Healing and Belonging: Community Based Art and Community Formation in West Oakland

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Honors Thesis in Comparative American Studies

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Pablo Cerdera
4/22/2015

Introduction

Unlike so many other days, on this sunny October afternoon the three square blocks of Lil' Bobby Hutton Park[1] in West Oakland, California are packed with people. A mix of musical styles, including Hip Hop, Reggae, and Soul, as well as the smell of cooking food, fills the air. Children are running and playing, and people of all ages are dancing. The atmosphere is one of celebration and openness, with people moving through the park at ease. In a few places, there are people grouped around massive cubes, covered on two sides with 8 foot high vibrant portraits. People are not just looking at the portraits and reading the words written around them, but are adding their own words and images to the other two sides of the cubes.

This is the Life is Living Festival, organized by Youth Speaks, a San Francisco based non-profit that promotes youth arts and performance for social change, and other community collaborators. The art on display is a part of Brett Cook's ongoing collaborative project, *Reflections of Healing (RoH)*. This yearly festival, which debuted in 2008, was conceived by its founders at Youth Speaks as a community Hip Hop festival aimed at combating environmental racism, and addressing ecological and other concerns of the West Oakland community. *Reflections of Healing*, which is the primary focus of this thesis, developed alongside the festival. *RoH* is a collaborative community based art project which seeks to highlight the importance of physical, emotional, and communal healing, and the presence of healers active in Oakland. *RoH*, and the festival it is intimately connected to, engage in different kinds of work which build a shared image of community in Oakland, as well as interpersonal connections between residents.

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[1] Officially named DeFremery Park, it has come to be popularly known as Little Bobby Hutton Park for reasons which will be explored below.

Pablo Cerdera
4/22/2015

Art and performance are showcased here as catalysts for positive and transformative experiences, and as tools to highlight and build community identity and power. My experience in the institutional art world has shown me that although many people talk about the revolutionary and transformative potential of art, they rarely change their fundamental approach to consider the needs, desires, and histories of the people they are doing outreach with. There is also often talk in these setting of outreach to "the community," which is taken euphemistically to mean Black and Latinx[2] urban populations, but without critical analysis of how community is constructed, or what role art and culture play in shaping community. Rather, the emphasis is placed on bringing people who are often not represented in the institution into the existing structure, without consideration of the history of how the content and shape of arts institutions can and have been used to limit community self-definition. There is too often a lack of recognition of the ways in which both the concepts of 'art' and 'community' are political, and do work beyond the creation of beauty.

This political reality, and potential, for art making, display, and analysis are what drew me to the contemporary field of "community based art." Community based art is a way of making and understanding art which emphasizes the situated and collaborative nature of meaning making. I saw in this model the possibility of fulfilling art's potential to reach people connect with them, and connect them with one another. Community self-determination and self-definition are of central importance to me, interpersonal connections are the foundation of any kind of resistive political action. This type of practice goes by many names, including social practice[3], socially engaged art[4], dialogical art[5], and littoral art[6], in addition to community based art. Each of these terms carries with

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[2] Spanish is a gendered language, and the traditional name for Spanish speaking Latin Americans and their descendants in the U.S. (Latino) is gendered male. The use of the word Latinx (pronounced La-teen-ecks) is an attempt to encompass people of all genders, including non-binary gender identities, without subordinating them to a male default.
[3] Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents," *Art Forum* (February, 2006)
[4] Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook.* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011)
[5] Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: U of California, 2004)
[6] Bruce Barber, *Littoral Art and Communicative Action* (Common Ground, 2013)

Pablo Cerdera
4/22/2015

it its own particular connotation and history. For instance, Grant Kester, a central theorist of this practice, uses the term "dialogical art" because the artistry in his opinion derives from meaning making based in dialog.[7] At its best, Kester describes dialogical art as "a model of engaged art that is developed not only on behalf of but alongside communities in struggle."[8] Gretchen Coombs, on the other hand, prefers the term "social practice," which she defines as "relational acts that involve interactions between artists and audiences; interventionist acts that are activist in nature … performances; installations; and events that speak to social and political concerns. It is art that is engaged in the broader social world, work that is conversational, interactive, temporal, and performative."[9] Together, all of these definitions offer a sense of the focus of the field on mutual meaning making, and the importance of dialog and everyday experience in forming shared understandings, and an emphasis on social change.

Though Cook primarily uses the term "socially engaged art" to describe his work, throughout this essay I will use the term "community based art" to describe *RoH*. While I respect Cook's choice in defining the nature of his work, for my purposes, the term "community based" is applicable because the aesthetic of Cook's work is, above all else, in the formation, cultivation, and articulation of community and communal identity: It is in the definition of the lines and contours of what it means to be a collectivity. In addition, my own interest in *RoH* centers on the question of how it is used to create a concept of community, and what the ramifications of this rhetorical work are. Therefore, in using the term 'community based' I consistently return our focus to this central question of what it means to base a work in community, and what community means in this context.

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[7] Kester, 10.
[8] Ibid. 180
[9] Gretchen Coombs, "Activism, art and social practice: a case study using Jacques Ranciere's framework for analysis" (paper presented at the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand Conference, Melbourne, Australia, December 5-8 2013) 2, accessed January 22, 2015,
http://www.academia.edu/8557202/Activism_art_and_social_practice_a_case_study_using_Jacques_Ranciere_s_framework_for_analysis.

Pablo Cerdera
4/22/2015

The mission of this thesis is to work towards answering a seemingly simple question: What does community based art actually *do*? The answer to that question is, in reality, much too broad and multifaceted for me to answer in this study. Therefore, I turn my attention to a more focused set of central questions, informed by this larger issue. First, how does *Reflections of Healing* as a case study illuminate some of the ways community based art can help form symbolic community? Second, in what ways does community based art and symbolic community lead to the formation or fortification of interpersonal relationships and networks? Finally, what are the social and political ramifications of this project, and what do they reveal about community based art as a model for engendering social change?

What I have found in my study has been a complex reality. Brett Cook's *RoH* provides a compelling example of the community based art model. Through an ambivalent and sometimes messy process of collaboration, *RoH* constructs a hopeful and positive image of community that prefigures a better world. This image does not come out of nowhere, but is built from a long history of organizing, activism, and community formation in Oakland, reflecting the importance of the creation of counter-hegemonic images of community, even while remaining open and inclusive for all. Although Cook intentional chooses not to face many social and political issues head on, the community constituted in the project carries with it the potential to make radical political change. Cook's emphasis on healing reflects the deep traumas, both historical and contemporary, faced by many Oakland residents, while remaining positive about the future. While it is not without room for critique in terms of the relationship to and definition of community, *Reflections of Healing* proves to be deeply meaningful for at least some of the participants and residents, and creates possibilities for community self-definition.

Pablo Cerdera
4/22/2015

Literature Review

This investigation of *Reflections of Healing*, and in particular its attention to community formation builds on and contributes to a small but growing literature on political aesthetics and community art. My work builds on previous scholarship in the fields of cultural politics, community studies, and the ongoing conversation about community based art.

I, like many others interested in the political potential of artistic production of any kind, base my political analysis of art and aesthetics in part on political philosopher Jacques Rancière's concept of "the distribution of the sensible": What is possible to experience or express in a society, and therefore the possibilities that exist for changing the social order.[10] As Rancière argues, new forms of artistic production have the potential to re-shape or influence the "distribution of the sensible," and through this reshaping shift the political possibilities in society.[11] This concept provides a model with which to understand the social and political ramifications of novel artistic modes, like the form of collaborative art exemplified by *RoH,* in terms of their contributions to the symbolic landscape. Despite its usefulness, Rancière's theorization are limited by its lack of engagement with the importance of art's content and the material impacts of art beyond the symbolic.[12]

Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony provides theoretical tools more equipped for understanding the political impacts of *RoH*.[13] Dominant hegemonic attitudes have considered

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[10] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013)

[11] In *The Politics of Aesthetics,* Rancière defines politics as the struggle for recognition and social equality by marginalized or socially invisible groups. Aesthetics are essential in this struggle, because what Rancière calls "aesthetic regimes" define the "distribution of the sensible." In this framework, aesthetics and politics are tightly bound, and can in many ways be understood as one in the same, with the political struggles shaping the artistic, and the artistic in turn shaping and reshaping the political.

[12] In fact, although Rancière cautions that the politics of symbolic re-distribution itself does not directly lead to a redistribution of political power, he offers no tools for analyzing the material work that art and aesthetics can perform. He is ultimately dismissive of explicitly political art, and more concerned with the symbolic or theoretical possibilities for artistic liberation than how artworks and collaborative processes can make material change.

[13] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. Quintin Hoare, Geoffrey Nowell Smith (International Publishers Co, 1971)
Described in various portions Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, though never defined succinctly, 'cultural hegemony' is similar to Rancière's "distribution of the sensible," if more intentional. Hegemony is when the ideas and attitudes of the powerful are so widespread and ingrained in society, they, and the hierarchies themselves, are taken for common

Oakland, until recently, to be inferior and marginal. Understanding hegemony as a contested field allows one to understand the ways in which the positive image of the Oakland community presented by *RoH* is a counter-hegemonic and resistive political project that challenges the status quo. Finally, hegemony theory helps me to see that certain cultural attitudes, namely those of the incoming wave of gentrifiers in Oakland, are privileged, while others, those of longtime Oakland residents, are discounted, and the ramifications that has for the way *RoH* engages with each of these populations.

Within the realm of cultural theory and critical pedagogy, I gain important frameworks for engaging with community based art. Drawing on the work of intellectuals like bell hooks, I analyze the power of self-representation and the ability to shape physical and acoustic space in *RoH* to foster self-determination and form community identity.[14] Though focused primarily on issues directly related to teaching, critical pedagogy also offers insights into how to evaluate power dynamics in ostensibly co-creative spaces, and how to foster hope and community across difference and among people who face marginalization and oppression, like the environment in which *RoH* is produced.[15]

My analysis of community and its meaning derives from a synthesis of several theoretical positions on community and community formation. Studies of community focus variously on:

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sense, which allows for the 'consensual' maintenance of hierarchies of power without the need for constant physical domination.

[14] bell hooks, *Art on My Mind* (New York: The New Press, 1995): Barry Shank, *The Political Force of Musical Beauty* (Durham: Duke UP, 2014). In *Art on My Mind*, bell hooks argues that the shaping of the physical landscape, and the creation of objects which define counterhegemonic self-conceptions for Black artists are essential in the larger Black freedom struggle. Her work also performs an important intervention in the field of art criticism by centering the voices of Black women artists, and focuses on the liberatory and transformative potential of art in the context of racial struggle. Barry Shank's, *The Politic Force of Musical Beauty*, makes a similar, though broader, argument for the importance of creating aesthetic landscapes in the production of political communities.

[15] bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (London: Routledge, 2003): Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012). In *Teaching Community*, hooks outlines an approach to community building and community definition which informs my own, and which mirrors Cook's in many ways. Though focused primarily on issues of pedagogy and education, the sorts of learning and growing communities described in *Teaching Community* are frequently relevant to issues in the co-creation that is inherent to community based art. hooks's thesis that community is best created in an environment of hope, and that hope is sustained by community, both which argue for the value of positivity in the formation of collectivities. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* also expresses a similar sentiment, in that it is only through the communal co-creation of knowledge that the negative impacts of oppressive hegemonic imposition of knowledge can be avoided. This mirrors in many ways the model of community based art, which seeks to challenge the traditional, top down approach to art making, and instead engage in co-creation.

place[16]; shared identity or interests[17]; shared norms[18]; the symbolic[19]; networks of mutual support[20];

and the act of "being-in-common".[21] While conceptions of community based solely on place or

identity (i.e. *The* Oakland community, *The* Black community) are often inadequate or essentializing,[22]

due to the nature of identity in our society people often build their social networks and communities

based at least in part on these considerations.[23] Therefore, while I embrace Jean-Luc Nancy's non-

essentializing understanding of community as dynamic and based on mutuality and "being-in-

common,"[24] I maintain that people's ability and desire to be-in-common with others are greatly

influenced by the above factors. I also understand networks of mutual support to be the ultimate

source of political power for otherwise disenfranchised communities. Community functions on

multiple levels, and while the community as "being-in-common" has no boundaries, the community

as shared symbols does, which can promote trust, solidarity, and shared purpose among the

members of the in-group, even while it is restricting. As such, projects like *RoH*, which project an

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[16] Lynn A. Staeheli and Albert Thompson, "Citizenship, Community, and Struggles for Public Space," *The Professional Geographer* 49 (1997): 28-38.
[17] Paul Hoggett, "Contested Communities," in *Contested Communities. Experiences, Struggles, Policies*, ed. Paul Hoggett, (Bristol: Policy Press, 1997)
[18] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000)
[19] Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Tavistock, 1985); Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.
[20] Graham Crow, Graham Allan, *Community Life: An Introduction to Local Social Relations*, (New York: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1994); Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.
[21] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community,* trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1991); Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert Richardson Anne O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford U, 2000)
[22] The concept of, for instance, *the* Latinx community suggests that there is only one way to be Latinx, and that all Latinx people share an essential characteristic which makes them be in community with one another. This completely erases the complexity of the identity Latinx, and the internal contours, divisions, and disagreements within this group. It also makes a definitive claim about the boundaries of in-group and out-group which can be divisive and dismissive of people's claims to community membership.
[23] Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity?" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: SAGE Publications, 1996); Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes toward an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-188. Hall's "Who Needs 'Identity'?" provides a critique of, and explanation of the value of, identity as an analytical tool when considering culture and community formation. Althusser provides a description of "hailing" and "interpolation," the processes by which individuals take on and shape existing identities.
[24] In *The Inoperative Community* (1991) and *Being Singular Plural* (2000) Nancy provides a definition of community which centers the act of being in relation. Nancy claims that any attempt to firmly delimit the boundaries of a community or fix it in place is inherently essentializing, and distracts from the reality of community as a dynamic process.

image of community, and also bring people into relation with one another, impact community on at least two levels, the symbolic and the interpersonal, both of which have political consequences.

Since the 1960s, art historians and art critics have also been engaged in debates about community based art. Grant Kester's *Conversation Pieces* is one of the foundational texts for the analysis of community based art and represents the dominant position in the pro-community based art conversation. Kester provides a cogent explanation about the aesthetic value of community based art,[25] which helps me to apply Rancière's aesthetic theories to the collaborative process of *RoH*. Unlike Rancière, Kester and others in the field do provide analytical tools for considering content, and to some degree audience response. Another important concept that Kester introduces is the danger of what he calls "dialogical determinism."[26] Dialogical determinism is what Kester describes as the idea that dialog and being in relation on their own will solve social issues, an attitude that can sometimes prevail among creators and critics of community based art.[27] This consideration informs my drive to contextualize *RoH* within a larger social and political landscape, and my emphasis on audience analysis.

Methodology

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of my research questions, I employ multiple methods. In this thesis I set out to understand the theoretical and practical impact of Brett Cook's *RoH* on a personal, communal, and political level for participants and participant communities. In order to explore the theoretical and political aspects of the project, I engaged in a formal analysis of Cook's

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[25] Kester traces the history of this artistic movement, and explicitly connects it to the avant-garde in terms of its rejection of previous artistic norms, and the emphasis placed on shaking the normal patterns of daily life.

[26] Kester, 182.

[27] He emphasizes that when considering the effects and impacts of community based art, we must always be mindful of power dynamics and of hegemony, and that art must always be part of a larger movement if it is to be effective in making change.

mission and project, images of the creation process, documents describing the project by funding

organizations, and the finished artworks themselves. This analysis is meant to determine the

theoretical and conceptual orientation of the project by those most directly involved, and allows me

to better evaluate the impact and meaning of the project as a whole.

In order to gain a higher degree of insight into the artist's process, his relationship to the

community, and the implications of his collaboration, I also conducted my own long form interview

with Brett Cook. By asking directed and focused questions, I was able to gain a deeper

understanding of the artist and his approach than had I simply relied on observation or reading

earlier interviews. This process also allowed me to begin to form a relationship with the artist, and

therefore better understand his work and his process.

Due to the emphasis placed in my research on context and community, I decided to spend

three and a half weeks living in West Oakland, to observe and interact with the community, begin to

build an understanding of the region, and to conduct direct interviews and surveys with people in

the neighborhood. The surveys and interviews focus on the respondents' experiences and views with

relation to the artworks, Brett Cook, and art in their community more broadly. In this, I attempted

to gain a degree of access to the perspective of local residents on this project, their community, and

art in general. In my time in Oakland I was also able to attend the Life is Living Festival, the main

site of community engagement in *RoH*. This allowed me to directly observe people's interactions

with the artworks and with the festival. This greater range of perspectives pushed my understanding

of these works beyond the traditional formal analysis, and helped me to analyze the audience and

their opinions, vital to understanding the true meaning of 'community based' art.

In addition I tried to be aware in my methodology of my position as a student at an elite

liberal arts college in Ohio, and not from the Bay Area communities that I studied. Therefore, I have

taken care throughout my research and writing to foreground the thoughts and experiences of

residents and participants in this project, and have worked to let them speak for themselves as much as possible. My bias, however, in terms of my position, my politics, and my goals for this project, has certainly seeped into this project through the ways in which I formulated my questions, how I engaged with my interview participants, and how I interpreted what I observed, as have my own social and political values and beliefs surrounding community. Nonetheless, I feel that by engaging in this case study I have been able to cultivate interpersonal relationships with residents and members of the community and in this way build connections to the material. You as a reader can and should take these things into account when considering my conclusions, as I have as a researcher.

Thesis Map

In my first chapter I will outline briefly a history of Oakland, focusing on the particular histories of segregation, racial and class oppression, and, most importantly, community organizing and resistance. I will then discuss the historical and contemporary image of what Oakland is, how this image is formed, and what impact it has on Oakland today. In this section I argue for the importance of social and political activism, particularly the activism of the Black Panther Party, for creating a collective vision of community in Oakland historically. Specifically, my focus is on how this history informs the ways in which community is and can be defined, and has been defined aesthetically in the past. All of this is to set the stage for the coming situated analysis of Brett Cook's *Reflections of Healing*.

In the following chapter, I begin my analysis of *RoH*, focusing on the ways in which the project works to create a symbolic or imagined community. This section focuses on those aspects of the project that construct a concept of community, either internally or to the outside world. Questions of place making, political aesthetics, display, multiculturalism, and cultural practice all

form a part of this chapter. Ultimately, I argue that *RoH* constructs an image of community that both builds on existing community identities while pushing to expand and adapted these identities in the face of a changing neighborhood.

In the third and final chapter I begin my analysis of the social aspects of this project, as well as its potentials for radical political possibilities. I highlight those moments in the art making process which emphasize relationship building and direct interpersonal interaction. This section focuses most specifically on the Life is Living festival, and the significance of community participation in art production, and the planning and interview processes.

In the conclusion, I reflect on the project as a unified whole, and work to build an understanding of the implications of this project, and this study, on the broader field of community based art. Here I ask the question of what lessons can be learned from *Reflections of Healing* about how to make community engaged art work, and how to avoid the pitfalls associated with it. Ultimately, I posit that, although *Reflections of Healing* itself may have succumb in some ways to cooptation, it is still an effective tool for creating social spaces where communal political power can grow and produce change. *Reflections of Healing's* message of radical hope, far from being naïve, is an intentional tool to challenge the negative hegemonic images placed on Oakland and to build resistance for self-help and community betterment.

Chapter 1- Background, History, and Context

Context and Community Building in Oakland

Reflections of Healing, like any community building effort, is necessarily situated in a social and historical context which informs the ways in which community can be understood and shaped. In Oakland, there is a long history of changing demographics, race and class based discrimination, and cultural movements, each of which informed different efforts to create a communal identity. *RoH* is not only indebted to these earlier movements, but also builds directly from a selective vision of this history. Most notably, the legacy of the BPP is very present in *RoH*, and in Oakland more broadly. I seek in this section to name some of the violences and traumas which *RoH* leaves unnamed, but seeks to heal. I also focus on the area immediately surrounding Lil' Bobby Hutton Park, as this is the location of LIL, as well as the home of several portraits from *Reflections of Healing*, arguably the symbolic center of the symbolic community *RoH* enacts.

Oakland has been deeply shaped by its role as a center of trade and by persistent practices of racial and class segregation. Following the displacement of Native Americans, the early demographics of Oakland were largely based on its role as a terminus of the Transcontinental Railroad beginning in the late 19th century.[1] In the early period of Oakland's history, the population was almost entirely White. However, with the advent of the railroad, a small Black population settled in the city, mostly as rail workers. These newcomers settled primarily in West Oakland, due to its proximity to the rail line and the Oakland shipyards. During this period, a larger Mexican and Latinx population also grew in West Oakland.[2] While the overall population of Oakland in 1940 was

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[1] Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*, (Princeton: Princeton U, 2003); Self describes the racial and economic history of Oakland in detail.

[2] I have yet to find any material that describes the relationship between the established Black population and the more newly arrived Mexican, Chicano, and Latinx populations.

predominantly White, West Oakland already had a high concentration of Oakland's Black and other non-White residents.[3]

It was only through and after WWII that any sizable Black or Latinx population began to form.[4] This period also marked a sharp increase in anti-Black state and state sanctioned violence in Oakland. At the same time as the southern Black population was growing throughout Oakland, so too was the southern White population.[5] The Oakland Police Department made an intentional practice of hiring newly arrived southern Whites, and not hiring Black applicants, in order to subjugate and control growing Black population. This marks the beginning of what has been a long history of antagonism and violence between the Oakland PD and Oakland's residents of color, most specifically Black residents.[6]

Even from this early period, there is a long and sustained tradition of community organizing and cultural resistance to racist and classicist actions of the local and federal governments in West Oakland. The Oakland general strike in 1946, the largest labor strike in U.S. history, was supported by many of the strong unions in the Black community, most notably the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters,[7] despite the racial subordination of Black workers above and beyond the conditions faced by White union men.[8] This attempt to build cross-race class based coalitions proved only

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[3] According to the 1940 Bay Area Census, Oakland was at this point 95% White but West Oakland was already 8-35% Black, and 2-3% what the 1940 census calls 'other.' At the time, the only other area with significant non-white settlement was Oakland's Chinatown, directly east of West Oakland, and just south of Lake Merritt. For more information, see: Metropolitan Transportation Commission and Association of Bay Area Governments, "Oakland Census 1860-2010," http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/Oakland.htm

[4] Self, 164; World War II brought profound change to the city's demographics overall, and in West Oakland there was an enormous wave of Black immigration, predominately from the U.S. South. From 1940 to 1960, the Black population across the city increased from a total of 8,462, or about 2.7% of the total to 83,616, or about 23% of the population. These newcomers, who came in search of work, and in part to escape the racial conditions of the south, settled primarily in East and West Oakland, the area around DeFremery Park became 95% Black at this time.

[5] While it would be overly simplistic to say that the rise in racism was due entirely to this shift, since the previous White population undoubtedly carried their own racial biases, this period nonetheless had a marked increase in racist violence.

[6] For more information about the history of intentional racist bias in police practices, see: Robyn C. Spencer, "Inside the Panther Revolution: The Freedom Movement and the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California," In *Groundwork: The Local Black Freedom Movement in America* ed. Komozi Woodard and Jeanne Theoharis (New York University Press, 2005) 300-318.

[7] Also known as the Pullman Porters

[8] Self, 46-47

partially successful for the Black participants, but was important in the history of community organizing in West Oakland, using labor solidarity to build community identity.

Oakland has also been the site of state sanctioned segregation, most visibly enforced in the 1950s and 60s, which shape the city to this day. During this period, many of the remaining White residents in West Oakland moved out to the suburbs on FHA loans, while Black residents, unable to attain such loans, remained in the city.[9] This segregation helped to build and enforce the racial homogeny of West Oakland. There was a great deal of economic divestment and removal of resources in this period that left many people impoverished, and weakened the local economy. At the same time, the racial homogeneity and shared struggle helped to solidify the importance Black political and cultural institutions which, as will be explored below, helped to lay the groundwork for future social and political organizing in the West Oakland Black community. In Oakland more broadly, there was at this time a small, but growing, Asian population, primarily Chinese, but also consisting of a fair number of Japanese and Filipino residents, who also faced some degree of residential segregation.[10]

During this period there were other forms of intentional divestment from West Oakland. Following World War II, several major public transit projects, most notably the Cypress Freeway in 1957, broke up the neighborhood, displaced residents, and furthered the social and economic isolation of West Oakland.[11] In this period, West Oakland truly was a "community under siege,"[12] by the city government, which helped to build a sense of community defined in opposition to the destructive efforts of the local and federal governments.

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9 For more information see: George Lipsitiz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (Philadelphia: Temple U, 1998); Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (June 1993) 1707-1791.
10 See: The Bay Area Census.
11 Self, 135-151; This construction also allowed potential consumers to bypass West Oakland completely, which together with the displacement of former Black owned businesses along the route of the Cypress Freeway caused a major economic downturn from which West Oakland has never fully recovered.
12 Ibid. 159.

Following this period of government sanctioned and sponsored divestment and destruction came a period of so called 'urban renewal' in West Oakland, which had effects almost as detrimental as the abandonment which preceded it. These 'urban renewal' efforts, which began in the 1960s, followed national trends of increasing segregation and exploitation of low-income communities of color in an attempt to maximize profits. Black neighborhoods, most especially West and East Oakland, were deemed 'blighted' or fundamentally broken. These 'blighted' areas then became targets for redevelopment schemes which focused on economic, not social, issues and threatened Black homeownership and interrupted the established relationships which formed the West Oakland community.[13] Robert Self puts it well when he states that the cries of 'urban decay' employed to rationalize these projects were "more than tinged," with anti-black racism.[14] This process served in many cases to leave longtime residents with little to no control over their own spaces.

Building on the tradition of union organizing, there was a wide range of community organizing efforts in the face of these redevelopment plans.[15] These efforts, focused on the specific issue of community control of development and resistance to government control, also helped develop shared community identity, and further developed networks between residents. This image of community was based explicitly on shared space, but, as a result of the segregationist policies described above, also carried with it a notion of Black working class solidarity. It is notable that a major point of contention for community activists was the defense of DeFremery Park, and

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[13] Self, 139-155; In some ways similar to contemporary trends of gentrification, these redevelopment plans had little regard for the needs or desires of longtime residents, and were primarily in the interest of business capital at the expense of residents, to the point of failing to employ local residents in the abundant construction work being done in their own neighborhood. One major difference, however, is that these redevelopment plans, such as the Acorn Plan and Oak Center, were explicitly planned and organized by the city government, whereas gentrification is more indirectly encouraged and condoned by the government.

[14] Ibid. 176.

[15] Ibid. 147-148; for instance, in 1960, Wade Johnson, a Pullman Porter, organized the United Tax Payers and Voters Union in an attempt to fight the Acorn plan, emphasizing the need for rehabilitation over demolition. When the city scheduled another area in West Oakland, called Oak Center, for redevelopment Lillian Love and a group of Black women organized the Oak Center Neighborhood Association (OCNA) to resist. After years of lobbying, their grassroots efforts were successful, and the city granted all Oak Center property owners access to redevelopment funds to revitalize existing property.

petitioning for its expansion, indicating its importance to residents of West Oakland as early as the 1960s.

The implicit racial solidarity of this organizing became much more explicit in Oakland's most famous political and social organization, the Black Panther Party, in 1966. Originally the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, the BPP was inspired by Malcom X and his call for self-defense "by any means necessary." The BPP espoused a political ideology that fused radical Black Nationalism with revolutionary anti-capitalist Maoism, and used the logic of decolonization to organize in response to the failure of liberalism and to push beyond the goal of desegregation in securing justice for the Black community.[16] The BPP also emphasized community self-determination, this time based explicitly on race, and joined other organizations coming out of the civil rights movement, like SNCC, CORE, SDS, and the Ad Hoc Committee to End Discrimination, as a leading force in the Black freedom struggle.[17] Though the leadership of the BPP would ultimately reject Black Nationalism, and accept help from people outside the Black community, their political goals remained firmly rooted in Oakland's, and eventually all of America's, urban Black communities, and in the process of attempting to forge this communal identity as a political rallying point.[18] This organizing strategy fit the political atmosphere at the time, and, importantly, the racial demographics of West Oakland, which, in 1970, was majority Black, with a growing Latinx population.

The BPP not only organized for self-defense and self-determination, but also instituted the famous "survival programs," which by 1972 included things like the People's Free Breakfast Program, sickle cell anemia testing, and Liberation Schools.[19] These programs projected an image of

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[16] Ibid. 217-218.

[17] Ibid. 180-185, 221.

[18] Ibid. 224

[19] The BPP have a rich and complex history, both in the local West Oakland context, as well as the national and international context. For further information on the BPP see: *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*, eds. Jama Lazerow, and Yohuru Williams, (Duke U, 2006); Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination* (Minneapolis, U of Minnesota, 2011); Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon* (New Press, 2006); Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's*

the BPP as not only a revolutionary organization, but also a pillar of community solidarity and

power based on principles of self-help and self-determination.

DeFremery Park served as the principle stage for many of these programs in West Oakland a

well as for their increasingly popular public rallies. When Bobby Hutton, the first recruit of the BPP

and its first treasurer, was shot and killed while unarmed after surrendering in a shootout with the

police on April 6th 1968, two days after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and two weeks

before Hutton's 18th birthday, DeFremery Park was unofficially renamed by the BPP in his honor.[20]

The degree of racist police violence in Oakland had increased unabated since the 1940s, and the

death of Bobby Hutton marked the beginning of a spike in violence in the community. Hutton

immediately became a martyr for the BPP, and his death had incredible symbolic power. Bobby

Hutton, and the park that bears his name, served as symbols of resilience in the face of state (or

state-sanctioned) violence. Black Power advocates hoped that symbols like these would help form an

"imagined community" of Black Oaklanders based on race and place. Unfortunately, in large part

due to the FBI's sabotage of the BPP through COINTELPRO, the party collapsed in 1982.

Despite the end of the original BPP, the name of the park, and many other rhetorical tools

used by the party to build shared identity, such as the phrase 'All Power to the People' and the Black

Power fist, remain in the public consciousness in Oakland, and were frequently used and referenced

at Life is Living, and in relation to *Reflections of Healing*. For instance, one woman at LiL, who grew up

in West Oakland, said that she came to "honor and celebrate the legacy of Bobby Hutton," and that

it was "really nice to see people coming together to celebrate the life of someone important."[21] This

indicates a degree of identification with the history of the park, and a recognition of "people coming

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Story (Anchor, 1994); Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (McGraw-Hill, 1968); Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (Black Classic Press, 1991).

[20] As mentioned at the start of this section, this was not an official change. Rather, it was another attempt by the BPP to construct community situated in a particular place.

[21] Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are sourced from my own interviews.

together" around a particular image, a particular symbol, that resonates with them and their

conception of community. Another man I spoke to weeks after the festival said that "young people

today need to look back to the Panthers; to their ten point program ... revolution is how you make

change." Both symbolically and explicitly politically, the BPP and their organizing work are still very

present in people's minds in the area.[22]

Over the past few decades, the demographics and economic situation has continued to shift

and develop. The Black/White dichotomy been replaced by a broader range of racial and ethnic

backgrounds, and the White population has been growing for the first time since WWII.[23] These

population shifts, most especially the increase in the White population, coincided with the dot com

boom in Silicon Valley, just to the south of the San Francisco Bay, from 1995 until the early 2000s,

which brought with it an overall whiter and wealthier population of immigrants to Oakland.

This population shift can be understood as gentrification, and it swept the city; having a

slower, but still major, impact on West Oakland.[24] Between 1995 and 2006 home prices skyrocketed

in West Oakland by 700%. This shift in home prices corresponded with a doubling of rents, which

in turn made renting infeasible for many. A number of older homeowners were able to take

advantage of this shift, and cashed out of their homes. While this was undoubtedly beneficial for

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[22] It is important to remember, however, that the BPP were *not* the only organization in Oakland at the time advocating for community self-determination. Just one of the many other important examples is the Oakland Economic Development Council (OEDC), a branch of the city government in charge of the 'revitalization' of West Oakland funded by the Federal "War on Poverty." In an unprecedented political push in 1964, community activists were able to secure a guarantee of 51% representation over this board, effectively securing local control, and soon after declared independence from the city government in order to pursue more radical community goals.Eventually the OEDCI became too explicitly political and had its federal funding cut, but in its lifetime the OEDC was able to funnel a large amount of federal money into local projects and into direct employment for many members of the Oakland community. However, in part because of their high degree of performative visibility, their national prominence, and the controversial circumstances of their demise, the BPP sit foremost in the collective imagination; See: Self, 203-205

[23] According to the Bay Area Census (http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/Oakland.htm) the White population share dropped consistently until 2000, when it bottomed out at 31.3%, it has since risen to 34%. The Black population peaked in 1980 at 47%, and since decreased to 27% of the population share as of 2010. The city has also continued to become more diverse in this period, with the Latinx and Asian, particularly Chinese, Vietnamese, and Filipino, populations growing from a very small portion of the community to make up 25.4% and 16.8% of the 2010 population, respectively.

[24] Jason Neil Zimmerman, "The First Cycle of Gentrification in West Oakland, California: 1998-2008" (master's thesis, San Francisco State University, 2009)

these individuals, it was ultimately an inaccessible solution for many of the area's long term residents as most did not own their own homes, and it broke up relationships, weakening this aspect of community. One man I spoke with, an Eritrean immigrant who had lived in Oakland for more than thirty years, described the changes saying "[there have been] lots of upgrades in housing. I'm not lucky enough to own though ... and for me the upgrades aren't worth the increase in rent."

Though West Oakland lagged behind the rest of the city in experiencing these changes, by 2000 more than half of the residents of West Oakland had moved there in the past five years. At the same time, however, it is worth noting that more than 1/3rd had been living there for more than a decade, meaning that in the year 2000 there was a major divide in West Oakland between long term residents and relative newcomers.[25] One newcomer, describing his interactions with long term residents said, "I don't try to get to know people. The only time I talk to people in my neighborhood is when they ask me for money on the street." Though this attitude cannot be said to be universal[26], it is clear that at least a portion of new residents do not have either the interest or the ability to form relationships with long term residents in their neighborhood, and are in fact openly dismissive of them. This divide is essential to consider when thinking about how ideas of community and communal identity can be constructed in this context.

The above mentioned changes in home values were linked to a corresponding shift in income and racial demographics. Between 1995 and 2006, West Oakland experienced a major spike in high income residents, with the White population doubling and the Black population decreasing by more than one third.[27] While on the surface this may seem like a simple diversifying of the area, it

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[25] Zimmerman, 75

[26] For instance, although none of the people I lived with while I was in Oakland were from West Oakland originally, all of them were active in the local community, and had built relationships with neighbors and local institutions. This may have to do with the particular activist bent of the house, however.

[27] Zimmerman, 90; The White population share moved from 10% to 19.8%, the Black population decreased from 63.2% to 39.6%, and the Latinx and Asian populations both increased their population share by a bit less than 10%, which was more or less in keeping pace with the rest of the city.

is important to note that the median household income for non-Hispanic Whites was $58,281, while for Latinx households it was $27,183, and both of these medians were significantly higher than the Asian median household income, $18,021, and the Black household median income, $17,562.[28] This makes clear the hugely disparate impact of the changes to West Oakland based on race, with the increase in property values and investment capital failing to correspond with increased income levels or quality of life for residents of color. This is yet another divide that complicates any attempt at racial inclusivity, because the white population holds a disproportionate amount of the wealth and power.

Despite the general trend of gentrification in West Oakland, the area directly surrounding Lil' Bobby Hutton Park has remained more economically depressed and a majority Black neighborhood. This is perhaps because of its location at the geographic center of West Oakland, its distance from public transit, and its particular racial and economic history, most notably its role in the development of the Black Panther Party. This means that the area directly surrounding Bobby Hutton Park, the symbolic center of the community constructed by *RoH*, more closely resembles the West Oakland of the second half of the 20th century than the surrounding areas. As will be explored in the following chapter, this distinction, and greater connection to the history of the place, directly impacts the ways in which community is defined.

In addition, racist state practices continue in Oakland to this day, taking some of the same forms as they did in mid-twentieth century, and taking on new forms as well. Racist policing and anti-black police violence has long been a pervasive issue in Oakland. The high-profile killing of Oscar Grant, an unarmed Black man, by BART police in 2009 is one example of continued police violence, and it serves a similar symbolic role for community as the death of Bobby Hutton did in the Black Panther era. However, the nature of police violence and racism has shifted since that

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[28] Zimmerman, 91.

period, and is often less direct but equally if not more pervasive than the violence of the 1960s and

70s.[29]

The still primarily low-income and non-White residents of West Oakland also suffer

disproportionately from the impacts of environmental abuse. West Oakland's location, surrounded

on three sides by major highways, puts the population at much higher risk for asthma, lung cancer,

and other diseases brought on by the transportation fumes. Together with the lack of access (until

recently) to affordable healthy food options, and economic and social pressures, this leads to higher

rates of obesity, heart disease, and diabetes among long term residents.[30] The low-income residents

of this neighborhood have much less access to medical aid, and are as such doubly targeted for

illness based on the zoning and development policies of the city of Oakland. All of this is part of a

widespread culture of racism in terms of law enforcement, and economic oppression throughout the

state and the county.[31]

In the face of continued divestment, violence, and increasingly the erasure and displacement

of gentrification, radical community action and efforts at self-determination still define political

activism in West Oakland. Part of the reason why West Oakland has faced lower rates of

displacement in this most recent wave of gentrification was because of the existence of community

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[29] Victor Rios, *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*, (New York: New York UP, 2011).
Victor Rios, in his book *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*, explores the experience of low-income Oakland youth with the police and criminalization. His study reveals that regardless of whether these boys engage in any 'criminal' activity, they are consistently profiled, harassed, and criminalized by the police. Rios also discusses the way in which the criminalization these boys face from police is mirrored in other social institutions, and often pushes them into a corner with relatively few options.

[30] Kang, Helen H. "A Case Study of Environmental Justice Work in West Oakland." *Golden Gate School of Law* (2009): n. pag. *Golden Gate Law Digital Commons*. 15 May 2009. Web; *Clearing the Air: Reducing Diesel Pollution in West Oakland*. Rep. Pacific Institute in Conjunction with the Coalition for West Oakland Revitalization, n.d. Web.

[31] For just a few examples, see: Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: U of California, 2007); *Warfare in the American Heartland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy*, ed. Joy James (Durham: Duke U, 2007); *Racializing Justice, Disenfranchising Lives* eds. Manning Marable, Ian Steinberg, and Keesha Middlemass (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007); Beth Richie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation* (New York: New York UP, 2012); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: The New Press, 2010); Rios, *Punished.*

organizations, such as the West Oakland Project Area Committee (WOPAC), which were able to

negotiate with development boards, and ensure community oversight of development projects and

funding for community based projects and organizations.[32] Clearly, the history of community

organizing and relationship building has lasting impacts in West Oakland.[33]

Hegemonic Images of Oakland

Oakland's secondary position in the Bay Area after San Francisco, along with its perceived

racial difference, has long shaped outsider perspectives on this city. This attitude has, in turn, shaped

the level of public and social investment in the city, and the material realities of the people of

Oakland, in addition to the impacts on the symbolic community in Oakland. Despite, and in part

because of, the long and rich history of community organizing and activism, outlined above, as well

as the storied cultural history of Oakland, public perception of the city was for much of the 20th

century, as Cook put it: "violent, and unhealthy, and dirty, and Black."[34] Creating counter-hegemonic

narratives challenging these perceptions, and some of the racist and classicist biases upon which they

are based, is one way in which to rally people in the work of community building. The shifting

hegemonic conception of Oakland also raises a core ambivalence about the role of art in shaping

development: in improving the image of the city, by emphasizing the hidden beauty within, there are

both positive and negative material and social impacts on those long term residents who were so

long stigmatized.

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[32] Zimmerman, 113.

[33] For just a few examples of the types of social and political organizing and activism happening in Oakland today see: Just Cause/*Causa Justa* (http://www.cjjc.org/); Oakland Community Land Trust(http://www.oakclt.org/); Oakland Tenants Union (http://www.oaklandtenantsunion.org/); among many others.

[34] Cook was describing the image he was attempting to challenge in his work.

The image of Oakland is tied to much deeper social and racial prejudices about the inherent criminality and unruly citizenship of urban people of color. One needs only look at the most recent news articles about Oakland from any of the major newspapers or news sites in this country to see the way this image is perpetuated. The Wall Street Journal, a respected and widely disseminated news source, also predominately features articles about Oakland which focus on either police conduct[35], increases in crime[36], violent protests[37], or the weakness of the economy[38]. There is in the media a pervading sense of fear and pity of the 'Blackness,' 'criminality,' and poverty, both economic and cultural, of Oakland, and these characteristics and assumptions are all intertwined and interrelated, with racial fears and economic worries mutually reinforcing one another, as can be seen in the parallel between responses to BPP organizing and contemporary 'Occupy' protests, both of which frequent center on a fear of damage to property or order. This understanding is essential to consider as a hegemonic backdrop against which any attempt at community self-definition will, intentionally or unintentionally, contrast itself to.[39]

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[35] Bobby White, "Oakland Police Face Judgment Day," Nov. 28, 2012, accessed January 12, 2015, http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324469304578143121259837966

[36] Vauhini Vara, "Oakland Struggles to Cope as Crime Surges," Feb. 13, 2013, accessed January 12, 2015, http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324880504578297981002351510

[37] Bobby White, "Occupy Protesters in Oakland Clash With Police," Jan. 30, 2012, accessed January 12, 2015, http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052970203920204577191211343756198; Alejandro Lazo and Zusha Elison, "Bay Area Protests Over Police Killings Are Latest in Long Tradition," Dec. 10, 2014, accessed Jauary 12, 2015, http://www.wsj.com/articles/bay-area-protests-over-police-killings-are-latest-in-long-tradition-1418163477

[38] Lauren Rudser, "Oakland Seeks a Lift From Pop-Ups," January 12, 2012, accessed January 12, 2015, http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052970204124204577151132311229176; Max Taves, "Bay Area's Office Boom Stalls in the East-Oakland, Others See Little Evidence of an Uptick," Oct. 21, 2014, accessed January 12, 2015, http://www.wsj.com/articles/bay-areas-office-boom-stalls-in-the-east-1413909800?KEYWORDS=Oakland

[39] This image and message is also echoed in popular culture, sometimes in complex and multivalent ways. One particularly intriguing example of what this looks like can be found in comedian Dave Chappelle's television special, *For What It's Worth*, recorded in San Francisco in 2004. In it, Chappelle describes the difference between San Francisco and its neighbor across the Bay, saying:

"What I like about San Fran ... is [that] of all the major cities in America somehow people get along here better than anywhere else I've seen in the country... And today, I've realized how you did it. You put all the n*****s on the other side of that bridge. There's nothing –shit ain't happy on that side. If you leave San Francisco, they're like, [Stereotypical Affluent White Californian Voice] "Bye, thanks for coming to San Francisco. Come back in April, we're having a sale on Birkenstocks." As soon as you get to the other side, [Stereotypical Black 'Gangster' Voice] "Welcome to Oakland, bitch." ... It's fucking crazy."

This characterization is complex; while on the surface it is simply a reiteration of the dominant stereotypes about Oakland and its residents, it can also be read as in some ways subversive by pointing out the racist and classicist foundations which underpin San Francisco's supposed perfection. Though Chappelle's caricature of Oakland does

This understanding is not limited to outsiders, but is also part of the mindset of hegemonic actors within the city, most notably the Oakland PD. Oakland's youth of color are especially marked in this view as delinquent, dangerous, and futureless, and this leads to increased maltreatment by those with power. Ethnographic research has shown that, regardless of their behavior, Black and Latinx boys are consistently harassed, confronted, and questioned by the Oakland PD, and other authority figures in their lives.[40] This maltreatment leads not only to widespread mistrust of the police, but also higher rates of incarceration of Black and Latinx youth, a fact that is greatly detrimental to the power and the coherence of these groups. In other words, these hegemonic perceptions have material consequences for people living in this community.

Recent writing about the culture and art of Oakland's longtime residents presents a new image of the city, showcasing a diamond in the rough, which reveals some of the power and the danger of using art to build community in this moment of gentrification. National Geographic, a major international publication, recently published an article by Cynthia Gorney exploring Oakland's vibrant graffiti and street art culture, a tradition that dates back to long before the gentrification the city has experienced in recent years. Gorney begins by presenting a complex image of a city 'in transition,' saying:

> "Oakland has half San Francisco's population numbers, more trees, better weather, and houses that don't cost a zillion dollars to buy, though far fewer of those than 30 years ago, when my husband and I found one ... Recently there's been some celebratory Coolest Place in America Outside Brooklyn press about Oakland. The phenomena usually cited are verifiably present (hipsters, rappers, Hip Hoppers, indie bands, tech startups, artisanal soul food, artisanal beer, artisanal marijuana strains, etc.), but this is also a city in which murderous thugs with bad aim have on three

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nothing to challenge its image as Black and dangerous, his joke does demonstrate the racial and class impacts of gentrification, while at the same time poking fun at the sheltered and oblivious world of affluent White San Fran. Chappelle points out the coercive aspect of the population distribution in the Bay and the way that Oakland's challenges can be traced back to efforts to build San Francisco's success and in these ways shifts the blame for Oakland's assumed dysfunction off of the residents themselves. As stated above, however, this does nothing to argue against the perception that Oakland is, in fact, dysfunctional.

[40] Rios, *Punished*

separate occasions since May wounded small children who happened to be outside at the wrong time. I've seen our annual homicide totals compared, unfavorably, to those of entire European nations."[41]

This characterization of the city simply overlays the image of a gentrifying neo-bohemian enclave[42] over that of a dangerous 'inner city,' without reconciling the two, or exploring the ways in which the gentrification relies on the image of the city's 'rough past' from which the gentrifiers can understand themselves as saviors.[43] National Geographic, which has a long history of showcasing 'exotic' and racially 'other,' cultures for the consumption of White explorers, in this contemporary moment presents Oakland in much the same way. This is one of the ways in which Hegemonic conceptions have real consequences; the role of the state in producing and perpetuating violence in the city, and Oakland's storied history of resistance and organizing is erased, replaced by an image of

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[41] Cynthia Gorney, "Sneak Attacks of Beauty in a Tough Town: Street Art in Oakland, California," Nov. 19, 2014, accessed December 13, 2014, http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/11/141119-oakland-san-francisco-solano-alley-cynthia-gorney-berkeley-zapatista/

[42] David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *New Left Review* 53 (Sept-Oct 2008) Web. 7 Jan. 2015, http://newleftreview.org/II/53/david-harvey-the-right-to-the-city; Richard Lloyd, *Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Postindustrial City*, (New York: Routledge, 2010); Gavin Muller, "Liberalism and Gentrification," *Jacobin*, September 26, 2014, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/09/liberalism-and-gentrification/

Two important authors for my understanding of gentrification as it relates to oppression and resistance are David Harvey and Richard Lloyd. In his essay "The Right to the City," Harvey provides an analysis of dispossession of urban population, and calls for a framework of analysis focused on access to the city as a basic right for long-time residents, most especially people of color.

Richard Lloyd's work, *Neo-Bohemia*, is central in shaping my understanding of the causes and impacts of contemporary gentrification, which in turns shapes how I interpret the impacts of *RoH* in terms of material and demographic change in West Oakland. Two important concepts from Lloyd's work that I apply in my analytical framework are "neo-bohemia" and "imperialist nostalgia." The concept of neo-bohemia is that one of the mechanisms by which gentrification occurs is that after systemic divestment and segregation has left a neighborhood without resources and filled with disenfranchised people of color, a certain class of 'neo-bohemian,' middle to upper class in origin and predominately white but without great individual wealth, is drawn to the neighborhood because of its perceived authenticity and because of its affordability. These people are frequently also members of the 'creative-class' and frequently form social and artistic 'scenes' in their new neighborhoods. In turn, these scenes often attract more people from the same social and economic background as the neo-bohemians, though often with more traditional middle or upper middle class employment and personal capital, which in the process of "imperialist nostalgia," displaces and replaces the people and culture which came before, destroying the very things that it fueled the nostalgic return to the city.

Gentrification is larger than any individual, and so liberal rhetoric of personal choice and individual decision making are not particularly relevant in this conversation, as is powerfully argued by Muller in his article, "Liberalism and Gentrification." As a result, I focus my interest in the response to gentrification on ways in which *RoH* and other organizing efforts create the possibility for large scale political organizing and pushback against the underlying causes, namely targeted and uneven capital investment and corporation oriented neoliberal capitalism, as opposed to focusing purely on the level of interpersonal interactions.

[43] See Kester, 126; Lloyd, *Neo-Bohemia*

rough city with hidden beauty.[44] As the article continues the author begins to describe the vibrant

street art that characterizes Oakland. Gorney highlights individual images and artists, and identifies a

particular alley where some of the most remarkable pieces are found. It is possible that this emphasis

on art, this characterization of Oakland as not irredeemably broken but still dangerous and exciting,

and possessing of beauty, makes it an even more attractive site for gentrifiers.[45]

Overview of *Reflections of Healing*

Reflections of Healing began in 2009 at the second year of the Life is Living festival in Oakland.

Life is Living, born from the vision of spoken word artist and activist Marc Bamuthi Joseph, and

developed with Hodari Davis, the National Program Director at Youth Speaks, pre-exists *RoH*, and

extends beyond it. Starting with an environmental caucus of the Living Word Festival in 2008, Life

is Living developed into an independent yearly Hip Hop festival in West Oakland.

Cook, whose history and relationship with Oakland will be explored more deeply in the

following chapters, had previously lived and worked in Berkeley, and returned to Oakland in 2006.

Cook's involvement in the project began when he was approached by the organizers of the festival,

who knew him personally from time they spent together at UC Berkeley and later teaching at

Berkeley High. Cook was at this point already known for his collaborative art making process, and

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[44] One newcomer to the city captured the potential ambivalence of using art to build community in his description of what brought him to the city in the first place. A young man who identified as mixed race and was originally from San Francisco, said that the "booming art scene" is what drew him to Oakland in the first place. He is an artist himself, and wanted to take advantage of the growing artistic community.

[45] That said, Gorney concludes her piece with one final sentiment after identifying the alley highlighted in her story, saying, "should you happen to find it, don't dump your garbage while you're passing through. Don't ... snap a couple of quick cell phone pictures from inside your rolled-up windows before speeding anxiously away, either. Salvador and Amy [two residents] have seen people do that, locked into their cars as though gawking is acceptable but everything else—this place, these visuals, this language, this story—is too scary even to try to explore. That's just wrong. People live here." This final note serves, to some small degree, to emphasize the humanity of the current residents, and to encourage outsiders to be respectful and understanding about how they interact with the places and people of Oakland.

had done major public works in the past. This was the beginning of a new, more deeply situated, practice for him. *Reflections of Healing,* whether intentionally or unintentionally, also emerges from all of the histories described in this chapter.

Before breaking down the project, I want to provide a chronological description of how *Reflections of Healing* takes shape. First, Cook and his collaborators determine the list of Bay Area healers, defined broadly, to be highlighted as subjects in this batch of the project. Next, Cook solicits questions about Healing from each of these participants, and conducts interviews with each participant using the questions provided by the others. Following these interviews, each subject selects an image of themself from their adolescence, which Cook then traces on to clear acetate and projects onto a wooden panel, to be traced. The tracing is done by Cook alongside the subject and any friends or family they select to join them. At this point quotations from the earlier interview are selected and copied out on to the panel, along with the subject's name. These large scale outlines are then taken to public events or gatherings, most notably the Life is Living festival, to be colored and decorated by members of the community. Cook then takes these colored pieces back to his studio, and 'finishes' the images, by painting over the outlines and fleshing out details and decorations begun by participants. Finally the pieces are displayed in public places, such as parks, libraries, businesses, as well as inside and outside of museums and galleries. In addition, at the most recently Life is Living festival, the project took on another aspect, in the form of a free wellness clinic serving the festivals visitors. At each stage of this process meaning is made in multiple ways and on multiple levels. What follows is a breakdown of the project into the aspects focused on the construction of symbolic community and the aspects which emphasize interpersonal network building.

Chapter 2- Constructing Community

All of the histories described in the previous chapter lead to the question of where Cook's *Reflections of Healing* fits. Even if the artists and collaborators involved in a project do not intend to shape the image of community, claiming to be community based and utilizing collaborative methods means that it is impossible to avoid doing so. Community building and organizing is a constant process filled with trial and error which is always contested. It is unlikely that there will ever be consensus about what a community truly is, especially a 'community' as broad as West Oakland, let alone Oakland as a whole. *RoH* is not all powerful in dictating community; it is one of many strands of community definition. There is no singular Oakland community, but rather a complex web of signs, symbols, and relationships, into which *RoH* enters, that shape the contours of what Oakland/West Oakland is understood to be.

In this chapter I will explore the role *RoH* plays in the formation and maintenance of community identity, as well as the tools and symbols *RoH* uses to construct its own image of community and what the boundaries and internal contours of that community are. I will also explore the ways in *RoH* builds counter-hegemonic narratives about Oakland, as well as the possibilities for co-optation which exist.

The subsections below are organized by aspects of the community envisioned and projected by *RoH*. Each subsection contains an analysis of how the project defines these characteristics and an exploration of the social and political ramifications of these decisions. The community envisioned by *Reflections of Healing* is:

Pablo Cerdera
4/22/2015

Open and Diverse

One of the most striking things about the community envisioned and constructed by *RoH* is

the emphasis put on multiculturalism and diversity. Cook describes part of his mission as creating

artwork that reflects the changing face of Oakland, and to make a stand visually against its dominant

image. Cook states, "Part of *Reflections of Healing*, is being aware of the changing demographics and at

the same time, highlighting the complexity of Oakland that I find so compelling ... part of the

iconography and the legacy that I'm leaving is that diversity. Intentionally." Cook intends both to

reflect the reality of shifting demographics in Oakland, as well as shape the visual landscape and

therefore internal and external impressions of the city, and what it is at its core. The visual character

of a space is often integral to creating a sense of community and communal ownership, and in

shaping that space to reflect diversity, Cook valorizes an 'inclusive' sense of community.[1]

The decision to build an open and diverse image of community has a great deal to do with

the changing demographics and social and political climate in Oakland. Cook seeks to encourage

collaboration between longtime residents and newcomers, rather than to resist demographic change

or gentrification directly. As Cook said,

> "When we first did the first Life is Living, Little Bobby Hutton Park was the 'hood. It
> just was ... Then, about two years I can remember us meeting there, and there was a
> European-American woman there with a baby in a baby carriage, and you are just like,
> 'yo man! Five years ago, this was impossible! There was no way this would even be
> imagined' ... And it reflects the change in Oakland."

This change is ambivalent in many ways. It reflects a shift away from the negative qualities of

poverty and danger associated with "the 'hood," but also the displacement of Black residents which

made the presence of these "European-American" newcomers possible. The embrace of change in

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[1] See: Ronald Lee Fleming and Renata von Tscharner, *Placemakers: Public Art the Tells You Where You Are*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987); hooks, *Art on My Mind.*

Pablo Cerdera
4/22/2015

Oakland is not critical of the larger social forces which caused it, however. What it does reflect is the reality that the new White presence shifts the social realities of the neighborhood, and means that the social organizing like that of the BPP, premised as it was on solidarity based in shared experiences of race and class, will no longer be effective. Therefore, Cook seeks in *RoH* to project an open image of community which will encourage connections between longtime residents and newcomers across lines of race and class.

One of the ways in which the *RoH* constructs and projects this image of a diverse community is through the selection of healers who are highlighted in the project. RoH has had three complete iterations, and between the three there is a high degree of representational diversity in terms of race, gender, sexuality, gender identity, religion, and in terms of the work that these healers engage in. Cook and his collaborators took a very broad definition of healing and healers when selecting their models, each of whom has their own definition of health and healing, and their own scope of healing practice.[2] This diversity suggests a diverse community, whose boundaries are not strictly tied to one particular racial, sexual, gender, or religious identity.[3] The common thread of the healing practices and healers selected is that they are somehow connected to Oakland, and their healing work is accessible to or has impacted at least some portion of the Oakland population. Many, though not all, of these healers engage in activist work that is focused on making social change and addressing structural inequalities and biases.

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[2] This range includes: Tyler Norris, vice president for total health partnerships at Kaiser Permanente, the largest managed care consortium in the U.S., whose definition of 'total health' encompasses access to food, safety, and sufficient material and social resources;; Favianna Rodriguez, a West Oakland based printmaker and digital artist, whose work is frequently explicitly political and activist in nature, focusing on themes of immigration, racial justice, feminism, and globalization; Larry Yang of the East Bay Meditation center, an Asian American Buddhist Monk and meditation instructor, who works primarily in downtown Oakland. Yang is also notable for his particularly diverse practice, with the highest number of LGBTQ and non-white meditation teachers coming up in his practice in comparison to any other Western Dharma practice; and many others.

See the Appendix for a full list of healers, with descriptions of their backgrounds and the nature of their healing practice.

[3] Recalling Nancy's conceptualization of community without the need for shared identity.

When describing the subject selection process for the first and third iterations of *RoH*, Cook stated that they, "under the guide of inclusivity and diversity … tried to make [the final selection] as diverse as possible." This drive came in part from a personal commitment to diversity on Cook's part, and a desire to embody and reflect a world in which diverse groups of people can be in community with one another. It was also a push to create counter-hegemonic depictions of Oakland's community to emphasize diverse reality of the city. Cook said that, "part of Reflections of Healing was … to make multi-ethnic images that aren't displayed traditionally in popular culture … and put them in public libraries, and local businesses, and public space, so that rather than talk about what is absent … [we can] just make what we want, and then it exists." When hegemonic conceptions of Oakland understand it to be a mono-cultural, depictions of racial and ethnic diversity shift the conversation. This approach is about creating representation, it is about community ownership, and it is about countering hegemonic understandings of Oakland by creating positive representations of Oakland residents, mostly residents of color, and thereby changing the visual landscape of the city.

In addition, the use of text in various languages in the latest installation makes a major statement about the boundaries of community. The images from the most recent iteration of the project, which are now on display on the outside walls of the Oakland Museum of California, have the words of several of the healers displayed translated into the six most spoken languages of the Alameda county public schools, in addition to the original English. This move was supported by several of the people I spoke with, including one longtime resident who said, "it reflects the community." Given that roughly twenty eight percent of Oakland residents are foreign born, and that there are several thriving diasporic populations in the city, the inclusion of multiple languages seems to be in line with the actual linguistic makeup of the city. This was reflected in my own experiences conducting surveys in Oakland, during which I found many examples of people for

whom English was not a primary language, and whose preferred languages included everything from Spanish, to Tigray[4], to Vietnamese.

This use of multiple languages reflects a broader definition of community than one limited to the urban Black community of West Oakland envisioned by the BPP, and creates the space for a community identity based on united cross-racial solidarity. It encompasses a much broader image of community that includes all of Alameda County, people who have a much more diverse range of thoughts, experiences, and histories than those traditionally associated with Oakland. This linguistic expansiveness invites people from minority language communities to understand themselves as included in the Oakland community. Through solidarity among those who are left out in large part of the prosperity of the region, and excluded from the social and cultural mainstream, could help push back together more effectively against domination from without.

While it is a positive image, and prefigures a hopeful vision of an integrated and equal society, there are potential dangers in this approach. For instance, the emphasis on diversity for its own sake has the potential to be dismissive or inadequately aware of the particular histories of racial and economic oppression faced by different populations in the area. The way in which Cook described his approach to diversity raises some concerns about this issue. Speaking about the mission of the project as it relates to his own development as a person, Cook said, "I may ride a 10-speed bike and you ride a single speed bike, or I like the A's and you root for the Yankees. We have all these things that are separations and I think a lot of what my work is doing is really building these architectures for people to be in relation, and to practice across class, across race, across geography, across literacy, across gender, really intentionally." The juxtaposition of differences across race, class, geography, literacy and gender with the differences between A's fans and Yankees fans seems, at

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[4] A language spoken primarily in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia

least on the surface, dismissive of the important historical and material differences and challenges

that separate people from these different backgrounds. While "modeling the world that [Cook]

want[s] to see," if the "architectures" created do not acknowledge, and are actively designed against,

dominant power relations, this approach can allow for the perpetuation of the inequalities these

separations are constructed to produce and maintain.

An important example of this can be seen in another, earlier, set of Oakland centered

community based art projects, *The Roof Is on Fire* (1994) and *Code 33: Emergency, Clear the Air* (1999).

These projects[5] sought to confront and challenge pre-existing ideas about Oakland's youth of color.

Code 33, which developed from years of collaborative work and conversation following *The Roof Is on*

Fire, and can be considered a triumph of collaborative planning, brought groups of police officers

and Oakland youth of color together in a parking garage, in an attempt to help work towards

reconciliation and a greater degree of mutual understanding. The "goal of the *Code 33* project was to

challenge the tendency of the police to view all young people of color as potential threats ... and the

tendency of young people in the city to view all police as racist and/or excessively authoritarian."[6]

This approach in many way reflects Cook's mission, to "create architectures for people to be in

relation" across difference. However, in the actual moment of the performance of *Code 33*, the

underlying issues of this approach became clear. Likely hoping to take advantage of the large media

presence at the event, a group of demonstrators arrived at the parking garage to protest the Supreme

Court's decision to deny Mumia Abu Jamal's death row appeal. The police response was to

immediately shut down the garage and cart of any suspected protestors among the audience in

handcuffs. In this way, "the police orchestrated their own performance ... [of] the ability to control

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[5] The first orchestrated by Suzanne Lacy and the organization T.E.A.M. in Oakland, and the second building on the earlier model with the additional help from organizers Julio Morales and Unique Holland.
[6] Kester, 183.

urban space."[7] As Kester explains, "the conflicts that exist in Oakland between a largely white police force and a largely black and Hispanic population of young people are not simply the result of empathetic failure but are ... grounded in the role that [the White suburban police] play in patrolling … working-class neighborhoods."[8] Projects like *Code 33*, and to a lesser, but still significant extent, *Reflections of Healing*, must then always be considered and analyzed in light of the context of racial, economic, and social power dynamics, lest they succumb to Kester's "dialogical determinism." The realities of power imbalances will always play a role in shaping the impact of community based art practice.

There were several examples of potential pushback against *RoH's* model of an open community by local residents. Speaking about the festival itself, Cook described hearing, "other organizers talk about how some people were saying ... 'this is the most White people I've *ever* seen in this park.' And, some of the organizers, really skillfully, were like, yeah man, there's more white people in the neighborhood. This *is* the community." Although the organizers, in Cook's words, "skillfully" addressed these comments through reference to broad and open community, the fact that such ideas were voiced in the first place indicates the potential for a certain discomfort with the presence of so many White people in a park that has long been a hub of the local Black community.[9] There is a sense expressed here of Black community ownership over the park, which is disrupted by the massive, and potentially dominating, White influx. With so much public space understood as 'White' by default as a result of White hegemony, this encroachment can represent a painful loss of one of the few spaces which can be understood as truly serving non-White residents. This represents

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[7] Kester, 185.

[8] Kester, 186. For more information on these projects see Kester, 1-6, 183-191.

[9] Recall the importance of the park in successive social movement starting as early as the 1960s.

the potential for co-optation that an open community creates, and relates to larger issues of gentrification and displacement.

Resistance can also be seen in the response to public advertising for the festival. Early promotions for LiL listed its location as DeFremery Park instead of Lil' Bobby Hutton Park. Several weeks before the festival, an official statement was published on the LiL Facebook page saying, "People get mad when we say DeFremery Park. We got something for that, but in the mean time, we say DeFremery cause thats what it says on map quest. To be clear with anyone from the Town who knows the Town, we are talking about the 8th Annual Life is Living Festival on October 11 2014, at the historic Little Bobby Hutton Park. Don't get it twisted ... Oakland is Proud."[10] This statement captures the ambivalence and the continued contestation which surrounds the festival and the park. The fact that the organizers found it necessary to post this statement indicates that there was pushback against the broad based approach to reach out to as many people as possible by people whose subcultural knowledge and personal experience about "the Town" made them feel connected with the community. This distinction which is drawn between people who are "from the Town," and those who are not, indicates the points of fracture and contention that still exist beneath the surface of the open and diverse façade of the festival. In calling the park DeFremery, the festival is made more accessible to people who don't "know the Town" at the expense of evidently alienating some people who do. At the same time, in several important ways *Reflections of Healing* builds on historical visions of race and place based community, specifically the legacy of the BPP.

"Diversity," too, has a long history as a concept, and mainstream notions of 'inclusivity' and 'multiculturalism' are frequently masks for issues of racial and ethnic inequality, and tools of exerting hegemonic control. Often calls for multiculturalism or inclusion come from positions of dominance,

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[10] Life is Living Facebook, September 9th, https://www.facebook.com/lifeisliving?fref=photo

in which the dominant culture becomes the ideal or default within the 'inclusive' environment.[11]

These critiques are applicable in some ways to the context of *RoH*, but in other ways they fail to

account for the complexity and nuance of this particular project, and its connection to a radical

history of place. Most notably, as will be explored in the following section, the *RoH* bases the

community in a thoroughly counter-hegemonic vision of history and identity, against which any

person involved needs to reconcile themselves.

Rooted in History of Race and Place

Despite the emphasis on openness and diversity described in the previous section, *RoH* is

rooted in history, with respect for and appreciation of the legacy of the more explicitly radical BPP.

In this way *RoH* keeps open the radical possibilities of what the West Oakland/Oakland community

can stand for. As Cook stated, "part of my process has always been about being sensitive to the

community that I am working in, and part of that sensitivity is always historical ... we as producers

have taken it as our mission to magnify those histories ... to have the event pivot off of those

histories in a tangible way." This historical awareness is a self-conscious and intentional move, an

attempt to honor the people, and the history of the area. It is in part this appeal to a shared historical

memory which forms the basis for community in West Oakland.[12]

The fact that *RoH* and the LiL festival are centered in Little Bobby Hutton Park and actively

reflect on the name and history of the park indicates an interest in the BPP's legacy. Of all of the

portraits made as part of RoH, only one of them depicts a non-living healer: the portrait of Bobby

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[11] Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*, (Durham: Duke UP, 2005) 7, 15, 200-201.
[12] As Nancy argues, communities need not come together with a shared identity- a shared history, or vision for the future will do.

Hutton. Not only does the Bobby Hutton portrait have this distinction, it was also described by Cook as the "ambassador" of *RoH*: its public face. On much of the promotional material for *RoH*, and in press materials, the "Bobby Hutton Power Figure" is highlighted. The decision to include Bobby Hutton, the BPP's first martyr and an important figure in their project of self-definition in the face of oppression and violence, and to highlight him as a central healer over 40 years after his passing, centers the continuing the legacy of the BPP. This move symbolically places RoH in a tradition of radical Black Power community definition, a counter-hegemonic image of a Black urban community united through history, culture, and resistance to oppression. It is also a bold move for a project which seeks to be inclusive of all of Oakland because Hutton was shot and killed by members of the Oakland Police Department, and the city government of Oakland and many Oakland residents were actively hostile to the BPP and their mission. In aligning itself with the radical movement, which was itself a response to violence perpetrated against Black Americans, *RoH* carries with it a recognition of this violence. Though it situates this violence in the past, and the healing in the present, this move marks the continuous nature of resistance, and in a way re-defines healing from a general concept to a specific response to historic and continued trauma felt most acutely by the Black population.

The image of a race and place based community is furthered in some ways by the selection of who is considered a healer, and what their healing work consists of. In the second iteration of *RoH*, which explicitly centered on Little Bobby Hutton Park, all four of the healers highlighted were Black, and all engage or engaged in work particularly targeting West Oakland. Among the people honored as healers this year was Tarika Lewis, the first woman to join the BPP, and a musician, artist, and organizer. Lewis's healing work focuses on racial healing and healing of the West Oakland Black community, and the BPP's idea of the universal urban Black community, from racist violence. It is particularly significant in the context of this project that Lewis was integral in the establishment

of a yearly celebration and remembrance of Little Bobby Hutton day[13], along with his family and other former BPP members. Highlighting another BPP member, who remains actively connected with the cause and the organization, and someone who is intimately connected to the Park and to Bobby Hutton helps reinforce the connection between *RoH* and the history and legacy of the BPP in West Oakland.

West Oakland's history is long and storied, with many possible political movements and cultural moments which could have been highlighted, so the decision to focus on the BPP was an intentional choice with symbolic and cultural ramifications. The BPP represent a peak of community self-definition and power in West Oakland, and is therefore a very positive memory for many Oakland residents, particular the Black residents of Oakland. Their legacy are still very present and relevant for many people in Oakland; I witnessed regular mentions of the BPP at the festival, and in other places throughout Oakland during my time there.[14] Though in other contexts Cook said he needed to dig up histories around which to build community, in Oakland there was no such struggle. Cook said, "Here there is a more tangible pride ... here it is less about unearthing the histories to develop pride around ... those histories are … accessible." The ideal of Black solidarity, and solidarity with other oppressed urban communities, which- in the face of widespread gentrification – may be a relevant and attractive history to highlight and identify with. As we saw in the previous section, when this history is not recognized, it can be alienating to longtime residents who identify strongly with the resistance to racial and economic violence exemplified by the BPP.

Certainly *RoH* would not be nearly as politically powerful if it did not contain references or reflections of this history. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, history and its interpretation is always

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[13] An unofficial holiday that has been organized every year since 1998.
[14] From regular calls of "All Power to the People," to explicit references to the party and their significance, to subtle homages, like the inclusion of a "People's Free Breakfast," at LiL in reference to one of the BPPs survival programs.

situated in relation to the present, and the way in which history is constructed and remembered tells

us a great deal about what is at stake in the present.[15] Perhaps the focus on the BPP helps to make

RoH and LiL effective, as it claims a space for those who have been denied it so long, and declares

ownership over the neighborhood for longtime residents just as it is beginning to be valued by

outsiders.

While, as explored in the previous section, the vision of the Oakland community from the

1960s and 70s is not applicable in the same way today, it is still important to make this history

present. Reflecting on this issue, and the demographic shifts in Oakland, Cook asked:

> "How do you make events that reflect the community? And to be even more specific, for me, it's also being aware of hegemony ... So that it is not automatically whitewashed, so that it's still about history, still about the people that have been there, or its still about making sure that the Panthers have space, in a way that a lot of times, because of hegemony, those things get lost."

As a result of Cook's awareness of hegemony, the choice to focus on the history of the BPP is

intentional. This highlights the importance of calling in these new residents, while holding on to the

memory and legacy of the old political ideal. Doing so creates space for radical political action: It

allows the community to move forward, intentionally, without erasing or destroying the decidedly

counter-hegemonic struggle which came before, and is still there today.

The nature of the Life is Living festival also serves to ground the community in cultural

forms associated with and originating with resistance among urban communities of color. The use

of Hip-Hip as an organizing principle for the festival, and the emphasis on showcasing the wide

range of artistic forms that Hip Hop encompasses, including music, dance, visual art, and poetry

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[15] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997) 11-15.

makes this point clearly.[16] As several of the presenters and performers stated during the festival's

kickoff event, Hip Hop was developed and envisioned as not only an artistic form, but as a resistant

and liberatory aesthetic which focused on taking the experiences of urban youth of color, specifically

Black and Latinx youth, and cultivating from it a new vision of urban society. [17] As Davey D, a

presenter at the Life is Living kickoff event and Hip Hop historian said, Hip Hop, in the first

instance, envisioned a new order, defined by this cultural and political aesthetic, that would include

"Hip Hop hospitals, Hip Hop schools, Hip Hop businesses, and so on." Hip Hop is an intentional

attempt to utilize the idea of the aesthetic being political, and the transformative power of resistive

cultural forms.[18] This vision of the Hip Hop aesthetic is a political statement, and an attempt to

create a counter-hegemonic force to resist cultural and economic domination.

There is, of course, the ever present danger of co-optation. Chris Emdin[19], a pioneer in using

Hip Hop in education, said at this same event that "White people appropriate Hip Hop, and they do

not acknowledge the real issues of Blackness." What was created as a counter-hegemonic or

resistive cultural form often is taken by those in power and stripped of its context, history, and

political meaning; repurposed to support the status quo, and for the consumption of the dominant

classes. At LiL, however, performers and artists resisted this co-optation of form through explicitly

political content and context. Both in between performances, and during them, there were frequent

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[16] Cook, although he does not actively embrace the label of 'Hip Hop Artist,' also has a certain connection to Hip Hop, most especially through his history as a street artist, and his use of a spray paint and his tendency toward outdoor display, both closely associated with graffiti practice.

[17] In 2009, Life is Living expanded to include festivals in Harlem, New York, Huston, Texas, and Chicago, Illinois, each of which was had the same general outline and goal, but each of which was built up from partnerships with local organizations, for one year only. As Hodari Davis describes in the short documentary video created at the 2009 New York Life is Living festival, "The focus is on sustainable survival practices. Obviously, folks of color and folks in low income communities have had survival practices for generations that have often gone unnoticed by the environmental movement, unseen by corporate green. So we are using Hip Hop, we're using culture, we're using faith." (http://youthspeaks.org/lifeisliving/cities/newyork/) This outlook defines the approach of the festival organizers, as does Marc Bamuthi Joseph's statement, "When you look at the roots, Hip Hop, when it began in the South Bronx ... was about community organizing." (http://youthspeaks.org/lifeisliving/cities/houston/)

[18] Much like the concepts theorized later by Rancière.

[19] Professor at Teachers College in Colombia University.

references to the BPP, the Black Power movement, and to the political and social issues of

environmental racism, discriminatory and brutal policing, and other "issues of [urban] Blackness."

Despite the widespread co-optation of Hip Hop in the contemporary moment, by aligning itself

with this original, radical, understanding of Hip Hop, LiL further builds an image of a community

based in the urban, and in a worldwide counter-hegemonic, people of color driven, political/artistic

movement.[20]

Reflecting on these and other choices, Cook explained that these were deliberate decisions

based on an attempt to reflect the neighborhood. Describing the execution of LiL, Cook said,

"These are the subtleties that make the event so successful. We've been really diligent about... You

know there is no Vitamin Water there ... no people who just aren't considering the neighborhood in

their contribution." This sensitivity to place is essential to the image of community being

constructed by this festival and this project, which seeks to be inclusive, first and foremost, for

people who identify with the history of the neighborhood.

Positive and Empowered

This vision of community is also incredibly positive: it is a community which: is attractive to

identify with; has hope for the future; can define itself and heal itself, without outside intervention.

This decision to be positive is an intentional one on Cook's part, and goes against the dominant

trend in contemporary political and activist artistic movements, in which the reality of violence is

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[20] This aesthetic and focus on contemporary issues facing urban people of color, and most particularly urban Black populations, is visible on the Life is Living Facebook page as well. As of April 2015, the cover photo for the official LiL Facebook page is an image of a sign which says "From #Oakland to #Ferguson, Black Lives Matter" connecting the festicale to a nationwide struggle for justice for Black communities against police violence, and state violence more broadly. The struggles of urban Black communities have changed since the 1960s and 70s, but as the #BlackLivesMatter movement makes clear, they have not changed nearly enough- young Black men are still being killed by police; From Bobby Hutton, to Oscar Grant, to Michael Brown. All of this makes the importance of this historical connection all the clearer.

frequently the focus. It creates a forward looking sense of community around a shared vision of a better future.

One of the ways in which this image is constructed is through the visual qualities of the portraits themselves. The project's final product consists of three series of portraits, executed in a combination of oil pastel, paint pen, and spray paint, and ranging in size from 8' by 5', to 8' by 15'. Each piece is vibrant, with swirling lines and colors delineating the likeness of the subject. In some, the marks of participant collaborators are clearly visible, in others less so, but all bear signs of the collaborative process. Each also has words written on the border around them, quotations taken from interviews, in some cases translated into various languages, and the subject's name. The visible presence of marks made by others in the area, others who are not necessarily considered artists, presents the possibility for identification with the creation of the work, and a feeling of belonging in connection with the work of the community.

The vibrant color choices, flowing lines, and golden backgrounds present a hopeful and positive image of the community. For example, the image of Chinaka Hodge (See Figure 1) shows the subject surrounded by bright swirling lines of white paint, radiating out from her, giving the sense of glowing, of sending energy out to the world. Her contemplative look, head resting in her hand gives a sense of presence and creativity. All of this presents a powerful and positive image, which is at once beautiful and thought provoking, and which can serve to energize viewers.

Emphasized in *RoH* is the potential for growth from the inside, stemming from, as Cook puts it, "the collective power of youth." This image can serve to counteract hegemonic ideas about Oakland, which understand it as fundamentally broken, and in need of outside saviors. This idea of

'brokenness'[21] is what so often leads to waves of, frequently well-meaning, gentrifiers who see themselves as fixing the problems of the city, while unaware of its past or the culture and institutions that existed before.[22] Particularly, by providing positive images of youth of color, it challenges conceptions about Oakland's youth, particularly Black and Latino boys, as described in the previous chapter, and positions as actors with potential to make positive change in their communities. This choice is one of the most powerful of the project, as it takes an often maligned population, and positions them as holding the potential for the community's healing.

In addition, Cook's vision, which is about, "magnify[ing] the effect of people who are already doing great work," is central to this counter hegemonic approach. *RoH* is not about imposing something new on the collaborative partnership, but rather it is about fortifying and intensifying the self-conceptions and power which already exist within the community. In this sense, Cook and his vision are only one aspect of what ends up defining the final product, assuming the collaborative processes work as they are intended to.

The visual experience of engaging with a beautiful artwork can also have major personal, emotional, and ultimately social and political impacts. One man, who has lived in Oakland for his entire life, and who was at LiL collecting signatures for a petition to raise the minimum wage, reflected on artworks he sees in his daily life, such as street murals and graffiti, saying, "If you are in a bad place and you see a beautiful piece of art, it can change your whole outlook on the world." As someone who grew up in a community that was often maligned as ugly and without value,

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[21] Much like the earlier charges of 'blight' referenced in the previous chapter.

[22] Chinaka Hodge, one of the healers honored in the latest iteration of *RoH* has written and performed extensively on this issue. Two important examples include an article aimed at gentrifiers about Oakland and its history-
http://www.modernluxury.com/san-francisco/story/the-gentrifiers-guide-getting-along
And a music video which takes a more combative approach; a collaboration with San Francisco based poet and rapper Watsky, titled, "Kill a Hipster"-https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6LTLuzkqpZc
Also see Suleiman Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn: Gentrification and the Search for Authenticity in Postwar New York* (New York: Oxford UP, 2012).

highlighting the beauty, both visual and social, that already existed in his community was a powerful

step for his personal growth and political activism. He described feeling without direction, and said

that experiencing positive art, music, and dance, helped keep him motivated to work for his

community. This connection between beauty and 'the community' invites people to identify with the

images and the community they represent.[23]

In addition to the visual nature of the artwork, the atmosphere of collaboration at the LiL

festival also contributes to the sense of positivity and empowerment *RoH* attempts to foster. The

festival was, in the first two iterations of *RoH*, the primary moment of mass collaboration on the

creation of the portraits, when all comers could take part in the creation of objects of beauty, meant

to adorn their neighborhood. In the most recent iteration, this collaborative aspect was not present,

but it was replaced by the presence of large chalk boards with the healer's questions about

community and healing on them,[24] giving festival goers the opportunity to write their thoughts about

healing, or their solutions for their collective wounds. In creating the space for people to share their

own visions for the future, and having these ideas visible to others, *RoH* encouraged the idea that

this community has the power and the knowledge to solve its own problems, and to manage its own

healing. Although, as far as I know, these panels were not displayed beyond the time of the festival,

this public invitation for creative and positive solutions was symbolically significant.

In many ways, the work of creating a community that is open, historically grounded, and

positive is much more challenging than creating a straightforward critique of the divisions,

inequality, and violence which define the hegemonic conception of Oakland and shape the lives of

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[23] This also relates to Shank's *The Political Force of Musical Beauty* as the experience of beauty brought him into a sense of community with those around him.

[24] These boards included such questions as-
"What are the steps we can take to heal ourselves and our environment?"
"Why do Black children always get left behind?"
"Why is spiritual healing important?"

the people who live there. Cook expressed the difficulty he faced in retraining himself to see positively, and said that "For so long I had been so trained … [in] finding things that were messed up and critiquing them. [It was very challenging] to do a much more proactive ... effort of visioning what is it that we really want." The reality is that the violences and traumas faced by many members of the Oakland community are already well known to them, and what is harder to see is a way for things to get better; specifically a way for people of the community to make their own lives better within these oppressive systems. While *RoH* does not provide specific solutions to specific problems it does engage in the work of looking forward to what a better future could be.

Therefore, although modeling good interactions on an individual level does not alone create change on a macro-level with regards to power, as evidenced by the example of *Code 33*, these utopic visions are still valuable. As José Muñoz explains in his book *Cruising Utopia*, utopic ideas can sometimes be both a vision for the future and a critique of the present.[25] In creating small scale utopic 'architectures' for community, not only do you improve the conditions in the short term and on a small scale, you also "model the world" as you envision it should be. This vision provides an end goal to work towards: a blueprint for a better world. Cook described his understanding of utopian visioning, saying "instead of fighting for the revolution; what would we do if the revolution ended? What would I want? And having that be revolutionary. And making it." This is, perhaps, one of the most powerful things that art can hope to do: to create a vision for to work towards. The radical vision of hope builds strength and unity for oppressed peoples, even if it does not eliminate the oppressive structures which cause the wounds in the first place.

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[25] José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York UP, 2009) 3, 10. Muñoz focuses on issues of Queer community formation, but the concepts in the book are highly applicable to *RoH*.

What we are left with is the paradoxical power and danger of Cook's understanding that community is whatever is created through the relations of people in a place, and that anyone can participate in healing. This conception of the nature of community leads to a situation where the new wave of, whiter, wealthier migrants to West Oakland must be understood as a part of the new community, not outside it. These newcomers must either be integrated into the existing patterns of community relations, or they will shift and shape the community to meet their needs and desires. The imbalance of power between the longtime residents and the newcomers, in terms of mainstream socio-cultural power, monetary power, and hegemonic dominance, means that the default would be for newcomers to overpower and displace not only the people but also the culture of the community that existed before their arrival. By inviting them to be in community using forms of being in relation which honor the history and political culture of the place, *Reflections of Healing* engages in a type of harm reduction, and works to avoid the erasure or fetishization of what came before that might otherwise occur, while taking gentrification to be an inevitability not worth attempting to stop.

Pablo Cerdera
4/22/2015

Figures-
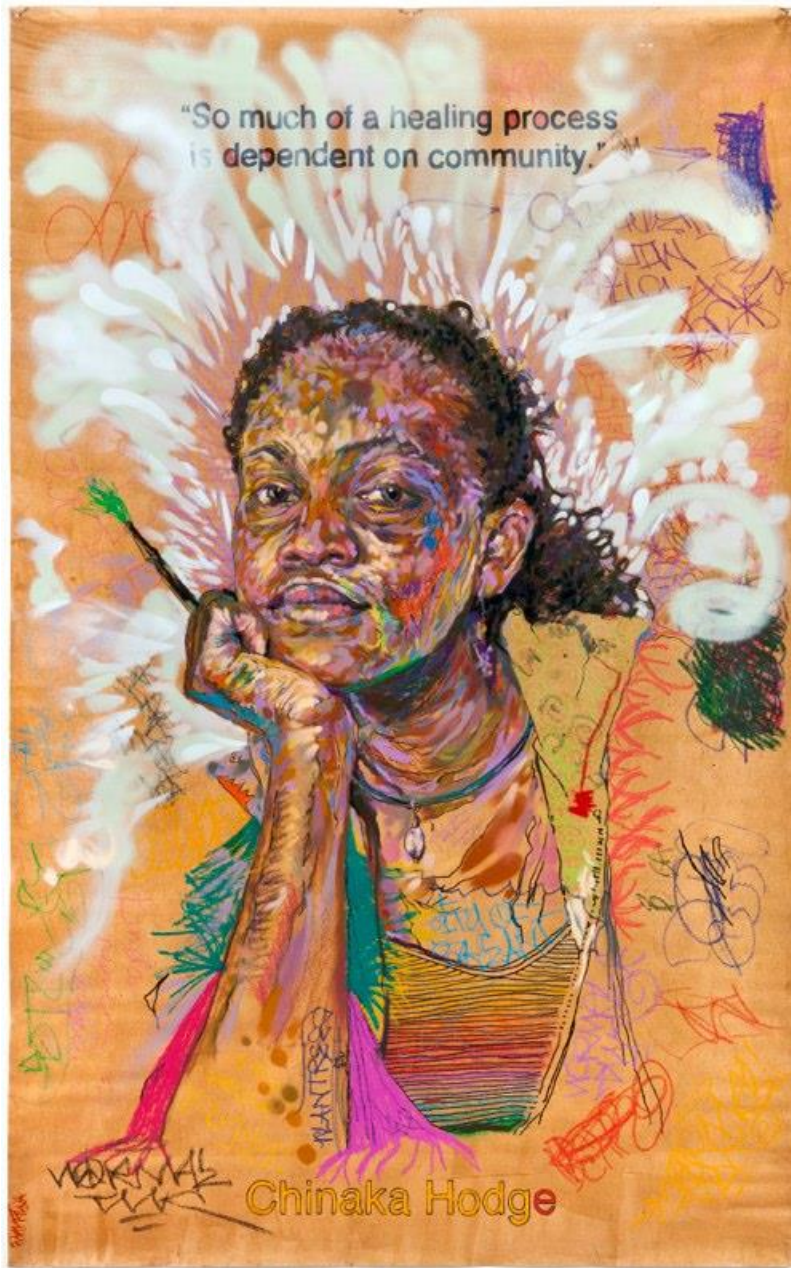
Brett Cook, *Chinaka Hodge*, from *Reflections of Healing*, Oakland Museum of California

Chapter 3- Building Relationships and Radical Possibilities

Equally if not more important to the social and political power of *Reflections of Healing* than

the symbolic ways the project constructs community are the ways it manifests that imagined

community through building interpersonal relationships and networks. The symbolic community

described in the previous chapter provides the basis of these relationships, and this chapter focuses

on the ways this plays out on the ground. While the vision of community communicated through

RoH does have the potential to alter outsider perceptions of the city and to give residents a common

sense of identity from which to organize, none of this really matters if there are not real

interconnections. These interpersonal connections are a major source of community power in

under-resourced communities like West Oakland, as they allow people to better pool their resources

and direct their power toward a common goal. This power and the ways in which it is built is what

will be explored in this chapter, as well as ways in which this work might be more effective, and the

political/aesthetic consequences of these interactions with and responses to this project.

Relationship building and networking happen in many ways throughout the process of the

production and display of *RoH*. On the smallest level, Cook described his relationships with the rest

of the "Life is Living Ecosystem" as being a form of community in itself. In 2008, three weeks

before the first Life is Living festival in Oakland, Hodari Davis and Marc Bamuthi Joseph, two of

the festival's primary organizers, approached Cook, and asked him if he would participate in the

project. Davis and Cook already knew one another from their time together studying at UC Berkeley

and later teaching at Berkeley High, and Davis knew that Cook had previous experience doing place

based and community oriented art projects. In this first year, due to the lack of time, and the lack of

funding, Cook turned down the offer to be a major collaborator in the production of *LiL*. Cook's art

had been moving in a more deeply community based and oriented model over the past few years

which led to him placing a greater emphasis on relationships and relationship building. He told

Davis and Bamuthi Joseph that the amount of time prior to the start of the festival would not be

sufficient to build meaningful connections with the other organizers, or with the site and the other

participants with whom he would be working.

Even though Cook did not actively take part in the festival in its first year, he supported the

work by serving as a judge in a 'Graffiti Battle' as part of the festival. Cook said that after his

marginal involvement in the festival the first year he knew, "that yes, this is my community, these are

my people, we share a lot of the same values, these are good people to work with." Cook firmly

emphasizes that:

> "Working with Bamu[thi Joseph] and Hodari *is* working in community. We are all
> partners and residents in this community. It's not the romantic notion of 'I'm going
> to go to this place where I don't know anybody and I'm going to save everyone,' or ...
> this more romantic notion of, 'from the cracks in the concrete I'm going to grow these
> roses,' ... I think there is a real power that is often overlooked about where we are in
> relation with people already."

This practical, non-essentialized, non-romanticized understanding of community, based in

relationships and personal connections, informs every step of *RoH*. Cook recognizes the importance

of connection in community. Anyone *can* belong in a community, what is important is doing the

work of being in relation. Even as *Reflections of Healing* constitutes a symbolic community that does

more than simply reflect existing relationships, interpersonal connections are central to the meaning

and political potential of the project.

Another important form of relationship and community building is in the interactions

between Cook and the people who are identified as healers. Fostering and promoting these

relationships is initiated by Cook but proceeds to develop further based on the desires and interests

of the healers involved. For example, one of the people highlighted this past year suggested that

there be a dinner to bring the healers together, and offered to fund it. Cook is now working to plan

and implement this dinner and to try to orchestrate it in such a way as to bring them together in

fruitful conversation and relation, and for it to be meaningful for participants without overly

burdening them- to have it be an inviting and positive community among the healers as well.

In independent interviews with *A Blade of Grass*, one of the primary funding organizations

for this project, several of the healers emphasized the importance of collaboration in their own

interest and satisfaction with *RoH*. Traci Bartlow, a dancer, educator, and activist, who was featured

in the most recent iteration of *RoH*, said she first met Cook in 2009, at a local art exhibit. This

relationship has developed since, and Bartlow has played a major role in LiL, taking to the stage and

teaching small dance workshops throughout the event. In this way, the event does not only reflect

Cook's vision, but also active participation by the healers in practice with members of the

community.[1] Kathy Ahoy, a former nurse and Oakland health advocate/activist, had not met Cook

before being interviewed by him, and was nervous beforehand, but said that his "sunny, at-ease and

relaxed personality also made the interview very non-threatening and fluid." She also said that for

her the "most meaningful part of the project was the participatory process."[2] By building

connections with community members invested in healing in Oakland from a variety of ways, the

social network from which Cook can draw in his own work grows, as does the overall level of

interconnectedness in the community.[3]

As explained in the first chapter, Cook bases his interviews on questions collected from the

healers themselves. In this way the healers are essentially interviewing one another, and are in

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[1] Joelle Te Paske, "Meet the Healers from Reflections of Healing: Traci Bartlow," *A Blade of Grass*, October 24, 2014, http://www.abladeofgrass.org/meet-the-healers-from-reflections-of-healing-traci-bartlow

[2] Joelle Te Paske, "Meet the Healers from Reflections of Healing: Kathy Ahoy," *A Blade of Grass*, March 18, 2015 http://www.abladeofgrass.org/reports-from-the-field/meet-the-healers-from-reflections-of-healing-kathy-ahoy/

[3] Itself a counter-hegemonic act in a society dominated by atomizing and alienating neoliberal capitalism.

indirect communication and community. These interviews serve on one level to provide the quotations which are inscribed on the portraits. On another, deeper, level the interviews are, "the beginnings of my building a relationship with them... [of] really getting to know about them and their work and their personhood in a way that expands my own world ... to become literate of them and their work, and their social networks." As a result of these new relationships and interconnections between Cook and others doing healing work in the community, new and more dynamic action can take place.

To give just one example, Sifu Kate Hobbs[4] and Cook have maintained a continued relationship in the years following their first encounter through the project. Every summer since that first iteration, Cook and Hobbs have collaborated on summer camp programing, with Cook teaching weekly three hour classes for students in Hobbs's camp. Cook told me, "I'm not getting funding for it. It is not in the narrative. It is just how our relationship has continued as a part of *Reflections of Healing*." These long term relationships are part of the larger project of *RoH*, in that, as a result of the community based art project, stronger community is formed, and the healing work of both Cook and Hobbs is magnified through continued collaboration. The initial act of art making brought Cook and Hobbs together, and they have developed a sustained relationship- one which reflects the aesthetic/political mission of *RoH* and showcases the power of collaboration for consolidating community power.

Networking also takes the form of regular connection and communication between the organizers and interested community members. The planning and implementation of the festival does not only occur in October, "there is stuff happening all year round. Partnerships that are made and nurtured by the festival." For instance, over the year and a half, the organizers held an event

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[4] A martial arts instructor who was highlighted in the first iteration of *RoH*.

every month in Bobby Hutton Park to tie ribbons on a Black Panther ribbon mural on the fence of the tennis courts. Regular meetings were "an ongoing effort to have people be in relation. To have people meet people, get to know people … and brainstorm about what we are thinking about doing [at LiL] next time, and who would be good to talk to in the community." This regular connection between organizers and people in the community who are interested in participating increases community ownership of the festival and enables people to build networks of communication and get to know who else is doing work in or for their community.

Visibly maintaining long term relationships enables the organizers to collaborate more extensively with other people in the community. For example, Cook said to me that in the planning for this latest iteration of the project he had originally intended not to do any new paintings and instead wanted to put all of his efforts into organizing a wellness clinic at LiL. After continued conversations with his collaborators, both within Youth Speaks, and other members of the community, he decided to do another set of portraits: people in the community demanded it. This is a very positive indication of the resonance of the visual aspect of *RoH* for at least some portion of the community, as well as the sustainability of the connections being formed.

Cook became more confident in the importance of listening and communicating actively with a broad base of the community after observing the first LiL. In the first year one of the key aspects of the festival was a performance by Mos Def[5], a prominent rapper, actor, and political activist. A large portion of the funds for the festival went to booking his performance, and his participation was highlighted by organizers as one of the main events of the festival. Cook recalls that first year "walking over to the skate park,[6] which had just opened that weekend, and seeing 300,

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[5] AKA Yasiin Bey.
[6] Called "Town Park" and opened by Keith 'K-Dubs' Williams, who was also eventually honored with a portrait as part of *RoH*.

400 kids in the park who were just not trippin' on Mos Def … and for me it was such a clear model of 'this is what the community wants, this is servicing the community.' The Mos Def entertainment is an interesting event, but it is going to disappear." Although the unifying event may be positive, and even powerful, for participants, Cook's goal is to create something sustainable and community supported which will reflect the desires of those it is mean to be in community with. While the portraits are created in singular moments of collaboration, the larger project *Reflections of Healing* is ongoing, and manifests itself in continued relationships.

To that end, Cook and the other organizer have strived to create opportunities for festival goers to connect with one another and to establish or strengthen relationships that can provide support beyond the confines of the event. Traci Bartlow reflected on this, saying, "it was wonderful to see the community, old and young, think about and share their ideas and processes of healing. This is an important exchange in our collective growth."[7] People's willingness to connect and communicate was evidenced by the degree to which they were willing to participate in my research, and talk to me about what brought them to the festival and to engage me in dialog about my own goals for my research. Although many people before and after the festival also engaged with me in this way, nowhere else did I find an environment in which people were so willing to open up to me and discuss their thoughts and experiences, nor did I find any other place where so many people expressed interest in maintaining contact with me and finding the results of my research.

There were also opportunities for festival attendees to meet community healers, and to connect with other people and resources in their community that they may not have previously been aware of. In addition to the presence and participation of several of the highlighted healers, including Traci Bartlow, Chinaka Hodge, and Kathy Ahoy, Cook also succeeded in orchestrating a

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[7] Paske, "Meet the Healers from Reflections of Healing: Traci Bartlow."

wellness clinic in addition to the portraits as part of *RoH*. The presence of the wellness clinic was incredibly important for the network building aspect of the project, beyond the direct health services offered at the festival. Many of the festival goers I spoke with were very excited about the presence of the clinic, and many of them had not heard of the people or organizations represented in the clinic. Attendees had the opportunity to learn directly about healing resources, such as doula services, chiropractic clinics, and herbal apothecaries, and to participate in healing practices, such as massage, martial arts, and dance. Through signup sheets and contact information, there was also the opportunity to follow through on the potential of these relationships. The wellness clinic offered a tangible way for people to be in community with one another, and to access community resources. The ability to engage with alternative healing practices on an interpersonal level models the larger counter-hegemonic goals of the project writ large.

The actual process of collaborative image making, though not part of the festival I attended, is also an important aspect of *RoH*, as it allows people not only to speak with one another, but to come together to create something tangible. This collaboration is an example, in Cook's words, of "taking the relationships that exist in a community and galvanizing them to make something. It is not trivial." Families and friend groups would often work together on the project at the same time, and in these moments strengthen their own connections, as well as connect with other people around them who they may not have already known. The embodied experience of collaboration and image making is a performance of community, which makes visible and reinforces the invisible bonds of community, while fostering a sense of shared ownership.

There is also value to be found in the simple act of seeing one's neighbors and spending time out in public space with one another, even if no new relationships are formed; The symbolic solidarity of seeing and knowing the faces of neighbors is not trivial. Gathering in a central location

in the neighborhood allows people to feel more connected to a community they may already identify with, and renews social bonds and a shared sense of collective ownership of space. One man I spoke with told me that, though he has lived in West Oakland for more than thirty years, he does not often see his neighbors, and this causes him to feel disconnected from his community. He reflected that events which bring people together can help encourage solidarity, and that if he saw his neighbors more, he might feel more a part of the neighborhood. Community is reinforced through the sharing of space. At the same time, the festival does draw a large number of people from outside the immediate area, which presents issues in terms of who can feel ownership over the park. As was emphasized in the previous chapter, the danger of co-optation is ever-present, and outsider domination is a familiar danger for many long term residents of West Oakland.

Ultimately, all of these opportunities for network building and collaboration form the backbone of what *RoH* is able to accomplish. As important as the artworks are in forming a symbolic touchstone for the community, the relational basis of the project is what shines in terms of laying a foundation for future community action.

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Conclusion- Where Do We Go From Here?

Ultimately, we need to consider this project in relation to the broader field of community

based art. When considered as a whole, the project prompts several important questions, and reveals

contradictions and seeming paradoxes about community formation, definition, and engagement.

Reflections of Healing can also teach important lessons about the potential resistive and

counterhegemonic power of art of this nature. Community based art, when enacted successfully, can

both reinvigorate and create new visions of what the community is as a symbol and rallying point for

identity and organizing. All claims of being "community based," in research, writing, activism, and

art, always make a statement about what the community *is*, and who it is comprised of. At the same

time, in its most effective form, community based art lays the groundwork for actual interpersonal

relationships from which trust, solidarity, and mutual action can grow. If community self-

determination is a political good, as I believe it to be, then there is a requirement to have both a clear

understanding and vision of what the community is, from which any action must be based, and the

presence of individual identification with that community. This is ultimately the strength of Brett

Cook's project, which functions despite the complexities of Cook's own insider/outsider status and

his open understanding of what defines community membership.

One potential point of critique in this community based project is the nature of Cook's own

relationship to Oakland. Despite a long history in and around the Oakland area, Cook can be

considered in some ways an outsider to the Oakland community. Cook is not from Oakland, and is

clear to admit that he has a great deal of educational privilege, having attended one of the most

prestigious colleges in California.[1] He is not of West Oakland, nor does his experience closely

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[1] Originally from San Diego, Cook came to the Bay Area to attend the prestigious Cal State Berkeley for Zoology, and after college he worked at Berkeley High, a diverse, primarily low income High School. However, Cook went on to

resemble those of many West Oakland residents in terms of income or education.[2] It could therefore be argued that his involvement in the community is 'inorganic' or not genuinely 'of the community.' Although the project is collaborative, in many ways the original concept and shape of the *RoH* were Cook's personal formulation. *RoH* also, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is attached to Cook's name, and its success garners him a great deal of cultural prestige, if not monetary reward.[3] Ironically, there is a risk of artists already present in Oakland being overlooked for funding or support in favor of Cook because of his background and wide-ranging credentials.[4] The loose definition of community, then, could potentially be interpreted as a way to excuse or explain away Cook's difference and distance from the community.

However, the longevity of the project and Cook's multiple points of connection with the community in large part refutes these potential critiques. When Cook returned to the Bay Area in 2006, he said that he began to think, "[I do] projects all over the world, but what are the projects I'm doing in the community I'm in?" This, along with a renewed interest in long term collaboration as opposed to one off collaborative projects indicate a real interest in building long term sustained connections with the people he found himself surrounded with. In addition, his hesitancy to engage with LiL in its first iteration indicates a dedication to relationship building as an essential aspect to successful collaborative work. Cook described his approach to collaboration, saying, "Collaboration

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spend many years living in Harlem, New York, working as an artist and an educator in the New York City School district, and travelled around the world to do his work. It was only in 2006 that Cook permanently relocated to the Bay Area, setting up his studio in the northern section of West Oakland, near the border with Berkeley.

[2] Though he did experience gentrification firsthand while living it Harlem, it could be argued, following the Lloyd's theorization in *Neo-Bohemia* that he was, as an artist, part of the social shift which provided the impetus for this trend.

[3] It is worth noting that this latest iteration of the project is being displayed on the exterior of the Oakland Museum of California, next to Lake Merritt, a recently renovated and heavily gentrified area. While this means that the project will reach a broader audience, it also carries the risk of alienating the core of West Oaklanders, who will be much less likely to see or interact with the finished pieces in this display. In addition, Cook has won grants and prestigious positions for his work.

[4] Larne Gogarty, "Art & Gentrification," *Art Monthly* 373 (February 2014) 7-10. This piece critiques the field of "Social Practice" for overshadowing community art, and turning it into yet another commodified medium within the realm of mainstream art.

is often thought about as, I want to do this thing, and you are going to help me do it, and that's

collaboration. For me, I say that collaboration is, let's find out our individual expertise and make

something together that is bigger than what we could make by ourselves." This approach to

collaboration illuminates Cook's desire to connect to the people he works with, in order to learn

each other's strengths and desires. In addition, *RoH*'s focus on highlighting people who have been

working in Oakland for a long time, many of whom are artists of some kind, mitigates to some

degree the danger of overshadowing artists already in the community. One community member

described his encounter with *Reflections of Healing*, saying, "I thought it was beautiful, and when

someone is skilled like that, it is good for the community for them to share it." The beauty of the

object itself had social and political meaning for him, and justified Cook's involvement in the

community.

In fact, the very question of 'authenticity' with regards to artistic collaboration raises

significant issues. Focusing on authenticity in terms of community membership often relies on

essentializing notions of community and belonging, buying into the idea that Oakland *is* poor, Black,

and uneducated, which, even coming from a sympathetic place, reinforces hegemonic conceptions

and ultimately the problems it is intended to fight.[5] The debate about genuine community

membership carries with it an assumption that if Cook was an 'authentic' member of West Oakland

he would be incapable of enforcing hegemony in the community or would somehow have access to

the 'true' desires of the community as a whole, which is, of course, absurd given that no such

consensus is likely to exist in a community as large and varied as even just the Black population of

West Oakland. It can also invalidate work that is counter-hegemonic, empowering, and achieving

positive results simply because it is not sufficiently 'authentic,' and suggests that a lack of

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[5] Kester, 130.

'authenticity' makes non-dominating collaboration impossible. As one young political activist who had lived in Oakland his entire life said to me in a conversation about my own relationship to the community, "You're here? You care about this place? You're ready to talk to me, to work with me? Then you are Oakland. You are part of this community." This idea, that solidarity and community membership can derive from action, as opposed to identity or geography, also validates Cook's work.

At the same time, the concerns about power dynamics in terms of background and identity always inflect the nature of collaboration, and should be engaged with head on. This is perhaps the major failing in the implementation of *RoH*. While Cook claims that all people can be in relation with one another, and that all we need is practice working across difference, if this does not work to directly challenging existing power structures of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class domination, the default is for these structures to be replicated in the ways people relate to one another, even if the vision they are working toward is utopian equality. While Cook's positioning of himself and his community collaborators as equals in a give and take collaboration is potentially very powerful, the danger in this rhetorical move is to erase the ways in which they are not equal in terms of power[6] and how this power imbalance shapes the nature of their collaboration.

In addition, Cook's position that "the only thing that's constant is change," is potentially problematic as it relates to the issue of demographic shift and gentrification in West Oakland. While many have argued that gentrification, as a systemic issue, cannot be stopped, and therefore should be either embraced or simply adapted to, this position is not the only possibility. Accepting gentrification as an inevitable, natural, change erases the ways in which it is in fact unnatural and manufactured and promoted by real estate and business interests, seeking to profit off of the

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[6] Monetary, institutional, educational, etc.

economic disenfranchisement of long established communities of color, much like earlier

community redevelopment efforts sought to do.[7] The 'Right to the City' model argues that longtime

residents, regardless of legal ownership or ability to purchase property, have a fundamental "right to

stay put" when faced with outside interests pushing them out.[8] In fact, many people in and around

Oakland, and in cities across the country, are actively battling gentrification, using a wide variety of

organizing methods and tactics.[9] Not every project or act of organizing needs to be focused

specifically on the issue of gentrification, but it is a particularly salient issue in Oakland in the

contemporary moment and by taking it for granted there is the risk of normalizing it and damaging

efforts to curtail or control it by building acceptance or complacency in the community.

In addition, it is frustrating that there isn't a more explicit racial and class component to

RoH, and that engagement with these issues is often left euphemistic. Even though the majority of

the healers highlighted are people of color, and many of them engage in healing work specifically

relating to structural violence against people of color, low-income people, and LGBT people, the

project as a whole does not address these issues directly. While, as explored above, the emphasis on

healing has radical potential given the history and continued presence of violence against people and

communities of color and low income people, by leaving the nature and source of this violence

unnamed, *RoH* potentially allows for the perpetuation of this violence within the community. Not

acknowledging the violence directly will not make it go away, and it can potentially leave space for

people to imagine that it does not exist, or that it is a thing of the past which now we are healing

from, as opposed to a real and present force in people's lives. Still, even though this violence is not

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[7] This article by Phat Beets Produce, an Oakland based food justice oriented co-operative articulates this reality very clearly and with a specific example, the artificial formation of the NOBE (North Oakland, Berkeley, and Emeryville) by real estate developers in order to make the neighborhood more attractive to gentrifiers: http://www.phatbeetsproduce.org/full-statement-on-gentrification

[8] Harvey, "The Right to the City."

[9] A few examples include: Causa Justa/Just Cause; EBASE; People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights (PODER); among many others.

named explicitly, which detracts somewhat from the overall impact of the project, it is still addressing many of these concerns, if indirectly.

In fact, the positivity can be understood not as naïve, but rather as empowering. The commitment to creating a space where the healing can be centered does have real power, as violence is so often emphasized, and a more positive future can become difficult to envision. In addition, the creation of this positive and politically active space presents the opportunity for real networks of mutual support and potential action to form, and from these networks can come radical political action. By facilitating new interactions and relationships on the basis of communal healing, *RoH* lays the groundwork for more explicitly political work in the future. Who is in one's social network can have a major impact one's ability to make change of any kind. Therefore, the opening up and interconnecting of social networks which *RoH* allows for links people together and builds collective power based on a shared commitment to healing in Oakland.

Ideally, if this research or other research like it were to continue, there are several important methodological issues that should be taken into account. For instance, a broader base of survey respondents, as well as repeat surveys and interviews with community members would greatly improve the ability to provide an in depth audience analysis, something which I struggled to do with my relatively small sample size. More focused survey questions and a broader longitudinal sample size would allow for more complex analytics as well, and help to build an understanding of the impact of this project on individuals over time. Interviews with the healers and a deeper exploration of the nature of their work would also enrich this research. One major fault in my analysis is my lack of engagement with issues of gender and sexuality, which undoubtedly inform and inflect the creation and perpetuation of community and communal connection. While these issues are of great

importance, the data I gathered, and my limited experience in the area, did not easily allow me to integrate this analysis.

In the end, it proves overly simplistic to call *RoH* a success or a failure, or to attempt to quantify exactly what it accomplishes; the standards by which that could be judged are far too varied. Better is to ask the question which I began with: what, on the ground, does the project do? What it does, I think, is create space for community power, self-definition, and self-determination. As Traci Bartlow, one of the healers highlighted said, "People often get self-determination misinterpreted. My understanding of self-determination is in an interdependent way so that we are together as a whole making things happen."[10] This is precisely what *Reflections of Healing* fosters- collective vision, connection, and space to work towards communal self-determination.

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[10] Paske, "Meet the Healers from Reflections of Healing: Traci Bartlow."

Pablo Cerdera
4/22/2015

Appendix: The Healers

The First Iteration:[1]

Sifu Kate Hobbs is an Oakland based teacher and martial artist. She holds the rank of fifth-degree black belt in the style Kajukenbo Kung Fu under the leadership of the late Professor Coleen Gragen. She currently studies Chi Gung, Tai Chi, and Northern Shaolin Kung Fu under Sifu Michelle Dwyer. Sifu Kate is the Chief Instructor at Oakland Kajukenbo Kwoon, a martial arts program for children and adults emphasizing the values of love, hard work and community service. Over the years, Sifu Kate has worked on curriculum for community-based and school-based programs that teach specific tools for healthy living, conflict resolution, violence prevention and community building. Sifu Kate was one of the founders of Oakland's famous **Destiny Arts Center**, and was the first Program Director for the national youth play organization Sports4Kids (now known as **Playworks**).

Larry Yang teaches meditation retreats nationally and has a special interest in creating access to the Dharma for diverse multicultural communities. He is a core teacher of the **East Bay Meditation Center** in downtown Oakland, which offers meditation training and spiritual teachings from Buddhist and other wisdom traditions, with attention to social action, multiculturalism, and the diverse populations of the East Bay and beyond. He recently completed coordinating and teaching an international 2-year dharma leadership training program which produced the most number of teachers of color and LGBTQ teachers in the history of Western Dharma practice. Larry has practiced extensively in Burma and Thailand, including a six-month period of ordination as a Buddhist monk under the guidance of meditation master Ajahn Tong.

Chinaka Hodge is a poet, playwright, screenwriter and educator. She writes with the primary intention of creating verse and fiction that give credence to the experiences, traumas and triumphs of young black women. Her work often puts her hometown of Oakland, CA at its center. Chinaka was an integral part of the growth of Youth Speaks in its first 15 years and through that work has mentored thousands of young writers. She was named Best Poet by the East Bay Express in 2008 and her first play, Mirrors in Every Corner, played at Intersection for the Arts in 2010 for 6 weeks of sold out shows. Chinaka is a founding member of **The Getback**, a collaborative of literary, stage, film and musical artists. She received her B.A. from NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study and her M.F.A. from USC's School of Cinematic Arts, Writing Division. Her work has been featured in numerous print publications, film festivals and in two seasons of HBO's Def Poetry.

Nicole Lee is the Executive Director of the Urban Peace Movement, an organization that grew out of the Silence The Violence Campaign (which she founded and ran at the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights). The Urban Peace Movement works to end violence in Oakland and beyond through transformational work with young people directly impacted by street violence, and through shifting urban youth culture. Nicole is a lifelong native of Oakland, California and has a background

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[1] All descriptions for this iteration from Oaklandish: http://oaklandish.com/oakblog/reflections-of-healing/

in labor and community organizing, policy advocacy work.
http://urbanpeacemovement.org

Favianna Rodriguez is a celebrated printmaker and digital artist based in Oakland, California. Using high-contrast colors and vivid figures, her composites reflect literal and imaginative migration, global community, and interdependence. Whether her subjects are immigrant day laborers in the U.S., mothers of disappeared women in Juárez, Mexico, or her own abstract self portraits, Rodriguez brings new audiences into the art world by refocusing the cultural lens. Through her work we witness the changing U.S. metropolis and a new diaspora in the arts.
http://www.favianna.com

John Santos, five-time Grammy-nominated percussionist and U.S. Artists Fontanals Fellow, is one of the foremost exponents of Afro-Latin music in the world today. Born in San Francisco, California, November l, l955, he was raised in the Puerto Rican and Cape Verdean traditions of his family, surrounded by music. The fertile musical environment of the San Francisco Bay Area shaped his career in a unique way. His studies of Afro-Latin music have included several trips to New York, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Brazil and Colombia. He is known for his innovative use of traditional forms and instruments in combination with contemporary music, and has earned much respect and recognition as an educator, composer, and record and event producer. He's been a prolific performer, composer, teacher, writer, radio programmer, and record/event producer whose career has spanned over 35 years.
http://www.johnsantos.com

Bryant Terry is a chef, food justice activist, and author of three books, including his latest *The Inspired Vegan*. He is also the host of **Urban Organic**, a new multi-episode web series. His interest in cooking, farming, and community health can be traced back to his childhood in Memphis, Tennessee, where his grandparents inspired him to grow, prepare, and appreciate good food. Bryant completed the chef's training program at the Natural Gourmet Institute for Health and Culinary Arts in New York City. He holds an M.A. in American History from New York University and a B.A. with honors in English from Xavier University of Louisiana. From 2008 to 2010, Bryant was a fellow of the Food and Society Policy Fellows Program. He lives and creates in Oakland, California, with his wife and daughter. **http://www.bryant-terry.com**

The Second Iteration:

Keith 'K-Dub' Williams is an artist, educator, and community youth arts organizer who has extensive work in schools and with students, and who was the main agent behind the creation of Town Park, a public skate park in Little Bobby Hutton Park.

Phyllis Lun is a longtime resident who worked consistently to organize and support the work of the DeFremery Park Recreation center.

Pablo Cerdera
4/22/2015

Kokomon Clottey, a Ghanaian immigrant and longtime resident of Oakland, is a healer whose work focuses on racial and communal healing and empowerment through drumming and storytelling.

Tarika Lewis was the first woman to join the BPP, and is a musician, artist, and organizer, who helped initiate Little Bobby Hutton day in 1998.

The Third Iteration[2]:

Kathy Ahoy, Kathy Ahoy, retired Public Health Nurse of Alameda County, co-founded Street Level Health Project in 2000 to serve the communities of Oakland. In her work caring for and responding to the health issues of Oakland's growing immigrant population, Ahoy has built strong relationships and championed the sharing of knowledge, resources, and skills. Her passion to serve the most vulnerable people in Oakland derives from her background as a refugee/immigrant. Born in Kalimpong, India, she and her family were jailed and interned in India for three-and-a-half years, due to a border dispute between India and China. Currently, she acts as a mentor and preceptor for health care students. Ahoy's history and memory of poverty, hunger and injustice equips her with a fierce determination to bring justice to others.

Traci Bartlow, Traci Bartlow is a multi-faceted artist, whose work as a creative director, dancer, choreographer, photographer, dance historian, producer, and director has allowed her to create and present unique art experiences. Bartlow has been teaching dance for more than 20 years, developing curriculum for youth programs through out the Bay Area. Bartlow is a founding and core member of Eastside Arts Alliance and Eastside Cultural Center in Oakland where she developed the Oakland Hip Hop Dance Institute, a program that documents and preserves the history and culture of hip hop dance and creates opportunities for dancers and choreographers to study, research, create, and perform. As the director and choreographer for StarChild Dance, Bartlow's choreography has been presented at the Malcolm X Jazz Arts Festival, the Black Choreographers Festival, and *The Sisyphus Syndrome-A Jazz Opera* by Amiri Baraka.

Melanie Cervantes, Melanie Cervantes is a Xicana artist and activist based in the Bay Area. Cervantes currently works at the Akonadi Foundation, which supports movement-building organizations working to end structural racism in the United States. As an artist, Cervantes has exhibited at Galería de la Raza (San Francisco); Woman Made Gallery and National Museum of Mexican Art (Chicago); Mexic-Arte and Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center (Austin, TX); and Crewest (Los Angeles). Cervantes and printmaker Jesus Barraza co-founded Dignidad Rebelde, a collaborative graphic arts project that uses principles of Xicanisma and Zapatismo to translate stories of struggle and resistance into artwork that can be put back into the hands of the

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[2] All descriptions from the Oakland Museum of California: http://museumca.org/reflections

communities who inspire it. Cervantes is a member of Justseeds Collective, Taller Tupac Amaru, and the Consejo Gráfico.

Esteban Cuaya-Muñoz, Born and raised in Oakland, the two-spirit identified Esteban Cuaya-Muñoz works with same-gender-loving young men and young trans women of color in creating safe space throughout Oakland and the East Bay Area. Through his work, Esteban develops tools for healing for young gay, bisexual men and trans women of color in the East Bay Area, ages 17–29. His program addresses family and community rejection, hate crimes, and discrimination. He currently works at La Clinica de la Raza in Oakland, whose mission is to improve the quality of life of the diverse communities by providing culturally appropriate, high quality, and accessible health care for all.

Lillian Galedo, Lillian Galedo, executive director of Filipino Advocates for Justice (FAJ), has worked for the organization since 1980. At FAJ, Galedo works to build an institution for the Filipino community that provides services and is involved in social justice issues. FAJ is a leading organization in the California campaign for a Domestic Worker Bill of Rights and the Dignity Campaign for Real Immigration Reform. Galedo helped to found the National Filipino Immigrant Rights Coalition, Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, Oakland Asian Cultural Center, the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, Filipino Civil Rights Advocates, and for the past 20 years, has been involved in the campaign to win recognition and equal benefits for Filipino veterans of World War II. Galedo was born and raised in Stockton where her immigrant parents were farm workers. She has been an activist since her days as a student at University of California at Davis where she helped found the first Asian American History classes.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph, Marc Bamuthi Joseph is the Director of Performing Arts at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, and is a vital voice in performance, arts education, and artistic curation. Bamuthi graced the cover of *Smithsonian Magazine* after being named one of America's Top Young Innovators in the Arts and Sciences in 2007. He is the artistic director of the seven-part HBO documentary *Russell Simmons presents Brave New Voices* and an inaugural recipient of the United States Artists Rockefeller Fellowship, which annually recognizes 50 of the country's "greatest living artists." Bamuthi has lectured at more than 200 colleges and universities, been a popular commentator on *National Public Radio*, and has carried adjunct professorships at Stanford University, LeHigh University, Mills College, and the University of Wisconsin. His proudest work has been with Youth Speaks where he mentors 13-to-19-year-old writers and curates the Living Word Festival and Left Coast Leaning. He is the co-founder of Life is Living, a national series of one day festivals designed to activate under-resourced parks and affirm peaceful urban life through hip-hop arts and focused environmental action.

Tyler Norris, Tyler Norris, M.Div, is an entrepreneur and founder of over a dozen businesses and social ventures. His three decades of service in the public, private, and non-profit sectors have focused on population health improvement, community vitality, and equitable prosperity. As a leader in the movement for healthy and sustainable communities, he has worked in over 400 communities and with scores of organizations in the United States and around the world. A new

resident of downtown Oakland, Tyler currently serves as vice president, Total Health Partnerships at Kaiser Permanente, where he leads initiatives working for the complete physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being of its members, workforce, and communities. Tyler serves as founding chair of a non-profit technology venture that powers Community Commons; he is a trustee of Naropa University; and serves on advisory bodies for the Convergence Partnership, Transportation for America, and the YMCA of the USA. He is a parent of two young adults, an avid mountain biker, backcountry skier, and pilot.

William Wong, William Wong was born and grew up in Oakland, California's Chinatown, the youngest child and only son of seven children of immigrants from China. His parents ran the Great China restaurant in the heart of Chinatown from 1943 to 1961. He attended Oakland public schools, the University of California at Berkeley, and Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism and has worked in both mainstream and ethnic journalism for more than forty years. A pioneer among Asian American journalists, Wong has been a columnist, reporter, editorial writer, business editor, assistant managing editor, and ombudsman. Among his most significant achievements were in-depth news feature stories about a growing Asian American community for *The Wall Street Journal*'s front page in the 1970s and his provocative columns about Asian America, race relations, multiculturalism, and a changing America.

Oscar Wright, Oscar Carl Wright, author and education supporter, has been an advocate for equal education in Oakland for over 47 years, with a particular focus on Latino and Black students. Wright attributes his dedication to his work to his parents and their determination to provide the best education for him and his siblings. One of eleven children born to sharecropper parents on a Mississippi plantation in the 1920s, Wright and his brothers were not permitted by the plantation owner to go to school. His parents moved the family to Clarksdale, Mississippi where all eleven of their children received their formal education. Although his parents were not permitted to obtain a formal education, Wright considers them the most brilliant people he has ever known and sees them as the inspiration for his life's work.

Pablo Cerdera
4/22/2015

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Pablo Cerdera
4/22/2015

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