

Holding Liberalism and Prejudice Simultaneously in Alameda

Alameda is known as a quaint little town situated in the East Bay, close neighbors with Oakland and across the water from San Francisco. Its character is mainly defined by the liberal politics of the Bay Area more generally and its history of the Naval Air Station (NAS Alameda) utilized during the second World War. Having lived in Alameda for 18 years, I feel a deep connection to its communities and the landscape. Through this paper and accompanying photographs, I hope to tell a counternarrative to challenge the dominant narrative of a peaceful and liberal city. Centering discussion on the lives of Black Alamedans and Alamedans of color during and after World War II highlights the ways Alameda has simultaneously welcomed people of color and denied their right to exist, all while perpetuating a surface level understanding of acceptance and belonging.

Black migration to the island began as early as the mid 1800's, but "racist housing practices in Alameda like restrictive racial covenants, zoning and "redlining" excluded Black migrants from calling the Island home." (Shabazz 2019). This, as well as corporeal violence, drove migrants from Alameda to seek a home elsewhere. Black migration saw a resurgence during wartime with the operation of the Naval Air Station Alameda. With an influx of soldiers, Alameda faced a housing shortage and relegated the Black soldiers and their families to temporary housing projects. "The city and the White businessmen that [sic] ran the Housing Authority, placed all wartime housing projects away from white areas like the Gold Coast and East End." (Shabazz 2019) Race was spatialized in the sense that Black people were forced out of the main parts of the city and into less than ideal housing projects on the outskirts of town. The control the white men had over housing and Black lives parallels Roberto Hernandez's concept of the "suburban noose" and "internal colonialism". He notes that, "Such a demographic

layout and racialized landscape would lead to the construction of the so-called “urban crisis”. (Hernandez 2018). After the war, most of the projects were demolished and the residents, unwelcome in Alameda, were displaced to neighboring Oakland. As Reginald James describes, “A concentrated bias against low-income and African American residents in Alameda manifests itself in rhetoric that associates low-income people with crime and slums, and uses code words like “Oakland” as racial proxies.” (James 2013). Hernandez characterizes this type of rhetoric as symbolic violence, a term which, “...refers to the internalization of structural violence... and makes its imposition on others appear natural and legitimate.” (Hernandez 2018).

Although the Navy base was largely abandoned after the war, it became a space of community building for many. The Alameda Point Collaborative is located on this land and works to provide housing, employment, and various other community resources. The way they have taken this abandoned space and turned it into a place of healing and growth is reminiscent of Willie Jamaal Wright's observations of spaces of marronage. He notes how, “...communities have taken a desire for liberation and merged it with an ignored and undervalued environment to gain liberties in opposition to repressive administrations.” (Wright 2020). In this somewhat isolated area, they are able to form new modes of community care and organization of their society. However, the safe space of the Navy base is being threatened, as new developers seek to construct new, expensive housing. Coulthard notes the “...persistent role that unconcealed, violent dispossession continues to play in the reproduction of colonial and capitalist political relations...” (Coulthard 2009) In contrast to the current gentrification of the former Navy base, Alameda has just approved the conversion of vacant Navy barracks into a wellness center for unhoused seniors in the Bay Area called Alameda Center which is run by the formerly discussed Alameda Point Collaborative. Although it was ultimately approved, it highlighted the tension

between the folks who supported the project, and those who had a more “not in my backyard” attitude. Liza Gabato Morse, an organizer with Friends of Crab Cove who opposed the project remarked, “There are other places, there can be other facilities. Not our Crab Cove.” (Aguilar-Canabal 2019). This visceral reaction, sense of possession, and defensiveness is reflective of the perpetual nature of colonial relations.

Histories of segregation and inequity continue to be visible in terms of education inequity. “The Island’s two high schools have also symbolized the historic social and economic divides between Alameda’s wealthy East End and its traditionally blue-collar West End.” (Tavares 2018). Alameda High, serving the wealthier side of Alameda, boasts high achieving students and diversity, yet the advanced classes remain largely white and Asian only. On the West End, Encinal High School consistently ranks lower in terms of achievement, but has more true diversity in its student body. The youth of Alameda is learning in a majority homogenous community, affecting everyone’s understanding of acceptance, diversity, and belonging.

Lately, Alameda has garnered national attention due to the murder of Mario Gonzalez by police. It is common to hear exclamations of disbelief that this seemingly utopian town could have such violence, echoing the very privileged dominant narrative of the town. However, at the same time, youth organizing has come to the forefront to protest racial injustice and demand changes at the city level. The protestors of Alameda are inspired by the same core principles as the EZLN who proclaim that “All political power emanates from the people and its purpose is to help the people.” (Zapatista Army for National Liberation 1994). Alameda has a history of racial discrimination and displacement and continues to be largely inaccessible to non-Asian people of color. However, hope resides with the younger generations who continue to fight for community acceptance and unity, new forms of governance, and a return of power to the people.



Central to Alameda's history is the former Naval Air Station Alameda. This is a photo of the USS Hornet. This ship was present at Pearl Harbor and was the ship that picked up the astronauts when they came back from the first trip to the moon. Currently, the USS Hornet is a museum and hosts tours and events for the community. The USS Hornet is the reason the Alameda High School mascot is Buzzy the Hornet!



This photo depicts Encinal High School and its mascot, the jet. Debates over school consolidation were revived when funding was allocated to renovate Encinal High School. People wondered if the money would be better spent creating one high school for all of Alameda. However, old prejudices about the “types of people” who lived on the West End prompted East End parents to argue against the consolidation, ostensibly to maintain the elitist wealthy bubble of Alameda High School.



Pictured is the main headquarters for the Alameda Point Collaborative. They are an organization that provides low income housing, employment, and resources to unhoused Alamedans. They have many projects including youth and senior programs. They are an example of taking an undervalued space and using it to create new forms of society. APC is working on fostering the connection to the community and to the land through gardening and food programs in addition to others.



One of the most recent additions to the portfolio of Alameda Point Collaborative projects is the creation of the Alameda Wellness and Medical Respite Center. Located in former military barracks and in proximity to Crab Cove Beach, it has received many mixed opinions from the community. Many residents who whole heartedly believe they are anti-racist and liberal have a “not in my backyard” attitude towards helping unhoused neighbors. Still, the center had enough support to pass the legislation and receive the funding to make this center possible.



New construction is rapidly popping up on the West End of the island, as developers realize the potential for capital the location holds. Continuing to exacerbate housing disparities, developers started constructing luxury apartments and condos. Their least expensive single family home is listed at \$950,000. Alameda has a history of being the location to which San Francisco professionals to flee the bustle of city dwelling and the safety of the suburb. In the 19th century, they developed the Gold Coast with Victorians and now they are moving to the base.



Taken from the perspective of the Bay Trail, this photo captures the Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco skyline, and the Alameda Ferry terminal. As previously mentioned, it is very common for professionals in San Francisco to live in Alameda. Facilitating this commute is the Alameda Ferry. This also highlights the fact that Bay Farm Island and the East End of Alameda are generally more wealthy, with high levels of single family homes and close proximity to the water.



Shown is a photo of Faction Brewing Company on the backdrop of a clear view of the San Francisco skyline. Not only is the former Naval Air Station being developed for new luxury housing, it is now becoming a hub for wine and beer companies. Taking advantage of the large open spaces, they have converted the hangars into hipster breweries and wine cellars.



For many years, the entirety of the former Naval Air Station looked similar to this photo. With peeling paint, broken and boarded up windows, and rusting pipes, these buildings and the space as a whole was seen to have little value. Now, however, we see these buildings in contrast to the neighboring alcohol businesses and new housing developments. This highlights Willie Jamaal Wright's points about gentrification and the way exchange value was given to this area.



Seen here is the Bay Farm Bridge and its accompanying Bike Bridge. Alameda is an island and it is clear how the space has been racialized. When just looking at Alameda, the majority Bay Farm Island is populated by wealthy White and Asian people. Going over this bridge and onto the main island, the majority of the Black and Brown people live on the West End, as far from Bay Farm Island as you can get, and closer to Oakland. Zooming out even further, the landscape is used to intentionally separate Alameda from Oakland by water and bridges. Citing Reginald L. James, prejudices against BIPOC and low income people are rendered visible in the common rhetoric of “keeping out people from Oakland,” attempting to insulate Alameda as the rich, white bubble that it is.



On April 19, 2021, police officers attempted to detain Alameda resident and father Mario Gonzalez. Kneeling on his back, face down, officers killed Mr. Gonzalez. Many see Alameda as a perfect town with liberal politics and plenty of money. However, this serves as a harsh wake up call that Alameda is by no means perfect and has many of the same problems other cities do in terms of racial discrimination and excessive use of force by police. Young people, namely the Youth Activists of Alameda, are the driving force behind the protests and calls to action surrounding this most recent killing of Mario Gonzalez and previously around George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Organizing vigils, marches, teach-ins, and sit-ins, they call on the city council and Alameda Police Department to make major changes to the way they imagine safety.

Photo courtesy of @ilovealameda on Instagram. Posted April 30, 2021.

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