the wide distribution of posters plastered on walls, billboards, storefronts depicting different Latino families with the statement "Here we stay, Aquí nos quedamos" on the bottom of each of one. Simple and direct, this image not only put a Latina/o face on the politics of displacement, it framed it within a larger context of resistance and defiance.



Conclusion: Interviewing Tombstones and Re-scripted Memories

... that which appears absent can indeed be a seething presence.

—Avery Gordon⁶⁹

We cannot, alas, interview tombstones.

—Paul Thompson⁷⁰

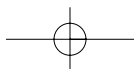
Trying to end an article on a topic that seemingly has no end is a challenge. The dot-com bust, the housing market, the bad economy have lessened the frenzy, but people still move in, while others move out. The landscapes continue to evolve as you navigate ever-changing terrains, deciding where and if you belong. It wasn't until I walked along San Francisco's Embarcadero and looked at, *really* looked at, the results of decades of urban renewal in what is now considered the South Beach area that I realized that, unlike other parts of the city, this area is littered with memorials. At that moment, and most likely, because of my sour mood, they appeared to be nothing less than tombstones. Extending from a now-scenic stretch of concrete beginning at 4th and King streets and ending at Fisherman's Wharf, tall and thin, black and white memorial towers and discrete plaques cemented onto the sidewalk dot the wide sidewalks and redeveloped waterfront. They were nebulous reminders that something else had existed here before ... but what? Much like tombstones, unless you're searching for one in particular, they're easy to ignore.

The funny thing is that I have passed these memorial towers, plaques, and concrete remembrances countless of times while on my way to a Giants' baseball game or to the farmer's market at the Ferry Building. They never truly registered as anything too important. I never stopped to read the historical notes written on the four sides of the towers. That is, until now. On a windy day in March of 2008 I took my time and walked to each memorial tower, reading the small print and the brief historical descriptions of the neighborhood and the people who used to live in an area now dominated by condominium buildings, upscale hotels, and a skyline that is perpetually under construction.

The historical notes were conveniently brief and clearly not intended to be anything other than fragments of information designed to historically titillate. The disconnected pieces of nostalgia threaded throughout the many memorials placed along the Embarcadero ranged from early whaling ships, to being "shanghaied," to the labor unrest of the 1930s. There are memorials devoted to the history of the Ferry Building, the evolution of transportation in the Bay Area, and the building of the Bay Bridge. What isn't included, however, is information on the number of people displaced by the

69. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

70. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd ed., (Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.



redevelopment in the South of Market, Mission Bay, South Beach, and Embarcadero neighborhoods.

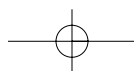
There are no memorials to the Filipino, Latina/o, artist, and working-class communities that have been forced to relocate. There is no mention of the immigrant businesses, community centers, public schools, and modest homes leveled to make room for the condominiums, skyscrapers, and upscale restaurants. There is no place for remembering the recently displaced and excluded. Instead, the memorials are embedded in a re-scripted historical memory of space and time that extends far beyond recent events and experiences. They cull *safe* memories and operate as historical anecdotes ready for tourist consumption.

Why do redevelopment agencies and cities do this? Why do they place placards, statues, installations, and monuments as physical reminders of a neighborhood's reconstructed past? A few weeks before I took this walk, Eva Martínez, a respected local activist, asked me if I knew anything about the history of Mexicans who lived in Rincon Hill (which is part of the Embarcadero). I did not. And I wondered why I didn't know and what it meant that others did not know either.⁷¹

Redevelopment efforts at memorialization can be seen throughout the city. Signs hang in different neighborhoods renaming them as Little Saigon or Polk Village, and in the Fillmore Jazz District, plaques on Fillmore Street inform passersby who just happen to look down at the sidewalk that Malcolm X gave a speech at the Fillmore Auditorium in 1962 and that Charlie Parker played at Bop City, a club that closed over twenty years ago. The prevailing thought is that memorials based on a constructed past prevent erasure and allow for a collective remembering of a neighborhood, people, and community that no longer exists. I don't buy it. Because in the end, whose memories are the ones that we are allowed to remember, whose memories are the ones officially on display? Who decides how we remember and why? There are no redevelopment placards, at least not yet, in the Mission District. There are no memorials to a bygone time or concrete statues that speak of a past history and people, who *once* lived here. But there is a seething presence, a *haunting* if you will, that travels and moves through space, resting in the cracks of the sidewalks and waiting for what comes next.

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71. Fortunately, Eva Martínez, director of AcciónLatina, has developed and directed an oral history project on the early Mexican community in the Rincon Hill section of San Francisco to preserve this area's history.



nity oral history projects. She has developed an ongoing collaborative community oral history/community archive project with AccionLatina (Latina/o community agency) and *El Tecolote* (local bilingual language newspaper) on the history of Mission District Latina/o activist from the 1960s and 1970s. She has also served as a consultant on ¡Mak-ibaka!, a technology-infused and interactive Filipino community oral history project that included art, dance, and activism.

I would like to thank the many San Francisco State University students and Mission District residents, business-owners, activists, artists, and colleagues who made this project possible. I am indebted to John Leños, Andreana Clay, Jean Kawahara, D. J. Cyphon, Norma Smith, Debra Koffler, Marcia Ochoa, Kim Alidio, and Ray Balberan. I would also like to thank the Regional Oral History Office at UC Berkeley, in particular Richard Cándida Smith, Lisa Rubens, and Nadine Wilmot, for their enthusiasm and support of the project. Many thanks to the anonymous readers for their helpful suggestions and comments. This article is dedicated to all who have struggled to build and sustain community in the most difficult of times.

