

Urban Social Hauntings: Disappearing Gravestone Murals in Gentrifying Brooklyn

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journals.sagepub.com/home/epd**Amaka Okechukwu** 

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Abstract

This article concerns the disappearance of gravestone (or “rest in peace”) murals in gentrifying Brooklyn, New York. Social hauntings reveal the unresolved violence of Black disposability and dispossession, as it manifests in the urban landscape in periods of urban decline and gentrification; gravestone murals are forms of “wake work” that attend to social haunting, accounting for Black life and death in urban place. This article first considers the wake work of gravestone murals, that they are memorials, archives of collective memory, spaces of worldmaking, and resistance to anti-Black violence. Because gravestone murals illustrate how Black people produce meaning in the urban landscape, they are also forms of Black spatial production. The article then explores the emergence of newer, stylized murals as aesthetic commodities that bring social and economic value to urban space, while commodifying Black life and death. The disappearance of gravestone murals, a visual record of the urban crisis, indicates the transformation of Black urban space in the 21st century.

Keywords

Black geographies, urban crisis, gentrification, murals, collective memory, black dispossession

Introduction

Although I no longer live there, Nostrand Avenue—the spine of Crown Heights and Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn—still feels like home. Even with the marked changes. The beauty supply store that is now a trendy bar. The extensive coffee options lining the street from Eastern Parkway to Fulton Street to DeKalb Avenue, and beyond. Fewer shouts of, “Empress! Dred!”—both a social recognition and a persistent demand for flirtation;

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more averted eyes as new residents aim to quickly make their way down the street and around folks hanging out, in line for fresh roti and currant rolls, sidewalk sellers of home-made delicacies. There are more people now, new high rises pack them in, dwarfing the brownstones, row houses, and pre-war buildings, clashing with the high and low-rise public housing complexes scattered throughout the neighborhoods. New residents use the street as high-speed walking thoroughfare, rather than the destination it is for many Black longtime residents—a card table set up on one corner, someone taking a quick nap on a bench between jobs on Eastern Parkway, another leaning against the wall of a bodega listening to the music from a car parked across the street.

With gentrification comes fewer Black folk, new spaces for consumption, less talking-arguing-laughing-*being* in public space, more police. But what haunts me regularly, here and elsewhere, are the gravestone murals¹—fading from the corners of bodegas and old storefronts, disappearing from the urban landscape (see Figures 1 and 2). Gravestone murals are forms of public art that commemorate the lives of the deceased. These murals emerged during the rise in urban gun violence during the 1980s and 1990s. Most of the memorialized people are from the local community, but sometimes the murals depict historical figures, such as activists and musicians. They appear on the sides of buildings, often on the exterior walls of bodegas, take-out restaurants, and other storefronts, but some also appear on the sides of residential buildings, facing alleys, and open lots.

The fading gravestone murals indicate a persistent social haunting, the societal disposability and dispossession of Black people over time, an enduring violence. Avery Gordon specifies that social hauntings are “one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied” (2008: xvi). Social hauntings announce that what appears to be absent is actually here, at this time. They represent and reveal an “unresolved social violence” (Gordon, 2008: xvi) that is alive



Figure 1. Mural at Lewis Avenue and Halsey Street, Bedford-Stuyvesant (2015) Photo by Regan Good.

and present in the present, in what Saidiya Hartman refers to as the “afterlife of slavery,” encompassing the persisting structural violence that Black people continue to face post-abolition, the ways that Black people have been made vulnerable to limited opportunities and premature death (2008: 6). Although I focus on a period of urban decline or “urban crisis” in the 1980s and 1990s, and gentrification in the present-day (post-2014), the “interminable event” of slavery (Sharpe, 2016: 19) is a social haunting that collapses time; mourning in the form of gravestone murals is not disconnected from grief that predates the 1980s, nor disconnected from present or future grief, even as the murals fade. I use the concept of social hauntings to examine inventories of Black dispossession through urban crisis and gentrification because it describes how violence cloaks itself in the everyday, how social forces shape worlds without notice. By naming and uncovering this violence, we bear witness to it and can recognize practices of survival and resistance to oppression. By acknowledging this violence, we can work to abolish the social relations and conditions that produced it.

I encountered these murals in Crown Heights and Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn as a resident, and then a visitor, listening to experiences told to me in the middle of sidewalks and on stoops; walking streets that became unfamiliar. I also explored oral histories conducted by other researchers and dug through archives of borough history. Drawing from Gordon (2008), I use haunting as a research method, considering the presences and absences of the



Figure 2. Mural removed, the wall at Lewis Avenue and Halsey Street (2018) Photo by Regan Good.

landscape: who and what was here, who and what remains (or has left), what appears to be absent, and what are the new places that emerge. In this, I look to the “wake work” of community members—how they attend to “physical, social, and figurative death and also to the largeness that is Black life” through the creation of gravestone murals (Sharpe, 2016: 16). Christina Sharpe’s (2016, 2018) analytic of wake work draws attention to the ways that Black people interrupt and resist the condition of living in the afterlife of slavery through refusal, practices of care, and by imagining new futures.

One definition of haunt is “to visit often: frequent” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) and community members’ wake work with gravestone murals—as memorial, an archive of collective memory, a space of worldmaking, and resistance to anti-Black violence—suggests that death is not an end, but rather, people have a persisting collective relationship to the dead. Even as urban neighborhoods change, the violence of the urban crisis, and by extension enslavement, continue to haunt Black people across spatial contexts. While the material culture of gravestone murals may fade, the memory and contemporary experience of violence persists. New and older forms of wake work will emerge in the absence of gravestone murals.

I contrast gravestone murals with the ways that a newer tribute memorial (commodified, stylized depictions of the famous dead) is an extension of the shifting social and economic conditions in a gentrifying landscape, these street paintings an aesthetic commodity that uses the representation of blackness to bring social and economic value into urban space. In this way, I contribute to literature on Black geographies (Bledsoe and Wright, 2019; Hawthorne, 2019; Hunter and Robinson, 2018; Lewis, 2020; McKittrick, 2006; McKittrick and Woods, 2007; Reese, 2019; Rios, 2020; Summers, 2019; Woods, 1998) of both care and dispossession. If wake work attends to the death and life of Black people, then this article also draws attention to the death and life of Black place.

Gravestone murals are spaces to memorialize the lives of the disappeared, mostly made absent by the violence of the drug wars of the 1980s and 1990s, a defining element of the urban crisis. The term “urban crisis” describes the postwar urban transformations of capital flight, deindustrialization, and hyper-segregation that shaped Black life in cities during the last half of the 20th century. With the elimination of many formal, legitimate labor options for the working class and poor as a consequence of deindustrialization (Sugrue, 2005; Wilson, 1990), and the expansion of a global narcotics network in part due to the government’s covert and unconcealed destabilization of Global South nations (Friesendorf, 2007), the drug economy became an identifiable feature of Black neighborhoods pushed to the edge of precarity during the urban crisis. While the sale of drugs became a labor opportunity for poor and working-class urban residents, unregulated, it became its own source of violence with battles over influence and authority waged in the streets. And drug abuse became an open, public matter.

With the government sanctioned War on Drugs, a war waged against its own citizens, drug policy enforcement occurred solely in Black and Brown urban neighborhoods as a form of social control, although all racial groups used drugs. This drug policy enforcement “took on the character of war” in the 1980s (Rosino and Hughey, 2018: 850), with President Regan’s authorization of local police to access military equipment and technology and conduct domestic military operations through legislation such as The 1981 Military Cooperation with Law Enforcement Act (Murch, 2015; Hinton, 2017). This violence, at different registers, resulted in the disappearance of large segments of the Black community, whether warehoused in prisons with the growth of mass incarceration, or death at the hands of the police, other community members, drug overdose, or by other means. This violence left ghosts in its wake. Gravestone murals are forms of Black spatial production that memorialize the casualties of this violence, their material form marking the urban landscape. By

Black spatial production, I refer to the ways that Black people produce spatial meaning through the use of space. This production of space from below is contrary to official, authoritative mapping, which does not make visible the structural violence, nor the wake work that attends to the victims and survivors of violence. Gravestone murals point to the presence of lives once lived in these neighborhoods, their spirits still present.

However, gravestone murals (largely a relic of the 1980s and 1990s) are fading and being intentionally erased. The disappearance of these “Rest in Peace” murals signify another urban transformation which produces its own violence of historical and cultural erasure, threatening the collective memory and recorded history of Black urban space. Many media and local government narratives herald the in-migration of the (mostly) white middle and upper class, increased private investment in urban real estate, and arrival of new businesses aimed to meet the cultural tastes of new residents, as signifying a “return” of cities after a long period of neglect (Florida, 2012; Katz, 1998; Voith and Wachter, 2014). But a return suggests a departure, and while capital investment may have reappeared, many residents never left, never intended to leave, but are now part of forced and “induced” migrations from their homes (Davies and M’Bow, 2007). The destruction of memorial murals also signifies a disappearance of those that remember, of those who hold the collective memory of urban places during the urban crisis. The chipping, fading, and explicit erasure of gravestone murals through paint, sandblasting, and building demolition (see Figure 2) indicate a persistent violence of displacement and dispossession that gentrification produces, reflecting the broader social haunting of the afterlife of slavery. The loss of these murals serves as a reminder that the violence that disappeared people also made gentrification possible through the devaluation of property, clearing of space, and narratives of pathology and subsequent justified renewal (Johnson, 2013; Pattillo, 2007). Thus, the lifecycle of these gravestone murals is entangled in subsequent phases of Black urban dispossession in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Commemoration

When someone dies tragically, loved ones construct makeshift shrines to commemorate the person’s life—sometimes centered around lamp posts, fences, and sidewalk corners where pictures or the name of the victim are posted, surrounded by an assortment of candles, balloons, flowers, stuffed animals, liquor bottles, and personal messages written to the victim. These memorials lack permanence—weather conditions sweep much of these materials away, foot traffic may force remaining materials to be discarded.

Commemoration also occurs on the body itself—as mourners wear t-shirts printed with the picture of a loved one, nicknames, and dates of birth and death. Others may permanently memorialize these details or the person’s likeness through tattooing their body. These private forms of memorial contribute to a public recognition and collective memory, especially when multiple people wear the shirts together in public; yet, these are mostly individual expressions of mourning.

Gravestone murals connect personal mourning to public memorial, transforming private loss into a public matter, naming the persistent violence and grief a community continues to bear (see Figure 3). Memorial murals are distinct in that they were semi-permanent forms of collective memory pinned in the geography of urban space. These murals were “more permanent than a funeral, more accessible than a grave,” (Delgado, 2003) but also situated a space within a socio-political context, imbuing in it a sense of place and time. Unlike sidewalk commemorations, they did not disappear in weeks, although environmental conditions and the motivations of individual property owners could threaten the lifecycle of murals.

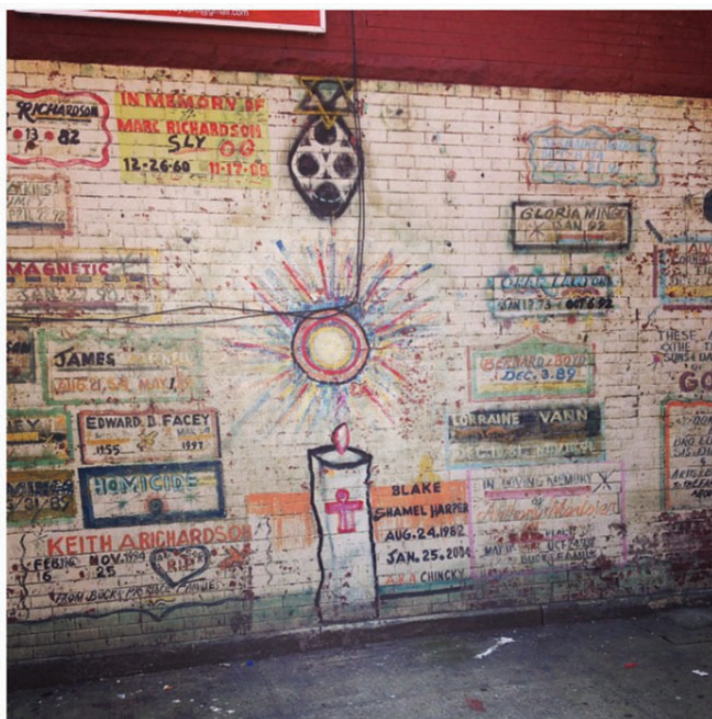


Figure 3. Fading Mural on Park Place at Nostrand Avenue, Crown Heights (2014) Photo by Author.

Still, most murals I encountered had existed for 10 years or more, indicating a long-term relationship to the local community. Alongside the explosion of unsanctioned graffiti marking urban public space in the 1970s and into the 1980s, gravestone murals emerged to memorialize the victims of violence during this period. With the onset of gentrification, memorial murals are no longer semi-permanent; instead, they are erased in efforts to quickly sell buildings and communicate a pristine and uniform urban aesthetic. Other murals slowly fade over time, no one left to touch up paint.

In the announcement of the violence, gravestone murals provide the opportunity for memorial and meaning-making. Most of the murals contain a mixture of symbolic images—such as a cross, an ankh, a burning candle, doves, flowers and clouds—or symbols (sometimes aspirational) that may be important to the victims commemorated—cars, a graduation cap and gown, sometimes the city skyline. These visual aspirational flourishes are ways that survivors “imagine otherwise” (Sharpe, 2016: 124); they are expressions of care that record the dreams and accomplishments of the dead. By creating and witnessing gravestone murals, community members practice Black spatial production by producing spaces of commemoration in locations of structural abandonment, revering victims that were socially marginalized.

In *Evidence of Being*, Darius Bost writes that during the early AIDS epidemic, Black gay men artists, anticipating their deaths, approached cultural production as a way to realize “archival permanence” in the face of the impermanence of their lives; with art, they could transform the dominant representation of their lives, challenging homophobia and racial oppression (2018: 85). Gravestone murals are imaginings by loved ones that bind the memory of the deceased to a historical record, aiming for a kind of archival permanence,

representing the dead as beloved, rather than the dominant dehumanizing images of Black youth. As wake work, these murals are a practice of care in the hold of the ship, a “[defense of] those already dead, those dying, and those living lives consigned to the possibility of always-imminent death” (Sharpe, 2016: 37).

In murals that commemorate more than one person, the names of the individuals are often listed with birth and death dates—sometimes prayers, poems, or specific messages to the public are incorporated in the image, such as “May God bless the families of these people upon this wall; they have been through denial, grievance, mourning and survived it all! There is hope for the future” (Figure 1). Through tragedy, loved ones gain a “knowledge on death,” an experiential knowing that serves as a source of strength for some (Carter, 2019: 4). These murals function as a reconciliation of grief, a means of commemoration, and a recording of history by giving voice to a memory. These murals are works of care that claim and transform urban space into places of Black remembrance.

An archive of Black life

Collective memory is an intricate process shaped by choices about what to remember and forget, what to include in the shaping of a narrative, and what to reject (Starzmann, 2016). In the production of gravestone murals, community members choose to remember the deceased in the face of the dominant society’s choice to ignore their death, misrepresent it, or sensationalize it. Tina Campt reminds us that so many images of Black subjects are “produced with the purpose of tracking, cataloging, and constraining [our] movement” (2017: 3). State and other authoritative archives—such as those that designate and record criminal activity, use of social services, represent a work history, document health conditions, and generally surveil Black life—are instruments of power that both represent and do the work of dispossession. These gravestone murals, on the other hand, are an archive that resists the incomplete and distorted accounts of Black life during the urban crisis. Memorial murals recall memories instead of repressing them.

Through representing Black lives in paint on walls, the community includes the deceased in the historical record. Gravestone murals chronicle the collective experience of loss and trauma through the widespread acknowledgement of life lived and taken. In pledging to never forget the deceased, community members also pledge to collectively remember the violence of this period. In this wake work, memorial murals, as funeral rituals and burial plots, “evidence Black social life asserted,” in the face of structural racism spatialized as urban divestment and neglect (Roane, 2018: 243).

Gravestone murals contribute to a broader cultural memory of violence beyond Nostrand Avenue, connecting Black places across the United States and abroad. From the more fleeting and quotidian “rest in peace” graffiti tags to the murals that dwarf passerby’s, these visual records point to a violence persisting across space and time. As Karla F.C. Holloway notes, “the act of memorializing retains a particular aspect of a culture’s narrative, and for blacks in the Americas, some notion of racial memory and racial realization is mediated through the veil of death” (2002: 7). Young people possessed this knowing, as the youth of so many of the victims is a defining aspect of the weight of this loss. As Richard Green, a respected neighborhood elder and the founder of the Crown Heights Youth Collective, said, “We were working so hard with these youths, and trying to just keep it, you know, going— I mean, that ‘94, homicides are up to 2,200 a year. Sometimes I’d go to two, three funerals a day, you know. Young people, 25 [years-old], were senior citizens” (2016).

Youth suffered much of this violence, attended funerals, buried peers. And the community collectively experienced what Dagmawi Woubshet (2015) calls a “poetics of compounding loss,” a matrix of community grief, met with their own vulnerability to mortality, as a greater public blamed them for their own loss. The youth of this period who remained in these neighborhoods, now adults with their own families, today face the prospect of displacement as these neighborhoods gentrify.

While taking in a more visually abstract memorial mural a few years ago on Nostrand Avenue outside of the Black Lady Theater (see Figure 4), a passerby explained the visual narrative: a mother is trying to repel the devil, who is dressed in a black suit. The devil has taken all three of her sons. The passerby tells us that all of her sons were killed by gun violence. Her mouth is open, as if she is screaming “No!” while repelling the force of the devil. In the background, her sons stand on what appear to be clouds, amongst smaller versions of the devil, each of whom is pointing a hand like a gun, as if targeting people, as if calling out the audience. The passerby, a long-time resident, says he remembers the mother, who lived down the street on Park Place. Although he did not specify, it was clear that the mother was no longer there—either also dead or moved away.

While the mother may be gone now, her grief is still present, on the wall on Nostrand Avenue near Park Place, the unsettled violence still haunting the urban landscape. In January 2020, the U.S. Marshals seized the theater from the inherited owners, the courts taking the side of the purported owner (of whom many publications have described as a slumlord) (Albritton, 2020; Rice, 2020; Wilson, 2017) in a chaotic and acrimonious legal battle. Who thought, when kids were being killed in the street, that outside



Figure 4. Mural on Nostrand Avenue near Park Place, Crown Heights (2014) Photo by Author.

interests would fight to take over these buildings? That out-of-town relations and nearby friends would argue over the ownership of these places, the courts classifying the people cleaning windows and maintaining the murals as squatters? The future of the Black Lady Theater and this memorial mural, now owned by “750 Nostrand 123 LLC,” appears bleak. With the erasure of memorial murals and the displacement of people, there is no one left to acknowledge the ghosts or recall a memory. Nothing to announce that lives were lived and lost here.

The erasure of memorial murals does not dispel ghosts. Instead, at another index of violence, it exemplifies a denial of Black life in urban space. If social hauntings “prompt a something-to-be-done” (Gordon, 2011: 3) or an urgent demand for a more just future, the denial of these social hauntings, and the wake work done to acknowledge Black life and death in place, reasserts generations of violence. Although the murals surfaced in response to the specific gun violence of the urban crisis, these conditions occurred in the wake of enslavement; what made Black urban residents vulnerable to gun violence is the persisting legacy of enslavement and subsequent dispossession that continues to impact the lives of the descendants of the enslaved in the United States and across the globe. In this way, the murals attend to the grief of the urban crisis specifically; however, they then also respond to grief experienced across time, a grief of social disposability and dispossession, a grief of persistently being haunted by violence.

Fading murals, those that weather with time rather than being suddenly and intentionally destroyed, do not indicate that a community has forgotten the deceased or has healed a broader collective grief. A community of survivors, haunted by this violence, is likely wrangling with its own persistent vulnerability to death. The mother depicted in the mural must have lived with an enduring grief of losing her children, the peers of these children must have lived with a persistent grief of losing friends; however, they must all collectively wrestle with the potentiality of this violence taking their own lives, and/or the distress of surviving traumatic conditions. Murals may fade as a community aims to cope with trauma; they may fade because there are few remaining to attend to their upkeep.

Wake work appears in many forms, murals are simply one iteration that is rooted in material space. Even as murals fade, community members continue to frequent them but also care for the living by supporting each other and engaging in collective activities. Faith communities gather and provide hope, people still throw parties and parades and cultivate joy; porches, stoops, barbershops, hair salons, bakeries, and take-out restaurants are still spaces where community knowledge is shared and passed down. Thus, these forms of wake work are also forms of Black spatial production in which space is purposed for the collective, especially when the material dimensions of these spaces were not designed for this purpose. In spite of the many violences the community continues to encounter, they aim to keep alive the presence of the Black community, even as the mural colors pale.

The passerby, who also takes me down the street to point out the names of friends on a nearby mural (see Figure 3), still lives in the neighborhood. But his ability to stay is threatened by gentrification. With continued vulnerability to various forms of violence, including displacement with the onset of gentrification, there is a need to attend to life that is constantly under threat, alongside care of the dead.

Afterlives of the dead

“Rest in Peace” murals call for a different world, asking community members to remember the dead, while also urging them to keep living despite the trauma of violence. Their presence symbolically appeals to peace, and in fact, many murals explicitly plea for unity and an

end to gun violence. In Crown Heights, murals became one site of “peace zones,” spaces aimed to encourage healthy youth interaction in spite of the regularity of violence. Richard Green says about the work of the Crown Heights Youth Collective,

Wherever we found an incident took place, we set up a peace zone there. We saw an area that was active in a shooting. One of our ballplayers—I’ll give you a good example—he was shot on St. Johns [Place] . . . off Utica [Avenue], and we set up a peace zone; an abandoned building right on that corner, right where he would have been hanging out. We painted a mural, we found a way to put up these basketball hoops, or if we couldn’t put them up, we would get the portable [basketball hoops], put them out there. We would put up a chess table—and those guys played dominos. Those were the peace zones (2016).

These peace zones were spaces for young people to play and socialize, encouraging joy, relationship building, and leisure. While murals may remind the public of a life lost, the layers of other objects, including basketball hoops, tables, chairs, and games, transform these sites into spaces where life is lived. These peace zones reflect a Black spatial practice in which locations of violence become sites of collective joy and sociality (Hunter et al., 2016). These collective activities both point to the afterlives of the dead (Brown, 2008) in which the living maintain relationships with those who have predeceased them, but also signify the wake work of the living, that is, how the living keep vigil and celebrate the life of the deceased (Sharpe, 2016: 10). West African funeral rituals involving music, dance, and large celebrations following burial, evidence themselves in Black funerary practices across the African Diaspora, such as in second-line celebrations during funeral processions and after burial in New Orleans. These peace zones serve as wake work that both heighten community awareness around specific incidents of violence, while serving as a space for community building, interaction, and play. Social hauntings reveal violence, but community members purpose these sites of violence for the opposite—intentionally placemaking around peace, love, and remembrance. By painting these memorials, the community claims space for the dead to occupy alongside the living, this wake work “keeping breath in the Black body” (Sharpe, 2016: 109). Through acknowledging the violence and transforming these spaces into peace zones, they work to produce the more just worlds that they demand.

Gravestone murals do not commemorate every person killed tragically. Family members and friends pay or raise money for an artist to memorialize their people (Delgado, 2003; Good, 2018). Community organizations, such as the Crown Heights Youth Collective, have painted murals of their members and affiliates that were killed. Community art organizations such as Groundswell Community Mural Project often paint murals that feature community leaders alive and deceased—beloved mentors and coaches, along with inspirational messages. And many murals feature Black historical figures, such as Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Harriet Tubman, and Bob Marley. Thus, there is a tradition of public art as a form of cultural expression and community building that is not tied to memorializing victims of the urban crisis. Although women, children, and the elderly are represented in gravestone murals, most of the murals that I have encountered commemorate the lives of young heterosexual Black men and boys. This is in direct response to the exponential rise in murder rates of Black males during the 1980s and 1990s. During a period that experienced heightened death rates of queer men, as well as straight men and women dying of AIDS, gun violence, domestic violence, drug overdose, and more, there is an absence of murals that speak to these specific realities. This reflects the particular anxieties around the social position of Black men during the urban crisis—their vulnerabilities to gun violence, mass incarceration, and economic precarity. However, the absence of long-lasting memorials for other

social subjects also conveys a privileging of certain kinds of violence, and certain kinds of victims, shaped by gender, sexuality, and addiction. This conveys how collective memory is political, shaped by patriarchy, homophobia, and notions of respectability.

Resistance to state and vigilante violence

There are also the gravestone murals that commemorate the lives of people killed by police or by white vigilante mobs. These gravestone murals serve as a form of resistance, indicating that resistance can be an important part of wake work. The urban crisis revealed, among many forms of violence, the persistence of direct, interpersonal racist violence against Black people through highly publicized and protested incidents, such as that of Yusuf Hawkins,² a Black teenager killed by a white racist mob in the Italian neighborhood of Bensonhurst in 1989, and Michael Stewart, choked to death by transit police in 1983. Black street artist Basquiat's imagining of Michael Stewart's death, composed on a studio wall amidst other graffiti tags, is owned privately and sometimes tours to museums.

The Yusuf Hawkins mural, painted in 1989, persists 30 years later, although it has been transformed by the retouches of different artists over time. Community members added the names and death dates of others killed (Sanford, 2014; Wooster Collective, 2019), making it more makeshift, more script-based, and less dependent on visual illustration. The mural included one off center black and white depiction of Hawkins' face, a reproduction of the photograph that lived on newspaper pages and television news briefs, on top of a yellow background with red and blue borders. In large script it read, "To Our Brother Yusuf Hawkins, born March 1973 murdered August 23, 1989" (Associated Press, 2009). Personal messages to Yusuf and the names of other victims are now worn, chipped, and unintelligible on the wall. Today, two reproductions of the black and white photograph of Hawkins face emerge amidst bouquets of lilies that surround both images (see Figure 5). Yusuf Hawkins' name is illustrated in the middle of these images, overlaid on top of a wreath of roses. That artists have worked to touch-up and update this mural over a 30-year period, and that the mural has recently been included in contemporary media concerning Hawkins' murder, suggests that the community would resist attempts to destroy it.³

The endurance of the Hawkins mural, while so many others have disappeared, signals the persisting political significance of this white supremacist violence in the following decades, and now in the age of Black Lives Matter and the greater Movement for Black Lives. Yusuf Hawkins' murder was a flashpoint in the racial politics of the urban crisis in New York—it marked the fifth documented murder of a Black person by white mobs in 1980s New York (preceded by Willie Turk and Samuel Spencer in Brooklyn, Michael Griffith in Queens, and Derek Tyrus in Staten Island) and Black New Yorkers mounted mass mobilizations in response (Daughtry, 1989). Director Spike Lee dedicated his film about the urban crisis, *Jungle Fever*, to Hawkins and included his image in the film. Popular hip-hop records of the time by Public Enemy, Chubb Rock, and Kool G Rap also referenced Hawkins. This was not a commodification of Hawkins' story, but rather a form of wake work. Hawkins occupies space in the dominant historical record of the period, largely because people demanded it through mass mobilization and cultural production, keeping vigil while calling for justice. The persistence of the Hawkins mural in material space may be dependent on the mainstream historical recognition of his death, the clear expression of direct, coercive racism in his killing, the accompanying understanding of the moral wrongness of his murder in the post-civil rights period, and the continued relevance of his death for activists today.

But when we do not understand the other everyday violence of the urban crisis as a result of direct and coercive racism, we fail to see the deaths of so many—those named on the walls



Figure 5. Mural on Verona Place at Fulton Street, Bedford-Stuyvesant (2019) Photo by Author.

and the unknowable—as a consequence of conditions shaped by white supremacy. Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s oft-quoted definition of racism centers not beliefs about characteristics or stereotypes, but the structural production of “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (2007: 247). This is evidenced in the direct and indirect forms of anti-Black exploitation, extraction, dispossession, and neglect that persist across time periods, and particularly mark the urban landscape in transition from the urban divestment of state and private interests during the urban crisis, to the hyper-investment of gentrification, both which require the marginalization of Black people and places.

The gravestone murals thus indicate multiple registers of violence: their emergence documenting the premature death, divestment, and hyper-criminalization of the urban crisis; their disappearance signifying urban investment, and the physical and cultural displacement of Black people; and the emergence of another kind of mural (discussed in the next section) representing a commodified form of Black cultural production in the absence of actual Black people. Gravestone murals insist on a recognition of these lost lives and acknowledgement of the greater structural violence that produced the need for this kind of recognition, and this still haunts the landscape. The gravestone murals insist on reminding us of this history and these ghosts.

Tina Campt asks, “how do we build a radical visual archive of the African Diaspora that grapples with the recalcitrant and the disaffected, the unruly and the dispossessed?” (2017: 3). I argue that gravestone murals are one element of this visual archive that are being eroded by fading and blatant erasure. Through memorial murals, community members do wake work for Black lives and Black places, commemorating the lives of the dead, archiving collective memory, resisting anti-Black violence, creating new spaces of peace, and practicing Black spatial production despite the violence they encounter. These memorial murals confront the many forms of violence that haunt Black communities throughout space and time. With gentrification’s displacement of residents, there are fewer people in

these neighborhoods to remember. Even in the presence of murals that persevere, there is little cultural or spatial context left for newcomers to relate to these images as community conditions transform.

“Authentic” commodities

In contrast to gravestone murals, there are other murals that are persevering (and emerging anew) during this period of gentrification. Bedford-Stuyvesant, the birthplace of many hip-hop legends, produced one of the most revered and martyred artists of the twentieth century: Christopher Wallace, best known as Notorious B.I.G., or Biggie Smalls. There are at least four Biggie murals in Brooklyn; three of the most prominent are in Bedford-Stuyvesant and serve as iconic emblems of an authentic “cool” neighborhood. Recently, while viewing a home-makeover television program focused on short-term vacation rentals, I watched the home renovation experts instruct an owner to highlight a towering mural of Biggie in his digital marketing materials as a means to attract guests (“Brooklyn Brownstone” 2018). Central to their business strategy was the creation of unique “experiences” that visitors would not be able to get elsewhere. While scholarship has clarified the negative impact of the short-term home rental market on affordable housing in gentrifying cities (Maharawal, 2017; Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018), this example illustrates how Black urban culture is being commodified at the same time that Black urban people are being displaced. Rather than spaces of collective memory, resistance, and world-making, these new murals are marks of a commodified cool, a visual component to Black displacement that mobilizes Black authenticity.

The Notorious B.I.G. murals bring economic value to gentrifying urban space. They are often colorful, towering images (a story high or more) that beg for social media photoshoots and tourist attraction (see Figure 6). Street art has been part of the New York City landscape for decades, and yet gentrifying neighborhoods become a blank canvas for up-and-coming artists who are able to attract global attention for these vast, striking paintings that go viral and become part of public art walking tours and festivals, which sometimes garner corporate sponsorship. In the nearby neighborhood of Bushwick, corporations have taken to mounting advertisements directly above these kinds of murals (Levingston, 2018). The murals signify that these neighborhoods are a destination for visitors and invite the creative and professional classes to invest in these places through consumption of food, clothing, culture, and the rental (and purchase) of personal and commercial property. Thus, these murals become extensions of the changing social, political, and economic conditions within a gentrifying landscape.

Tiffany Lethabo King identifies Black fungibility as an “expression of spatial expansion” and further, that Black placemaking socially produces space (the settlement of land) which then becomes usable to capital (2016: 1026). Black people produced place in these neighborhoods through building and living lives in these ignored, under-resourced spaces. Wake work contributed to this Black spatial production, by attending to the lives, deaths, and afterlives of community members in public (and private) space. In the face of structural racism, Black communities still produced cultural abundance. Yet, capitalists extract as much as they can from Black spaces before they reclaim them for those that can pay more, from the practices of redlining to “predatory inclusion” in which mortgage lenders, the real estate industry, and speculators exploit Black homeowners and renters (Satter, 2010; Taylor, 2019). Historian Daina Ramey Berry’s work shows that the enslaved remained commodities even after death, a “ghost value” placed on the bodies of the deceased, then sold in the domestic cadaver trade (2017). The mass death and dispossession of the urban crisis, produced by the structural forces that make Black people vulnerable to premature



Figure 6. Biggie Mural on Quincy Street at Bedford Avenue, Bedford-Stuyvesant (2017) Photo by Daryl Finan.

death and displacement, cleared the urban landscape (including gravestone murals) for investment, flipping, and profit. Capitalists engage in spatial production from above, gaining economic value from Black displacement. There is ghost value in Black spaces, predicated on the removal of Black people.

Oftentimes, new residents' primary connection to the neighborhood is through consumption, rather than through interpersonal relationships with remaining long-time residents, or even each other. Sharon Zukin argues that "authenticity," a social construction of uniqueness attached to consumption in gentrifying cities, is being used as a "lever of cultural power" for new residents to "claim space and take it away from others without direct confrontation" with the help of media, consumer culture, and the state (2011: 246). This deployment of authenticity often relates to murals and graffiti, but also extends to cuisine, architecture, music, and nightlife.

In her study of gentrification in Washington, D.C., Brandi Thompson Summers argues that the articulation of blackness in aesthetic form is an important element in the production of gentrifying urban space:

Blackness lends itself to the process of urban aestheticization through the paradoxical incorporation and exclusion of blackness. The blackness that people's bodies and culture index in

multiple domains becomes part of the aesthetic infrastructure of gentrification. This form of urbanization happens through a violent calibration of blackness that leads cities to ultimately face how Black do they want a place to be. (2019: 21)

This paradox of the incorporation of blackness aesthetically, with the exclusion of Black long-time residents is not specific to contemporary Brooklyn, Washington, DC, or the United States. Keisha-Khan Perry puts forth this central contradiction in her account of Salvador, Brazil—where Afro-Brazilian popular and religious culture is marketed to tourists, especially through Carnival festivities, while Black populations are pushed from neighborhoods now deemed desirable (2013).

This commodification of authenticity through the aesthetic incorporation of blackness often caricatures the past violence of these urban spaces. For example, a bar opened in Crown Heights boasting a “bullet hole-ridden wall” and a menu featuring “Forty Ounce Rose” (Rosner and Dai, 2017). Although the owner, a former corporate tax attorney, was quite aware that bullet holes did not cause the cosmetic damage to the wall, she chose to commodify the past violence of the neighborhood as a draw to her business. What she referred to as “cheeky,” serves as a rejection of Black humanity and a Black living past that is still present through those that remain in the neighborhood and the gravestone murals that still mark the landscape.

As new residents have few intimate relationships with long-time residents or past residents, they have no connection to gravestone murals. If gravestone murals reveal the social hauntings of racial violence over generations, then to be haunted—to hold the social memory of this racial violence and experience the contemporary manifestation of it—indicates that the haunted occupy the exploited end of a power differential. New residents are not haunted by this racial terror because they lack the experience, knowledge, and curiosity about these legacies of violence. New residents hold more power than the dispossessed and this raises questions about whether they can be haunted by this violence, especially if they are agents in the violence of displacement. They do not understand these murals as symbolic graveyards, spatial archives, practices of resistance, calls for new worlds. Rather, they see fading paint on brick or metal, exteriors that need tending to; they see what could be for themselves, not what is, or what was for others.

The disappearance of gravestone murals and the commodification of Biggie murals share space in a shifting urban geography, representing violence at different levels and discrete forms of placemaking: one type emerging as a resource for survival, the other signifying urban property appreciation. Gravestone murals are a visual reminder of the urban crisis; their erasure suggests an unwillingness to reflect on the violence of the period, or the wake work done to hold and remember Black life. The remaining gravestone murals interrupt the narrative of renewal that gentrification brings to these neighborhoods, relics of a past that many wish to leave behind. On the other hand, the newer Biggie murals are forms of public art and “black aesthetic emplacement” (Summers, 2019: 4) that reflect a notion of authenticity being mobilized in gentrification efforts. Although both of these kinds of murals occupy the changing urban landscape, the chipping, fading, and explicit erasure of gravestone murals suggest that they will soon be absent from the brick walls and storefront security gates.

While Notorious B.I.G., a great storyteller of the urban crisis, lives on in his music and through his likeness in murals, it is likely that his peers who survived the urban crisis and remain in the neighborhood wrestle with this rapidly changing landscape—the disappearance of people and place, the emergence of new forms of urban life that do not include them. The violence of gentrification creates a place described by Black absence.⁴ At some point, it is likely that these Biggie murals will be replaced with something else as well, perhaps blank walls.

Buried graveyards

In urban areas across the nation, we regularly walk on the graveyards of the indigenous and enslaved, neatly disguised and organized into neighborhood blocks and city lots. Some are publicly acknowledged, as activists did for the African Burial Ground (now a national monument) where the remains of over 400 Africans were discovered near Wall Street in the early 1990s (Frohne, 2015). In Crown Heights, on Buffalo Avenue between Sterling Place and Eastern Parkway, where there are corner stores, weathered storefront churches, and new constructions springing up; below the concrete surface are likely the bodily remains of Weeksville, an early 19th century free Black community. Here lay the Citizens Union Cemetery (later renamed Mount Pleasant Cemetery), a graveyard for Black people, that did not charge the poor a burial fee (Inskeep, 1998; Wellman, 2016). The cemetery fell into economic hardship and the trustees were forced to sell, exhuming the bodies and burying them further east at Cypress Hills Cemetery, although unmarked graves and loose record keeping meant that the men hired to remove the bodies did not know where to look for them. As an 1872 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* article, titled “Desecration of the Dead,” remarked about these events,

Those who lay away their dead from sight will now learn that it is simply a question of chance whether they are disturbed or not . . . the remains are now turned up piecemeal by the “steam shovel,” and are dumped in carts and baskets and thrown away as offal. The story is sickening beyond sufferance. There seems to be no excuse for this outrage on the tenderest sensibilities of the living, which disturbance of the dead always provokes . . . There must be some legal redress for this gross outrage done [to] the dead (The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 1872).

Across the country, African-American burial grounds have been abandoned, neglected and defiled—sometimes built over for development and capitalist growth, oftentimes forgotten about, overgrown grass and weeds taking over cemetery headstones and fences. In Iberville Parish, Louisiana, along what people call “Cancer Alley” for the spatial concentration of petrochemical companies and high rates of cancer among a largely Black and poor population, Axiall Chemical legally claims ownership of the land that Revilletown Cemetery (founded by the formerly enslaved) remains on. In court, a judge ordered that Revilletown descendants have to obtain permission from the company to visit ancestors and bury loved ones (McDowell, 2019). From gravestone murals to graveyards, Black efforts to bury and honor their dead, to record life and death, continue to be threatened by the spatialization of racial capitalism. When I walk slowly down these streets, hoping to cross paths with the people you only run into tending to errands or waiting for buses and trains, I see what is no longer.

By examining gravestone murals as social hauntings, I ask what the urban landscape represses under the surface of the pavement and what it hides through the process of redevelopment. Gravestone murals are forms of wake work and Black spatial production that honor Black life, indict structural racism, collectively record loss and survival, and evidence geographies of both dispossession and care.

If gravestone murals bring the lives of those lost into the present moment, if they serve as a form of collective memory of the urban crisis, their erasure does not dispel the ghosts, but instead concretizes a refusal of Black life in urban space by racial capitalism. If the recognition of social haunting is a means of “knowing what has happened or is happening,” (Gordon, 2008: 63) how we know what we know, through experience lived and recorded, or that we know what we know, can be further denied or forgotten with the absence of material culture such as gravestone murals.

Despite this, people will still find ways to care for and support each other amidst these shifts. Wake work persists; I see it in the endurance of the annual West Indian Day Parade and J'ouvert festivities, despite municipal efforts to regulate and control the time, pathway, and existence of the roaming street celebrations. I see it in the consistency of drumming, music-playing, and dancing in parks, even with increased noise complaints. I see it in the daily mutual aid that neighbors, faith communities, and activist groups do in making sure people are fed and can stay in their homes. I see it in the violence interruption work that community organizations do, employing the formerly incarcerated to work in conflict resolution in their communities. And I see it in the annual "Old Timers Day" public housing project reunions, that bring folks near and far together to catch up and reminisce. New forms of wake work will appear in response to gentrification, resisting dispossession and creating new ways of relating and caring for one another. This is one way forward.

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Notes

1. In this article, I use the following terms interchangeably: gravestone murals, memorial murals, and "Rest in Peace" murals.
2. Yusuf Hawkins name is also spelled Yusef in media and other archival documentation. I am reproducing the spelling that is captured on the mural.
3. See *Yusuf Hawkins: Storm Over Brooklyn* (2020) directed by Muta'Ali.
4. In *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon writes about the simultaneous absence and presence of social hauntings, drawing from Patricia Williams journey in uncovering the history of her enslaved ancestors, where Williams writes that she is looking for "the shape described by her [enslaved female ancestor] absence in all this." (p. 6)

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