

Defying Annihilation of a Black Sense of Place

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Abstract

Since 2000, the city of Oakland has lost over 30 percent of its Black population. In defiance of the violent systemic removal of Black communities, Black residents have occupied urban spaces and deployed multiple strategies of resistance to confront displacement and police repression. Paying particular attention to Black communities in Oakland, California, I will explore how activists and residents have worked to contest histories of dispossession and state violence. In 2019, Moms4Housing, a collective of Black homeless mothers galvanized a national movement affirming housing as a human right and demanding housing for all. Drawing from Katherine McKittrick's (2006) theorization of a "Black sense of place" and George Lipsitz' (2007) conceptual analytic of the "Black spatial imaginary," I consider the Moms4Housing campaign as a specific case in which Black mothers convened to articulate a geography of resistance. Following McKittrick's (2006) assertion that "Black lives are necessarily geographic, but also struggle with discourses that erase and despatialize their sense of place," the central question this paper asks is how do Oakland's Black residents subvert Black exclusion and annihilation of Black sense of place? I examine Black residents' historical struggles over space in Oakland and analyze the contemporary strategies Black mothers in Moms4Housing utilize to forge a Black sense of place against practices of erasure and domination.

Introduction

On November 18, 2019, a group of homeless Black mothers and their children settled into an empty home at 2928 Magnolia Street in West Oakland. The mothers cleaned, painted, and furnished the three-bedroom home. They also paid the household's utility expenses. In occupying the vacant home, the mothers intended to provide safety, shelter, and stability to their children. In attending to their family's basic survival needs, the mothers disrupted a system that prioritizes banks and corporations while actively displacing and criminalizing poor, Black and brown communities. After years of living in unhoused and precarious conditions, the mothers organized under the name Moms4Housing. When Moms4Housing began their two month occupation of the home on Magnolia Street, affectionately called "Moms' House," they were deliberately waging a campaign against real estate speculation and the neoliberal privatization of cities. "There are four times as many empty homes in Oakland as there are homeless people," Sameerah Karim, one of the members of the collective, stated. "Why should anyone, especially children, sleep on the street while perfectly good homes sit empty?" (Coleman 2020). Karim's remarks not only call attention to histories of dispossession and displacement in Oakland, they also highlight the failures of democracy and the systems that construct housing and shelter as a commodity rather than a universal human right.

Oakland's historical Black geographies

While Oakland's Black residents have been systematically pushed out of the city for decades, Oakland has a rich and extensive Black history. At the city's founding, there were 14 African Americans counted in the East Bay census (Lazard 2018). After World War II, many Black families from the south took part in the westward migration and settled in the Bay Area in search of employment opportunities in wartime jobs such as working in shipyards or manufacturing. Across the bay, the Fillmore neighborhood in San Francisco was dubbed the "Harlem of the West" for its jazz and blues scene. In 1966, Oakland became the birthplace of the Black Panther Party. The Black Panthers staged multiple political campaigns at the intersections of multiple streets in North and West Oakland. St. Augustine's Episcopal Church, the site where the Black Panther Party initiated its free breakfast program for children, is only blocks away from 2928 Magnolia. The occupation of the home on Magnolia Street, spearheaded by Black mothers with roots in Oakland, is thus part of a much longer historical struggle of Black contestation over space.

Since the 20th century, Oakland's Black residents have faced decades of housing discrimination, redlining, environmental racism, exclusionary zoning and urban renewal that have determined the spaces where they work and live. According to a study conducted by the Haas Institute, many of the nation and state's exclusionary housing policies originated in the Bay Area (Moore et al. 2019). A coalition of local developers, real estate groups and homeowners in Oakland bested plans to build 3,000 public housing units in the city (Aguilar-Canabal 2019). After their victory, the coalition turned their efforts into a statewide campaign that passed Article 34 in the California Constitution in 1950. Since its passing, Article 34 has been a major constitutional barrier to building public and affordable housing across the state. Between 2017 and 2019, the homeless population in Oakland swelled by 47 percent (Ravani 2019). Black communities are disproportionately impacted by the exclusionary housing policies that drive homelessness. Around 24 percent of Oakland's residents are Black, yet they account for 70 percent of the homeless population in the city (Coleman 2020).

Contemporary exclusionary housing practices and protection of private property are rooted in colonial logics and histories of land theft, genocide, and forced exploitation of labor. Indigenous groups including the Ohlone (Costanoan), Coast Miwok, Wappo, Patwin, and Pomo inhabited and continue to inhabit the land that is now known as the Bay Area (Moore et al. 2019). Native peoples were violently displaced from their lands and held as forced labor by Spanish military officials. The state violence and forced dispossession of land from Native peoples followed "a logic of economic profit and racial hierarchy that became institutionalized through law, establishing a thread of racial capitalism, which carries through to the more contemporary forms of racial exclusion in housing" (Moore et al. 2019). Capitalism's tenets, settler colonialism and chattel slavery, shape the contours of Black and Indigenous communities' relationship to space.

George Lipsitz identifies the entanglements of race, space, and power as "the racialization of space and the spatialization of race" (Lipsitz 2007). Built environments have a racial geography informed by policies and acts of exclusion. Race serves as an important indicator and determining factor of the kind of place people will work and live in. For instance, according to a study released in 2017, Black people are 75 percent more likely to live near harmful pollutants and toxins, causing long term health complications like asthma (Baptiste 2017). In addition, Black people are most likely to live in areas with a lack of access to healthy

food, green spaces, recreational facilities, and healthcare resources. Black people's material conditions are a result of structural inequalities embedded in society's systems and institutions. In an article titled, "Why are Blacks dying at higher rates from COVID-19?" sociologist Rashawn Ray explains that "health outcomes are as much about place as they are about race" (Ray 2020). Citing, for example, how children in Baltimore, a city with a Black population over 60 percent, have lead levels over the double the recommended rate and how hospitals and pharmacies in Black neighborhoods are often subpar and further away, Ray makes the argument that "the racial composition of neighborhoods" is a crucial factor in health inequities. These detrimental health outcomes that have exacerbated the rates of Black death from COVID-19 are the results of structural conditions that produce a racialized spatial geography of ethnoracial control, containment, and premature death. The spaces people occupy are thus mediated by race. And Black life is consequently mediated by race and space.

Lipsitz argues that for Black people in the United States, "struggles against the oppressions of race have by necessity also been struggles over space" (Lipsitz 2007, 17). The Civil Rights Movement's campaigns to desegregate schools, lunch counters, trains, and buses as well as the Black Panther Party's commitment to claiming and defending their Black neighborhoods have decidedly been struggles over space. These battles have been about fighting for the ability to freely move through, inhabit, use, control, and own space (Lipsitz 2007). This legacy continues through Moms4Housing occupation to affirm housing as a human right and secure homes for all.

"It's a greed crisis"

Speaking at a press conference in front of Moms House in November, Dominique Walker, an occupant of the Magnolia Street home and co-founder of Moms4Housing, declared, "Oakland doesn't have a housing crisis. It's a moral crisis. It's a greed crisis. It's a speculators-in-my-hood crisis!" (Deane 2019). Walker's statement points to the paradox of calling thousands of people living on the streets a housing crisis when there are more vacant homes than there are homeless people in Oakland. There are over 4,000 homeless people in Oakland, yet there are about 6,000 vacant homes that often remain empty for years (Castañeda 2020). Can we earnestly call it a "housing crisis" when decades of deliberate government neglect and profit-driven policies have decimated the most vulnerable communities in urban centers? Walker's statement aptly critiques our morally bankrupt political and economic systems. Rather than serving the interests of the people, the state serves the interests of capital. The deterioration of government policies and programs that promote social welfare, which involves protecting the health, safety, and overall well-being of all people, is in part due to the destructive expansion of neoliberalism, which political theorist Wendy Brown defines as "a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life" (Brown 2015, 30).

Neoliberalism has played a pivotal role in transforming social systems and institutions for the purpose of protecting the sanctity of private property rather than the value of human life. According to California state law, the homeless mothers were illegally occupying property owned by Wedgewood Properties. Sam Singer, spokesperson for Wedgewood Properties, vilified the mothers, calling them "bullies" and "thieves" and their action of civil disobedience "violent, dangerous, and unsuccessful" (Walker 2019). Singer further stated that, "Ultimately, they're going to get evicted, and it's unfortunate. Nobody wants to evict these people, but when you

steal someone's home, you get evicted" (Walker 2019). Singer's remark about the Moms "stealing someone's home" seems like an inaccurate claim when 2928 Magnolia sat empty for nearly two years before the Moms settled in (Kim 2020). The real estate company has a history of buying foreclosed homes in working-class neighborhoods, then letting their remodeled properties sit empty for years, waiting for the value of their assets to appreciate in order to resell the property for a massive profit. Over the past decade, Wedgewood has flipped over 160 homes in Oakland alone by taking advantage of foreclosures in poor communities devastated by economic hardships (Gafni and Dineen 2020). To Wedgewood, the house was just an asset accruing value that the company could eventually cash in on. The Black mothers, on the other hand, had made the property a home. "My son took his first steps in that house," Walker told *The New Republic*. "He said his first words" (Alvarez 2020). Under the law, Wedgewood had not committed any illegal acts by buying up these properties, yet the Moms campaign has exposed the violence and callousness of systems that by design deny people of their most basic needs for selfish financial gain. As Walker articulates, "The true crime lies in this society that we live in that can normalize people living in the street. Shelter is a human right. It's needed to protect yourself from the elements, and it shouldn't be commodified" (Ho 2020).

Real estate developers, speculators, and landlords drive up housing costs and reap all the benefits, leaving many, including mothers and children, homeless and housing insecure. Yet, actors in the private sector are not the only perpetrators of gentrification. Government policies have significantly contributed to the displacement of the poor and working-class. For instance, the privatization of affordable housing in the 1990s and early 2000s dwindled the already limited amount of public housing units in the country (Khare 2013). The state's investment in private capital is most visible when the state deploys law enforcement to protect private property above the safety and security of people. This was painfully evident in the case of Moms4Housing when at 5am on January 14, the Alameda County Sheriff's Office arrived at 2928 Magnolia with officers in riot gear, military grade weapons, a battering ram and armored tanks (Gold 2020). The military officers descended on West Oakland with AR-15s prepared for combat. Their target? Poor, unhoused, and unarmed Black mothers. These officers did not arrive in response to a riot or to engage in a war, they arrived with their military weapons drawn to evict and arrest Black mothers along with their families. The raid revealed how law enforcement's priority is not public safety but rather to safeguard assets and protect the rights of property-owners. The excessive use of force displayed also showed how police have weaponized blackness. Though unarmed and vulnerable, the Black mothers were marked as threats, criminals, dangerous. The only danger the Moms posed was to a callous system they threatened to expose and dismantle. They thus became a menace to those who sought to uphold the system. The Moms actions have laid bare the racist and classist workings that undergird our political and economic systems and institutions.

Poor Black mothers forge a Black sense of place

Beyond revealing the cruelty and failures of the system, the Moms' housing movement has opened up new liberatory possibilities for democracy. Moms4Housing has advanced alternative ways of viewing space, envisioning democratic imaginaries, and practicing communal models of care. In coming together to co-create a space of mutual responsibility, the Moms forged a Black sense of place, which scholar Katherine McKittrick defines as, "the process of materially and imaginatively situating historical and contemporary struggles against practices of domination and the difficult entanglements of the racial encounter" (McKittrick 2011, 949).

Scholar Brandi Summers argues that Lipsitz' Black spatial imaginary analytic expands on a Black sense of place, which he frames as, "'spaces of mutuality, community,' and 'radical' solidarity, as well as 'new democratic imaginations and aspirations' that foster communal survival as opposed to individual privilege" (Summers 2019, 14).

The Moms' campaign offers an alternative Black spatial imaginary that champions a more democratic and inclusive use of space. Lipsitz writes, "For aggrieved communities of color and other non-normative populations...a different spatial imaginary exists. This perspective on space revolves around solidarities within, between, and across spaces. It views space as valuable and finite, as a public responsibility for which all must take stewardship" (Lipsitz 2007). The Moms' occupation of 2928 Magnolia was a public seizure of vacant private property. In taking over the space for public use and services, the Moms promoted privileging the public good over private interests. Their politicized action enforced the notion of social responsibility of private property in contestation of neoliberal privatization of urban spaces.

Similar occupations have taken place in Brazil for decades. Years of neglect from the Brazilian government and increased unemployment has driven citizens to occupy buildings abandoned by real estate companies and the federal government. The crisis of homelessness in urban centers is a manifestation of what literary scholar and cultural historian Saidiya Harman calls the afterlives of slavery (Hartman 2007). Following the abolition of slavery in Brazil, the government failed to provide emancipated Black people with the reparations and social structures necessary to include them in the formal economy and provide them with full citizenship rights (Samora 2018). Today, hundreds of families in Brazil organize to occupy abandoned buildings and create a communal space of shared responsibility and mutual care. Residents of the occupied buildings are actively involved in making these spaces sustainable and livable. They share cleaning responsibilities and take turns carrying out maintenance tasks as well as security duties (Cowie 2017). These occupation movements emerged out of necessity as much as political struggle. The Brazilian movements, along with Moms4Housing political movement, successfully pressure local governments to develop inclusive housing policy with public input.

Prior to the campaign, the Moms had been pushed out of the city, barred from the housing and rental market and excluded from access to many public goods and services, effectively becoming exiles in their own city. Out of necessity and survival, they politically mobilized as a community, with support from their local neighbors. Through collective action, they furthered their demands to pressure real estate companies to sell their vacant houses to the land trust and urged the government to develop inclusive housing policy. Though they were excluded from participating in traditional arenas of democracy, the Moms envisioned and achieved an alternative democratic model, one that insisted that their struggles be heard and demands be met. The Moms' occupation was able to democratize the policy-making process by insisting that the development of housing policy be participatory. Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf called for a negotiation between Moms4Housing and Wedgewood, in which the Moms succeeded in getting the real estate company to sell the house to the Oakland Community Land Trust (Mock and Holder 2020). The Moms are now working with City Council members to draft new legislation named the Moms 4 Housing Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act, which will allow affordable housing organizations and Oakland renters a first right of purchase for properties when they go on the market, limiting speculation in Oakland and transforming the housing landscape (Lew 2020). Therefore, their action has opened up new opportunities for renters and working-class residents of Oakland to assert their claims to the city.

The Moms' political actions have ultimately pointed us toward new visions of freedom and justice that reconceptualize our understandings of need, value, home, community and care. Against the hegemonic directives of a system that promotes competition and individualism, the mothers pooled their resources and opted to raise their children together in the Magnolia home. Their vision of communal mothering and universal services that meet everyone's needs challenges the capitalist status quo that directs people to think and act as individuals rather than as a united community. Rather than suffer independently and alone under the crushing weight of capitalism, they created and relied on an extended network of mutual support as a mechanism of survival. Through these practices and strategies, the Moms challenged normative conceptions of motherhood, kinship, and caretaking. Community-based mothering and kinship networks are part of a long tradition of modes of Black survival. These modes of Black survival have also been historically contested and criminalized, from slaveholders snatching infants from their mothers and severing familial bonds to contemporary anti-Black tropes that depict Black mothers as irresponsible and lazy welfare queens. Consequently, for Black mothers, mothering is a deeply political act. The moms involved in Moms4Housing exhibited what it takes to be a Black mother in this society, doing whatever is necessary to provide their children with a dignified and safe place to live. Moreover, the Black mothers' mothering practices have offered us an alternative and expansive vision of communal care that insists that we, society and its systems, are accountable to and work on behalf of all children and all people.

Conclusion

Lipsitz claims that “the Black spatial imaginary has vitally important creative and constructive things to offer to this society and to its potential for democracy” (Lipsitz 2007, 69). This is evident with the Moms4Housing movement. The Moms4Housing movement has made substantial contributions in advancing equitable housing policy. In 2928 Magnolia Street, a group of poor, unhoused, Black mothers forged a Black sense of place that shifted the spatial discourse of who belongs, who matters, and who has a say. Yet, their movement goes beyond Moms' House. Local and international campaigns and movements have emerged to occupy and reclaim homes. With the arrival of COVID-19, working-class families in Los Angeles have turned to occupying vacant state-owned properties to protect and shelter their families from the pandemic. Martha Escudero, one of the residents inspired by the Moms4Housing campaign, declared, “We're not squatters. We're retaining something that's ours because it's state-owned. We've been paying taxes all these years while they're sitting vacant” (Appleford 2020). Yet, as is evident with the Moms4Housing case, the urgency to provide families with shelter existed well before the current pandemic crisis began. Across the Atlantic, a group of British mothers in 2013 organized under the banner Focus E15 to utilize direct action as a means of getting the government to respond to their housing needs. Focus E15 has collaborated with Moms4Housing, hosting a virtual event called “Reclaim Homes from the US to the UK” on Sunday, April 19. The distinction is crucial. Mothers and their families are not taking homes; they are reclaiming homes. They are reclaiming their right to live near their support networks and their right to belong in the cities they help sustain.

As a loving and mothering act of placekeeping, as opposed to placemaking, the Black mothers in Moms4Housing sought to preserve a Black diasporic desire to be rooted in place. The Black mothers worked to defy an annihilation of a Black sense of place. Against a system of exploitation that denies vulnerable populations, particularly Black women, their most basic needs, the Moms convened to create a geography of Black resistance. Within the Moms' Black

insurgent modes of citizenship, we can locate possibilities for freedom and democracy that can disrupt entrenched systems of inequality and transform our social order.

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