

5: “FOR MORE THAN PROFIT”

GRAFFITI, STREET ART, AND THE GENTRIFICATION OF DETROIT

When much of Detroit burned down in an 1805 fire, a local priest, Father Richard Gabriel, stated: “*Speramus meliora, resurget cineribus*. We hope for better things; it will rise from the ashes.”¹ It wouldn’t be the last time Detroit erupted in flames. With each successive destruction, there has always been an accompanying desire to rebuild and rebrand, an embrace of a hope for future possibilities. This hope found purchase in the middle of the twentieth century as the city rebounded from the Great Depression. As Europe lay in ashes from World War II, Detroit rose as a manufacturing powerhouse. Building machines for the war effort and then cars for returning soldiers, Detroit became a (white) working man’s ideal place: middle-class respectability emerged as men worked in factories, drove home in their cars, and parked in front of their single-family homes. Detroit’s roads are long and wide, veins entering the heart of downtown before flowing outward into the various neighborhoods. In a city of automakers, daily commutes advertised the products the workers had built themselves. In Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady’s documentary *Detropia* (2012), the archival footage of Detroit in the 1950s purports a city of workers building the American dream.

The American dream, though, was not accessible to all. As Black people moved to the North to find factory work, they encountered discriminatory hiring practices and housing policies officially and unofficially in place. Smoldering from toxic race relations for decades, in 1943, the Black Bottom neighborhood burned in a race riot, placing the whole city on edge. Over the following two decades, thousands of buildings were condemned, clearing “urban blight” and making way for the Chrysler Freeway and Lafayette Park—a mixed-use “urban renewal” project that featured apartments the former Black Bottom residents could not afford. Many former

residents moved to different Black-centered neighborhoods, including the Twelfth Street area, a poor neighborhood that later erupted in flames in 1967.² As the city burned again, and then rebuilt itself again, the cycle of racist discrimination and civil uprising continued.

Fire and race relations continued to be linked in the second half of the twentieth century. In the ashes of the 1960s riots, Coleman Young, a powerful African American mayor of Detroit for twenty years, rose to political power. White people fled the city in droves, moving into suburban neighborhoods, with Eight Mile Road marking a racial and economic dividing line. The result, according to Jerry Herron, is that Detroit is the “longest-running disaster story in American history.” A story that is a “result of white not black decisions. It is the people who left, not the people left behind, who have created this place.”³ In the vacuum left by “white flight,” the city budget contracted; when Bill Clinton signed the North American Free Trade Agreement into law in 1994, city finances contracted further and never recovered. 53 percent of working-age Detroit residents in 2014 were unemployed during the course of the year, and by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, one in every twenty-five adults (and one in seven in some sections of the Eastside) was either in jail or under correctional control.⁴

Systemic racism has a long history in Detroit, as do stunning moments of racial violence. In a case illustrating the entwining of both, in 1982, Vincent Chin was beaten to death by two white men: Ronald Ebens, a Chrysler foreman, and his stepson Michael Nitz, an unemployed auto-worker. They mistook the Chinese American as a Japanese “mother-fucker” who “took white peoples’ jobs,” as Ebens allegedly yelled at Chin right before he slammed a baseball bat into his head. In a further injustice, the two white men, described by the judge at the trial as “family men,” pleaded to manslaughter and received only three years’ probation.⁵

On July 18, 2013, this city of continual racial and economic conflict, and carrying an estimated debt of \$18 billion to \$20 billion, filed for Chapter 9 bankruptcy, the largest municipality bankruptcy filing in US history. Although no flames ripped through the city streets on that hot summer day, bankruptcy brought austerity measures and economic “new visions” forcing, once again, a new Detroit to be forged from the decaying detritus of the old. This chapter explores ways in which these new visions are fashioned, centering attention on the way graffiti and street art play an active role in rebranding Detroit for investors and young entrepreneurs ready for a stylized adventure.

THE NEOLIBERAL AESTHETIC:
EMBRACING STREET ART GLOBALLY

As discussed in the previous chapter, Sean Cummings is a New Orleans real estate entrepreneur who uses graffiti to sell a "new," post-Katrina New Orleans. He is unoriginal, though, in his calculated use of graffiti and street art to gentrify a neighborhood he has a financial stake in—he's just very good at it. Greenpoint, Brooklyn, is one of many other examples in the twenty-first century where a multiethnic working-class neighborhood filled with graffiti-covered warehouses transformed into a gentrified street-art mecca of specialty coffee roasters, microbreweries, and high-priced converted loft spaces.⁶ The rebranding effort of moving from graffiti to street art is not linear, but there is an amorphous tipping point between the two. When I lived in Greenpoint, a neighborhood that gentrified around me, there was a categorical difference between "street art," as done by the likes of Banksy who visited my neighborhood on a clandestine US tour, and "graffiti," as sprayed by Miss 17, a tagger who lived in Greenpoint. The former was seen as "art"; the Banksy image was placed on an advertisement to sell a newly constructed high-end apartment building in the neighborhood. The latter was seen as dirt, visually connected to poverty and gangs.⁷ This well-used road map of remaking a neighborhood through street art, rebranding it as a place where tourists want to visit and then eventually buy into (with the consequential eviction of poor and working-class people) is an integral part of the "new" Detroit. It is not, however, always a smooth transition.

The gradual violence enacted on Detroit's citizens through the erosion of infrastructure, jobs, public welfare, and unions has been brutal. To remake the city's image in the national and international landscape after a well-publicized bankruptcy, city planners are doubling down on what Richard Ford has described as "creative capital" by using art to rebrand the city as "Detroit 2.0," marketing the city as evolved, safe, and open for business. My last chapter began with the spray-painted pleas written by those desperately attempting to survive the aftermath of a hurricane and concluded with a rich, white real estate developer using graffiti to sell a gentrifying version of New Orleans. This chapter begins at that moment of gentrification, discussing the ways that developers have used graffiti and street art to radically transform Detroit. It is not, though, a straightforward narrative. I contextualize ways governments from around the world have embraced street art to "improve" city infrastructures, while detailing how graffiti has been weaponized to resist the erasure of poor, marginalized individuals from neighborhoods. In Detroit, the paint on the walls is a proxy battle in the larger racial and class divide of the city.



Mural on Eastern Market, Detroit by FEL3000FT. Photo by John Lennon.

One of the most successful attempts to rebrand a Detroit neighborhood, almost entirely through street art, is the restoration of Eastern Market, a historical landmark located one mile northeast of downtown. Located on forty-three acres of land, the first “sales sheds” were established in 1891, devoted to selling hay and wood. The market continued to grow. After World War II, it became a hub for wholesale food vendors, with six blocks of open-air merchants selling their wares, surrounded by more than eighty buildings and warehouses.⁸ Like many places in Detroit in the 1970s and 1980s, though, the area was in decline, with the neighborhood viewed as a violent place filled with homelessness, drug addicts, and petty crime. For graffiti writers unafraid to enter the area, it was also a prime spot to paint.

While *graffiti* is often perceived as a visual marker of a declining neighborhood, *street art* can often lead to a neighborhood’s “revitalization.” As part of a larger effort to remake the downtown area, a Detroit-based art publisher, 1XRun (“one-time run”), teamed with local businesses to rebrand Eastern Market.⁹ In 2014, 1XRun received permission to make an open-air gallery of street art with the goal of generating foot traffic. Starting with a budget of \$125,000, Roula David, the chief operating officer for 1XRun, along with David Carmody, president of Eastern Market Corporation, commissioned local and international artists to paint the walls in bright, eye-catching colors. The event was successful and dur-

ing the annual "Murals in the Market" event, more than fifty new murals were painted simultaneously, often with the whole edifice of a building covered in a particular artwork.¹⁰ Carmody explains the value of the murals: "In Eastern Market, people are using these murals as a backdrop for their wedding photos, for their graduation photos, for really important passages for their life."¹¹ More important, after they take their photos, they're entering into these newly opened, art-wrapped neighborhood stores and restaurants.

Carmody articulated a strict divide between mural art and graffiti vandalism: "The murals are a great way to make something interesting that isn't. When we first began the mural project, we were having a challenge with graffiti. Once the art goes up, taggers don't feel like defacing it. It makes the market feel more cared for and safer."¹² As the business district manager, Carmody makes aesthetic judgments based on financial incentives. The murals themselves are a mash-up of goofy alien creatures and political race-related images; a guided walking tour reveals the stories behind each one. Other corporate-backed artist spaces have subsequently opened in the neighborhood, including the Red Bull House of Art, which offers residencies and gallery space to visual artists.¹³

Stated simply, mural art is a boon for Eastern Market, and street art has spread outward from the downtown region. In the 2018 rendition, 1XRun, along with the Small Business Mural Project by Quicken Loans Family of Businesses, expanded its reach with ten local artists painting on small businesses in six Detroit neighborhoods. As the art spreads, the hope is that eager shoppers will feel safe entering those neighborhoods. According to its corporate website, Quicken Loans' interest in street art is as a "for more than profit" enterprise.¹⁴ The company is owned by Dan Gilbert, the multibillionaire businessman whose name is synonymous with the revitalization of downtown Detroit. I'll return to his influence in the city later in this chapter, but "for more than profit" is a central tenet of the "new" post-bankruptcy Detroit that consciously uses street art to aid in the gentrification of working-class, often minority neighborhoods, transforming them into something, as the ad copy states, "more."

Beyond a catchy public relations phrase, "for more than profit" underscores how street art serves the needs of capital. Graffiti has a history of antiauthority rebelliousness in which socioeconomic outsiders illegally secreted their way into areas where they didn't belong. "Bombing," after all, is one of the militaristic terms used to describe illegally catching a tag on someone else's property. The "profit" is in the fame one receives from hitting as many buildings as one can. Gilbert's company's use of the term *for more than profit* lays bare that street art serves capital, and the profit the company receives is paramount to underwrite the whole

enterprise. The “more” of the term is ambiguous (more what exactly?), but the profit motive anchoring the phrase is clear. In urban areas, graffiti makes visible the lives of those who have been rendered invisible; street art is used to bolster the value of the properties lining the streets of the city. Graffiti reveal a city’s economic disparity, whereas street art wraps buildings in images hiding those divested lives. Graffiti is born of conflict, whereas developers use street art to transition a neighborhood into something “more.” Regardless of the content, street art is made safe through its inclusion in the city’s economic revitalization plans. There is a dialogic relationship between the two; “safe” art makes one feel as if the streets are “safe,” and vice versa. At its worst, street art, according to the artist Lutz Henke, goes hand in hand with gentrification, killing off organic energetic creative spaces and defiling the city’s corpse with its murals, “artificially reanimating the creativity it has displaced, thus producing the ‘undead city.’” These “zombie” city spaces create “an amusement park for those who can afford the rising rents,” displacing those who can’t.¹⁵

If the sheer number of city street-art tours is any indication, there’s a ton of zombie cities throughout the world, and the virus is spreading. Contextualizing how other international cities have embraced legal street art to combat illegal graffiti illustrates the ways Detroit’s gentrification is following a rehearsed script. São Paulo, for example, embraces street art to combat the widespread tagging called *pixação* (or *pichação*), a text-based graffiti (without pictures or figures) formed using straight lines and sharp edges. *Pixação* writers eschew color with black, almost tarlike paint covering the facades of buildings. The style emerged in the 1980s, heavily influenced by the typeface of album covers of popular bands such as Judas Priest and AC/DC. The ancient, gothic or pagan inspired lettering is rigidly angular. While *pixadores*’ writing is unique in comparison to other taggers around the world, what has made *pixação* particularly notable is the extreme daring of the participants, who risk their lives to hit downtown skyscrapers. *Janela de prédio* (building window) is the “art” of *pixadores*, which entails individuals climbing the facade of a large building, floor by floor. *Escalada* (“building”) is an even more extreme climbing technique in which *pixadores* climb the surge arrester cable, a device covering electrical equipment on the outside of buildings, to hang precariously over the city streets to catch their tag.¹⁶

Much like US graffiti, *pixação* is viewed as visual pollution, or *sujerta* (dirt), and “city authorities, as well as private real estate owners, make enormous efforts to combat *pixação* through harsh ‘zero-tolerance’ policing, legally prosecuting writers and large grey-scale painting.”¹⁷ *Pixação* is most often located in downtown areas—the central business district—



Pixação on building, São Paulo, Brazil. Photo by Ray Schwartz.

with graffiti writers entering from surrounding poorer neighborhoods and meeting up as crews before climbing seemingly impossible heights. The aesthetic quality of *pixação* is linked with the perceived danger of getting up; the black latex ink using ancient lettering on skyscrapers offers an arresting contrast to the cityscape supposedly symbolizing São Paulo as a modern "global city."

While São Paulo has employed strict antigraffiti laws since the 1980s, like most zero-tolerance policies, they have been ineffective. Discouraged, officials decided instead to decriminalize "graffiti." The key, though, is how they define the term. The 2011 legal act 9605/98 categorizes graffiti as "performed with the objective to artistically valorize" a facade.¹⁸ *Pixação*, though, is illegal. As Roger Gastman, a US graffiti writer and chronicler of graffiti movements around the world, states clearly, "The people of Brazil . . . don't have a problem with graffiti. It's [*pixação*] they can't stand."¹⁹ Splitting graffiti (roughly equivalent to US "street art") and *pixação*, municipalities valorize the former while criminalizing the latter. Graffiti murals are supported both financially and politically in an effort to "modernize" São Paulo into a global city whose artistic heritage, as mayor Fernando Haddad proudly announced, "is one of the biggest in the world."²⁰ As the city embraces neoliberal policies that privatize public resources, street art becomes the aesthetically pleasing advertising face enticing outsiders to the city.²¹ Supported by real estate developers and politicians, São Paulo has valorized street art in much the same way that it has been embraced in Eastern Market and downtown Detroit.

Situating *pixação*'s qualities of resistance within Brazilian politics, the theorist Marcia Tiburi remixes Marx and Engels's famous opening line to *The Communist Manifesto*, writing, "A specter is haunting Bra-

zil: the specter of *pixação*.”²² The aura surrounding these old-style letters on skyscrapers is one of discomfort, both aesthetically and in the perceived danger of the application. Tiburi refers to this graffiti style as an “aesthetic terrorism” that is “a shattering of the enclosed space” of São Paulo and has “the power to fragment the city dominated by white capitalists.”²³ *Pixação* reminds viewers that that which is made invisible has the ability to reemerge to great heights. The blots of white paint officials use to erase *pixação* are representations, for Tiburi, of the whiteness financing the city; São Paulo’s street art, therefore, connects to other gentrifying art scenes of emerging global cities. *Pixação*, however, links Brazil’s urban poor with other international disenfranchised communities who have illegally claimed space on their cities’ walls. By conjuring Marx and Engels, Tiburi underlines the politics in *pixação*’s ghostlike haunting: when erased by city officials, it reemerges in another part of the city, eerily showing itself on sides of buildings where it seems the writings could not have been humanly placed.²⁴

São Paulo has been successful embracing “good” street art to rebrand a city, but it certainly wasn’t the first one to do so. As São Paulo was just beginning its fight against *pixação*, Philadelphia was embracing graffiti muralism as early as 1984 as a part of the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network run by Mayor Wilson Goode. Philadelphia—the birthplace of US modern graffiti—has been trying to stop illegal graffiti from the time Cornbread began tagging the city to impress a high school girlfriend in the 1960s.²⁵ One of the longest-lasting graffiti-to-mural arts programs in the United States, Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network was conceived with the intention to eradicate graffiti. When the artist Jane Golden was hired to direct the network, though, instead of ostracizing graffiti writers, she “legitimized” them by pushing the writers into legally funded art projects. To emphasize the difference between vandal and artist, though, in 1997 the program was removed from the Anti-Graffiti Network and combined with the private nonprofit Philadelphia Mural Arts Advocates, becoming its own entity, Mural Arts Philadelphia. Murals are extremely popular throughout Philadelphia, bringing tourists into the city. For example, the same year it became a nonprofit, Prince Charles of Wales and Camilla, the Duchess of Cornwall, spent the day on a well-publicized graffiti mural tour. More than twenty years later, the program is very much alive, with new murals continuously emerging on the streets of Philadelphia in 2021. Street-art tours of Philadelphia—like the ones in São Paulo, New York, London, Tel Aviv, Moscow, Krakow, Milan, and almost every other large metropolis—are popular attractions that bring people to city centers.

Even though Mural Arts Philadelphia rebranded itself by separating from the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network thirteen years after its gene-

sis, the program's ideological base is still of replacement—murals and graffiti do not share the same city space.²⁶ Mural arts programs in Philadelphia, New Orleans, Detroit, and numerous other cities are embracing aesthetically market-driven place making, which, as Alesia Montgomery writes, "suppresses and replaces cultures of resistance."²⁷ Neoliberal "place making" creates appealing locations within urban districts that interact with regional and global markets. While the 1970s and 1980s saw "white flight" from city centers and the consequential removal of public funding, in the present day, urban art connected to graffiti styles—though more legible to those not associated to the graffiti subculture—is used to bring back middle- and upper-class white people. This strategy, Montgomery points out, is an example of urban neoliberalism based in racial capitalism. Building on the theories of Lester Spence, Anjan Chakravartty, and Ferreira da Silva, among others, Montgomery argues that neoliberal critics undertheorize the influence of racial politics, viewing neoliberalism in purely economic terms while failing to dialectically situate policies in race-class struggles and violence.²⁸

To resist "urban economic development" catering to bourgeoisie tastes and leading to the destruction of working-class neighborhoods, Jamie Peck argues that local communities need to create opportunities for their own constituents instead of "bringing in culture" from the outside.²⁹ Peck's idea has been mostly ignored in Detroit. Downtown areas—once public places where minority activists demonstrated against systematic and incendiary racism—have now become havens for white middle- and upper-class denizens. The legal street-art scene in Detroit and other cities exposes a neoliberal racial politics that, though seemingly inclusive, is exclusive in its economic removal of the poor from neighborhoods.

The archetype of this form of racial capitalism is Wynwood, Miami's artistic entertainment neighborhood. Centered on street art, an arts and nightlife economy emerged in the early 2000s in this formerly Puerto Rican working-class community. Raphael Schachter describes how Wynwood "art washed" the local community: "Many locals who had been living in the area since the 1950s felt not only alienated by the influx of 'creatives' and tourists attracted by the 'edgy' look and feel of their own streets, but felt estranged from their own neighbourhood due to the eradication of the genuinely local businesses, businesses that had provided not only employment but the very sense of community itself."³⁰ In Camila Alvarez and Natalie Edgar's documentary *Right to Wynwood*, the directors interview the men and women who endured the race uprisings of the 1980s and 1990s and the consequential evisceration of jobs, public services, and infrastructure from the neighborhood, powerfully illustrating how this artistic "playground's" foundation is the removal of

these longtime residents. Alvarez and Edgar painfully peel back the neo-liberal policies that have created the environment for real estate entrepreneurs such as David Lombardi, who states on camera, “I like to say I took chicken shit and made chicken salad in this neighborhood.”³¹ The excrement, of course, is the homes in which people once lived. Lombardi explains with pleasure how he evicted people from dilapidated houses because economically razed buildings make him more money than those that housed poor people. Lombardi is rightfully cast as a villain in the documentary, and his “more than profit” mentality emerges in his incendiary comments revealing a joy in others’ misery.³²

Lombardi’s greed and toxic masculinity border on cartoonish. The film, though, specifically reveals how art is racially weaponized against the poor. As Schacter states, “The ‘avant-garde’ artists working within these sites can thus be understood as a vanguard in the most traditional sense: they are the group who secure new ground at the forefront of an impending army, who advance, seek out the enemy and establish their demise.”³³ The violent terminology of war is not hyperbole. For Schacter it is the “ugly truth” of “art-washing” in the “creative city”; street art leads the way for a tourist invasion unsettling local communities before displacing them, erasing whole communities under globs of brightly colored paint. In his examination of Wynwood, Marcus Feldman argues that organic community-based change empowering locals is possible with art leading this transformation. Wynwood developers, however, see art as a cudgel to knock down those in its way.³⁴

Regardless of its implementation, the street-art campaigns discussed here are part and parcel of racial capitalism’s rebranding of each of these cities. Each one, though, has different roots from which its street-art scene grows. Unlike Miami or São Paulo, Detroit has a long history of muralism, with Diego Rivera’s fresco murals in the Detroit Institute of Arts being the most famous. But while Detroit’s cultural history and use of muralism is different from its Wynwood counterpart, the question remains as to whether the art is any less weaponized.

DAN GILBERT AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF DETROIT

“Detroit vs Everybody” is a popular slogan found on T-shirts throughout the “new” Detroit. It’s a catchy phrase capturing a history of strong fighters with hometown pride—a statue of Joe Louis’s fists is a prominent feature of Detroit for a reason. But the rallying cry is not a simple statement; after all, who is “Detroit” and who is “everybody” else? As the city gentrifies, resulting in evictions for poor and working-class families, the inclusion-exclusion lines are blurred, if not outright manipulated. In the

1950s, there were 1.8 million people living in Detroit; in 2014, there were only approximately 680,000 living in the city, with the white population changing from 84 percent at the midpoint of the twentieth century to less than 13 percent in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Since the decline of Detroit's automobile industry, there has been a radical change in demographics. To reverse this trend, a welcome mat has been rolled out for mostly white, professional young people who have found apartments and loft space in the gentrifying downtown area. This move seems to be working. In three years since the 2010 census was taken, the white population increased from seventy-six thousand to eighty-six thousand.³⁵ With rents cheaper than in other cities and an environment welcoming entrepreneurial capital, downtown Detroit is rapidly gentrifying, with economic decisions to "save" Detroit wrapped up in aesthetic branding.

For example, the high-end watch company Shinola, heralded as the "coolest brand in America," emphasizes "Made in Detroit" in its advertising campaigns.³⁶ Highlighting their prosperous Detroit factory, the hope is that, as Stacy Perman states of the narrative the company is selling, "Every time customers purchase an \$850 Shinola watch, they too can feel they're doing their part in Detroit's fight for survival."³⁷ The message seems to be working. When director Peter Farrelly won a 2019 Oscar for his film *Green Book*, he inexplicably gave a shout-out to the owners of Shinola: "They're saving Detroit!" It's a preposterous statement, one that Michigan congresswoman Rashida Tlaib angrily responded to on Twitter: "We just need the 1% to stop taking our land for nothing + shifting our tax dollars towards for-profit development that makes them richer."³⁸ Tlaib is arguing against private companies "saving" a city by reaping financial benefits at the cost of taxpayers. Others, though, see "corporate welfare" as a way to rebuild the city.

"Made in Detroit" is another lucratively popular marketing campaign for the "new" Detroit, found on clothing, city advertisements, and company taglines. From an advertising perspective, it's a perfect phrase, nostalgically linking to the car-making history of the city while also rooting people to a place. In Detroit, people and things are made; there is no birth right assigned in the slogan; rather, it's an attitude that "makes" one from Detroit. What is being made—in terms of things and demographics—is transforming. Dan Gilbert, whom the *Atlantic* has called a "superhero" for rebuilding Detroit, is synonymous with the new downtown.³⁹ He owns over ninety-five buildings in the city and, with his Detroit-savior status among corporate sponsors, has a large influence on government policy.

Detroit began transitioning in 2010 when Gilbert moved his corporate headquarters of Quicken Loans to the One Campus Martius building in downtown. This move kick-started Detroit's rebranding, which, as Mark

Jay and Philip Conklin state, went from a mecca of Fordism to a mecca of post-Fordism.⁴⁰ Downtown has been made over into what some locals have called “Gilbertville,” a place, as the *New York Times* reporter Reif Larsen explains, where “millennials take a break from beach volleyball to sip craft beer and nibble on artisan pickles.”⁴¹ While Larsen is making a joke at millennials’ expense, he is still unabashedly “giddy with possibilities,” arguing that the new twenty-first-century Detroit will have an aura of a pleasant bike ride with people “from all walks of life [and] all colors” happily riding together. Dan Gilbert’s real estate prowess has led to this optimistic hope in the city among white and Black leaders. Heaster Wheeler, for example, an executive director of the city’s NAACP branch, has rallied around the need for Black entrepreneurs, whom he dubs “Black Dan Gilberts.”⁴²

In 2017, the *New York Times* labeled Detroit “The Most Exciting City in America.”⁴³ A question, though, needs to be asked: exciting for whom? The hyperoptimistic view of Detroit is somewhat perplexing, as the contrast between downtown and the rest of the city is painstakingly apparent. One example of many: it is easy to find organic produce at the Jeff Bezos owned Whole Foods, but more than a hundred thousand residents in the surrounding metropolis have had their water shut off since 2013. As Jay and Conklin state, “Detroit has become a living illustration of one of the dynamics of capitalism, in which wealth accrues at one pole of society in direct proportion to the poverty and misery that concentrate at the other.”⁴⁴ One way this pole is greased is that neighborhoods deemed “viable” for transformation receive resources diverted from other parts of the city. For example, the Detroit Future City strategic framework, a centerpiece for mayor Mike Duggan’s plan for revitalization, attempted “to shrink the city” using the resources allocated to these poorer neighborhoods to help pay the costs to invigorate “strategically important” areas.⁴⁵

What makes a city “viable” to draw young, mostly white, tech-savvy people to downtown? Safety is certainly one concern, and Gilbert has hired several hundred private security guards to police the downtown area, installing an intricate surveillance system with over five hundred cameras to protect people and property.⁴⁶ Jobs are also certainly necessary, and the gig economy has allowed young entrepreneurs to embody the attitude emblazoned on a boutique clothing store that “Detroit Hustles Harder.” This rebranding is not just semantics—although the new Detroit certainly likes its T-shirt ready slogans. It is the epitome of an extreme ideological change in the city’s makeup: at one point in Detroit’s history—after tremendous protracted fights between labor and management that cost the lives of workers—this was a union town. Now, it is a



Ford Mustang GT mural, Eastern Market, Detroit. Photo by William Jensen.

city celebrating individualistic “hustling.” In 2019, Gilbert affectionately called Detroit “gritty” in his failed attempt to lure Amazon to build its second headquarters in the city. His idea of grit, though, is not the grit borne on the skin of a unionized factory worker but a sanitized, nostalgic view of grit turned into an advertising slogan.

One way to advertise this aestheticized “grit” to welcome young transplants to Detroit is through street art, which the city has enthusiastically embraced. The Detroit Mural Project has documented more than a thousand images of murals throughout the city, with more than two hundred in the downtown area.⁴⁷ Styles and subject matter are not uniform, as there are numerous types of images adorning the outside of buildings, from Kobie Solomon’s huge chimera on Clay Avenue (the mechanical lion is featured on the label for Stroh Brewery’s Perseverance IPA) to Ellen Rutt’s cubist-inspired mural on the Vernor Highway.⁴⁸ As each new neighborhood begins to gentrify, street art often leads the way. Walking through the Dequindre Cut Greenway on a midweek summer night in 2017, for example, I was surprised that this once notorious hang-out spot has transformed into an open-air museum with sanctioned graffiti and murals on every one of the numerous underpasses. Like Eastern Market, art draws tourists into an area; in what was once considered an empty and dangerous spot, bike riders now leisurely pedal along the well-maintained path.⁴⁹ Graffiti aesthetics are interlinked with capital—safe art implies safe streets. In this way, legal, outdoor graffiti mural art helps define the neighborhood as an innocuous place to spend money. Gilbert

is betting heavily on this sanctioned wave of street art to wash away the remains of the “old” bankrupt Detroit and paint a “new” Detroit with eye-popping colorful images.

There are many examples of how Gilbert’s “grit” sells the “new” Detroit but the Z garage may be the most absurd (plate 13). The garage is a ten-story, half-million-square-foot parking garage with 1,300 parking spots and murals by twenty-seven international graffiti and street artists from Australia, Greece, Mexico, Ukraine, and Switzerland. Bedrock Detroit, the largest commercial developer in downtown Detroit, with more than a hundred commercial properties, boasts that the Z is “unlike any parking structure in the world” and “ignites” the downtown area. Dodging cars while walking the many levels of the Z, I checked out the murals. Some have wildstyle lettering, others have weird depictions of alien worlds, and still others are more realistic renderings. They all, though, are spectacle. Hearing music from the bars adorning the similarly pretentiously named commercial alleyway “The Belt” located directly at the rear of the parking structure, the attempt to rebrand a practical space into an “experience” is obvious. Far from feeling organic, though, the space feels like what it actually is: a parking garage with some cool designs. There is no connection between the murals and the downtown specifically or to Detroit in general. Detroit used to pride itself on a working-class culture that built cars; now the city is being “ignited” by a commercial real estate company that allows you to park near art-covered walls for twenty-five dollars a day, Monday through Friday (more during events).

Grffiti is, of course, not new to parking garages—graffiti writers often tag these structures. But the Z put the spotlight on graffiti, giving 130 walls to “star” international street artists to make the garage a “destination,” or, as billed by *Visit Detroit*, “an artists’ United Nations of parking structures.”⁵⁰ In 2013, the city sold the parking garage to Dan Gilbert’s company for a dollar. It is part of his large collection of at least sixty-two buildings and seventeen thousand parking spots Gilbert has bought since 2011, which he spent over \$421 million to purchase.⁵¹ These buildings—like the Z garage—were bought from the city or previous investors struggling through the Great Recession. As someone with deep pockets and a sustained vision of what the downtown area should become, Gilbert bought the properties, invested heavily in their reconstruction, and found tenants quickly.

Grffiti and street art make these buildings more lucrative, and Gilbert is certainly willing to pay to have his buildings art wrapped by the most famous street artists in the world. Gilbert’s Bedrock Real Estate Services (along with Library Street Collective and MeridianHealth) paid Shepard Fairey to paint the largest mural the artist to this point has ever done—an



Plate 13 Z garage, Shepard Fairey mural, Detroit. Photo by Richard Hedrick.



Plate 14 Mural by Sintex, Detroit. Photo by Chris Freitag.



Plate 15 Dot house, Heidelberg Street, Detroit. Mural by Tyree Guyton.
Photo by John Lennon.



Plate 16 *Women of Color Part 2* mural, Baton Rouge. Mural by Rahmaan Statik Barnes.
Photo by Kevin Harris.



Plate 17 H. Rap Brown (Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin), match, Baton Rouge.
Mural by Chemis. Photo by John Lennon.



Plate 18 Alton Sterling mural, convenience store, people, Baton Rouge.
Mural by Jo Hines. Photo by Mark Wallheiser/Getty.



Plate 19 "Make the Rich Pay for COVID-19" graffiti, lamp, crosswalk, London.
Photo by Ian Roberts.



Plate 20 "Defund the Police" mural, street, trees, Washington, DC.
Photo by Tasos Katopodis/Getty.

eighteen-story painting on the tax-subsidized headquarters of Quicken Loans (which Gilbert's company, along with MeridianHealth, owns). The 184-foot-by-60-foot mural is an arresting image to anyone heading downtown; in red- and cream-colored geometric shapes, the mural has André the Giant in a central five-pointed star amid a peace sign and lotus leaves. Its sharp, clear design towers over downtown Detroit and, although the connection of the former wrestler to the scales of justice painted above him are not easily discernable, there is no mistaking the value of street art to this area. The mural is part of Detroit place making; anyone heading into the city center sees the mural and Gilbert's building, anchoring the business district while creating an art-focused hip downtown area. Galleries, coffee shops, and cocktail bars all have legal street art, graffiti, or murals adorning either the inside or the outside of their establishments. This is the new Detroit: you can park your car in a Gilbert-owned parking garage with international street art, go to work in a large Gilbert-owned building art wrapped by Shepard Fairey, and then head to the Belt to have a drink surrounded by more art.

To be clear, this is all legally sanctioned graffiti—permits are granted. While he was in Detroit on commission, though, Fairey also painted other walls without permission. Consequently, the police issued a warrant for his arrest when they discovered eighteen of Fairey's illegal wheat-paste posters (many were of his iconic André the Giant) throughout downtown, East Jefferson, and Midtown. Fairey stated in interviews before he arrived to paint Gilbert's building that he was also going to do illegal graffiti while in the city. The police, therefore, charged Fairey with two counts of malicious destruction felonies for causing approximately \$24,000 in damages to the cash-strapped city, with the potential of landing him in jail for up to five years.⁵²

Fairey's case epitomizes the "new" Detroit: it celebrates legal street art that wraps around buildings bought cheaply by developers who have a vision for a sanitized "gritty" Detroit that, like Fairey's sharp-edge designs, is actually extremely clean. The prosecuting city attorney told reporters that Detroit's new graffiti policy "has successfully prosecuted approximately 30 graffiti cases in the past 2½ years as part of an overall effort to clean up blight. . . . Mr. Fairey is not entitled to special treatment over ordinary citizens just because he is famous."⁵³ Except, of course, he is. A judge dismissed the case against the star of the street-art world who attracted worldwide acclaim for his Obama poster *Hope*. Fairey—much like Banksy—holds a tenuous position in the world of street art and graffiti, especially after his Obama image received so much attention. Embracing a neoliberal mainstream political candidate, Fairey has been accused of "obeying" the system that he has seemingly railed against since

he first started putting up posters when he was a design student in Rhode Island: “I gained a new audience and lost a lot of the old. I was seen as sucking up to the evil system.”⁵⁴

Detroit’s graffiti and street-art scene is based on capital; the market, intertwined with the legal system, decides value. Fairey could go free; it certainly appears that this white, rich, well-known street art star did not receive the same treatment as would graffiti writers catching their tags on Six Mile. Rick Manore, founder of the now-closed CPop Gallery, stated: “[Fairey] wears his warrants on his sleeve like badges of honor. He’s using the judicial system and the media to market himself. It’s a minor investment and in return his name stays relevant. He’s been doing this for years, and he’s great at it.”⁵⁵ This line between legal and illegal graffiti is somewhat invisible but carefully patrolled and continuously negotiated.

GRAFFITI WARS

Dan Gilbert’s “igniting” of downtown with a graffiti-covered parking garage or paying for a 184-foot mural on the side of his building has been a beacon for younger people interested in living, as one white twenty-something sneaker entrepreneur confided to me in a bar in Corktown, “in the wild frontier.” From a business perspective, street art is an innocuous balm soothing the transition from a neighborhood in conflict to an economically thriving neighborhood. This alteration does not, though, always succeed. When it fails, the wounds created by racialized capitalism are reopened. Street art is being celebrated as helping to create “Detroit 2.0;” however, in a poor, Black community along Grand River Avenue, gentrification has not gone according to plan. Instead of specialty pop-up stores dotting the street, a very public “graffiti war” commenced after a Black graffiti writer and a white real estate entrepreneur fought over a graffiti mural depicting a murdered Asian American man. The fight spilled from the walls to the street to the larger Detroit area, uncovering the racial underpinnings involved as a neighborhood attempted to transition to something “more.”

The origins of the graffiti war began in 2013, when Derek Weaver, a twenty-six-year-old white man from Monroe County and recent business graduate from Wayne State University, attempted to become a real estate entrepreneur. As one of his first jobs, he was hired as a manager to help transform 4731 Gallery, a four-story building with thirty-one studio spaces and a large first-floor gallery. Although not an art aficionado—he fully admits he didn’t know the difference between “an oil painting or a graffiti piece”—he envisioned the half-mile section on Grand River between Rosa Parks Boulevard and Warren Avenue as ripe for revitaliza-

tion.⁵⁶ Weaver wanted this neighborhood to follow Eastern Market and the nearby areas of Corktown and Woodbridge that have seen a rise in property values. He cut the rents in the building to decrease the turnover rate, bringing in artist-entrepreneurs to create small enterprises and businesses including tattoo parlors, a church, and graphic design shops.

Weaver endeavored to rebrand the neighborhood around him. He contacted Sintex, an African American Detroit-born graffiti writer, to place a mural on the front of the building. People in the neighborhood were receptive (with some coming from outside the neighborhood to look at the piece). Weaver then set his sights on rebranding the dilapidated storefronts along Grand River Avenue that a local reporter derogatively described as "a hot mess of asphalt."⁵⁷ Using artists from the nearby College of the Creative Arts to enact his vision, Weaver created the Grand River Creative Corridor (GRCC). Using local graffiti writers and street artists such as Kobie Solomon, Malt, FEL3000ft, Tead, Halima Cassells, Sydney G. James, and Alonzo Steve, Weaver built on Sintex's relationships with local artists to help transform his status from the "wealthy country club guy" to a community organizer.⁵⁸

Like David Carmody, the manager at Eastern Market, Weaver instinctively recognized the legal and perceptive divide between "street art" and "graffiti." In an interview about his vision of the GRCC, Weaver is explicit, stating graffiti writers who don't seek permission are "vandals," but through his negotiation with them and neighborhood businesses, they are transformed into "contributing artists."⁵⁹ Weaver's presumptuous strict divide between graffiti and street art (with him as the judge) is certainly not new, as politicians have made this claim ever since street art became financially lucrative. Both categories, though, often bleed into each other. There are certainly participant-purists in both camps, but from an aesthetic perspective, using graffiti styles in large mural pieces—as Sintex does along the GRCC—makes the divide extremely porous (plate 14).

From an economic point of view, however, if the graffiti is sanitized and entices outsiders to enter a neighborhood, it is safe street art. Content often does not matter. Street art celebrating minority figures often does not make graffiti art any less economically viable. Although these areas are certainly in conflict—economic and racial forces structure the neighborhood's poverty—it is not a traditional war zone, and there is much more leeway for minority cultures to represent as long as the art is presented in a nonthreatening manner. In fact, these images illustrating Black and minority culture are often the draw that brings white tourists with deep pockets into the area. Regardless of the content, street art offers potential investors a rebranded version of the neighborhood. Art-wrapped buildings sell for a higher price.

Or at least that's the plan. It doesn't always work out, and the graffiti war that erupted between Derek Weaver and Sintex illustrates how these conflicted relationships are fraught with race- and class-based tensions. At first, though, the relationship between the two men was beneficial for both. Sintex's birth name is Brian Glass, and he has been involved in graffiti from a young age. After graduating from Crockett Technical High School (a few blocks from Eastern Market), he went to the Pratt Institute in New York to study art. The terrorist attacks on 9/11, however, interrupted his college career, and Sintex returned to his native Detroit, becoming, as he describes it, "an 18 year vet of the graffiti scene" and "a Detroit ambassador."⁶⁰

When local media began covering the GRCC in 2012, there were usually accompanying photos of Weaver and Sintex. They make a surprising pairing: Derek, with his long-sleeved, collared shirt untucked over his pair of jeans, and Sintex, with his shaved head, camouflage pants, and T-shirt, seem to be from opposite sides of Eight Mile (which they are). But each offered the other credibility. Weaver had the support of a known Black Detroit-born graffiti artist with connections to many other artists in the area; Sintex received a six-thousand-square-foot loft in 4731 free of charge for two years. The relationship seemed solid as the GRCC plans continued to materialize. Weaver obtained funding from Home Depot, the Detroit Hardware Company, and Rental Clean USA, while Wayne State University students volunteered to mow and remove garbage from the empty lots. Over one hundred murals were placed on more than fifteen buildings, and a dozen free-standing sculptures (based on Diego Rivera's frescoes) were raised on empty lots. The project won the "Keep Michigan Beautiful" prize as Weaver looked for grants and business entities to cover the thousands of dollars in supplies.⁶¹

The working relationship between Weaver and Sintex would not last, however, and the separation was messy. On June 18, 2014, Andrew Piscane, a well-known mural artist from Baltimore who goes by Gaia, was flown to Detroit by Weaver to paint over one of Sintex's murals on the north wall of 4641 Grand River, a large building under foreclosure that sold for \$6,400. A month prior, Gaia had discussed with Weaver his plans to paint a memorial mural for Vincent Chin, murdered in a savage racial attack by two white men wielding a baseball bat. Gaia sought permission from Chin's family, and the American Citizens for Justice—an organization founded after the death of Chin—gave approval to use Chin's likeness. On June 19, Gaia met with "Red," the owner of the property, as well as Sintex to discuss his vision. After completing the mural in a few days, Gaia left Detroit. A few months later, though, the trouble began.

On August 9, Sintex texted Weaver that someone had "buffed" the piece,



Vincent Chin mural, Detroit. Mural by Gaia. Photo by Patrick Hershberger.

and when Weaver arrived he found black paint haphazardly splashed over the wall. Because the paint was still wet, Weaver removed 90 percent of the damage, immediately planning to hire artists to restore the mural back to its original form. Sintex, though, was adamant that it be removed, and on August 13, after getting permission from Red, he buffed Gaia and placed a new mural on the wall. Chin's image was again represented but as a smaller figure surrounded by images of Native Americans and other minority figures. After finishing the piece, Sintex made multiple inflammatory Facebook posts, including accusing Gaia of being disrespectful to the community by painting a Chin memorial where he did (Chin had been killed in Highland Park and had no direct connection to the Grand River neighborhood), subsequently entering into numerous beefs with a variety of individuals.

On his own Facebook page, Weaver publicly cut ties with Sintex, presenting the GRCC as a conscientious community organization and Sintex as a self-promoting liar. The "graffiti war" had begun. On a wall near 4731, Sintex painted numerous skeletons in business suits with one who had a name tag "C. Vulture," obviously accusing Weaver of nefarious cultural appropriation. Sintex also fought against others he believed were "culture vultures," including graffiti stars Revok and his MSK crew who were in Detroit participating in a corporate-backed street-art beautification program. He buffed one of Revok's murals, replacing it with an image of Tupac holding a gun and the phrase "I got the juice now." When Revok retaliated by placing his name over the Tupac mural, Sintex painted a mural of Rosa Parks, who is inexplicably holding a sign with his own name. Sintex described the move to paint Rosa Parks as his "chess" move; if Revok buffed the piece, it would start a "race war" (the memorial painting was, after all, on Rosa Parks Boulevard). The mural was not touched; instead the MSK crew painted over Sintex's popular *Art of War* mural. Sintex retaliated by buffing Revok and MSK crew's large Eastern Market mural. As

Weaver attempted to do damage control, local newspapers began reporting the ins and outs of the “graffiti war”—with most comments to the online articles siding with Gaia and Revok, arguing that Sintex was jealous of their fame.⁶²

No one was killed or physically hurt in this “war,” although the potential was certainly there, as Sintex was arrested in 2013 when he allegedly pulled a gun on individuals who buffed his piece (charges were eventually dropped, and Sintex denies the allegations). The “war,” though, does highlight the potential hazards present in the uneven relationship between artist and benefactor. Painting walls to gentrify a neighborhood seems to be a win-win for all; but the seeds of anger over racial and economic disparity were planted in this neighborhood long before Weaver began trying to rebrand it. In Weaver’s official statement about the Chin mural defacement, he writes, “Public art is for everyone,” and the graffiti war started by Sintex “shows that the ‘No Fly Zone’ mentality still exists today and hinders the growth and the resurgence of the great city of Detroit.”⁶³

The “No Fly Zone” is a way some Detroit artists stop outside artists from “flying” into the city, performing their show, and then leaving without working with local artists. The unwritten rule—especially in the hip-hop community—is that if an out-of-state artist performs in Detroit, they must include local artists in their show. On the same day that Gaia was painting the image of Chin on Grand River, the Detroit rapper Trick Trick (Christian Mathis) led a hundred-person human blockade to stop Rick Ross from performing at a local concert, allegedly threatening Ross’s life if he took the stage.⁶⁴ While illegal, it was effective; Ross did not perform that night in Detroit. As a white businessman who is not part of the hip-hop arts community, Weaver may not have fully understood the No Fly Zone, but Sintex, it seems, was following the lead of Trick Trick and other Detroit artists.

For Weaver, the No Fly Zone is hurting Detroit’s revitalization; he is not alone in this view. Many other artists, including Sydney James, who participated in the mural projects of the GRCC and Eastern Market, find excluding outside artists from Detroit to be counterproductive.⁶⁵ Lines are certainly drawn. When I met Sintex on a hot summer day while he was painting Bob Marley on one of the many medical marijuana shops dotting the streets on Seven Mile, he was adamant that Weaver and his ilk are more interested in raising property values than promoting local artists or art in Detroit. As he stated of the large mural projects covering over the city, “Who’s going to have the money for these things? Pay attention to that.” It’s a valid question when assessing any city mural arts program.⁶⁶

The details of this “graffiti war” are messy, and the “truth” of what happened is hard to pin down, even after conducting multiple interviews



Greener Thingz, Seven Mile, Detroit. Mural by Sintex. Photo by John Lennon.

and following the media reports of the "war." But unlike successful street art revitalizations that hide gentrification's impact on minority and poor people, this iteration brought issues of race and class to the forefront. A white real estate entrepreneur gave free space in his building to a Black graffiti writer in order to attract investors to the neighborhood. As attention to the neighborhood grew, a white muralist from Baltimore was commissioned and flew to Detroit to paint a memorial to an Asian American victim of white violence in this predominately Black community. When Sintex buffed the mural, he then started a larger "graffiti war" that included taking on a white Los Angeles-based graffiti "king" and his crew who were in Detroit to participate in a "beautification" street-art program financed by a number of companies based in Los Angeles and Detroit. The "war" included battling on the streets by painting over MSK's murals, replacing them with images of iconic Black rappers and civil rights leaders (all seeming to highlight Sintex's own name). Painting the image of a victim of a hate crime had unintended consequences in the GRCC, uncovering the racial and economic politics of a neighborhood uncomfortably attempting to transition into something "more."

As of 2020, Derek Weaver is the principal at Clear Advantage Asset Management, who, according to his LinkedIn page, turns real estate "problems into opportunities," while Sintex is still painting on walls throughout Detroit as the city's "graffiti ambassador."⁶⁷ The GRCC has

more murals, but the revitalization of the neighborhood is hard to quantify. The 4731 space has been sold, and Weaver has stated that he left the neighborhood because city regulations made it “extremely difficult to own property in Detroit.” Ironically, the building was bought by Allied Media Project, a nonprofit opposed to gentrification, which displaced all the tenants.⁶⁸ The revitalization strategies behind the GRCC are not unique in Detroit—many neighborhoods use graffiti and street art to re-brand—but the public feud uncovers the messy racial politics underwriting many of these plans. In Weaver’s case, his pockets were not as deep as Gilbert’s, and the street art did not lead to Grand River’s radical transformation. Weaver, of course, is an outsider who saw the GRCC as an economic investment, not a place to live. In the next section, I examine an artist who calls attention to a Detroit neighborhood in conflict where he was born and raised. The ensuing racial and economic politics are no less messy.

FROM HUMILIATION TO TRANSFORMATION? THE HEIDELBERG PROJECT

One morning in 1986, Tyree Guyton stepped out on his porch and carefully listened to the sounds of the city calling out to him. What he heard were the anguished cries of his neighborhood. The thirty-year-old man who had lived all his life in Detroit decided then and there that through his art he would respond to that call. Thus began the Heidelberg Project.

When he was nine years old, Guyton’s grandfather Sam Mackey put a paintbrush in his hand, telling him to “paint the world.” Three years later, his East Detroit neighborhood was burning as the 1967 race uprisings set many parts of the city on fire. Guyton harrowingly recalls: “I was 12 and I thought the whole world was coming to an end. . . . Everywhere I looked buildings were burning. The city never recovered. We’re living in a new millennium and we’re still not recovered.”⁶⁹ Walking out onto his porch in 1986, surrounded by dilapidated houses, crime, drugs, and prostitution—along with families who had lived in the neighborhood for generations and were struggling to survive—he heard what Neal Shine, former president of the *Detroit Free Press*, has labeled “psychic echoes.” These are the “echoes of the past in places like old houses, in the walls, the floors, and in the ceiling . . . you could hear them if you listened enough and honestly believed that the place could speak to you.”⁷⁰

On that morning in 1986, Guyton believed, and in the thirty-plus years working on the Heidelberg Project, he has not lost his faith. Incorporating murals and sculptures, Guyton transformed houses in his neighborhood into art installations, using the detritus of the city surrounding

him. Placing a mural of Martin Luther King Jr. on one house, nailing thousands of shoes onto the weathered boards of another, lining hundreds of discarded vacuums in an abandoned plot of land, or building piles of old tires, discarded toys, and unrecognizable items picked from a garbage dump in another, Guyton has significantly changed the neighborhood's aesthetics. Bright-colored dots are present on some houses, while rusted, broken-down machines are on other lawns; the project is big, chaotic, and bold in its implementation. Heidelberg's name derives from the street from which the art project has expanded, belying the neighborhood's German working-class roots. By 1986, though, it was primarily a poverty-stricken Black neighborhood, with an abundance of abandoned houses and lots. Guyton began repurposing the overgrown plots of land and the dilapidated houses, creating his paintings and structures that are a cross between the graffiti drawings of SAMO/Basquiat, the ready-made art of Marcel Duchamp and Tracey Emin, and the folk art practices of Clare Graham, Timothy Washington, and Mr. Imagination. Guyton found the objects discarded in the streets, remaking them into art.

In *AfterCulture: Detroit and the Humiliation of History*, Jerry Herron graphically depicts the art on Heidelberg Street: "His houses literally vomit forth the physical elements of domestic history, furniture, dolls, television sets, signs, toilets, enema bottles, beds, tires, and baby buggies come cascading out doors and windows and through holes in the roof flowing down the outside walls and collecting in great heaps on the lawn, so that the whole looks like some sort of man-made lava flow. The magma of discarded lives: these visible tokens of a humiliated history."⁷¹ What was inside is now outside; what was private is now public for all to see. For Herron, Guyton's structures are unmistakable bodies, vomiting up the private relics of the dispossessed. The ready-made objects are not supposed to be seen outside of the home, and yet they are expelled into the street, partially digested and uncomfortably real in their disclosure. In Julia Kristeva's sense of the term, which she explores in much detail in *Powers of Horror*, Guyton's art renders the abject; when viewing his artwork one is confronted with a breakdown in meaning between what is a subject and what is an object, what is the self and what is the other.⁷² The house becomes a defiled body; to view it is to examine a corpse. To explore the Heidelberg Project is to discover the abject, an open wound streaming out its pus, where boundaries between self-other or subject-object no longer are clear. The abject is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules."⁷³ Pretty colored circles aside, the Heidelberg Project elicits intense feelings of the abject as the vomited objects of the house-corpse flow outward.⁷⁴

Guyton would certainly disagree with using psychosexual theory to

examine Heidelberg, arguing that his work is about hope and reconciliation, not death. The artist has explained, “I create beauty—my own beauty from what I see, what I understand, but not without first being able to relate to the beauty in myself.”⁷⁵ Guyton is a spiritual man with a religious zeal about the “life” he creates, coining the term *Heidelbergology* to define how found objects and murals can be assimilated into an urban community as an art practice.⁷⁶ There is, though, a flattening of the inherent racial and economic politics of the project when Guyton categorizes his art in this way.

Herron understands Heidelberg in distinctly political terms: an artistic response to the sociopolitical daily lives of poor Black victims of systematic racial and class-based practices that caused their “humiliation.” Herron’s term is important. Guyton’s installations and murals, presented in the streets where people are struggling, underscores the humiliation present in racial poverty. Race-based neoliberal capitalism economically wounded those living in this neighborhood; Guyton’s work exposes the humiliation involved in the “discarded lives” of those evicted. Duchamp’s urinal was shocking because he placed an object connected to the private space of excretion within the hallowed halls of a museum. The scandal of his ready-made sculpture is not that it is a urinal but that it is a urinal on display in a museum and labeled as art. The Heidelberg Project, while reminiscent of Duchamp’s art object, is doing something different. Guyton is taking objects of the private sphere and, instead of placing them within a museum, displaying them on his own neighborhood’s streets. The detritus is the neighbors’ “waste”; the broken objects he nails onto his walls or incorporates into his paintings are part of the lives of those who have suffered. The spray paint on the walls of the houses calls attention to the broken shingles of those homes that belong to his evicted neighbors. Guyton’s artwork highlights this humiliation.

Weaver, following in the footsteps of Gilbert and others, attempted to use graffiti to gentrify the Grand River neighborhood, knowing that art drives higher real estate prices and alters demographics. The Heidelberg Project, though, does not fit easily into this gentrification narrative, as there has not been a significant change in the McDougall-Hunt neighborhood since 1986. There is no Starbucks on a corner, no microbrewery in one of the houses, no pop-up bakery stall selling mini-doughnuts on one of the lawns. The art was prominently displayed when I visited in 2017, but the neighborhood still had many overgrown plots of land. In the 2010 census of tract 5168 of Wayne County (Heidelberg is part of the approximately fifty-street tract), out of the 774 residents, 739 were African American or Black. There were 472 housing units available, but 145 of them were unoccupied, not accounting for the number of abandoned

buildings knocked down by the government over the past decade.⁷⁷ The neighborhood, I was told, did not look that different from what it did in 1986. Michael Hodges, a former writer for the *Detroit News*, stated bluntly in 2007, "Indeed, twenty years on, it's fair to ask whether the Heidelberg Project has improved the neighborhood and helped the community."⁷⁸ Add another ten-plus years into the mix, and the answer is even more ambiguous.

Guyton's work highlights the systematic racism enveloping the lives of those in East Detroit, but does his work also help transform the neighborhood, easing the humiliation of those living there? Importantly, could his work be an antidote to gentrification by enriching the neighborhood for those living within its confines? The answer seems to be a resounding no. Many residents were angered Guyton took it upon himself to make their neighborhood a living art piece. By repurposing the abandoned houses and empty lots, Guyton was forcing his neighbors to be a part of the attraction that brought tourists into to the area. As Erma Dicus, a woman living three houses away from the Guyton household since 1956, asked, "Who gave him permission? . . . Who let him do this?" B. B. Odums, another woman living in the neighborhood, stated, "If we rode up and down the streets in the suburbs, we'd get picked up because we're Black. Every summer night we've got people riding up and down and looking at what we're doing. It's an invasion of privacy. They look at us like we're animals on display."⁷⁹ Over two hundred thousand visitors drive through this McDougall-Hunt neighborhood each year, stopping their cars and walking around the plots of land.⁸⁰

The Heidelberg Project allows these visitors to experience a living "ruin" much as Hurricane Katrina gave tourists a chance to examine the destruction of the Ninth Ward, even as people were living there and trying to piece together their lives. Journalists have linked the two cities as modern-day ruins, with Adam Nossiter stating: "New Orleans [post-Katrina] will be like Detroit. . . . A moldering core will be surrounded by miles of vacant houses, with wide open neighborhoods roamed by drug dealers and other criminals."⁸¹ The New Orleans disaster tours allowed well-intentioned tourists to see the ruins for themselves. Similarly, trips to Heidelberg are a safe way to view Detroit's "moldering core"—or "the zone," as one author describes it—where the ruins of a once-proud neighborhood are laid bare.⁸²

These moments of contact are important to Guyton and his defenders—white tourists would never enter his neighborhood without the art to attract them. The Heidelberg Project is a way to connect, and regardless of the tourists' intentions, the result is still contact, a rubbing together of peoples who normally never meet.⁸³ Derek Weaver argued this

point about the value of graffiti in the GRCC; when those in the suburbs meet those in the inner city, radical transformations can happen. But as Hodges argues, “With the clear majority of neighbors either indifferent or hostile, what claim can Heidelberg make to community enrichment, a central part of its professed mission?”⁸⁴

Community enrichment, though, is a central tenet of the Heidelberg Project, and over the years, there have been numerous attempts to raise funds for neighborhood improvement. Over the thirty-year history, Guyton updated the installations (rebuilding when the city destroyed some of the art), consistently adding new art pieces. The project evolved into a nonprofit corporation led by Jenenne Whitfield, a woman so inspired when she first saw the art that she quit her job, attempting to turn the one-man project into an artistic cultural village. Over the years, Whitfield struggled to legitimize Heidelberg, arguing for its community usefulness, including educational opportunities. Trying to combat the residents’ negative voices, she has created a public awareness campaign highlighting its artistic and social benefits. Whitfield has been moderately successful, working with Detroit mayors who have supported the project (or at least turned a blind eye), Wayne State University, and various large donors, including the Kresge Foundation, National Endowment of the Arts, and the Bloomberg Philanthropies.⁸⁵ In 2019, Guyton and Whitfield began working with the Detroit Land Bank (a quasi-governmental organization that has bought up 50 percent of abandoned homes in Detroit) to become a “community partner” in the neighborhood.⁸⁶

In the third decade of its existence, Heidelberg has continued to evolve. In the surrounding areas of Heidelberg Street, graffitied clocks have appeared on abandoned houses, all pointing to different times, some with no hands at all. In a news release, Guyton asserts, “After 30 amazing years, it’s time to bring a close to this phase of the project. It’s time for change! Haven’t you noticed the clocks?”⁸⁷ The new vision calls for more art programs, outreach, and renovation of the original houses. Whitfield has been promoted to CEO, while Guyton is completing a multiyear process of dismantling the art from the grounds not owned by the Heidelberg Project, showcasing the pieces in various museums and galleries.⁸⁸

In May 2019, the *New York Times* published an article on Guyton, stating that he is dismantling the Heidelberg Project because the neighborhood, while not yet gentrified, “has shifted from an impoverished pocket into a potential opportunity,” claiming that “the artist gained international acclaim making sculptures of the wreckage of his neighborhood. Now he must destroy his work in order to save it.”⁸⁹ M. H. Miller’s turn of a phrase leaves the *it* unclear: save what, exactly? The art or the neigh-



Clock on abandoned house, Detroit. Photo by John Lennon.

borhood? The answer, I find, becomes transparent when analyzing the Heidelberg Project App, which offers self-guided walking tours. The app, created by Isobar, won the 2018 MediaPost Appy Award in the Mapping/ Location-Based category and is a simple, easy-to-use interactive platform with a clickable map of the artwork.⁹⁰ For me, this app encapsulates both the potential and the objections associated with the Heidelberg Project for the past thirty years.

On the Heidelberg Project website, a news bulletin celebrates this award with a professionally stylized photo that places the iconic “dot house” in the background (plate 15). The dots are inspired by Guyton’s grandfather, Sam Mackey, and his love of jelly beans. As described by the app, “The dots represent the circle of life, the cell, the sun, the moon and how all things in life are connected and repeat.” The 1908 house is where Guyton grew up (and where in 1986 he emerged from to hear the cry of his neighborhood). Nicknamed the “Dotty Wotty House,” colorful circles of all sizes and colors cover the outside of the two-story house. According to the “Insights” section of the app, “Dotty Wotty represents how we should celebrate and respect all races of people living together.”

The two people in the forefront of the photo, however, are not of different races but a young white couple joyously holding hands. The young woman, in a white sweater and an above-the-knee green skirt, is laughing

while the twentysomething man, in a button-down long-sleeved shirt and dress jeans, is staring happily at her. The photo looks as if from a J.Crew catalog advertising to a white middle-class clientele, not a scene in front of a house in the middle of a poor Black neighborhood. There is harmony in the photo, but it is between man and woman, not between couple and environment. The artwork is background, with the happy white couple the focus of the photo.

The description of the circles as representing racial harmony is certainly hopeful—a far cry from seeing the Heidelberg Project as the evictee’s “humiliation.” Herron, though, made his comment in the 1990s, and the project has certainly evolved, culminating in this image of a white bourgeois couple frolicking in front of a dotted house. It’s hard not to read this image in the context of B. B. Odums’s comment—“If we rode down the streets of the suburbs we’d get picked up because we’re Black”—while the white couple seemingly has no worries as they walk hand in hand in a neighborhood that does not appear to fit their socioeconomic status. Here, Heidelberg is advertised as a safe cultural outing for white people who enjoy art. In the visual politics at play in the advertisement, there is an emphasis on showing a neighborhood where these outsiders would feel *at home*. While this might speak to the Heidelberg Project’s stated goal for racial harmony through art, it erases the racial and economic political reality.

Dan Gilbert and Derek Weaver are white men intent on revitalizing neighborhoods. Although *gentrification* is a bloated term that is pliable and overused, these men are using street art to transition neighborhoods to support higher real estate properties. While this strategy is coded as a positive economic renovation, a social and racial transition will consequently occur in these neighborhoods on a comparable scale to the gentrification’s “success.” Tyree Guyton, however, is from the neighborhood where he creates his art. His transformation was one of spirit, and for over thirty years, hundreds of thousands of people have traveled to examine the art Herron has called a humiliation and Guyton has called beautiful. The neighborhood, though, has remained relatively static.

But can street art stop gentrification while encouraging neighborhood enrichment? Can it be organized in a way that limits state and local municipalities from “igniting” neighborhoods, presenting instead a neighborhood as one worth protecting around core racial and social histories? In contrast to the other entrepreneurs discussed in this chapter, Kevin Harris, an African American orthodontist living and working in Baton Rouge, has used street art to attempt to save a neighborhood from gentrification.

USING STREET ART TO CONTROL GENTRIFICATION:
THE MUSEUM OF PUBLIC ART

On a seasonally humid Sunday afternoon in July 2016, I met Kevin Harris and Daryll on the corner of Eddie Robinson and Myrtle in what has been called the Old South Baton Rouge neighborhood. Sitting on the street, with weeds popping up through the cracks in the concrete in front of the Museum of Public Art, we chatted over the loud music spreading out from cars that were driving slowly over the pot-marked road. Daryll has lived in this neighborhood his whole life; he pointed toward his mom's house and then his house before explaining his connection to the museum. A house painter by trade, Daryll recounted the neighborhood's history, reminiscing about a time when the area could support two train stations. Those days, though, are gone. While speaking, he began pointing out various closed businesses.⁹¹

A few years before our conversation, while sitting on his porch, Daryll saw Harris taking pictures of the neighborhood, struck up a conversation, and soon became part of a project that would evolve into a museum almost completely organized, run, and financed by Kevin Harris. The Museum of Public Art is not like many other museums, including its lack of a roof (although it does have a door with a lock on it). The interior has been swept clean, with nothing on the inside of the building except walls. Each wall has an elaborate mural on it by some of the most well-known graffiti artists throughout the world, including Belin, Pose 2, Chemis, and Odeith. Mohammed Ali, Richard Pryor, along with weird-shaped aliens and a 3-D alligator, pop out from the wall. Being roofless also allows the art to spill from the inside of the museum out into the surrounding neighborhood.

Intricate graffiti styles, bright colors, and often Afrocentric themes, mark the outsides of numerous buildings around the museum. These buildings include the gorgeous, though derelict, Lincoln Theater, a famous landmark opened in 1956 as a showcase of art and music for Black audiences. The theater closed in 1986 and the graffitied outside walls served as an unofficial memorial to dead gang members and drug dealers. After much convincing by Harris, the owner of the building finally allowed it to be painted, and in 2013, Chemis and Pose 2 celebrated the theater's history with African and African American images.⁹² Connecting history with art, Harris proudly recounted to me his influence in the neighborhood.

Driving around this neighborhood, which featured immaculate homes with flowers in front yards and others abandoned, their plots filled with



Museum of Public Art, Baton Rouge. Photo by John Lennon .



Woman with light and long skirt mural, Baton Rouge. Photo by John Lennon.

overgrown weeds, there are strong similarities to the neighborhoods I drove through in Detroit. Harris pointed out over twenty murals he commissioned throughout the neighborhood. While the subjects and styles ranged, he was particularly proud of one painted on the outside of a beauty shop (plate 16). When examining this mural, his graffiti campaign's central mission crystallized for me. In the graffiti mural, four Black women with various skin tones are painted along the length of the building, forming a powerful Afrocentric image. One of the women looks at the viewer, her hair flowing upward with an otherworldly quality. From her hair grow two other faces of Black women, forming a triumvirate of Black female power.

On the left side of this large mural are painted three women, the first sitting on the floor reading a large book, the second sitting behind her combing the first woman's hair, and a third standing behind the second one braiding that woman's hair. Generations of Black women are working together as the youngest generation is reading. Not simply didactic, the images tell a story of female Black power that has generational roots with a visualized hope for the future. The image itself is a culmination of negotiating a shared vision between the owner of the beauty shop and the artist. According to Harris, the mural has had an economic impact on the business; the owner stated that there was an increase in local neighborhood women wishing to get their hair done in the building with these images on the outside.

Harris understood the need to find the right person for the beauty shop's mural. An orthodontist by profession, Harris previously owned an art business but eventually sold it because he found that for most of his customers, "anything that does not fit in the plantation system does not work with their cultural sensibilities. . . . Now if you want to paint some Sambos and Mammies, they think that's just wonderful. That's part of the sentiment. They like their little darkies serving mint juleps on porches . . . that's the imagery they like—that they'll actually buy."⁹³ But Harris's vision for the murals in South Baton Rouge does not cater to racist, infantilized white tastes. For the beauty shop, he contacted Rahman Statik Barnes, a graffiti writer and muralist from Chicago whose extensive career features predominately Afrocentric images of strong Black figures.⁹⁴ Choosing an artist who understands how to work with members of the poor Black community is important for Harris; he understands graffiti as a conversation in which the artist cannot dictate what the art should look like but rather create a dialogue that will spill out into the larger neighborhood community.

Creating graffiti murals that engage the community is different from making art that will speak to a future community, one that arrives from



Police, protesters, dead body mural house, Baton Rouge. Photo by John Lennon.

the outside. While most place-based mural arts programs, such as the ones in Eastern Market, Philadelphia, and São Paulo, state the need to interact with community members, the programs are meant to appeal to the largest number of people, especially if their *raison d'être* is to create “foot traffic.” When attempting to “revitalize” a neighborhood, officials are often risk-averse to anything confrontational. Murals can have images of minority figures; in most communities with mural arts programs, an image of Martin Luther King Jr., for example, will not appear to be confrontational. However, if the objective of the art program is to keep the neighborhood from displacing a poor, minority population, the murals do not need to be “inclusive” or to speak to a wide audience with various sensibilities. Kevin Harris funded almost the entirety of this project to insulate the neighborhood from gentrification. The artwork speaks to this intended goal.

Harris’s vision for the neighborhood can be best understood when examining the row houses that show, as he explained it, the “progression toward freedom.” A series of “shotgun”-style row houses—some abandoned, others not—were painted to illustrate the hard-fought progression of African Americans. The first house represents Africa, the second house represents enslavement on the plantation, the third shows the beginning of the civil rights movement, and the last houses represent the

end of the civil rights movement. Trained artists beautifully paint some of the houses, and local community members paint others. For example, the house symbolizing enslavement of Africans is an aesthetically challenging realistic 3-D image of an older woman in a rocking chair with a small child at her feet. Some houses have more simplistic drawings, painted by nonprofessional hands, including one featuring brightly colored African masks. Another house depicts the 1953 Baton Rouge bus boycott that served as the model for the better-known Montgomery bus boycott.⁹⁵ This mural acts as a Baton Rouge history lesson, rooted within a larger African history, and it celebrates a dynamic resistive event.

What is fascinating about these art-wrapped houses is that, although some do show more universally accepted images a wide swath of people could relate to (or at least not be offended by), Harris included confrontational images, including H. Rap Brown (Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin), a Black civil rights leader convicted of killing a police officer (plate 17). The image, painted by Chemis, is certainly dynamic: on an abandoned house with plywood covering the door, the silhouetted image of the head and upper body of Brown is painted. Coming up from the floorboards in 3-D is one single hand holding a lit match. The match, with an impossibly long flame, has started a fire, with the light splashing on Brown's face.

The Baton Rouge-born Brown, who was the fifth chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, wrote the inflammatory political autobiography *Die Nigger Die!* (1969). He infamously proclaimed "violence is as American as cherry pie," and, "If America don't come around, we're gonna burn it down." Placed on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list after avoiding trial for inciting a riot, Brown eventually served five years in Attica prison. While there, he converted to Islam and changed his name to Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin; upon leaving prison, he moved to Atlanta and became a community activist. On March 9, 2002, he was convicted of the murder of Fulton County sheriff Ricky Kinchen, who was shot and killed when attempting to serve Brown a warrant (Al-Amin denies the charges).

Most city beautification campaigns would certainly reject the image of an incendiary Black activist and convicted murderer of a police officer. Celebrating H. R. Brown/Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin's "burn, baby, burn" motif on a wall in a decimated South Baton Rouge community calls out institutional racism, advocating for the emergence of a new United States from the ashes of the old. The artwork, painted a decade after Brown/Al-Amin was convicted of killing Kinchen, is not meant to bridge Black and white relations or to offer easily digestible history lessons to white tourists. It is not trying to show, as President Donald Trump stated after Heather Heyer was killed in South Carolina while protesting a white

nationalist demonstration, that there are “very fine people” on “both sides.”⁹⁶ Harris’s graffiti murals are meant to provoke uncomfortable conversations.

Speaking with the orthodontist in his office, which Harris adorned with beautiful stained-glass windows, making it feel more like an art studio than a place to get braces, it is obvious that Harris is fine with confrontation. Our conversation often touched on Baton Rouge’s overt and veiled racism. We spoke shortly after Alton Sterling was killed by Officer Blane Salamoni on July 5, 2016, while he was selling CDs in front of the Triple S Food Mart. For days afterward, protesters demonstrated against racialized police violence enacted upon the bodies of African Americans. A graffiti wave appeared overnight, including murals of Sterling (one placed on the market itself), antipolice graffiti calling for the death of police officers, and numerous “ACAB” (all cops are bastards) tags. Protesters were in the street, and paint covered the walls. Much of the antipolice graffiti I documented in the city was amateurish, with the letters scrawled on walls by hands that did not have much control over their spray cans. The city was on edge as reports of an unarmed Black man killed by police fit into a national conversation begun in earnest with the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson. Angry, accusatory graffiti was one way in which the conversation erupted.

The violence against Sterling was not shocking to Harris (or many of the Black community members I spoke to that day) but revealed the racism of living in Louisiana. To that end, Harris spoke of the lack of funding he was able to receive from state and local sources despite the Museum of Public Art receiving positive attention in newspapers and other local media and having thousands of followers on Facebook. He believes the reason is simple: “Because it was in a Black neighborhood, and anything that appeals to or benefits Black people is not something that white people can embrace.” Harris explained the murals were not all political; many were, in fact, abstract art by some of the world’s most well-known muralists. But, because it was in a Black neighborhood, he was unable to find financial support from the white community.⁹⁷ He looked to other sources of funding, including a Kickstarter campaign and local Black churches, but both were ultimately unsuccessful.⁹⁸ Harris therefore funded most of the project with his own money, paying for artists to come to Baton Rouge. He and Daryll were responsible for them when they arrived in town, acting as a welcoming committee to Baton Rouge and showing them around the community while also organizing the more practical tasks of providing rides to and from the airport, arranging hotel rooms, and dealing with issues that arose when artists ran afoul of the law.



"BRPD Are Killers" graffiti on building, Baton Rouge. Photo by John Lennon.

The main reason Harris is so committed to the project—besides being a huge graffiti fan—is the role of gentrification in this Black community. Unlike Sean Cummings or Dan Gilbert, who use art to enhance gentrification, Harris believes that graffiti is a way to put an end to, or at least limit, gentrification. He certainly hopes for urban renewal, but Harris wants it enjoyed by the actual residents who live there, not those who would come in after the changes have taken place. The South Baton Rouge community sits between Louisiana State University and the downtown area.

The neighborhood where the murals are located separates the two areas, and as the two sections begin to prosper, land developers are considering Old South Baton Rouge as the next potential site for revitalization. The problem for developers is that they have to get the people living there to move out.

For Harris, public art is a way to stop this removal: "If the people, the community, has something to offer, it would be a little bit different. Meaning that you can't just get rid of all the art that we've created, can't get rid of all the murals. We have something here that you can't replace with your new buildings. It offered people an opportunity to start to unite under a common cause, which they'd never done before." The project, he states, has no "commercial or monetary incentive behind it. It wasn't promoting anything, it wasn't trying to make the community appealing so that outsiders could move in there." Harris believes he is creating a space for a voice to emerge from the community when talks begin on "igniting" the neighborhood. As Harris states, "When communities bring art to the table there is less talk about demolition and more talk about preservation."⁹⁹ The hope is that the art will force investors and Baton Rouge to take into account the people living within the community instead of focusing on derelict housing needing to be razed. In other words, there is no profit but maybe something "more."

Is Harris being overly optimistic? Will developers targeting South Baton Rouge consider the people living in the neighborhood as they revitalize, or will they look to move in a new population that can pay higher rents? Is there money to be made in preserving a dilapidated, though historically important, old theater, or is there better money in renovated loft space showcasing a few of the theater seats as kitsch luxury? Harris is far from naïve, and on our travels throughout the neighborhood, he pointed to one building already zoned for new loft space, pointing out how gentrification has begun to seep into the neighborhood. He has also given up fundraising because of the racism he perceives in the city, as well as the time, money, and effort it would take to organize. Importantly, Harris has also not made on-the-ground connections to any neighborhood activist community, and in my conversations with him, there is no indication that he has gone through the hard labor of working with community organizers. Instead, he has been a one-man operation who financed and found the artists himself, making deals with individual business and home owners to paint their walls. There is certainly community involvement when it comes to the artwork, but little coalition building with other types of community organizations. He hopes that art will save the community. Art, though, without a popular organized movement behind it, will not protect a neighborhood from real estate entrepreneurs.

As Harris pulls back, others have moved in. These groups rely on patronage and government subsidies to "beautify" the city. One specific group becoming a force in Baton Rouge is the Walls Project, featuring mural art throughout the city, including South Baton Rouge. The project originated when Casey Phillips was on a beach in Santa Monica, California, and a feeling of shame overpowered him for abandoning the city of his youth. After running away from Baton Rouge and spending his twenties in New Orleans, Colorado, and eventually Los Angeles, he returned to his hometown and saw a desperate need for "new energy" and leadership to transform his city. Splitting Baton Rouge into three major demographics—the locals who have lived all their lives in Baton Rouge and make up 88 percent of the population, the "boomerangs" who move away for a time before coming back "home," and the "transplants" who move to the city for a variety of reasons. For Phillips, it is this third group of outsiders he calls "his people" and "his heroes." They are the ones who "have huge ideas" because they are "starved and thirsty for culture [they] don't have." They are not anchored to a passive mind-set, believing that the city is "just the way it is and always will be."¹⁰⁰ It is these transplants, not those who have been living in the Baton Rouge communities their whole lives, that he believes will reinvent the city.

When Phillips returned to Baton Rouge as a self-proclaimed "entrepreneurial activist," he volunteered in many arts-related activities. Forming a small group of ten influential townspeople, and without any foresight or knowledge of public art, the group decided they would paint a mural. It was well received by those inside the community, and by the time they were painting the second mural, they had over a thousand donors. The Walls Project had officially begun.

Started in 2012, the Walls Project is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit created by real estate developers and various community members in Baton Rouge with a professional public relations campaign claiming that, "through creative placemaking, The Walls is educating citizens to create a skilled workforce, rejuvenating public and private structures and streetscapes, improving local business viability and public safety, and bringing diverse people together to celebrate, make change, and be inspired."¹⁰¹ To do so, the project is "fostering entrepreneurs and cultural industries" that will integrate "arts and entrepreneurial initiatives" that have an impact on "participants far beyond simple self-expression." The goals are lofty; each side of the official triangle logo—create, cultivate, and reactivate—is meant to seamlessly work together. Unlike Harris, the Walls Project attempts to work with various community organizations to build their brand by reaching out to numerous constituents. Besides placing murals in the community, the Walls Project also has programs for science, tech-

nology, engineering, the arts, and math education as well as workforce development, with a goal of getting youth engaged in creating “the future of Baton Rouge.”¹⁰² By 2018, over one hundred murals had been painted throughout the city, six hundred students had gone through some form of an educational program, and more than thirty blocks had been “reactivated” (which, among other things, means that garbage has been picked up and houses have been painted).

In his analysis of the Walls Project, Nouredine Miladi suggests that this type of project “may serve as an alternative space for marginal views to emerge and brought to the attention of the establishment,” allowing minority voices to have discussions with those in power.¹⁰³ From Miladi’s point of view, both Kevin Harris’s project and the Walls Project are similar, creating positive forces within the community. But these two projects, while sharing comparable activities—painting murals and graffiti in Baton Rouge—diverge at key points. While Harris could not find backers, and he has insisted that racism was a key component for the lack of interest, the Walls Project, originated by a “boomerang” white man, has found many corporate backers, including, Cox, ExxonMobil, Best Buy, and Capital One. While there are a variety of factors for the differing “success” of the two projects, the nuanced ideology of urban renewal certainly plays a role.

Harris believes that his graffiti murals can produce “a seat at the table,” staving off the harshest tentacles of gentrification already wrapping themselves around the neighborhood. While Phillips’s “arts activism” may be pure, the Walls Project is certainly much more ambiguous about its intentions vis-à-vis gentrification. To whom does the Walls Project answer? The neighbors? The board? Corporate sponsors? When speaking to Helena Williams, a Walls Project spokesperson, she explained that the project itself is a constantly evolving organization attempting to walk the very fine line between urban renewal and gentrification. When I questioned whether the murals themselves could start “reactivating” neighborhoods to the point that current residents would no longer afford to live there, she stated there is a conscious “hope” the project will lead to urban renewal and not “gentrification.” Scanning through the project’s board of directors and seeing names from various architectural and real estate firms, however, there are certainly questions around this commitment. For example, why is the Walls Project, a nonprofit organization, involved in painting a huge blues harmonica on the outside of the Belle of Baton Rouge Casino?¹⁰⁴ What this example shows is that, unlike Harris, who is trying to create art for those within the community, the Walls Project has its sights set on those outside.

The Museum of Public Art and the Walls Project diverge on the idea of

what the murals should do within a community. For Harris, the graffiti's artistic merit is of great importance. Claiming that there were not enough talented graffiti artists in Baton Rouge, Harris brought "the best" writers and artists to the neighborhood, attempting to make this Southern city a known stop for world-renowned graffiti writers. Harris hopes that when "urban development" progresses in this poor Black neighborhood, the residents will have something that allows them to negotiate. Harris, though, was unable or unwilling (depending on whom you speak to in the community) to get his more radical vision to be supported financially by a larger community. Banging his head against what he considers racist bureaucracy, and others describe as a difficult personality, he ended his project. Phillips, in contrast, who desires to work with different private funding groups and government agencies, has been successful in building a brand around his mural beautification project. He is aware that funding is easily lost, and the artwork, therefore, is neither controversial nor overtly political.

During my conversation with Williams, it was unclear how much approval (direct or tacit) the Walls Project receives from the mayor's office; it is apparent, though, that the organization and mayor's office work closely together. When clicking through the one hundred murals, almost all are nonconfrontational. Except one. The day after Alton Sterling's death, Casey Phillips commissioned artist Jo Hines to spray paint an image of Alton Sterling on the side of the Triple S Food Mart (plate 18).¹⁰⁵

The walls were already tagged by those who had "signed in" at the gas station to offer their condolences to the Sterling family and to publicly grieve the death of the unarmed Black man killed by police. Written in Sharpie markers, these graffiti notes were expressions of grief and rage. Getting permission only from the owner of the gas station, Phillips did not seek formal approval from the mayor's office or ask permission from donors—the mural was painted on the gas station as Black Lives Matter protests were being organized throughout Baton Rouge. It was a risky decision when much of the Walls Project's funding came from the state or philanthropic donations from wealthy (white) donors—a move Williams stated that they did not know how the town would react to (there were, in fact, a few objections). This was the image, though, that made numerous paper and television reports in the aftermath of Sterling's death. While Harris must answer to no one when placing the image of H. Rap Brown/Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin on a building in South Baton Rouge, Phillips certainly does. It was a bold choice for him to organize a memorial to a Black man killed by the police.

Harris's racial politics are clear. His commissioning of Afrocentric imagery and radical Black political leaders' murals is an attempt to limit

gentrification's scope, keeping the neighborhood a Black-centered one. Unbending in his aesthetic vision and his political ideology, Harris went it mostly alone and, after a successful run, was burned out both mentally and financially. Casey Phillips, a self-identified "entrepreneurial activist," also desires change, although he believes that outsiders are the primary agents needed to revitalize the city. Phillips envisions a new Baton Rouge emerging from the shell of the old and his entrepreneurialism has led him to make deals with various stakeholders. There lies the major difference: Harris believes that graffiti art can protect the neighborhood by keeping its culture and residents; Phillips's reliance on outsiders does not share these same end goals.

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In Detroit, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Miami, Philadelphia, São Paulo, and countless other cities around the world, there is a clear divide between street art and graffiti. In this chapter, the division between mural arts and graffiti is one way to explore the nuances of gentrification as race-based capitalism—especially in conflict areas undergoing economic and racial transformation. A "new" New Orleans emerged post-Katrina; what does a "new" Detroit look like post-bankruptcy with its similar threads of neoliberalism, gentrification, and racial capitalism? In the latest wave of conflict graffiti, street art has been leading the way.