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Rachel Brahinsky

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“Tell Him I’m Gone”

On the Margins in High-Tech City

Rachel Brahinsky

Wandering through San Francisco with a public television crew in 1963, writer James Baldwin commented on the crumbling geographies of liberally inclined cities like this one. At the time, the politics of racism smoldered across the nation. Shuttled by the TV crew from one end of the city to the next, Baldwin listened as young Black teens expressed their frustrations and anger at a city that enjoyed a progressive reputation, even as these youth and their neighbors struggled to survive the premature deaths of unemployment and urban renewal, which were rippling through the city at the time.

A half century later the TV documentary on Baldwin’s visit emerged from the archives and saw a revival in the city in which it was filmed. This was a very different San Francisco in many ways, and yet the spatial politics of race and capital were again at the forefront, with marginalized communities and their haunts facing daily losses. Like the youth in Baldwin’s time, people on the socioeconomic fringe in twenty-first-century San Francisco struggled to reconcile the progressive reputation of their city with the facts of their own lives, as they and their communities weathered a new era of race-class urban removal.

Like the narrator in the traditional Black labor ballad “Take This Hammer,” after which Baldwin’s documentary was named, the contemporary

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city was also breeding fugitives from urban life. Poor and working-class San Franciscans were being forced from their homes by a rising tide of rents, in an era in which privatization of all things had become so normalized that it was hard for many to imagine another way.

*Take this hammer, carry it to the captain
Take this hammer, carry it to the captain
Take this hammer, carry it to the captain,
Tell him I'm gone, boys
Tell him I'm gone.¹*

The ebb and flow of populations is part of urbanness; this has long been understood. Just as separation—of ethnic groups or land use types like industrial or residential spaces—marks the shape of cities, so have relocation and im/migration defined the shape of our metropolises. The evolution of place in these ways can be fascinating, exciting, and beautiful. But it is the *why* of urban migrations and containments that defines urban justice. It is the power behind such motion and containment that matters, and too often that power has been guided by race-class exclusion.² Whether it is containment through racial segregation, or displacement through evictions, rent hikes, or demolitions, power-laden patterns of racialized urbanism bring deep social disruption at multiple scales.

San Francisco has long played host to many rounds of such disruption and containment. Even so, there has always been a subaltern struggle in the city, a creative resistance to capitalist urbanization, often led by racial castaways whose life stories undercut the well-hewn narrative of San Francisco as a haven for marginalized people.³ These stories of struggle are also narratives of resilience in which marginalization is redefined.

This chapter draws lessons from linked historical moments of such struggle, using James Baldwin's commentary on 1960s San Francisco to consider racial capitalism's urban consequences years later. Using a mixed-method approach, I look at the KQED film as a primary sociopolitical text and incorporate historical-geographic research on racial politics in the city to develop a context for conversations about race-making.⁴ I argue that urban space plays a key role in shaping the bounds of racial justice, both in Baldwin's time and beyond. By foregrounding the politics of place, I seek clues toward a broader urban justice.

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In the next section of this chapter, we encounter San Francisco through the KQED film narrative, exploring the spatial politics of race—and the meaning of race itself—as it played out in two of San Francisco’s two largely African American neighborhoods. Throughout, the chapter reflects on how urban policy has intersected with the everyday Black geographies that Baldwin investigated, with a call for a revisioning of those same geographies. Through reseeing place, I argue, we may also reimagine racial marginalization in our cities.

The rhythm of the song “Take This Hammer” permeates this chapter, as I seek to illuminate the role of what geographer Clyde Woods called the “blues epistemology” in shaping knowledge and power in racialized cities.⁵ Woods conceived of this as a way to understand the role of underground music-makers and creative forces as “sociologists, reporters, counselors, advocates, preservers of language and customs, and summoners of life.”⁶

These life-affirming practices, for Woods, played a key role in keeping alive social critique and even policy alternatives through times in which such alternatives were crushed by the spatial pressures of urban change—like urban renewal and its offspring—pressures that still threaten to extinguish everyday life in Black communities.

Multiple Marginalities: “We Don’t Even Have a Country”

The film begins with a drive into San Francisco, streaming west over the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge. The city lights burn through the dark night, and Baldwin’s voice narrates the view, speaking of the paradox of San Francisco. Though it seemed to beam a message of social progress, he reflected, San Francisco remained problematic in many of the quotidian realms of urban American exclusion: chiefly, through its legacies of race-class segregation.

Then: Pan to the grassy hillside, to the sight of a young girl chasing a ball on a classically Californian slope. The hill is brown with summer grass that shimmers like the hips of some giant golden bear. It’s summertime, and the living here is typically quite dry.

Soon, images of other kids walking and talking offer glimpses of the city’s two largely African American neighborhoods. The documentary, conceived and created by Richard O. Moore for KQED public television, paired

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novelist and sharp-tongued social commentator Baldwin with Orville Luster, a community advocate known for his work with Black youth from the city's southeastern corner.⁷ Baldwin's national and international profile was rising. A scathing essay on religion, race, and sexuality—later published as *The Fire Next Time*—had just come out, following the publication of his boundary-pushing novel *Another Country* in 1962. In much of his work, as in these texts, Baldwin took race, sexuality, and religion head on, often with the trans-Atlantic perspective for which he was to become known. Even so, his critique of American racism stood at the center of his work, with his position as a member of a triply marginalized group—having been born poor, Black, and gay—shaping his literary voice.⁸

Hunter's Point Hill, where many of Luster's teens lived, sits adjacent to San Francisco's Naval Shipyard, an institution that both built and destroyed the neighborhood around it. Having long been a shipbuilding center, the place was acquired by the US Navy to serve as a key node in the World War II Pacific theater. The activity there through the 1940s and 1950s drew migrants from across the country for shipbuilding, atomic-weapons processing, and administration of the war effort.⁹ At the time of Baldwin's visit, the Hill was largely an African American space, with Blacks representing about 80 percent of residents. The places they occupied included dilapidated housing, which had been assembled as temporary shelter for shipyard workers during the war, and which was largely left to crumble after conversion into federally managed public housing in the postwar period.¹⁰

Though the Hill boasted incredible views of the San Francisco Bay and the city itself, it had begun its urban life as a fringe industrial place one hundred years earlier—and had long struggled to shake off its marginal status. Nearby urban landscapes had included outlaw Chinese shrimpers, the city's Butcher's Reservation, electric power plants, sewers, and all manner of industrial workshops. By the late 1940s the African American community called it home. The Hill was a key geographic feature of the larger neighborhood of Bayview–Hunter's Point, which was undergoing a racial and economic transition as working- and middle-class white-ethnics packed out of the city.¹¹ Swept up in the federal housing programs that enabled their upward mobility, whites sought a more suburban existence down the San Francisco Peninsula to the south, in synch with others quite a bit like them across the country.¹²

As the *white pull*¹³ of federal housing programs generated what ur-

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banists tend to call white flight, Bayview–Hunter’s Point filled with Black families fleeing the urban demolitions of the Western Addition, known also as the Fillmore.¹⁴ At the same time, the labor opportunities of the shipyard were disappearing, lingering in short supply through the Cold War, soon to vanish entirely. In that context, the young people of Hunter’s Point Hill, who were generally the poorest Black youth in a struggling Black neighborhood, sought extralegal employment and tangled with the white San Francisco power structure. Orville Luster was focused on the young men of the Hill, working largely with those whose lives were dangerously veering away from stability, if they had ever experienced it at all.¹⁵

By 1963 the urban renewal program that later made the city infamous for bulldozer politics was long under way in the Fillmore, and Luster’s youth were well aware of it. Displacees from the central city were appearing in the southeastern corner of the city week by week, in search of work, stability—and home. This was a community that had already been in shock, having fled the Jim Crow South just a short generation earlier, and not too many generations after their ancestors had endured American slavery. Now they were making home out of the San Francisco hills, having sought “the warmth of other suns,” though that warmth now seemed fleeting.¹⁶

In many ways this story was a classic California experience lived by cultures of all kinds: a people, drawn west by desperation and aching hopes, sought the many golds of the Left Coast, from mining to jobs to cultural freedoms. Upon arrival they found that the mythos of western success was warped by race, class, and time. Attention to these dynamics, to the ways that racial politics shaped western cities, and the way that “space-time” shapes the bounds of urban justice, helps explain the predicaments of Black San Franciscans in the 1960s.¹⁷ It was capital that drew African Americans to the West during the World War II period; it was race that defined their spatial freedoms, or lack thereof. And it was time that shaped the intersection between race, place, and capital, such that Luster’s youth found themselves surviving the city with a steady thrump of fear that their rickety owner-neglected homes were about to disappear under yet another state-mandated bulldozer. The experiences of Black urbanism were fluid, sometimes dangerously so.

Now: the kids are surrounding Baldwin, saying that they can’t get jobs; there are none to be found if one is Black, they say. Baldwin responds, acknowledging the invisibility of their situation: “This is the San Francisco

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Americans pretend does not exist. They think I'm making it up." They clamor to be seen by Baldwin, to air the complaints of the unheard. Baldwin says, in mentoring tones: "I want *you* to think about *this*. There will be a Negro president of this country. But it will not *be* the country we're sitting in now. It will be someplace else." The young people respond, calling out over each other in the crowd: "We have no flag. We don't even have a country. Do we have a country?"¹⁸

The film has its imperfections. On the one hand, the public television camera is obsessed with the figure of Baldwin. Baldwin's words and flair, as he smokes and takes in the sights, dominate the screen, eclipsing the voices of the youth. From Baldwin's perspective, this was problematic; he had apparently hoped that the youth would be prominent in the final cut.¹⁹ Meanwhile, some of Baldwin's observations about Black life were strangely objectifying of the people who are offered, nameless, as universal representatives of Black people and culture. These points weaken the narrative and its political force. Even so, the documentary offers a text through which to see the refractions of racialization as life-affirming rather than centralized around death or violence.

Now: a girl skipping along the street, running, to the sounds of gospel music. Baldwin's voice is overlaid, talking about the inner life of Black people, and the ways that they are misunderstood, by whites, by others, and by each other. For Baldwin, some of this was wrapped up in what he called "the God shops"—the storefront churches that peddled religion in its various forms. Having grown up as the son of a Baptist minister and having trained in the clergy himself as a young man, Baldwin later saw those operations as preying on the weak, the poor. Religion was a social force that thrived on the ongoing search among the disaffected for belonging and safety. He had long linked religion and the notion of racial progress to experiences of belonging and home in his writing.²⁰

Luster confirmed this sense of dislocation, the ongoing existential experience of the Diaspora: "The negro in San Francisco, he doesn't really know his place. He's trying to find his place. That's one of the problems: *What place is there for me?*," suggesting that for Black San Franciscans, "You came out here to escape."²¹

If he ask you, was I running
If he ask you, was I running

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“Tell Him I’m Gone”

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*If he ask you, was I running,
Tell him I’m flyin’, boys
Tell him I’m flyin’²²*

“Oh, They Talk about the South! The South Ain’t Half as Bad as San Francisco!”

The KQED documentary came together because Baldwin was flying in to give a talk in the Bay Area, on the themes he explored in *The Fire Next Time*. Moore, who is white, recalls thinking, “Let’s get him to come here and look behind the veneer in San Francisco of the cosmopolitan liberal city.” Asked why he was drawn to the topic, Moore explained: “Don’t you think it would have become my responsibility to become interested in the black experience at that time?” To refuse attention to the subject, he reflected, would have been “immoral.”²³

It was mostly filmed out of the windows of a Chevrolet Corvair station wagon—with the engine in the rear. Moore’s camera crew took off the hood of the car and fit a camera in the windshield. The rear of the wagon was packed with batteries and a sound recorder, with just enough space for one cameraman to lie on his stomach to train the camera on the landscape while Baldwin spoke.²⁴

For those who know Baldwin’s work as centered on sexuality and gender, such topics and their intersections with race may seem like a strange omission in the film. Any read of Baldwin is richer with attention to his work on intersectional politics, and in many other texts Baldwin spoke about love and sex and belonging and race as interwoven problems, often suggesting that his position in the society as Black and gay pushed him to the edges in a way that he used to develop his power as a writer. It was a place from which he could look back at the rest of us with unique perspective and critique. Even so, not much of his analysis of gender or sexuality comes through in the film. Perhaps that wasn’t Moore’s mission.

It’s also worth noting that though San Francisco is known for its openness to sexual fluidity, Baldwin didn’t seem to have deep connections there. One might guess that San Francisco would appear prominently in Baldwin’s work or life. In a survey of Baldwin’s talks and writings, however, including his plays, essays, novels, and other film commentary, it’s hard to find much reference to the city by the bay. Baldwin’s cartography circulated trans-

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nationally between the orbits of New York and Paris for much of his life, with key visits to Turkey and Eastern Europe. The racial exclusions of San Francisco—perhaps in its queer communities as well—could have been at play here.

Though San Francisco may not have been that significant for Baldwin, however, Baldwin was ultimately very meaningful for residents of San Francisco. This wasn't true right away. With its stark commentary on racism and exclusion in the city, Baldwin's visit and the documentary record that it left behind could have gashed open the sparkling image of San Francisco progressivism. The city had long enjoyed a reputation as a bastion of liberal sociopolitics, and yet the African Americans who had most recently migrated here found that this reputation did not extend to racial liberalism.²⁵

Baldwin's visit exposed this alternative, often bitter view of the city, focusing on the young people who felt cast away by the mainstream and who viewed their social and geographic place in the city largely through the lens of race and racism. As one young man says to Baldwin, in a challenge to the progressive ideal: "Oh, they talk about the South! The South ain't half as bad as San Francisco! You want me to tell you about San Francisco? I'll tell you about San Francisco. The white man he's not taking advantage of you out in public the way they do in Birmingham, but he's killing you with that pencil and paper, brother, oh he's killing you."²⁶

It was this quote that would be aired over and over upon the film's revival. But in 1963 it remained relatively unheard. It aired on public television, probably just once; following that, the film went largely unnoticed in the press. Moore commented years later that he felt that the work was sidelined because the critique was too strong and the depiction of angry Black youth was seen as untenable material for the general public; ultimately, to his disappointment, Moore believed that "nobody paid attention."²⁷ Indeed, if city leaders or media producers were worried about volatile tensions, they would not have been so far off. It was barely five years later that a white police officer killed Black seventeen-year-old Matthew Johnson on Hunter's Point Hill. The uprising that ensued captured the city for five days.²⁸

The Black radical politics that may have terrified the KQED higher-ups are not often associated with San Francisco but rather with Oakland. The Black Panther Party was strongest in Oakland, building power even as San Francisco's urban process pushed new Black families into the Oakland fray, having radicalized many of them via displacement. Where San Fran-

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cisco’s Black exodus began as early as 1970, Oakland’s African American population continued to rise through the late 1980s.²⁹ With that growing population, the symbiosis between the urban politics of postwar neighborhood clearance with the political development of radical Black politics was broadly evident in Oakland.³⁰

Still, the everyday material conditions of life for Black people in San Francisco produced theorists out of young minds. The issue of housing, for example, for the KQED youngsters was no distant policy concern. Rather, it was the heart of their quotidian existence. They needed no imported theoretical lens to see that. As one young man put it: “They tryin’ to tear down our homes, brother! When the white man try to tear down your homes, what are you gonna do?” He went on, framing jobs and labor as fundamentally linked: “You know what kinda job they gonna give us? They gonna let us tear down our own homes, here in Hunter’s Point.” In that light, Black San Francisco’s role in its own displacement would then be complete. “It’s a job, temporarily, and then what you gonna do? Where you gonna live?”³¹

One of the only girls quoted in the film offered the same clarity, suggesting that the displacement of urban renewal would arrive with the erasure of more than just housing but would entail a more thorough eradication of *home*, with its deep sense of place. This place, she told Baldwin, “ain’t gonna be no place, when they get through. We gonna be living out on the streets.”³²

Now: Baldwin, Luster, and the film crew pack into the Chevy, with cameras poised in multiple directions as they drive. Passing public housing in the Western Addition, Baldwin talks about the dangers of living in what he calls the ghetto. He says that being forced to live among danger at all times is deeply unsettling in long-term ways. The children here, he says, are exposed to “a million forces that appear, when a people are despired.”³³

Images of a weed-filled yard with wilting cars take over the screen. Although the camera moves along streets that served as the city center after the Great Quake and Fire of 1906, signs of demolition and abandonment surround Baldwin and Luster. Where urban renewal had first staked its claims, tearing through Victorian homes, there now were empty lots, awaiting development. Some of those spaces would fill quickly, with a new hospital and union-backed affordable housing. Many blocks would fester for decades, leaving the community with a visible reminder of the gaping wound that

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urban renewal's displacements had wrought in the city.³⁴ Baldwin speaks: "There is no moral distance, that is to say—no distance—between the facts of life in San Francisco and the facts of life in Birmingham."³⁵

This was the year that the March on Washington was to take place, the same year that Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" pled for dialogue and action on race-class inequality.³⁶ Later that year four Birmingham girls would be murdered by a Ku Klux Klan bomb. But then, soon after, the Civil Rights Act would be passed by the US Congress, marking a new level of mainstream acceptance of the shifting times.

On the precipice of all of this political change, Baldwin and Luster paused in front of the Eichler crane near Laguna and Geary Streets in San Francisco. With the camera running, they mused on the state of reconstruction of the city streets and the ways that it might serve the working-class Black community that had been removed to make way. City officials would later feature this redevelopment site as a sign of hope and progress for the area. The public-private partnership between Eichler Homes and the SF Redevelopment Agency was lauded for its new-modernist dwellings suited for the masses, which would replace the old Victorians. This was in the era before preservationism gained traction, and the 1880s structures made of California redwood were not yet valued by the real estate industry. Conversely, it was construction projects like Eichler Homes that had inspired community members to turn out en masse to public meetings in the years prior, some with guns in hand, in defense both of their right to stay and of their need for a piece of the economic pie represented by symbols like the Eichler crane.³⁷

In front of that symbol, Baldwin turns to Luster: "I don't know what I could say to those kids that would make any sense. Because in fact, it does not make any sense."³⁸

The hopelessness of that moment did not tell the whole story. The 1960s closed with Fillmore residents and others across the city developing tactics of participation that reshaped the redevelopment schemes in favor of affordable housing and increased community retention.³⁹ In Bayview-Hunter's Point, women leaders would further develop this activism to ensure that an entire hillside would be populated with subsidized housing, creating a bulwark for Black residential stability for decades.⁴⁰

At the same time, the processes that Baldwin witnessed kicked into gear a long, slow march out of the city as African American San Franciscans

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began to leave for the East Bay and beyond, often returning only on Sundays to attend church services in the Fillmore. By the mid-2000s, “Black flight” was understood as a crisis with public policy implications, but years later there were still no clear programs to stem the tide.⁴¹

*If he ask you, was I laughing
If he ask you, was I laughing
If he ask you, was I laughing
Tell him I’m cryin’, boys
Tell him I’m cryin’⁴²*

By 2015 the geographic center of the Internet-tech economy had expanded substantially from Silicon Valley into San Francisco, rattling the demography and landscape of the city, with striking impacts on Black San Francisco. With the spread of tech firms—from information storage services to web-based startups to biotech expansions—came a boom in demand for housing that drew out the toughest tendencies of urbanism. Residential evictions, small-business displacement, and rising rents marked the days and filled the newspapers. Having counted as about 14 percent of the city in 1970, Black people now comprised less than 6 percent of the booming population, and key Black cultural institutions were shuttered by the steep heights of the real estate market.⁴³

Black people who remained in the city talked of feeling isolated and abandoned. A group of Black artists formed a collective museum show titled “Hiraeth,” telling stories of home and drawing on narratives of gentrification-driven expulsion, which they connected to the historic Black Diaspora. Hiraeth is a Welsh word that suggests longing or homesickness, as the collective expressed it: “a longing for a far-off home—one that may not even exist, now changed by time or idealized memory.”⁴⁴ The art in the show centered on dreams of belonging and rootedness and the strong desire for a sense of place and home. Some pieces evoked the particular ways that this longing played out for Black San Franciscans at a time when the Black Lives Matter movement was growing across the country.

The connections weren’t hard to make. Black Lives Matter emerged around national concerns, appearing on social media after the nonindictment of Trayvon Martin’s killer. The movement itself was spearheaded in part by a woman who had developed her political organizing skills working

around Hunter's Point Hill, fighting the city's redevelopment plan for the naval shipyard.⁴⁵

“As Long as You Think You're White, There's No Hope for You”

There's a second version of the KQED documentary with extended discussions on race and religion. These conversations push the edges of white comfort even further than the original cut. This version was released in 2014, after *Take This Hammer* had already been reintroduced to the general public and was starting to make the rounds among San Franciscans. Moore later reflected—in yet another film, this one was about the making of the original—that after a day of interviewing youth, Baldwin was exhausted. After a bubble bath and some scotch, Moore said, Baldwin appeared in the filmmaker's living room ready to reflect on the day.⁴⁶ With cameras rolling one more time, he delivered a forty-five-minute monologue, concluding with a classic Baldwin commentary on racial formation, which could have been aimed at the presumptive white KQED viewership or editorial staff: “I've always known that I'm not a nigger. But if I am not . . . [then] who is? . . . I am not the victim here. But *you* still think, I gather, that the negro is necessary. Well he's unnecessary to me, so he must be necessary to you. So: I give you my problem back. You're the nigger, baby, not me.”⁴⁷

With that provocative stance Baldwin raised one of the key lessons of *Take This Hammer*, and perhaps of his larger legacy as a writer and thinker: to reverse the conversation about race, to turn it toward white people and whiteness itself as a site of political and literary analysis. This was one of Baldwin's signature theoretical moves, echoing the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Toni Morrison, and many other Black intellectuals who recognized that race and racialization were above all defined by ways that power defined biology, not the other way around.⁴⁸

One of Baldwin's characters in the 1964 play *Blues for Mr. Charlie* elaborates on this idea. The trouble with blackness, he argues, is in fact not blackness but whiteness. He puts it this way: “It's up to you—as long as you think you're white, there's no hope for you, because as long as you think you're white, then I'm black.”⁴⁹ This is a complicated but important theoretical turn. On the one hand, Baldwin gives the power of racialization to white people in this formulation, which could be seen as removing

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agency from Black people and others. A closer read shows that the point of the comment is to degrade whiteness as a hopeless category that relies on demonizing others. Beyond that, the comment clarifies the ways that race is a dynamic and relational category. Race is created through relationships between people and places.

Much later, in the scathing 1985 essay “The Price of the Ticket,” which was also developed as a film, Baldwin again describes whiteness as a yoke or a burden. He suggests that the notion of blackness as a solid category is perpetuated by whites to hold on to their elite status, and that they cling to whiteness as a status symbol reflecting class mobility and power.⁵⁰ Fanon had suggested the same in the 1950s when he explored the meaning of the color line and the power relations embedded there. As he put it, “What is called the black soul is a construction by white folk.”⁵¹

This attention to the relationality of race also positioned Baldwin alongside critical-race scholars who have argued that racialization is a process of “othering” through political, social, legal, and spatial systems.⁵² Consistently, Baldwin argued in his writing and lectures that black positionality—that is, experiencing the world as a person understood to be Black, and being treated in the ways that follow in a racist society—allows one to understand the broader social structure of the United States in particularly useful ways. He argued that the experience offered a lens through which to see events like the end of legal slavery in the nineteenth century and of formal segregation in the twentieth as the result of geopolitical pressures rather than goodness of heart among the white majority.⁵³

Baldwin thus exposed the fallacy of what Audre Lorde described as the white “mythical norm,” or what Adrienne Rich would call “white solipsism,” in which she suggested that white people narrowly believe that whiteness is the baseline from which to measure the world.⁵⁴ Like Baldwin’s work, these interventions sought to reclaim master narratives—retelling stories of people and places through the eyes of the ignored.

This wasn’t just for the telling. It mattered beyond that. Similar experiences emerged over the years in the work of Black intellectuals, who described seeing themselves split in two, living out the “double consciousness” that Du Bois had named at the turn of the century: “Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant

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sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town. . . . To the real question, how does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.”⁵⁵

With blackness embedded deep in the American psyche as a foil to mainstream white purity, Baldwin followed Du Bois in insisting that the un-freedoms of the nation at large could be resolved and corrected only when the boundedness of Black life was finally cleared. This was the same position that would be adopted by the Black Lives Matter movement, making the claim that Black life still served as the proverbial canary in the coal mine of human exclusion. That’s why they’ve recoiled when people quickly declare that “all lives matter,” noting that the inability to make Black life, in particular, matter is revelatory.

Toni Morrison wrote about the process of retaking the master narrative as an act of what she called “literary cartography,” situating place-making as a way of simultaneously redefining both identity and freedom. In her essay “Black Matters,” she explained the radical impulse to reshape the world cartographically: “I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography, and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World—without the mandate for conquest. I intend to outline an attractive fruitful and provocative critical project, unencumbered by dreams of subversion or rallying gestures at fortress walls.”⁵⁶

Morrison explored the polarity of race that Baldwin and Du Bois highlighted, insisting that it was the un-freedom of Black slavery—which was a geographically defined labor- and social-relationship—that bolstered the broader notion of American Freedom. The traits ascribed to Blackness over time became the traits of the un-free. As she wrote: “Black slavery enriched the country’s creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me. The result was a playground for the imagination. What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm and desire that is uniquely American.”⁵⁷

Race, ever since, acts as “a metaphor so necessary to the construction of Americanness that it rivals the old pseudo-scientific and class-informed

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racisms whose dynamics we are more used to deciphering. . . . Deep within the word ‘American’ is its association with race.”⁵⁸ It is this Americanness of race and racism that Baldwin raised as he wandered San Francisco—charging that liberal/progressive places contained the same poisons as the South.

The contemporary videos of police killings that spurred the Black Lives Matter call has drawn from this same intellectual well, both revealing still-seated racisms and working to retell the story of America from the margins. The act of video-making has both raised awareness of a long-existing problem (police impunity) and quite literally turned the lens on an institution with a long antiblack legacy. The cell-phone videos brought names like Oakland’s Oscar Grant, Ferguson’s Mike Brown, Sandra Bland in Texas, and others every day of the year into the public eye and shed light on what it’s like to live on the very dangerous margins.⁵⁹

*I don't want these, your cold iron shackles
I don't want these, your cold iron shackles
I don't want these, your cold iron shackles
Around my leg, boys
Around my leg⁶⁰*

Calling All Summoners of Life

Just a few blocks away from the sites that Baldwin visited, the Baldwin documentary was screened in celebration of its fiftieth anniversary. It was 2014, and the film had been restored and revived by public archivists from San Francisco State University, and it had been shown around town a few times. This was a special screening, held at the Bayview Opera House, which is a historic Victorian-era building that serves as a Black cultural community center for Bayview–Hunter’s Point. Bayview was still home to a third of the city’s quickly dispersing Black population.

Though decades had passed since Baldwin’s visit, many of the telling statistics about the place remained intact in troubling ways. Unemployment was much worse, now twice the rate of the rest of the city. Foreclosures, which were relatively uncommon in San Francisco compared with the rest of California, were a key part of the neighborhood landscape. Black youth struggled to find legitimate employment and faced ongoing racial profil-

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ing.⁶¹ At the same time, there was a renewed energy in the community, with community organizers working to draw people together.

Perhaps that's part of why, when local activists pulled together the screening, the Opera House was packed and buzzing with hundreds who had gathered to watch. A community restaurant served plates of pulled pork in the back. The place hummed with a sense of purpose and importance. The screening was marred by technical glitches; even so, it was a time in which local community members came together to witness the evolution of their own history.

In his work, Baldwin often called for an activist mode of social observation, which represented a refusal to simply watch the disintegration of Black people and Black places. By doing so he was part of a larger tradition of staking a claim against white-dominated notions of academic or journalistic objectivity, which presuppose that activism and observation cannot be entwined.

Geographer and urban planner Clyde Woods once commented that he had spent his life witnessing the death of African Americans and their communities—through environmental disease, through the force of the development bulldozer, and through what could be called a *designed neglect* of urban communities. Woods wrote about the ways that mainstream social science, in its attempt to rigidly follow rules of objective observation, ignores so much about how these disappearances take place. Questioning his own role in documenting the death of communities and people, he wrote, “Have we become academic coroners? . . . Have the tools of theory, method, instruction, and social responsibility become so rusted that they can only be used for autopsies? Does our research in any way reflect the experiences, viewpoints, and needs of the residents of these dying communities? On the other hand, is the patient really dead? What role are scholars playing in this social triage?”⁶²

Like Woods, critical-race scholars including Kimberlé Crenshaw have long insisted that the task at hand in documenting stories of racism and exclusion—through all social mechanisms, including housing, employment and legal formations—is not “simply to understand the vexed bond between law and racial power, but to change it.”⁶³ Crenshaw's words could be reframed to reflect the links between urban history and racial power, in which the “premature deaths” of police violence, urban demolitions, and poverty itself are enacted through race.⁶⁴

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To the extent to which researching race is about *doing race*,⁶⁵ our research and observational paradigms weigh heavily on the production of the social facts of racism and inequality. That is, in the ways that we focus on social problems, we may reproduce them. If the purpose of deep observation is to change the social conditions that we are explaining, then we may need to reframe the very meaning of observation. Black feminist theorists and feminist geographers argue for this in a variety of ways—all urging for reordering analytical visions to reflect the view of the subaltern or the counterpublics that persist beyond the white gaze.⁶⁶

With that in mind, a few observations about the facts on the ground in San Francisco are necessary. In 1963 the “asset stripping” of gains that had been made by African American midcentury migrants, many of whom had purchased homes and planted roots in the city with their high wartime wages, had already begun.⁶⁷ In 2015 these processes continued in formal and informal ways, most prominently through market-capitalism’s authority over the real estate market, and the dominance of that market over other realms of everyday life. The corporate tech economy, which is plagued with race and gender exclusions, has flooded San Francisco with a tech-centered nouveau riche who have crowded out Black culture and people, among many other aspects of this onetime hub of creativity. This has accelerated the stringency of the housing market, squeezing out the oldest Black bookstore on the West Coast, along with many other cultural institutions.⁶⁸

There is more to tell about the ways in which the tech economy has tipped the economic balance in San Francisco. But this work is largely accomplished elsewhere, and Baldwin’s work called for attention to the beauty and inspiration that grows out of the cracks of so-called ghetto sidewalks. Clyde Woods described the process as excavating cultural rebellions from subterranean places, noting that “Brilliance often flashes brightly, just as suddenly disappears, and then reappears decades later. . . . The reader will have to explore the subterranean caverns that shelter the wellsprings of dreams during the seasons when hope can’t be found. . . . Expertise in the arts of social, economic, political, cultural, and spiritual reconstruction is required.”⁶⁹ Geographer Katherine McKittrick builds on Woods’s work, calling for a reframing of the body counts of the past through creativity. Using the poem “Inventory” by Dionne Brand to explore poetic reimaging of the effects of racism, McKittrick writes:

The body count that frames much of “Inventory”—800 every month for the last year, 120 in four days—is thus also about survival and human life, or a new math-space, where the calculus of human actions and cooperative human efforts encounter poetry to reinvent the unambiguous dead-end culmination that is so often coupled with analyses of violence. . . . Here, we envision a life on the edge, a geography that demands you stay alive yet threatens your physiology, a spatial politics of living just enough, just enough for the city: this is a political location that fosters more humanly workable, and alterable, geographic practices.⁷⁰

In McKittrick’s vision, the inventory of deaths and urban racial injustices can be rewoven through the words of creative acts. In these ways, the spaces of racism and injustice may be reexperienced as spaces of radical empowerment.

*Take this hammer, carry it to the captain
Take this hammer, carry it to the captain
Take this hammer, carry it to the captain
Tell him I’m gone, boys
Tell him I’m gone⁷¹*

Transforming Geographies of Racism

Aug. 15, 2014. Field notes. On the BART train tonight the kids in the front of the car retook the place for themselves. They were about sixteen or seventeen years old, Black and Asian American boys. They were lanky and angular, wearing saggy skinny jeans, their bodies covered in tattoos. Leaping through the subway doors as they closed, one boy pressed “play” on a small gray box, and his friends began to dance as music tinned through the metal train car. They were amazing: body-popping, yoga-hip-hop-acro-blending, using the poles of the train to flip and bend in incredible ways.

It was hard to simply enjoy the beauty of their performance. The crowd seemed to watch them display their double-jointed prowess while watching each other for tension. We were traveling under the San Francisco Bay on the same train line on which Oscar Grant had died, shot dead by transit cops on New Year’s Eve three years earlier, the first high-profile

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event in the wave of cell-phone-captured police killings that has persisted since.⁷²

The train was packed. Most people were nose-down in their smart phones as usual. A small group turned to watch the show, which pushed so many boundaries at once—stretching notions of dance and gender and race and public space, all at once. Then one older white man piped up, angry about the loud music and the kids’ dominance of the space. He demanded that they leave with the authority of someone who was used to being heard. The tension rose.

At the next exit, the boys bowed and leapt off the train, deftly; they seemed to have been here before. “We out! We out!” they hollered. They taunted the man through the train windows, but the doors were closing, and we pulled off through downtown Oakland and into the night.⁷³

“That’s, I Suppose, All That Saved My Life”

James Baldwin read the landscape through race. He saw the spaces of cities and the shape of human experience as deeply linked. Driving through urban renewal zones in San Francisco, for him, was revelatory not of new experiences but of the universal processes that Black communities faced at the time—even in progressive places like San Francisco, or in the open landscapes of the American West. His visit and his words sought to challenge the liberal-minded city, pushing on the meaning of race and racism. Racism wasn’t just an unfortunate social problem that limited the lives of Black people; it was not just something that affected the young men in Orville Luster’s programs on the Hill. It was, Baldwin showed, a rot inherent to American society that prevented the society from living up to its founding liberal ideals of freedom and equality.

It would be wrong to say that nothing has changed since Baldwin passed through San Francisco in the early 1960s. The dynamics of race itself are different, and real changes in the demography of power have shifted rights and access in many realms. Still, the concrete gains of civil rights have been undercut by economics. The “roll out” of neoliberal policies over the last thirty years has reinscribed the problems of racial inequality in new ways.⁷⁴ Black representation in the prison population is beyond disproportionate and continues to boom.⁷⁵ Segregation is more pronounced now than it was in the 1980s.⁷⁶ These dynamics play out across the country, and the

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increase in global inequality is sharply pronounced in historically progressive San Francisco.

This new civil rights era, a time in which communities are networking across the country to develop a broad response to racialized inequality, comes as there has been a revival of interest in Baldwin's oeuvre. A barrage of papers, symposia, and events appeared around the globe in the last few years—revealing the ongoing relevance of Baldwin's analysis for people in these times.

He was central to the Black radical intellectual tradition, though he was sometimes sidelined because of his sexuality. In the end, as a writer and intellectual force, he left us with the notion that to survive the materiality of marginalization requires both creativity and love, those summoners of life. As he said in one of many interviews about surviving racism: "I think the trick is to say yes to life. . . . Love comes in very strange packages. I've loved a few men. I've loved a few women. A few people loved me—and that's, I suppose, all that saved my life."⁷⁷

Notes

I want to thank and acknowledge Alex Cherian, the archivist at the San Francisco State University Library who made both the original and director's cut of *Take This Hammer* available to the public, who also filmed the 2013 interview with director Richard O. Moore, and who is thus largely responsible for getting the film and its history back into the public eye. My sincere thanks goes to volume editor Susan McWilliams and to the two anonymous reviewers who offered incredibly detailed readings that significantly reshaped this chapter. My thanks also go to colleagues at the 2015 Association of American Geographers meeting in Chicago for their comments, and to the University of San Francisco College of Arts and Sciences writing retreat for the time and space to write. Any mistakes are my own.

1. Odetta Holmes, "Take This Hammer," on *At the Gate of Horn*, LP (Tradition Records, 1957). These lyrics come from the traditional Black Gospel song "Take This Hammer," which has been recorded, revised, and reinterpreted by Mississippi John Hurt, Odetta, Johnny Cash, a Spanish hard-core band, and many others over the decades. The song is central to the soundtrack of the KQED documentary. The lyrics quoted throughout this chapter are excerpted from the version recorded by Odetta. I encourage readers to find the song online or elsewhere and listen so you have a sense of the melody.

2. Rachel Brahinsky, "Race and the Making of Southeast San Francisco: Towards a Theory of Race-Class," *Antipode* 46, no. 5 (November 1, 2014): 1258–76.

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3. Albert S. Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West, 1900–1954* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993); Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

4. Rachel Brahinsky, “The Making and Unmaking of Southeast San Francisco” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2012).

5. Clyde Adrian Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (London: Verso, 1998).

6. *Ibid.*, 17.

7. *Ibid.*

8. James Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial, 1962); James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial, 1963); James Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings* (New York: Pantheon, 2010).

9. Lindsey Dillon, “Waste, Race and Space: Urban Redevelopment and Environmental Justice in Southeast San Francisco” (PhD diss., Department of Geography, University of California at Berkeley, 2014).

10. Brahinsky, “The Making and Unmaking of Southeast San Francisco.”

11. *Ibid.*

12. Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Kevin Michael Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

13. Rachel Brahinsky, “Race and the City: The (Re)development of Urban Identity,” *Geography Compass* 5, no. 3 (2011): 144–53.

14. Rachel Brahinsky, “‘Hush Puppies,’ Communalist Politics, and Demolition Governance: The Rise and Fall of the Black Fillmore,” in *Ten Years That Shook the City: San Francisco 1968–1978*, ed. Chris Carlsson (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2011), 141–53; Elizabeth Pepin and Lewis Watts, *Harlem of the West: The San Francisco Fillmore Jazz Era* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 2005).

15. Christopher Agee, *The Streets of San Francisco* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

16. Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010).

17. Clyde Adrian Woods, “‘Sittin’ on Top of the World’: The Challenge of Blues and Hip Hop Geography,” in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, ed. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Adrian Woods (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2007), 46–81.

18. Moore, *Take This Hammer*; italics added by author to reflect spoken cadence.

19. Alex Cherian, *The Making of “Take This Hammer,”* Bay Area Television

Archive, 2013, <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/210522>. There was a divide between what Baldwin wanted out of the documentary and what director Moore produced, and Moore later reflected that he believed that Baldwin never forgave him for not living up to his vision for the project.

20. James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (New York: Knopf, 1953); Baldwin, *Another Country*; Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie: A Play* (London: M. Joseph, 1965); Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948–1985* (New York: St. Martin's/Marek, 1985).

21. Moore, *Take This Hammer*.

22. Holmes, "Take This Hammer," on *At the Gate of Horn*.

23. Cherian, *The Making of "Take This Hammer."*

24. *Ibid.*

25. Broussard, *Black San Francisco*; Daniel Crowe, *Prophets of Rage: The Black Freedom Struggle in San Francisco, 1945–1969* (New York: Garland, 2000).

26. Moore, *Take This Hammer*.

27. Cherian, *The Making of "Take This Hammer."*

28. Ford E. Long et al., *128 Hours: A Report of the Civil Disturbance in the City & County of San Francisco* (San Francisco: San Francisco Police Department, Planning and Research Bureau, 1966).

29. US Bureau of the Census, "Census 1960" (Washington, DC: US Department of Commerce, 1960); US Bureau of the Census, "Census 1970" (Washington, DC: US Department of Commerce, 1970); US Bureau of the Census, "Census 1980" (Washington, DC: US Department of Commerce, 1980); US Bureau of the Census, "Census 1990," <http://factfinder.census.gov>.

30. Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); James A. Tyner, "Urban Revolutions and the Spaces of Black Radicalism," in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, ed. McKittrick and Woods, 218–32.

31. Moore, *Take This Hammer*.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

34. Brahinsky, "Race and the City," 144–53; Clement Lai, "The Racial Triangulation of Space: The Case of Urban Renewal in San Francisco's Fillmore District," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 102, no. 1 (2012): 151–70.

35. Moore, *Take This Hammer*.

36. Martin Luther King, *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (Stamford, CT: Overbrook, 1968).

37. Brahinsky, "Race and the City," 144–53

38. Moore, *Take This Hammer*.

39. Calvin Welch, "The Fight to Stay: The Creation of the Community Housing

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Movement in San Francisco, 1968-1978,” in *Ten Years That Shook the City*, ed. Carlsson, 154–69.

40. Brahinsky, “The Making and Unmaking of Southeast San Francisco.”

41. S. A. Ginwright and A. Akom, “African American Out-Migration: Initial Scan of National and Local Trends in Migration and Research on African Americans” (San Francisco: Mayors Office of Community Development Task Force on African American Out-Migration, 2008); US Bureau of the Census, “Census 1970”; US Bureau of the Census, “Census 2010.”

42. Holmes, “Take This Hammer,” on *At the Gate of Horn*.

43. Rebecca Bowe, “Marcus Books of San Francisco Evicted,” *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, May 8, 2014, www.sfbg.com/politics/2014/05/08/marcus-books-san-francisco-evicted; Ian S. Port, “Coda: The End of Yoshi’s SF,” *SF Weekly*, June 18, 2014, www.sfweekly.com/sanfrancisco/coda-the-end-of-yoshis-sf/.

44. Aaron Chavez, “Hiraeth: The 3.9 Collective Searches for Home,” University of San Francisco, November 16, 2015, www.usfca.edu/thacher-gallery/gallery-history/previous-shows/hiraeth. Chavez quotes from the description of the show by the 3.9 Collective.

45. Alicia Garza, who co-birthed the #BlackLivesMatter movement with Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors in 2013, was a community organizer in Bayview–Hunter’s Point in the early 2000s.

46. Cherian, *The Making of “Take This Hammer.”*

47. Richard O. Moore, *Take This Hammer—Director’s Cut* (KQED Inc., 1963), <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/187041>.

48. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 2008); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992),

49. Baldwin, *Another Country*, 51.

50. Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*.

51. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, xviii.

52. Kimberlé Crenshaw et al., eds., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* (New York: New Press, 1995); Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994); George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

53. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*.

54. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Crossing Press Feminist Series (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984); Adrienne Rich qtd. in Ula Y. Taylor, “Making Waves: The Theory and Practice of Black Feminism,” *Black Scholar* 28, no. 2 (July 1, 1998): 18–28.

55. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1.

56. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 3.

57. *Ibid.*, 38.

58. *Ibid.*, 47.

59. There are political and research boundaries that limit our knowledge of the totality of such killings. One widely cited statistic comes from a 2012 report by the Malcolm X Grassroots movement, which found that every twenty-eight hours during that year a Black person was killed by a security guard, police officer, or vigilante (see Arlene Eisen, "Operation Ghetto Storm: 2012 Annual Report on the Extrajudicial Killing of 313 Black People [updated in 2013]," Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, October 2013, https://mxgm.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/operation_ghetto_storm_updated_october_2013.pdf).

60. Holmes, "Take This Hammer," on *At the Gate of Horn*.

61. In March 2015, a news report uncovered a police sweep of a youth hip-hop rehearsal, turning a musical recording event into a crime (cf. Jonah Owen Lamb, "Hunter's Point Rap Video Shoot Interrupted by Police, Two Arrested," *San Francisco Examiner*, March 13, 2015, www.sfexaminer.com/sanfrancisco/hunters-point-rap-video-shoot-interrupted-by-police-two-arrested/). This is not presented as quotidian but as one of many examples of similar challenges.

62. Clyde Woods, "Life after Death," *Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1 (2002): 62–66, 63.

63. Crenshaw et al., *Critical Race Theory*, xii.

64. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

65. See Jackson John L., Jr., *Harlemworld: Doing Race and Class in Contemporary Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

66. Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (1986): S14–S32 ; Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 575–99; G. Rose, "Situating Knowledges: Positionality, Reflexivities and Other Tactics," *Progress in Human Geography* 21, no. 3 (September 1, 1997): 305–20; E. Schoenberger, "Interdisciplinarity and Social Power," *Progress in Human Geography* 25, no. 3 (September 1, 2001): 365–82; Taylor, "Making Waves: The Theory and Practice of Black Feminism."

67. Clyde Adrian Woods, "Katrina's World: Blues, Bourbon, and the Return to the Source," *American Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2009): 427–53.

68. Rachel Brahinsky, "The Death of the City? Reports of San Francisco's Demise Have Been Greatly Exaggerated," *Boom: A Journal of California* 4, no. 2 (June 2014): 43–54.

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69. Woods, “Katrina’s World: Blues, Bourbon, and the Return to the Source,” 430.

70. Katherine McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” *Small Axe* 17, no. 3 (November 1, 2013): 1–15.

71. Holmes, “Take This Hammer,” on *At the Gate of Horn*.

72. Grant’s killing was the subject of the 2013 film *Fruitvale Station* (Ryan Coogler, Significant Productions).

73. Adapted from author’s research field notes, August 14, 2014, Oakland, CA.

74. Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell, “Neoliberalizing Space,” in *Spaces of Neoliberalism: Urban Restructuring in North America and Western Europe*, ed. Neil Brenner and Nikolas Theodore (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002).

75. Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*; Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012).

76. John Logan and Brian Stults, “Racial and Ethnic Separation in the Neighborhoods: Progress at a Standstill,” American Communities Project, Russell Sage Foundation, December 14, 2010, www.s4.brown.edu/us2010/Data/Report/report1.pdf.

77. Karen Thorsen, *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket* (Films Media Group, 1990).