

No “Blank Canvas”: Public Art and Gentrification in Houston’s Third Ward

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Abstract

Public art and urban renewal have become integral to reconstructing urban landscapes. In this essay we assess how these two spatial practices converge and diverge in the historically and predominately Black community of the Third Ward in Houston, Texas. The essay examines the work of MF Problem and the Black Guys, two Black artist collectives based in the Third Ward. We argue that their public performances critically engage the spatial processes of gentrification and ghettoization in their neighborhood. Furthermore, these performances indicate a unique spatial imaginary held by Black artists that privileges the use value associated with long-term residents’ views of public and private space over the potential exchange value rooted in urban renewal projects. [New Genre Public Art; Gentrification; Black Geographies; Third Ward; Houston; Texas]

Introduction

Public art and urban renewal have become integral to reconstructing urban landscapes. In addition to the increasingly ubiquitous presence of both, gentrification and public art share a number of important commonalities: 1) they occupy, and are thought to beautify, the urban core of cities (Hall 2007; Hein 2006); 2) they are hotly contested spatial projects (Ball 2014; B. Davis 2013a; Deutsche 1996; Hall 2007; Sussman 2013); 3) they are sponsored by public and private donors (Cartiere and Willis 2008; Lees, Butler, and Bridge 2012; Davidson and Lees 2010; Knight 2008); and 4) they have become a global urban strategy of spatial change (Pallares-Barbera, Dot-Jutgla, and Casellas 2012; Kester 2004; N. Smith 1996, 2002).

While public art is ubiquitous in the downtown core of Houston, Texas, and some of the surrounding neighborhoods, there are less than a handful of public art projects in the Greater Third Ward area (a.k.a da Tré¹). One of these pieces of public art is virtually impossible for pedestrians, cyclists, and many drivers to miss. The 250’ by 18’ mural (Figure 1) on the northern exterior of Blackshear Elementary School is a collage of “selfies,” painted by Israeli-born artist Anat Ronen. The painting has drawn a significant amount of attention from local residents, some of whose faces have become part of the mural. When complete, the mural



Figure 1. Detail of *People from the Community*. (Mural and photo: Anat Ronen.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

will include the portraits of fifty-four men, women, and children from da Tré who volunteered their image for the art piece (Ronen 2015).

According to some, Ronen's *People from the Community* mural is a symbol of progress for the neighborhood. Reginald Adams, a Houston-based public artist, shared his enthusiasm for Ronen's mural during a televised news report with reporter Sonia Azad: "To have such a colossal work of art in a neighborhood where you would never expect it is such a treasure for the city" (ABC 13 Eyewitness News 2015). Azad's closing commentary reveals a similar view of the Third Ward, stating that, "For entrepreneurs and artists like Anat Ronen . . . the transition in Third Ward is a blank canvas, an opportunity to shine" (ABC 13 Eyewitness News 2015). Adams's and Azad's comments regarding the positive impact of the mural and the emergence of young entrepreneurs in the Third Ward prioritize a vision of the neighborhood shaped by municipal leaders and developers, one devoid of any consideration of the community's existing residents.

The metaphorical recasting of the Third Ward as a "blank canvas" reveals one of public art's effects: the marginalization of existing communities, rendering them invisible in the larger scope of urban gentrification (Sharp, Pollock, and Paddison 2005). Hall (2003, 221) notes that "institutional public art" is utilized in urban regeneration projects and subsequently endorses the "official" view of the city promoted by local leaders and community developers. The vision of a renewed and revitalized Third Ward stands to benefit municipal leaders, commercial developers building new homes, new business owners, incoming residents, and

artists like Ronen who are commissioned to fill the blank spaces of this environment with their art. For some, including Adams, the changes in the Third Ward are an inevitable and welcome process: "Like all things, it must change. I think it's to the benefit of any community that becomes very diverse" (ABC 13 Eyewitness News 2015). This is not to say that the revitalization of the Third Ward will not provide any benefits to existing residents. However, as many of these changes appeal to the demands of developers and new residents, the desires and needs of existing residents are supplemental, in essence. For instance, if the developers and municipal leaders desired to provide the residents of the Third Ward with a state-of-the-art public park, how come the renovations to Emancipation Park did not occur until real estate development flourished in the neighborhood? Furthermore, it is unlikely that other amenities, such as increased police presence and coffee shops, will contribute to the quality of life for longtime residents.

How can the Third Ward be a blank canvas if residents, some of whom are notable artists, already live and create there? How do artists residing in the Third Ward utilize public art performances to respond to changes that result from city efforts to "regenerate" their neighborhood for new residents and investors? In this paper we examine how artists in Houston's historically and predominately Black Third Ward neighborhood employ public art performances to contest the new visions of their community. This essay utilizes a unique confluence of analytics and methods from sociology, geography, and anthropology to study the relationship between gentrification and "new genre public art" in the Third Ward community of Houston. Ethnographic observations, geographic theory, and a case study analysis of two Black artist collectives aid us in answering Suzanne Lacy's (2008, 22) appeal for a "close reading critique" of public art and, as a result, discuss how public art performances in da Tré contribute to the alternative production of space in the face of its rampant urban renewal. Furthermore, following in the footsteps of Hall (2007), Kester (2004), Lacy (2008), and Miles (2008), we believe the inclusion of spatial theory could mark what Jane Rendell (2008, 34) calls "a new direction between art and geography around spatial production." Employing McKittrick and Woods's (2007) concept of Black geographies,² we suggest that through a unique confluence of Black spatial imagination, praxis, and productions, a number of the da Tré's Black artists-in-residence create elusive artworks that acknowledge and recreate Black geographies and Black communal life.

Black artists-in-residence, as defined here, are those artists born and raised in the Third Ward or those who have made the neighborhood their own, by having lived there for a number of years while engraining themselves in the community's social norms, its political issues, and its culture of arts. This definition differs from given conceptions of artists-in-residence, who are often commissioned by a museum or organization, and brought into a particular community for a brief period of time to create a performance or an installation. Conversely, the Black artists-in-residence from whom we draw inspiration are products of their community. The

embodied and artistic presence of these artists within the Third Ward's residential, social, and cultural circles contends with the ongoing removal of residents and their spatial and cultural practices due to efforts to respatialize the community through gentrification; this respatialization shows itself in the form of the purchasing of homes via eminent domain, the destruction of single-story homes, the regeneration of Emancipation Park, the closure of public schools, and the erection of magnet and professional schools in their stead. Furthermore, the segment "in-residence" speaks to a decision made by a number of local artists to stay in Houston, foregoing the draw of larger markets like Los Angeles and New York City—a decision that has contributed to the stability and growth of Houston's art scene.³

Engendering gentrification

Research on gentrification has changed significantly since Ruth Glass (1964) coined the term to give nomenclature to the regeneration of homes and the insertion of the class-privileged gentry to neighborhoods in London. The evolution of the processes by which gentrification occurs and their study is evident by references to the various "waves" of gentrification (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008) and the varying descriptors associated with this sociocultural, political, and economic process of spatial change. For instance, work is actively being conducted on rural gentrification (Brown-Saracino 2009; D. Smith and Phillips 2001), gentrification as a global urban strategy (Davidson and Lees 2010; N. Smith 1996, 2002), Black gentrification (Inwood 2011; Moore 2005, 2009; Patillo 2007; Taylor 2010), and super gentrification (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008). Regardless of the conceptual pendulum upon which the origin stories (B. Davis 2013a; Bolton 2013; Glass 1964; Moore 2009; N. Smith 1979, 1982, 1996) and impacts (Mueller 2014; N. Smith 1982, 1996) of gentrification rest, the vast majority of research on the subject shares at least one enduring commonality: Houston occupies little conceptual or conversational space (Bullard 1987; Christian 2006; Norris 2010; Podagrosi and Vojnovic 2008; Podagrosi, Vojnovic, and Pigozzi 2011) in "the urban hierarchy" of their analyses (Lees 2000, 390). Though generalities permeate the course and study of gentrification, Loretta Lees (2000) instructs that urban renewal remains a process of spatial change contingent upon particular contexts and temporalities. Thus, today, it is important to study not so much the overlapping qualities of this global phenomenon but its place-based specificities. Houston's Third Ward is primed for such study.

In response to the economic downturn of the mid-1980s that followed a boomtown era in the 1970s (Bullard 1987), Houston's leaders began their pursuit of a service-oriented economy. The oil crisis and subsequent recession exposed the vulnerability of Houston's economic reliance on the energy sector (Feagin 1985; Podagrosi, Vojnovic, and Pigozzi 2011). Unemployment rates rose more rapidly than the national

economy, tax revenue declined, and dependent businesses faltered. Additionally, the residential population declined in the downtown area, turning it into a “typical U.S. urban core” lacking the commercial activities necessary to sustain the social and economic vitality ascribed to urban life beyond business hours (Podagrosi 2005, 2). Houston’s leaders had to address these issues if they were to improve the city’s image and avoid similar economic crises in the future. Urban redevelopment in the city’s core neighborhoods served the dual purpose of rebranding the city’s identity and generating interest from new investors (Podagrosi 2005).

In the early 1990s, the city of Houston focused its efforts on diversifying the local economy and revitalizing the urban core. Attracting new businesses from a variety of industries including technology, tourism, and specialized services would reposition the city, favorably, in the United States’ shift towards a service economy, strengthening its fiscal resolve in the face of economic fluctuations. The influx of professionals from these industries would contribute to the city’s consumer economy and improve its residential tax base. To achieve this goal, local leaders focused on developing an infrastructure of amenities in the areas surrounding downtown Houston linked to quality-of-life factors commensurate with the needs of young professionals (Podagrosi, Vojnovic, and Pigozzi 2011). In recent years, members of the Millennial generation seeking jobs in the energy and healthcare industries have found opportunities in Houston. The city has become a beacon for millennials aged 18–34 (Takahashi 2015), and it experienced a 50% increase in young professionals aged 25–34 from 2002 to 2012 (Miller 2014).

Gentrification in Houston’s neighborhoods deviates from classical notions of the process wherein individual gentrifiers invest capital in disinvested properties, dislocating long-time residents of the community. It aligns more accurately with Hackworth and Smith’s (2001) conception of third wave gentrification, a “post-recession” form driven by state actors, represented in Houston’s case by successive waves of city government leaders committed to improving the city’s local economy and residential infrastructure.

Igor Vojnovic (2003b) has documented how public officials facilitate the growth objectives of local business leaders and commercial developers despite claims to a *laissez-faire*-style of local governance. Houston has subsidized new development projects using taxpayer money, including the distribution of billions in federal and state funds to develop the infrastructure for petroleum exports (Vojnovic 2003a) and professional sports arenas. Additionally, tools like the Tax Increment Reinvestment Zones are designed to facilitate commercial reinvestment in deteriorated areas (Podagrosi and Vojnovic 2008) while commercial developers benefit from tax abatement laws for focusing their efforts on these areas designated in urban neighborhoods (Norris 2010).

As the commercial business district developed downtown, adjacent communities became, and continue to be, prime targets for urban redevelopment projects. We have seen the expansion of gentrification beyond the immediate urban core to surrounding neighborhoods—an additional

characteristic of Hackworth and Smith's (2001) third wave—in Freedmen's Town. Developers established the non-profit organization Houston Renaissance with the support of public officials to acquire property in the Fourth Ward. As Podagrosi, Vojnovic, and Pigozzi (2011) note, developers in this organization used the threat of eminent domain,⁴ a legal right of the city, to pressure long-time residents in Freedmen's Town and other Fourth Ward neighborhoods to sell their homes at very low prices. Properties acquired through this "block-busting" process were transferred to the city when the non-profit filed for bankruptcy in 1999 and eventually sold at extremely low rates in comparison to downtown rates. According to Podagrosi and Vojnovic (2008), the large-scale acquisition of land reduced the risk for commercial developers that, in turn, resulted in the creation of lofts and townhomes that long-term residents could not afford. In two decades, Freedmen's Town, considered the "Mother Ward" for Houston's African American population in the Fourth Ward, had transformed from a majority Black community with an only 15% White population to a majority White community (Podagrosi, Vojnovic, and Pigozzi 2011). Although the social actors and institutions driving the process have changed, residential displacement of lower-income residents is still an outcome of third wave gentrification.

The Third Ward

Like Freedmen's Town, the Third Ward, a historically and predominantly African American community, is experiencing the effects of Houston's transformation. The Third Ward's transition is marked by a number of new developments evident in the increasing presence of townhouses, an influx of entrepreneurs and niche businesses (e.g., a coffee shop specializing in vegan products), and new housing stock. For decades, city planners (Jones and Heiser 1976) and independent analysts (Perkins 1987) have suggested the redevelopment of areas of the Third Ward bordering downtown via business development and mixed income housing, a program for development considered by some to be a form of stealth gentrification (Lees, Butler, and Bridge 2012; McGhee 1999). These decades-old recommendations for Houston's redevelopment are coming to fruition, as the new-build gentrification (Davidson and Lees 2010) of exorbitantly priced "freestanding homes" (Urban Living 2015) within the Third Ward, and the city at large, helped make Houston the nation's leader in the construction of new, single-family home start-ups in 2013 (Adams 2015, para. 1).⁵ Additionally, the Third Ward's proximity to a number of amenities including three major sports arenas, a public zoo, two universities, downtown, and one of the nation's leading cancer centers⁶ increases the neighborhood's value to investors targeting the area for redevelopment (Norris 2010; Garrison 2007).

The gentrification of the Third Ward is also reason for more study into the intersection of race and gentrification, considered a fertile vein of future research on the subject (Lees 2000; Lees, Slater, and Wylie

2008). Though a warranted approach, the literature on race (Lees 2000; Moore 2005, 2009; Schaffer and Smith 1986; Slater, Curran, and Lees 2004; N. Smith 1979, 1996)—be it tacit or explicit—has proven, to quote Lees, Slater, and Wyly (2008, 80), that “gentrification is nothing more and nothing less than the neighborhood expression of class inequality.” As a result, much of the research on race and gentrification references the polarizing intraclass cultural conflicts that undergird processes of Black gentrification (Hyra 2006; Inwood 2011; Moore 2005, 2009; Patillo 2007). From this perspective, it would appear that the thesis of noted sociologist William Julius Wilson (1980) regarding the declining significance of race is true. Research that considers the primacy—or at least parity—of race, as a key factor in gentrification, has become marginal.

Our research diverges from these studies, as we not only interrogate race and gentrification but also how some residents impacted by this process in the Third Ward use art to resist uneven spatial development, to pose alternative spatial imaginaries, and to create new publics within a community undergoing rapid privatization.

A trek through da Tré

The initial stage of the Third Ward’s urban redevelopment was announced via signage around 2006. These markers were staked into the grounds of abandoned properties by private developers as if the signs were advertisements for an electoral candidate. They read: “Cash for Houses, Any Condition,” “We Buy Houses, Avoid Foreclosure,” and “We Buy Houses, Cash.” Following the purchase of land by developers, the City of Houston would forewarn the community of impending development via small white billboards with black print that professed, “Notice of Variance Request” and “Notice of Public Hearing” (Figure 2). These signs, to borrow a phrase from Otabenga Jones & Associates, a local Black artist collective, became “so prevalent as to be ubiquitous” (Project Row Houses 2014, para. 1).⁷ It was apparent then that change was coming, but what many residents could not foresee was how



Figure 2. Willie J. Wright with Notice of Public Hearing billboard. (Photo: Derrick Sexton.)

rapid and how stark the change would be. Since this time, the Third Ward's residential and commercial landscapes and its racial demography have undergone a glaring alteration.

Emancipation Park is indicative of such change. Originally purchased and named by a collective of freedwo/men following Emancipation, the space was conceived as a location on which Blacks could celebrate Juneteenth, a day that commemorates the date that men and women enslaved in Texas became aware of their freedom—June 19, 1865. A collective of Black parishioners purchased the land in 1872 for \$800 and named it Emancipation Park. In 1918, the City of Houston acquired the park, which was the only green space accessible to Houston's Black residents (The City of Houston 2015).

Today this park, a place where predominately Black youth played basketball on an uneven court; where families gathered to grill food in celebration of someone's birthday; where the Third Ward's homeless and otherwise transient population convened to fellowship (i.e., to engage in merriment), drink, and get a night's rest; and where rappers Waka Flocka, Ludacris, and Bun B (who are known for having street credibility in Houston and Atlanta) met to film a video for the single "Candy Paint & Gold Teeth" is no longer. One is left to wonder whether these outdoor performances, embodied indicators of what Kesha Moore (2009, 137) might deem a "Black *habitus*,"⁸ will endure. This green space of deliverance, having begun its \$33 million renovation, is now an expanse of dirt—pitted and piled—in the process of giving way to a new racial and sociocultural landscape (Figure 3). On all sides of Emancipation Park, where dilapidated, yet inhabited, shotgun-style houses once struggled to remain upright, exorbitantly priced townhomes stand erect, at heights of thirty feet or more, littering an ever-growing panoptic landscape. We imagine these high-rises, à la Michel Foucault (1977), as residential pan-opticons that allow new residents to surveil the neighborhood from on high. They are joined in this effort by roving police units and developers



Figure 3. Architectural drawing of renovated Emancipation Park. (Image: Freelon Group Architects.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

who are on a constant hunt for cheap land. All serve a singular function of monitoring Black geographies (i.e., cheap, abandoned, and alternately usable land) and Black bodies (i.e., existing residents, the homeless, children, and transients).

The townhomes, the increasing presence of police, and the circulating White bodies of recently arrived neighbors give new meanings to a walk throughout the neighborhood. They not only show how the neighborhood has changed (and continues to do so); the presence of these structures *and* bodies-in-motion work to codify spaces as White, spaces where one's roving Blackness becomes a practice in defiance of this racial compartmentalization.⁹

Setting the stage for public art

Hilde Hein (2006) describes public art as a phenomenon—one, that in addition to taking place in public, *creates* a public as an artistic product during the process of art making. She states, "The art is its gestation, history, the public it gathers and reactions it evokes, and the memories it leaves behind" (xvii–xviii). The American origin of this global practice, according to Cher Krause Knight (2008), was the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA commissioned American artists to create public art as a means to help alleviate the emotional and aesthetic effects of the Great Depression. Following the New Deal, the General Services Administration's Arts in Architecture program and the National Endowment for the Arts' (NEA) Art in Public Spaces program came to prominence. These federally funded projects helped launch contemporary art into public spaces and the American artistic imagination (Knight 2008; Lacy 1995; Miles 2008).

Much of the scholarly and artistic interest in public art—be it in the United States or Europe—privileges permanence, stature, and the site-specificity of artworks commissioned by governments, corporations, non-profit organizations, and communities (Bach 1992; Cartiere 2008; Hein 1996, 2006; Knight 2008; Senie and Webster 1998; Shamash 1992; Sussman 2013; Nawrocki 2008; Zebracki 2013). Today, public art has grown, according to Lacy (2008, 19), into a decidedly "worldwide" practice that has developed into a field of critical inquiry. Believing that a desire for permanence was dominating public art, Patricia Phillips (1998) called for a turn towards the temporary as a way in which to innovate and investigate public art. "Public art requires a more passionate commitment to the temporary—to the information culled from the short-lived project," said Phillips (1998, 297). Since her recommendation, scholars have paid closer attention to temporality in the study of public art (Zebracki, Van De Vaart, and Van Aalst 2010).

In an edited collection, Suzanne Lacy (2008) lists three opportunities for strengthening research into public art: a close reading critique, multi-vocal criticism, and the addition of social theory. Public art, she says, is

in need of a “critical unpacking,” an assessment that would benefit from, and perhaps require, engagements with disciplines and frameworks outside the art world (Lacy 2008, 24). Perhaps influenced by her challenge, scholars have incorporated spatial theorists like Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, David Harvey, and Michel de Certeau into their analyses of public art (Hall 2007; Miles 1997, 2008; Rendell 2008). In spite of the theoretical and analytical developments being made in the study of public art, the theorists from whom scholars have drawn, like the artists whose productions are generally critiqued, have been predominantly White/European and male. There is a glaring paucity of studies of public art by Black and other artists of color, from the perspective of non-White, non-male theorists.

With these analytical contributions and limitations in mind, our research makes four valuable contributions to the study of public art. First, our study analyzes non-institutionalized forms of new genre public art produced by two Black artist collectives. Second, our inquiry privileges the provisional over permanence, as the performances we analyze are short-lived projects that take place on public and private land. Third, we consider how new publics emerge from uncommissioned, unsolicited public art performances. Fourth, we step beyond the bounds of the discipline of fine art and into Black geographies, a subfield of human geography formulated by Clyde Woods and Katherine McKittrick (2007).

Woods and McKittrick (2007) suggest that the relationship between Black life and spatiality in North America has been that of spatial marginalization and spatial containment—the result being a spatial imagination that inflects the ways Black people engage with, produce, and upend space. As a spatial theory born of Blacks’ historical experiences with spatial containment and marginalization, Black geographies serves as a base for analyzing the alternative modes of spatiality and temporality within the performances occurring in the Third Ward. By working through Black geographies, we take Phillips’ (1998, 297) suggestion that scholars consider, critically engage with, and apply “opposing conceptions of temporality” that are both non-western and non-linear. We also suggest that these performances, unlike other public artworks, challenge rather than fuel processes of gentrification, in part, by turning from commissioned installations to unsanctioned performances, from permanence to brevity, and from institutionalization to fugitivity.

These site-specific, disruptive, and yet mobile performances represent what Lacy (1995, 19) has termed *new genre public art*, a form of public art that is often informed by the experiences of marginalized artists. More than mere sculptures and installations placed in public, new genre public art takes shape through the incorporation of various mediums. It also engages publics directly, inviting audiences to become participants and collaborators in the production of public art. In response to the simultaneous under- and uneven spatial (re)development of the Third Ward, some Black artists-in-residence have developed such collaborative, people-centered projects.

New genre public art in Third Ward, TX

The Third Ward owes much of its notoriety as a community of artists to the success of Project Row Houses (PRH), an art and community-based non-profit (Lacy 2008; Finkelppearl 2013; Phillips 2013). Formed in 1996 by visual artists Rick Lowe, Jesse Lott, Floyd Newsum, and Bert Long, PRH has grown into a successful and sizable organization whose efforts extend beyond public art. Twice a year PRH invites artists of varying mediums to make art *in* and *of* eight renovated shotgun houses. Rick Lowe described the inspiration for PRH in *Third Ward TX*, a documentary about the organization filmed in 2007:

One day, I drove down the street and I saw those houses. You know, I saw them and it must have been the way the lighting was hitting the roofs or whatever, but [the] rust colored roofs were just beautiful. And immediately, I started thinking of John Biggers' paintings As John Biggers talks about it, you know, the shotgun house is the belly of the mother. It's where we live. It's where we shelter ourselves before we go out into the world. (Garrison 2007)

Since its inception, PRH has activated a social agenda in the community that has resulted in an affordable housing program for single mothers; after school programming for area youth; the revitalization and reopening of the Eldorado Ballroom, a historic performing arts venue; an Internet radio station (All Real Radio); and NuWaters Food Cooperative (Project Row Houses n.d. b). As a result of this vision based upon the conceptual work of John Biggers, a Southern-born muralist who viewed the shotgun house as home and refuge, PRH has grown into a well-recognized community-based art project. Though Rick Lowe and PRH have been lauded for much of their collective existence,¹⁰ the organization and the method of art it presents is not without critique. One such critique addresses the confluence of social practice art and non-profits.

In a critical review of social practice art penned for the *International Socialist Review*, Ben Davis (2013b) questioned whether or not this socially responsible strand of art, for which PRH is merely a figurehead, was "a starting point for addressing social problems, or a distraction that keeps us from seeing their true extent?" (para. 10). He also called for a more robust theorization of social practice art based upon a review of mainstream and radical art history. Employing a Marxist lens to artistic production and consumption, he stated:

no artistic gesture, on its own, can be intrinsically radical or anti-capitalist. What appears at one juncture to be radically opposed to the values of art under capitalism often later appears to have represented a development intrinsic to its future development, for the simple reason that without changing the underlying fact of capitalism, you cannot prevent innovations in art from eventually being given a capitalist articulation. (B. Davis 2013b, para. 19)

Though a valuable assessment of the inability of many socially engaged art projects to elude capitalist accumulation, where B. Davis' (2013b)

challenge falls short is that social practice art institutionalized in the form of a non-profit consumes his analysis. That is why, according to B. Davis (2013b, para. 24), “sometimes ‘social practice’ can seem like little more than [an] aestheticized spin on typical non-profit work.” From this perspective, one that situates social practice art squarely within the confines of the non-profit industrial complex, there can be no flight or escape from capitalism as PRH (and similar groups) must rely on, in order to ensure the permanence of their projects, public and private sponsorship from their local municipality, including corporations like Chevron and entities such as the Texas Commission on the Arts and the Bruner Foundation (Project Row Houses n.d. a).

An elucidation we have drawn from Ben Davis’ (2013b) critique is the need for a turn, in the art world and its scholarship, to temporary *and* non-institutionalized artworks. Hence, our interest in the temporary and unsolicited performances taking shape in da Tré’s outdoor spaces. Though the ways of being in space proposed via these performances may not change the “underlying fact of capitalism,” they demonstrate an elusive mode of thought and existence that, heretofore, has escaped it (B. Davis 2013b, para. 19).¹¹ Moving forward, we will discuss the performances of two Black artist collectives based in the Third Ward: MF Problem and the Black Guys.

MF Problem

MF Problem is a duo consisting of Autumn Knight and Robert Pruitt. The two began coordinating performances in 2011, two of which being *Mobile Block Party* and *Sunday Social*. Aptly named, the *Mobile Block Party* performances took place at a Mobil gas station at the corner of Francis and Dowling Street (Figure 4). Following unfruitful discussions with the Houston Police Department (HPD) and the owner of the gas station regarding ways to address the dangerous nocturnal elements occupying the establishment, MF Problem conceived of the *Mobile Block Party*



Figure 4. “Party Over Here.” (*Mobile Block Party* flyer: MF Problem.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

alongside the PRH Residence Council, a community group with which they were affiliated.

During an artist talk at the University of New Mexico's Tamarind Institute of Lithography, Pruitt offered a description of the gas station and MF Problem's rationalization for its respatialization:

After about midnight it transforms into like [something] really terrible. Drugs and prostitution and all kinds of things happen when the sun goes down So in the daytime it's really pleasant, people with families and kids. But when the sun goes down, it becomes almost dangerous to be around that area. So, we had been discussing ways to kind of deal with it. You know, talkin' to police. Talkin' to the owner. And nothing seemed to work. So, we started throwing these *Mobile Block Parties*, to kind of displace the crowd. (Tamarind Institute 2014)

MF Problem hosted four block parties on a portion of the gas station's parking lot. During these parties, a potluck-style buffet of food was provided and a DJ aired music while attendees fellowshipped (i.e., congregated and ate food), danced, and played dominoes. Via a collective effort, MF Problem and their audience made use of private space in ways that addressed long-standing issues of neglect, criminal activity, and the underdevelopment of spaces in their community. As profound as these performances were, Pruitt was clear in his talk that these performances, due to issues of finance, time, and artistic inspiration, were not sustainable. Despite their finite nature, each block party led to the creation of a new public composed of friends, customers of the Mobil gas station, supporters, and members of the community who happened to pass through and by the parking lot (Figure 5).

The lone *Sunday Social* took place on June 7, 2013 (Figure 6). A derivative of the *Mobile Block Party*, *Sunday Social* was a social gathering set on an abandoned lot within the neighborhood, a privately owned



Figure 5. "Take Back the Corner." (*Mobile Block Party* flyer: MF Problem.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]



Figure 6. *Sunday Social* flyer. (Flyer: MF Problem.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

parcel of land that had not yet been included in the litany of lots that had succumbed to gentrification. MF Problem’s Tumblr page states that the event drew on “rural/Southern/African American traditional picnics, socials, and jubilees that include dancing, live music, food, and socializing (MF Problem 2013, para. 3). Guests were “encouraged to dress in semi-formal clothing or your ‘Sunday Best’” (para. 3).

Pruitt discussed how MF Problem conceptualized *Sunday Social* by speaking to what Hein (2006, 55) would consider the “moral merit” of this performance. Moral merit is the ideal upon which one’s art is produced—and it need not align with the art’s aesthetic merit. “Beautiful art can be morally repulsive,” says Hein (2006, 55). However, this is not the case with MF Problem’s *Sunday Social*, a performance laden with both moral and aesthetic merit:

There’s a corner in our neighborhood at Sauer and McGowen [Streets] that was listed on one of those, like, 25 Worst, Most Dangerous Neighborhoods in America [lists]. And can you imagine seeing, like, a corner in your neighborhood on that list? And the thing that’s weird about it, like when you go to that list and there’s a thing that says, “If you want to learn more about this neighborhood, click on this link.” And you click on the link. And it was a real estate site. You know, so the idea is to label these things as such so that it drives down prices. You know, our neighborhood is in the midst of crazy gentrification. So, it’s just one of the tools to kind of gentrify a neighborhood. (Tamarind Institute 2014)

Neighborhood Scout, the website to which Pruitt refers, ranked the corner of Sauer and McGowen Streets as number fifteen on its 25 *Most Dangerous Neighborhoods* list.¹² Pruitt’s analysis suggests that by labeling this corner as dangerous, the website is a method used to drive down the price of real estate, thereby fostering land grabs and gentrification in the community. To dispel the myth of the dangers that the corner of Sauer and



Figure 7. *Sunday Social* event. (Photo: Tai Barnes and Autumn Knight.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

McGowan Streets supposedly pose, MF Problem decided to perform, to loiter, to have a party (Figure 7):

We decided, that corner is not as dangerous as they claim. And, it's just a vacant lot on that corner. So, we decided to have like a party, again. We had like a Sunday picnic. We hired out a cook. We hired a DJ. And we all just sort, you know, of illegally hung out on that lot for a day. Again, to kind of displace, and even just for ourselves, to kind of like dispel the idea of how this corner can be. And how it can look another kind of way, you know—with very little effort, you know? (Tamarind Institute 2014)

MF Problem's *Sunday Social* not only challenged developers' spatial imagination regarding what the space is (i.e., a threat) and can become (i.e., a safe and profitable space of townhomes and condominiums); it also challenged negative views that they themselves and other members of the community may have held regarding neighborhood spaces. Thus, their performances became a source for producing into being, for and with their neighbors, alternative spaces and spatial imaginaries that drew upon a communitarian ethic, cooperative economics, family togetherness, and a history of resistance.

The *Mobile Block Party* and *Sunday Social* performances challenged the notion that certain areas of the da Tré, and by association, its residents, were deviant. Instead, they displayed the area as a neighborhood space with many uses, a place where friends (old and new) and family gather to engage in fellowship and to provide one another with social nourishment. These neighborhood conventions can remind existing residents, and show developers and newcomers, that da Tré is, and has always been, inhabited by people who value the land and the community who inhabits it. Without ignoring the problems that exist in their community, MF Problem seeks to address these issues in ways that require

community participation, rather than those that result in the community's relocation.

MF Problem's use of private space as public space in service of new publics provides an on-site demonstration of how residents may activate sites in their community for their betterment. This is done, particularly, by formulating ways to challenge the private accumulation of land that results in the neighborhood's uneven spatial development. By re-appropriating "empty" spaces, MF Problem enacts an alternative spatial imaginary for development in the Third Ward, one based on its use value, rather than emphasizing its potential to produce exchange value. Their spatial imagination also results in the spontaneous and simultaneous creation of multiple publics by drawing upon the Third Ward's existing residents and supporters of the community's culture of arts. These publics are made, unmade, and remade as individuals walk, cycle, and drive by a corner or parking lot of ill repute, joining and exiting the performance.

The Black Guys

Robert Hodge and Phillip Pyle II are known, collectively, as the Black Guys. In December 2014, The Black Guys staged a twenty-four-hour performance,¹³ *24 Hrs*, during which they occupied a local bus stop from 10:00 a.m. one morning to 10:00 a.m. the next day. The bus stop was located at Dowling and Francis Streets, directly across from the gas station where MF Problem held their *Mobile Block Party* performances.

The stop, which includes a historical marker, is dedicated to Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins, a renowned blues musician who made the Third Ward his home in the 1970s. Years prior, PRH and the Nathan Cummings Foundation commissioned Robert Hodge to create the bus stop in his honor (see Hodge 2014). The desired public for this permanent installation were pedestrians waiting to patronize the city's system of public transportation.

At the beginning of their performance, Hodge and Pyle believed they would spend the entire twenty-four hours alone. However, their efforts elicited the opposite effect. Over the course of the twenty-four-hour period, a performance that began as two young men sitting on the bus stop bench with laptops, cell phones, and a camera, grew into a full-on engagement with scores of visitors who were either residents of da Tré or passersby. Shortly after the occupation started, a supporter, likely a friend of the duo, brought a tarp to house the artists and visitors for the rest of the performance. A large group of young, mostly White women and men holding notepads—what appeared to be a class—were among the first visitors. Hodge told this group that he "did not have any idea that it would turn into this place of people hanging out and congregating, and doing other things other than riding the bus. I don't mind gathering if it's, um, beneficial" (Pyle 2014).

Throughout the performance, a range of people (e.g., community members, journalists, students, friends, and family members) came to visit



Figure 8. At 24Hrs public performance. (Selfie: ZIN of All Real Radio.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

and talk with Hodge and Pyle, some inquiring about the purpose of the occupation, others providing food and company. At times there were as few as two visitors, but at no point throughout the twenty-four-hour performance were the artists alone (Figure 8). Later in the evening, a group of cyclists stopped by the tent, joining the constant stream of participants throughout the day's performance. When one cyclist asked what they were doing at this stop, Hodge explained: "And so, what we're doing out here, basically we're occupying this bus stop for twenty-four hours. And we're kind of reclaiming it back because at night, some unsavory behavior happens here" (Pyle 2014).

The unsavory behavior Hodge referenced was drug sales and sex work, which one might say is the unexpected creation of another public within the community, due to urban renewal. During the performance, community members suggested that the illicit acts occurring at the bus stop were initially taking place at Emancipation Park, which is one full block north of the bus stop at the corner of Dowling and Elgin streets. However, after the city began renovations on the park in October 2013, drug dealers and users, along with sex workers, began using the bus stop as a base for their underground economy. The creation of this unanticipated and conflictual public speaks to Zebracki's (2013, 303) argument that public art cannot be assessed as a one-size fits-all cultural product because it is "shaped by its publics, which comprise a multifaceted audience."¹⁴

Indeed, the dichotomy of uses of the Lightnin' Hopkins Bus Stop between bus riders, the Black Guys, and the unconventional/undesirable means made of it by drug dealers, drug users, and sex workers, speaks to its effect as a work of public art. The creation of multiple publics, even those unintended by the artists, highlights that "what exists in the space between the words public and art is an unknown relationship between

artist and audience, a relationship that may *itself* become the artwork” (Lacy 1995, 20; emphasis in the original). As evident by Hodge’s disappointment, no one artist may dictate the formation and effect of these relationships. The birth of unexpected publics is cause—as noted by Hall (2007), Massey and Rose (2003), and Zebracki (2013)—for further inquiry into the study of perspectives held by the multiplicity of publics created by a work of public art, or what Hall (2007, 1383) proudly describes as “the more messy reality of the ongoing relations that come to form between artworks and their audiences.”

Discussion

The Black artist collectives and new genre public art performances reviewed here are less informed by a desire to halt the state-sponsored gentrification of their community. To be clear, the artists are not in support of the uneven spatial redevelopment of their community in a way that neglects the needs and wants of existing residents. This is to say that unlike previous responses to the gentrification of the Third Ward (Christian 2006), MF Problem and the Black Guys do not set out, explicitly, to stop gentrification from occurring through traditional political mediums. Instead, they use their performances to pose the continued existence of alternative geographies in the Third Ward that do not fit in the city and developers’ restrictive model for neighborhood development. These performances, and the publics that accompany them, create Black geographies. These spaces challenge notions that stigmatize the neighborhood as divergent, and that valorize private property and exchange value. Instead, they illustrate the use value of community spaces—be they privately or publicly owned.

In addition, these practices highlight a unique Black spatial imagination held by members of the community that is amorphous and that may be adopted, regardless of one’s race (Lipsitz 2007). This is evident not only in photographs of MF Problem’s *Sunday Social* performances that show participants of various races, but also in Pruitt’s suggestion in his talk before an audience at the Tamarind Institute, that *Sunday Social* was as much a declaration to existing community members regarding the need to reactivate spaces in a collective fashion as it was to developers. Participation in these performances by artists, community members, and passersby was further indication that “new genre public art is not only about subject matter, and not only about placement or site for art, but about the aesthetic expression of activated value systems” (Lacy 1995, 30).

Our analysis of MF Problem and the Black Guys’s new genre public art also demonstrates the potentialities that await research on short-lived public art projects. Each collective’s awareness and avoidance of the levels of surveillance monitoring their work, their bodies, and community speaks to a level of threat surrounding their art. Within the context of the Third Ward, a number of potentially oppositional publics (e.g., police, developers, landowners, new residents, and drug dealers) exist as

sentries of MF Problem's and the Black Guys's public performances and the land on which they are located.¹⁵ It is our perspective that the all-watchful eyes of these audiences contribute to the necessity that MF Problem's and the Black Guys's performances are mobile and temporary. Their art performs maroonage, flight, and escape—producing space, all the while avoiding the accumulation thereof. Such ceaseless movement is, perhaps, what a local photographer described in the documentary on PRH as the community's "effort to survive and how they make adjustments" (Garrison 2007).

Movement allows these artists to elude any legal and/or extra-legal challenge to their artistic/spatial productions. It also contributes to the art's impact as a mode of resistance against the community's dual processes of gentrification and ghettoization. By moving their works between private and public space, either for a few hours or across a number of days, these artists engage in what Fred Moten (2008, 179) discusses as the "fugitive movement[s]" of Blackness, a mode of existence expressed saliently through the arts, which has no place within, and which can never be corralled, fully, by the dominant society. *Mobile Blackness* (a term we have developed to refer to the elusiveness of Black bodies, geographies, and spatial imaginations), expressed in performances across multiple spaces and temporalities, allows these artists to defy—whether wittingly or not—capture by developers, the police, drug dealers, new residents, and, as we will explain further, the temptation towards institutionalization.

Concision may aid these artists in avoiding the temptation to institutionalize their efforts, what we view as a capitalist and spatial form of capture and accumulation. We use as examples three public art projects, spearheaded by Black artists, that have become household names in the United States—Project Row Houses, the Heidelberg Project, and the Dorchester Projects. Though literature exists that interrogates the relationship between public art and gentrification (Matthews 2010), there has been little critical study as to the relationship between gentrification and these organizations, PRH in particular (Finkelpearl 2013). Project Row Houses' relationship to the gentrification of the Third Ward has been acknowledged for some time now. Deborah Grotfeldt, PRH's former Managing Director, stated back in 2007, "The really scary part of it all, is the more we do brings more attention to the Third Ward, which has got the cheapest land prices now in the city. Real estate speculation has already begun" (Garrison 2007).

The internment of public art as fuel for capitalist urban redevelopment is illustrated in an essay penned for *Art News*, wherein Carolina Miranda (2014) describes PRH's socially engaged art set within the home as a form of activism that has "turned urban renewal into an art form" (para. 4). The message is clear: public art and urban renewal are a perfect match. One way to expand the geographic and temporal frames bordering our understanding of public art would be to interrogate the institutionalization of public art as a form of capture into a capitalist mode of economic and spatial production that may, at times, run counter to the aims

of the artists who created these projects, and threaten the communities they seek to serve.

The threat of institutionalization is illustrated in the documentary, *Third Ward TX*, when Rick Lowe states that he initially envisioned PRH as “a temporary kind of guerilla style art project” (Garrison 2007). And yet, some twenty years later, PRH has gone from guerilla to guarantor. Conversely, employing an eye for seizure and co-optation, MF Problem and the Black Guys perform an escapist public art, as brevity and multi-spatial movement allow them to skirt pervading threats to consume, contain, and legitimize their art for a general public—a group to which they, their neighbors, and their collective spatial imaginaries are not generally given access.

Both MF Problem and the Black Guys utilized the Internet (including social media technologies) before, during, and/or after their material performances in ways that extend the spatial and temporal reach of new genre public art. In addition to the physical spaces of the Third Ward’s parking lots, vacant lots, and the Lightnin’ Hopkins bus stop on Dowling Street, public art can be expressed in virtual spaces, “media (non-)places” like television and the Internet (Sharp, Pollock, and Paddison 2005, 1004). These “non-places,” particularly the Internet, become vehicles for performances and create an online awareness of the artists’ agenda. During the *24 Hrs* performance, attendees and interested community members spread the word through Facebook status updates and Instagram photos. Twitter posts were particularly useful as the Black Guys used the hashtags *#theblackguys* and *#24hrs* to open the possibility for viewers to discover the performance online and join the emerging publics in person. Furthermore, social media activity, including access to the Black Guys’ performance on YouTube and MF Problem’s Tumblr page, comprise an online repository of their activity that preserves the critical intention driving the performance while evading the potential co-optation and depoliticization associated with more institutionalized forms of permanent public art.

Within this paper we also posited that inquiries into such spaces would benefit from the use of analytic frameworks based on the experiences of Black people in the United States and the African diaspora. As scholars in a variety of disciplines have argued (Collins 1991; A. Y. Davis 1983; hooks 1990; Ladner 1973; Pulido 2002; Woods and McKittrick 2007), it is paramount that research is contextualized critically along lines of gender, race, class, and space, lest it be homogenized by/into a White literary imagination that subsumes a coterie of perspectives underneath a Eurocentric analytic umbrella (Morrison 1992). Thus, our critical foray into public art utilized geographic theory that considers how Black people within the United States, due to a history of racial-spatial marginalization, contribute to the production of space and reorient linear notions of time. The result, we feel, is the exposure of “a public art that identifies a new geography of art, audience, production, and involvement” (Phillips 2013, 16). We also found further cause for research into the perspectives of the varying publics that engage these new genre public artworks, not only for

views regarding its attractiveness (Zebracki 2013) but also for perspectives held by multiple publics regarding how a work of public art should be used and if it should exist in public spaces.

Conclusion

MF Problem's *Mobile Black Party* and *Sunday Social* and the Black Guys's *24 Hrs* performances, in addition to privileging and imposing an alternative spatial imaginary for development in the Third Ward based on the use value of existing spaces over their potential exchange value, draw on what George Lipsitz (2007, 14) considers a "black spatial imaginary" in order to materialize—even if illegal, unsolicited, and for a brief moment—new Black geographies along and around the Third Ward's Dowling Street strip. These spatial productions are also artistic productions, which utilize private and public space in the service of new publics. In each of these performances, friends, family members, supporters, and residents of the Third Ward who happened to stroll by and find themselves as conscripts, became contributors to MF Problem's and the Black Guys's public art performances and the publics they produced.

Notes

¹*Da Tré* is a nickname for the Third Ward used by residents. We incorporate this colloquialism throughout the essay to connote the emotive and spatial differences between it and the Third Ward, the difference between a community and a municipality. The late comedian Richard Pryor put it best when he stated in 1975, "This is a neighborhood. This ain't no residential district!" (*Saturday Night Live* Transcripts, n.d.).

²Black geographies are unique spatial productions that derive from the spatial imaginations of Black people throughout the African diaspora. McKittrick and Woods (2007) suggest that due to the longstanding conditions of captivity and ownership of Black people and communities, particularly in the Americas, Black men, women, and children have developed ways of spatial production that operate and emerge in opposition to traditional notions of space and spatial productions (i.e., space as bordered, owned, and economically productive).

³A number of visual, performance, and literary artists of color have made Houston and the Third Ward their home and muse. These include John Biggers, Little Joe Washington, Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins, Bobby Ray, Rick Lowe, Jesse Lott, Floyd Newsum, Ray Carrington III, Eddie Hudnall Jr., Sehba Sarwar, M'Kina Tapscott, Nathaniel Donnett, Lovie Olivia, The Flower Man, Jamal Cyrus, Robert Pruitt, Kenya Evans, Dawolu Jabari Anderson, Autumn Knight, Phillip Pyle II, Nikala Asante, Lisa Harris, Robert Hodge, Regina Agu, Monica Villarreal, Rebea Ballin, and Brian Ellison.

⁴See Norris (2010) for a discussion on the legal process that made the acquisition of private property for commercial redevelopment legal under eminent domain in Houston, Texas.

⁵The city failed to implement many of the cooperative and community-centered recommendations made in 1973 by the independent research group Progressive Environmental Planners Inc. (see Progressive Environmental Planners Inc. 1973).

⁶This is based on the U.S. News' 2015–2016 ranking of the best hospitals in the United States (see U.S. News 2016).

⁷The signs, with their black-on-white aesthetic and sheer volume, have taken on qualities of public art (i.e., they are placed on private property, have a striking presence, and are commissioned by public and private donors).

⁸In Moore's (2009) discussion of Black gentrification in a North Philadelphia neighborhood, she uses the phrase *Black habitus* to discuss the cultural identities, allegiances, and practices of the Black middle class. We re-appropriate this phrase and apply it to the cultural practices and spatial productions of Black working-class and underclass residents in the Third Ward.

⁹We view Black residents' seemingly benign everyday practice of walking throughout da Tré, in the midst of the neighborhood's privatization and respatialization, as a way to recoup public space with what Michel de Certeau (1988, 96) coins as one of a number of "microbe-like" acts of trespass.

¹⁰The NEA provided funding support for PRH's initial efforts. The NEA also provided funding support for *Third Ward TX*, the documentary that chronicled PRH's humble beginnings and its impact on the Third Ward. More recently, Rick Lowe was honored with a 2014 Genius Grant from the MacArthur Foundation.

¹¹Fred Moten (2008) states that Blackness is always already fugitive to capture—what we in this essay see as a netting into capitalist-tinged artistic modes of spatial production, or a "commercial demand for novelty" (Lippard 1995, 125).

¹²Another corner in da Tré, Scott and Wilmington streets, made number six on the list. Corners were classified using the following criteria: Rank, Neighborhood, Violent Crime Rate (per 1,000), and My Chances of Being a Victim Here (in one year). The website also provides links to the 100 Safest Cities in the U.S., the 100 Worst Public Schools in the U.S., and the 100 Most Appreciating Cities in the U.S., not to mention guides on real estate investment and assistance in locating a real estate agent (Neighborhood Scout 2013).

¹³To view the performance in its entirety, sped up for the sake of brevity, see Pyle (2014).

¹⁴On Sunday, January 3, 2016, da Tré lost one of its most vocal and dedicated champions—ZIN of All Real Radio. ZIN, a.k.a. Wali Aqueel, is the photographer of the final image in this essay. Rest in power, ancestor.

¹⁵During the early hours of the 24 Hrs performance, an HPD officer who moonlights as a private security guard shared her thoughts with the

Black Guys that the bus stop should be removed. In her opinion, the removal of the bus stop would help alleviate the space's growing underground economy (Binkovitz 2014). Later that evening, another HPD officer pulled up to our performance (the presence of one of the authors at the bus stop made him a participant in the performance) from across the street. This officer was leaving the scene of a robbery that all of those participating in 24 Hrs had witnessed. Seeing that we were stocked with electronics (e.g., laptops, speakers, a lamp, cameras, and a camcorder), the officer asked if we happened to have watched the basketball game between the Houston Rockets and the Sacramento Kings. We had. After receiving our score report, the officer left. Though a seemingly benign interaction, most of those in attendance were sure that the officer was less concerned with the outcome of the game and was more interested in uncovering just exactly what the large and lively group of Black and brown wo/men was up to.

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